

The Origin of Negative Dialectics

Theodor W. Adorno,
Walter Benjamin,
and the Frankfurt Institute

Susan Buck-Morss



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To my parents

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Preface

In the 1960s, Theodor W. Adorno became the most controversial theoretician of the German New Left. He and Max Horkheimer had reestablished the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) in Frankfurt after the war, and since Horkheimer's retirement in 1959, Adorno had been acting director. The Institute, which spent the Nazi years in the United States, was identified with Critical Theory, an original method of Freudo-Marxist analysis that developed there when Horkheimer first became director in 1931 and Herbert Marcuse was one of its more illustrious members.

Critical Theory looked to Marxism as a method rather than a cosmology, and it considered dialectical thinking to be the core of that method - dialectics as the tool for a critical analysis of society, not for building metaphysical systems. Instead of trying to fit present historical conditions dogmatically into Marxist theory, it applied Marx's method to the present, and its critique of the most contemporary, psychological phenomena of late bourgeois society -the "culture industry," mass media, conformism - spoke to students of the fifties and sixties with an urgency which a classical analysis of wage labor would not have achieved. Its criticism of the patterns of authoritarian domination within bourgeois society applied to the purportedly "revolutionary" societies of Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe as well.

The intellectual influence of Adorno and Horkheimer was even greater than that of Marcuse, who chose to stay in the United States, as they had a decisive impact on not one, but successive generations of postwar students. They attracted some of the best to the Institute, the first place in postwar Germany where one could study Marxist sociology and Freudian psychology in order to comprehend analytically the fascism which had outlawed them both. The preeminence of the Institute had its source in the paradox of its historical situation: its members were totally immersed in the German intellectual tradition which they criticized. Exiled by Hitler because they were Leftist and Jewish, these "outsiders" provided by their personal survival and return a link to the best of the German past, its Enlightenment and humanist tradition, which the Nazi experience had all but obliterated. Critical Theory

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gave students the opportunity to reject the Germany of their fathers and yet find a home in its intellectual traditions. Its analysis was thus both the negative critique and the positive redemption of that German *Geist* which had proven such an ambivalent legacy, and it played an important role in Germany's intellectual reconstruction. Almost singlehandedly Adorno and Horkheimer reestablished a kind of radical social analysis which relegitimized Marxist thinking, so that it once again became part of the national political debate. As a result, although they shunned affirmative, political participation, their work contributed indirectly to the end of the Christian Democrats' monolithic rule and the victory in 1971 of Willie Brandt's Social Democratic Party.

But at the height of the student movement the goal was revolution rather than reform. The demonstrations of workers and students in Paris in May, 1968 seemed to indicate that socialist revolution was not only desirable but possible. Students in Germany entered an antiauthoritarian phase of counterculture and anarchist praxis. Whereas Marcuse in the United States gave some degree of theoretical support to such activism, Adorno at the Frankfurt Institute did not. As a result, young radicals who had shortly before crowded the aisles to hear the erudite, eloquent Adorno speak on Hegel's *Logic* or *Goethe's Iphigeneia*, disrupted his lectures. They attacked him because his revolutionary theory seemed to leave no space for revolutionary praxis. In May 1969, students occupied the Institute, and when Adorno did nothing to stop the police from evicting them, their sense of betrayal was complete. Adorno met with SDS leaders, who had learned from him their radical criticism of society but now charged him with not being radical enough. He told them that precisely because of his revolutionary goals he was critical of anarchist tactics as ineffective, and he was clearly worried by the students' impatience with theory. Their glorification of action, their counterculture, and even their hashish echoed the abortive protest of the intellectual *avant-garde* of his own generation, which had proven no match for fascism.

By then the student confrontation had spread well beyond Frankfurt. One after another, student assemblies voted to strike. During that year, I was studying in Tübingen, and the disruption of the university in the summer of 1969 was my introduction to Marxist theory in general and to Adorno in particular. The universities were turned over to continuous debate in plenary sessions and "work groups," where the writings of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, but also Marx, Lenin and Mao were attacked or defended with passion.

The student strikes were an intellectual explosion, and they had some lasting success in transforming the power structure, the syllabus, and the method of instruction in German universities. But in achieving their major goal - the formation of a revolutionary political movement - students here were not more successful than in other Western countries, and Adorno's skepticism was perhaps justified. The possibility of further dialogue, however, was cut short when Adorno died suddenly from a heart attack in August of that

year. The euphoria of antiauthoritarianism dissipated, and the sense of solidarity that underlay this rebellion against the Establishment began to reveal its superficiality. Some students, stung by remorse, became ardent apologists for Adorno, attempting to prove his legitimacy as the heir of the tradition of Marx. Others abandoned him as a pretender, and turned to Lenin or Mao on questions of theory and organizational discipline. A few (including Angela Davis who studied with Adorno from 1966-1967) joined the Communist Party. The sectarian struggles that followed splintered the New Left, and one of the casualties was the Institute itself.

When I returned to Germany the following summer to begin research for this study, the Frankfurt Institute was museumlike and ghostly silent. Horkheimer was in retirement in Montagnola, Switzerland, where he died in 1973. The younger generation of Critical Theorists had moved elsewhere, joined research institutes or university faculties, and had begun their own theoretical writing. Jürgen Habermas, the senior member of this second generation, soon moved to the *Institut für Friedensforschung* in Starnberg, where he began a long-term sociopsychological project. The critics of Critical Theory congregated largely in Berlin, where journals like *Alternative* still made sporadic attacks against the revisionism of the Frankfurt School.

As the aura and immediate presence of the Institute began to evaporate, the question of historical origins became significant. How was it that Adorno and Horkheimer, born at the turn of the century and reared in Weimar Culture, became the articulators of a theory which half a century later captured a movement renown for its youth, its rejection of tradition and suspicion of age? What historical network linked the American with the German New Left and led not only Angela Davis, but a whole group of students from the United States to study at the Institute in Frankfurt? It was an American, Martin Jay, who wrote the first scholarly history of the Institute, tracing its development from 1923-1950.* In a pioneering effort of intellectual road-mapping, Jay unearthed a web of connections which embraces a surprisingly large segment of Weimar culture. His book discusses the involvement of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse - all at one time members of the Institute's "inner circle" - and others who as members, journal contributors, friends, or enemies played a role in the Institute's history. The list reads like a roster of this century's intellectuals. Included were Hannah Arendt, Raymond Aron, Bruno Bettelheim, Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Bloch, Otto Kirchheimer, Siegfried Kracauer, Paul Lazarsfeld, Georg Lukács, Karl Mannheim, Paul Massing, Thomas Mann; Franz Neumann, Friedrich Pollock, Wilhelm Reich, Gershom Scholem, Paul Tillich, and Karl August Wittfogel.

Jay quite rightly chose to focus his study on Max Horkheimer and the decades of the thirties and forties which were Horkheimer's most productive years. For it was Horkheimer who held the Institute together as it wandered

* Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

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from Germany to New York, from New York to California, and back again to Frankfurt sixteen years later. And it was Horkheimer who, by inspiring personal loyalty, managed to maintain a degree of theoretical cohesiveness among the strong-willed, brilliantly individualistic thinkers to whom he gave intellectual and economic shelter. But there are problems with Jay's approach when it tends to equate the intellectual development of Max Horkheimer with that of the Institute, and to speak of a Frankfurt "School" even though the *non*identities of its members' positions were sometimes as significant as their common assumptions.

In particular, Adorno remains a somewhat shadowy figure in Jay's account, all the more remarkable as Adorno became Horkheimer's close collaborator after 1938 and was the leading "Critical Theorist" at the Institute during the 1960s. The problem has been largely attributed to Adorno's esoteric language, to which, in fact, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt "School" fails to provide sufficient key. The search for such a key has prompted the present study. My research into the historical origins of Adorno's philosophy was done in Frankfurt from 1970 to 1973, during which time the documents from Adorno's Estate were being assembled in preparation for the publication of his complete works. I had access to hitherto unpublished writings, and they contained some surprises. Particularly revealing was Adorno's inaugural lecture to the philosophy faculty at the University of Frankfurt in 1931. It outlined a program and a task for philosophy which was to guide his intellectual efforts for the rest of his life. As he himself recalled in 1962:

Very much of what I wrote in my youth had the character of a dreamlike anticipation, and only from a certain shock-moment on, which may have coincided with the outbreak of Hitler's Reich, did I actually believe that I was right in what I had done.[†]

As the first articulation of his philosophy, which Adorno much later named "negative dialectics," the inaugural lecture demonstrates the remarkable consistency of his thinking over time. It also gives evidence that a shift which occurred in the Frankfurt Institute's position after 1938 reflected not only the external reality of Hitler and World War II but the internal one of Adorno's arrival in the United States as a full-fledged Institute member, the closest to Horkheimer in a personal sense, and increasingly in an intellectual sense as well. Ironically, the shift, which has been interpreted as a move by the Institute away from Marx, on the part of Adorno marked a move toward Marx, along

[†] Letter, Adorno to Ernst Bloch, cited in the editorial afterword of Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1: *Frühe philosophische Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), p. 384. Translation from the German here, and those that follow, are mine. In cases where published English translations exist, I have used them or made my own at my discretion.

with a greater recognition of the limits of intellectual praxis - hence the increased pessimism in the tone of his cultural criticism.

The really formative influence on Adorno occurred before 1931, and it came from Walter Benjamin. Adorno's inaugural lecture clearly documents this fact, which only increases the mystery surrounding the origin of his philosophy. The lecture lays out guidelines for a "dialectical," "materialist" theory which is intentionally Marxist, yet it does so in language and conceptual categories borrowed from the non-Marxist, nonmaterialist early philosophy of Benjamin. The latter incorporated structural elements from such seemingly remote sources as Jewish mysticism, Kantianism, Platonism, and German Romanticism.

The question raised by Adorno's inaugural lecture is the puzzle which this study has tried to resolve: How does Benjamin's early, non-Marxist philosophy provide the key to Adorno's own dialectical, materialist method? The answer involves following Adorno in a double procedure, translating Benjamin's original conceptions into a Marxist theoretical frame, and grounding Marxist theory philosophically with the aid of those conceptions in order to prove immanently that dialectical materialism was the only valid structure of cognitive experience. This task distinguished Adorno's work from *Ideologiekritik*, the criticism of the ideological, social function of ideas, which was characteristic of essays written by other members of the Frankfurt Institute. Adorno not only wanted to demonstrate the untruth of bourgeois thinking; he wanted to show that precisely when the bourgeois project - the idealist project of establishing the identity of mind and material reality - failed, it expressed, unintentionally, social truth, thus proving the preeminence of reality over mind and the necessity of a critical, dialectical attitude of *nonidentity* toward it -proving, in short, the validity of dialectical, materialist cognition.

Adorno's project does not fit neatly into the Hegelian-Marxist philosophical tradition. In rejecting the concept of history as progress and in insisting on the nonidentity of reason and reality, it broke decisively from Hegel; in separating philosophy from all concern with the proletariat, it broke radically from Marx. Adorno was influenced by Husserl's phenomenology as much as by Hegel's. Indeed, it could be said that if Kierkegaard's existentialism and Marx's materialism represented the two branches of protest against Hegel, then there was a parallel in Heidegger's and Adorno's responses to Husserl. But if Adorno was on Marx's side in rejecting existentialism, endorsed by Kierkegaard and Heidegger, his understanding of dialectics was modeled more on aesthetic experience than, as with Marx, on the experience of economic production.

This last point is particularly significant. Adorno thought of himself as an artist, and the time he spent in the 1920s in Vienna studying Schonberg's compositional method with Alban Berg, although brief, left an indelible imprint. He and Benjamin both viewed art as a form of scientific knowledge. Perhaps their most important contribution was to redeem aesthetics as a

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central cognitive discipline, a form of secular revelation, and to insist on the structural convergence of scientific and aesthetic experience. They thereby challenged a fundamental dualism of bourgeois thought, the binary opposition between scientific "truth" and art as "illusion," which had characterized bourgeois thinking since the seventeenth century. Their intellectual careers demonstrate the promise and also the dangers of trying to reconcile these two cultures.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the closeness of Adorno's and Benjamin's philosophical thinking, they became involved in an extended debate, documented by their correspondence, in which Adorno found himself in the anomalous position of defending Benjamin's philosophy against the latter's own revisionism. But after Benjamin's suicide in 1940 his influence on Adorno's thinking remained, and his brilliantly eccentric mind haunts even the most empirical, social-scientific writings of Adorno's later years.

The story of their intellectual friendship forms the major theme of this study. The first part, introduced by a biographical chapter describing Adorno's early intellectual development, analyses his philosophical conceptions as they were first articulated in the early 1930s and demonstrates their debt to Benjamin. This section grew out of a dissertation completed in 1974. The second part returns to the chronological structure of the introductory chapter, tracing the theoretical debate between Adorno and Benjamin, and concludes with Benjamin's suicide and Adorno's reaction to it, in particular, his sublation of even the most daring Benjaminian techniques in the empirical research methodology of *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), the pathbreaking social-psychological study for which he is best known in this country. The account ends in 1953 when, at the age of fifty, Adorno left the United States to return to Frankfurt and join Horkheimer at the newly reestablished *Institut für Sozialforschung*.

This book will have achieved its aim if it introduces "negative dialectics" to an English-reading audience, demonstrates the originality of Adorno's philosophical project when compared to other strands of Western Marxism, and, by showing the project's historical connection to the theory of Walter Benjamin, sets the discussion of Adorno's contribution within an accurate understanding of what it was that he hoped to accomplish.

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