

## Philosophy in Review



# Heinz Sünker (ed.), "Theodor W. Adorno: Aktualität und Perspektiven seiner Kritischen Theorie."

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Volume 41, Number 3, August 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081593ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081593ar>

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### Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

### ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Kilkauer, T. & Link, C. (2021). Review of [Heinz Sünker (ed.), "Theodor W. Adorno: Aktualität und Perspektiven seiner Kritischen Theorie."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 41(3), 215–217. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081593ar>

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**Heinz Sünker, ed.** *Theodor W. Adorno: Aktualität und Perspektiven seiner Kritischen Theorie*. Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot 2020. 282 pp. €30.00 (Hardcover ISBN 978389610530).

Heinz Sünker's German-language book (which includes four chapters in English) is about one of Germany's foremost philosophers of the 20th century, Theodor W. Adorno. Written by fifteen contributors, the book's chapters are divided into two parts: I. Theory and II. Fields of Engagement.

Adorno died unexpectedly in 1969. Fifty years later in 2019, a commemorative conference held at the Bergische Universität in the city of Wuppertal resulted in this book. Sünker's book starts with what many see as the founding document of Critical Theory, the Frankfurt School, and perhaps even Adorno's philosophy. Written by Adorno's lifelong friend Max Horkheimer, *Traditional and Critical Theory* (Herder 1937) marks one of the most acknowledged highlights in the philosophical-theoretical project of Critical Theory (14).

At that time, Critical Theory still saw 'class relationships as being the engine of capitalist production' (16). Yet the main emphasis of Critical Theory has become increasingly clear. It was Critical Theory's philosophical and analytical interest 'in a practical-emancipatory perspective' (18) as Heinz Sünker shows. Crucially, Sünker says that 'ideology is not something like an overlay covering society as a coating that can be removed' (21). Instead, ideology is something that is 'housed inside society' (Klikauer, T. 'Adorno on Ideology: Ideology Critique and Mass Consumerism Media' in Coban, S. (eds.), *Media, Ideology and Hegemony*, Brill. 2018, 21). What is also housed inside society is 'conformity' (28), which represents something Adorno's philosophical-political interest critically examines.

Self-evidently, Adorno and Critical Theory's interest in emancipation simultaneously means both are dedicated to ending domination [*Herrschaft*] and especially 'institutionalised domination' (33). Adorno's work is a critique on the 'preparation of human beings to become objects of punishment, social atomisation, discipline and ideology' (33). It is also about a 'submission to [ideologies like] law and order [traces of this can also be found in Hegel's] master-servant dialectics' (Klikauer, T. 'Negative recognition: Master and slave in the workplace,' *Thesis Eleven*, 132(1): 37, 2016). For Adorno this also means that 'inside the process of civilisation, barbarity is already laid out [*angelegt*]' (39). Beyond that, Adorno's philosophy always means a critique of society but also 'a critique of [the mechanisms of system] integration' (40). It is the systematic integration of human beings into the social and economic apparatus of capitalism (Lockwood, D. 'Social Integration and System Integration,' in G. K. Zollschau & W. Hirsch, (eds.) *Explanations in Social Change*, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1964). In this process, human beings become things in the course of *Verdinglichung* or reification.

On this, Thompson argues that 'Adorno is convinced that reification has penetrated so deeply into the structures of administrative-capitalist society that the culture and the frameworks of modern forms of agency have become unable to serve as resources for social transformation' (51). In a nutshell, this sums up Adorno's devastating as much as pessimistic insight after a lifetime of examining capitalist societies. Welcome to Adorno's 'Hotel Abyss' (Lanning, R. *In the hotel abyss: an Hegelian-Marxist critique of Adorno*, Brill 2013). We are locked into the 'un-freedom in which society sustains itself' (53) with no way out.

Perhaps it is only the selected few who truly understood the magnitude of Adorno's philosophy. Those few genuinely appreciate Habermas' masterpiece *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Volume I & II, reprint, Polity Press 1997) which rescued Critical Theory from Adorno's deep positivism, moving it out of the Hotel Abyss. With that, and at least in part, Critical Theory was able to

re-direct ‘its powers toward social transformation and to provide a politically useful theory of immanent criticism,’ as Thompson argues (70).

What Adorno so devastatingly diagnosed becomes ‘the colonisation of the life-world’ (74) as Schechter emphasizes. Schechter’s ‘instrumental reason may currently prevail over communicative reason [which excludes many] alternative modes of rationality’ (89). This, of course, leads to a rather questionable form of ‘progress’ (92) as Resch notes. Resch states that in ‘everyday life [many think that] an espresso and taking a shower indicates progress’ (93). On the idea of progress, Adorno emphasizes that ‘a purely philosophically based idea on what progress is would be almost meaningless because progress is inextricably linked to societal development’ (94). In other words, progress has to be seen within what Adorno would call the force field of tension between emancipation and domination.

And on that, ‘Adorno’s work provided a theorisation of domination’ (115). During Adorno’s time, this came within the philosophical tradition of left-Hegelianism which, according to Harris, ‘the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory has been needlessly abandoned’ (119). Perhaps one key undertaking of Adorno’s version of Critical Theory was its focus on ‘all forms of violence in all parts of society working on those aspects that render human suffering visible’ (147). According to Erxleben, there is something of an underlying ‘violent constitution inside modern social formations’ (148). Thus ends Heinz Sünker’s Part I on theory.

Part II starts with Gödel’s well-placed argument that Adorno’s philosophy is defined by a general ‘distrust of all tendencies directing us towards conformism leading to a subjectivist and positivist theory of society’ (163). Gödel also argues that there is a ‘fiction that sees consensus as a guarantor of truth’ (163) which, in turn, is something Habermas indicates in *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

Yet, Gödel also points to another often-underappreciated fact about Adorno. Adorno ‘not only wrote to his audience through academic texts, he also published in newspapers, gave public lectures and even appeared on radio and television’ (164). In other words, Adorno was not only an academic, he was also a committed public intellectual. This is something many academics—with notable exceptions like Jürgen Habermas, Noam Chomsky, Henry Giroux, etc.—more or less conveniently forget. Adorno reminds us not to retreat into our ivy towers and our post-Covid-19 home offices.

One of the unexpected highlights of the entire volume is David W.G.F. Jäger’s chapter on ‘the affirmative character today.’ Jäger starts by reaching back to Erich Fromm and Adorno’s seminal book on *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswick, E., Levinson, D. J., & Nevitt, R. John Wiley 1964). Most likely Adorno would agree with Jäger when he argues that ‘we cannot deny that authoritarian political propaganda fell on fertile grounds during the 20th century’ (177). Most likely authoritarian propaganda also encouraged the radical right even in the 21st century when ransacking Capitol Hill and killing a police officer (Klikauer, T. & Campbell, N. 2021. Trump Departs, But Raging Right-Wing Populism Lives On, *Buzzflash* <https://buzzflash.com/articles/thomas-klikauer-and-nadine-campbell-for-buzzflash-trump-departs-but-raging-right-wing-populism-lives-on>, 25 January 2021).

Unlike the affirmative character that conforms to the status quo, the authoritarian character is defined by what Horkheimer and Adorno saw as a ‘bicycle rider [that is] push up your back and kick downwards’ (178). In the world of corporations meanwhile, the flagship of US Managerialism, the *Harvard Business Review*, defines the very same authoritarianism in our workplace as ‘kiss up and kick down’ (Chamorro-Premuzic & Sanger, “What leadership looks like in different cultures,” *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2016/05/what-leadership-looks-like-in-different-cultures>,

6 May 2016). Management systems are almost ‘Taylor-made’ for authoritarianism (Klikauer, T. *Managerialism – Critique of an Ideology*, Palgrave 2013 & Klikauer, T. & Campbell, N. The Anti-Racist Feminist and the Corporate CEO, *Counterpunch*, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/09/16/the-anti-racist-feminist-and-the-corporate-ceo/>, 16 September 2020). The authoritarian character might very well be ‘the fulfilment of instrumental rationality’ (195). Unlike the authoritarian character, the affirmative character transfers aggression not outward but inward (195).

Of course, both the affirmative and the authoritarian character are part of a ‘de-democratisation process’ (201) even though inside managerial regimes democracy was eliminated decades ago—if it ever existed in the first place. Inside as well as outside of work, ‘human beings are degraded to being agents of commercial exchanges’ (203). In commercial exchanges, goods are exchanged and ownership changed. In what many call the labour market, things are different. Here, human beings are no longer exchanged. Slavery has mostly disappeared—apart from the 40 million slaves the world still has (<https://www.globallslaveryindex.org>).

For them, what Critical Theory advocates is namely ‘the possibility of a reasonable formation of society [based on] happiness and a good life via emancipation by means of removal of mastery and oppression’ (233). For many people of the global south, this goal is even further away than for most people in the so-called advanced countries. Yet, in both places—the advanced OECD world and the global south—trade unions still fight for what Critical Theory seeks: a good life, emancipation, and the end of oppression. György Szell’s chapter shows as much.

Very early on in the history of the Frankfurt School, Critical Theory tasked itself with the understanding of attitudes shown by German workers on the eve of Hitlerism (267; Bonß, *Critical Theory and Empirical Research: Some Observations*, in Fromm, E. (eds.), *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*, Berg 1984). In 1942, Adorno wrote on ‘reflections on class theory’ (271). Most likely Adorno, who was a victim of Nazism and a Holocaust survivor, would agree with György Szell’s final words in the closing pages of the book, ‘we can only fight fascism with violence’ (273).

Overall, and even though Heinz Sünker’s insightful book *Theodor W. Adorno* ends without a conclusion that could have answered the question: *what can learn from all this?*, there is a lot to be learned from engaging with one of Germany’s foremost philosophers. Like very few others, Adorno has shaped Critical Theory, German sociology, and philosophy. As a public intellectual, his philosophy has impacted German society through, for example, his appearances on a radio programme at my local station in Germany during the late 1950s and 1960s. Adorno’s philosophy is still relevant today (HR, “Did Adorno predict Donald Trump,” <https://www.hr-inforadio.de/podcast/wissen/hat-adorno-trump-vorhergesehen-teil-a-podcast-episode-30286.html>, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2017). The initial conference in 2019, including Heinz Sünker’s volume and the fifteen contributions show that Adorno’s exquisite philosophy remains significant inside as well as outside of Germany.

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