

Jürgen Habermas

Dual-Layered Time

Personal notes on philosopher Theodor W. Adorno in the '50s

by
Jürgen Habermas

What seems to be trivial in retrospect could not be taken for granted by the time I joined the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research); that its reputation would be more dependent on Adorno's incessant productivity, which was only then heading for its climax, rather than on the success of the empirical research with which the institute was supposed to legitimize itself in the first place. Although he was the nerve-center of the institute, Adorno could not handle administrative power. Rather, he constituted the passive center of a complex area of tension. When I arrived in 1956 there were symmetrical differences between Max Horkheimer, Gretel Adorno and Ludwig von Friedburg that were defined by the fact that their respective expectations toward Adorno were thwarted.



Friedeburg had a legitimate interest in a content-based cooperation with Adorno, which would lead to a more theoretical orientation of the empirical research. Separate from this Gretel wanted the personal success of the philosopher both as a scientist and writer, which Adorno actually gained only posthumously. And for Horkheimer it was Adorno's task to establish a public prestige for the institute through politically pleasant and academically impressive studies but without denying their common philosophical intentions and without harming the non-conformist character—the important image in terms of attracting students.

To me Adorno had a different significance: time had a dual-layered quality in the institute. During the fifties there was probably no other place in the whole Federal Republic, in which the intellectual twenties were so explicitly present. Certainly, the old staff members of the institute like Herbert Marcuse, Leo Löwenthal and Erich Fromm, also Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer had remained in America. However, also names like Benjamin and Scholem, Kracauer and Bloch, Brecht and Lukács, Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Norbert Elias, of course the names of

Thomas and Erika Mann, Alban Berg and Arnold Schönberg or those of Kurt Eisler, Lotte Lenya und Fritz Lang circulated in a completely natural fashion between Adorno, Gretel and Horkheimer.

This was no name-dropping. In an astonishingly natural way these names were used to refer to people they had known for decades. The names belonged to people they were either friends with or—more importantly—fought against. Bloch, for example, was still *persona non grata* by the time Adorno wrote *Die große Blochmusik*. The irritatingly casual presence of these minds brought about in me a discrepancy in my sense of time. “For us” the Weimar Republic was lying beyond an abyss-like caesura, whereas “for them” the continuation of the twenties had only recently ended in emigration. Three decades had hardly passed since the time Adorno used to visit his future wife in Berlin where she as a trained chemist and carried on her father’s factory for leather goods—and on one of these occasions he had also met Benjamin. Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* that George Bataille—who by that time was librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale—had taken into safekeeping was hanging at the wall right next to the entrance in Gretel’s room. Then the picture became Scholem’s property and is hanging now in exactly that room of the Hebrew University in which the unique library of this obsessive collector is housed. When I came to Frankfurt, Benjamin was for me as he was to almost all the younger ones—a stranger. But I was soon to learn about the significance of this picture.

Gretel and Teddy Adorno had just published Benjamin’s first essays with Suhrkamp Publishers. Since the public response was weak Gretel asked me to write a review. Therefore, I got hold of those light-brown leather-bound volumes that retrieved Benjamin from oblivion. Ute and I immersed ourselves in the dark shimmering essays and in a peculiar way we were moved by the opaque connection of lucid sentences and apocryphal allusions, which did not seem to fit in any genre.

I was not completely unprepared for the aspects of the dual-layered temporality of everyday life at the institute. However, only they made me aware of the academic milieu of German-Jewish tradition and of the long noticeable extent of the moral corruption of a German university that had not directly engaged in, but at least had tacitly accepted, the expulsion and annihilation of this spirit. In those days I began to imagine the state of mind of those colleagues who must have been staring at empty chairs at the first faculty meeting of the summer term, 1933. In Frankfurt, the young university owed its fame it found during the Weimar Republic to the non-discrimination rule in its policy and hiring procedures that were

unbiased toward Jews, but in Frankfurt the faculty was reduced by almost a third.

Intellectually I entered a new universe in 1956. In spite of familiar issues and sets of questions, it was different and fascinating at the same time. Compared to the environment of Bonn University, here the lava of thought was moving. Never before had I encountered such subtly differentiated intellectual complexity at its embarkation—in the mode of movement before finding its literary manifestation. What Schelling had developed in the summer term, 1802, in his Jena lectures to serve as a method of academic studies as an idea of the German university, namely to “construct the whole of one’s science out of oneself and to present it with inner and lively visualization”—this is what Adorno practiced in this summer term in Frankfurt.

Effortless as it seemed, he presented the dialectic production of speculative thoughts without notes but in a polished style. Gretel had asked me to accompany her to the lecture that still took place in those days in the small lecture hall. In the following years when I already was busy with other things, I noticed that she hardly ever missed one of Teddy’s lectures. The first time I struggled to follow the talk; blinded by the brilliance of expression and the way he presented it, I was lagging behind the diction of the thought. I only noticed later that this dialectics often fossilized into mere manner/affectation. The main impression was the sparkling pretense of enlightenment that was still in the darkness of the not understood—the promise to make concealed connections transparent.

How a whole new world opens up

However, those unknown authors and thoughts—Freud and Durkheim, psychoanalysis and sociology of religion—did not enter as from outside, as a reduction into the holy realm of German Idealism. With the help from Freud’s superego and Durkheim’s collective consciousness, he did not examine the miserable other side of the categorical imperative—its inappropriate usage—in order to denounce Kant’s *free will* but he did so to denounce the repressive circumstances that made this potential fade away. What Paul Ricoeur later called the “hermeneutics of suspicion” was not Adorno’s thing. This was due to the protective impulse, which was just as strong as the critical one that served anyone—at least that is what it appeared to me. We had studied at the morally-deteriorated universities of the Adenauer era that were marked with self-pity, suppression and

insensitiveness. In the mind-fetishizing shallow and murky environment of the “loss of the center,” our vague need for an act of a *comprehending* catharsis could not be satisfied. Only the intellectual fervency and the intense analytical work of a solitary working and defiant Adorno saved the substance of our own great traditions for us in those days. He did this in the only possible way: by relentlessly criticizing their views.

The imperative consciousness of needing to be absolutely modern was combined with Proust’s gaze of remembrance to the wildly leveling-off of progress in a modernization devoid of any remembering. Modernization was hardly anywhere as overpowering as in the hastily and roughly performed corrections in the wounded streets of a town as hard hit as the Frankfurt Berliner Strasse. Whoever was listening to Adorno could not fail to tell the avant-garde spirit of modernity from the fake, aesthetically self-destructing progress of the “reconstruction.” This haste had lost touch with the insight into this forward-looking dialectics of the nonconformist, which had been dismissed as obsolete. To me new and outrageous, in a philosophical context, aesthetic arguments gained immediate political affirmation.

If I remember correctly, the ambivalence of my first impressions in this new environment, to me with all of my intellectual excitement it was a mixture of disconcertment and admiration. I felt like being in a novel by Balzac—the clumsily uneducated boy from the province whose eyes were opened by the big city. I became aware of the conventionality of my way of thinking and feeling. I had grown up in the dominant traditions, that had persisted during the Nazi-era and now I found myself in a milieu in which everything was alive that had been eliminated by the Nazis. It is easy to remember those unknown issues that had to be learned about then. However, it is hard to describe how a universe of concepts and mentalities changes through the opening of a whole new world. It is this what happened shortly after my arrival while attending this memorable series of lectures that was held by Alexander Mitscherlich and Horkheimer on the occasion of Sigmund Freud’s 100th birthday anniversary. All these new thoughts were eye opening, overwhelming.

At least I was prepared for Adorno and the reconciliation of philosophy and sociology and of Hegel and Marx, even though I was not used to the systematic style that promised to live up to the radical expectations of a social theory. Adorno gave new life to the systematically used and amalgamated concepts by Marx, Freud and Durkheim. By means of a contemporary-sociological thinking, he removed the simple historical from everything that I already knew from the Marx discourse of the '20s and made it very present. It was only in the melting pot of this

enlightened culture informed by social theory critique that the vague concepts of my Bonn University days dissolved. But the fog would not have lifted as fast had I not convinced myself of the scientific character of the new perspective on the facts.

The power of negating thought

The now-legendary Freud lectures were very helpful in this. At that time in the USA, in England, Holland and Switzerland, psychoanalysis was at the peak of its reputation. The groundbreaking works of Erik Erikson, René Spitz, Ludwig Binswanger, Franz Alexander, Michael Balint, Gustav Bally and many more (among which was Anna Spitz, of course) enjoyed worldwide respect. Hardly more than one decade after the end of the war this elite circle of scientists addressed a German audience to report on the progress of this discipline that had been ousted shamefully in 1933. I do not know what had fascinated me more now, after having encountered Freud only in derogatory contexts: the impressive individuals or the brilliant talks. In this respectable environment Adorno's and Marcuse's contributions to the Horkheimer *festschrift* received an enhanced scientific character.

At that time I did not know the research agenda of the old Institute and was not aware of the fact that it was these two authors *alone* who continued the tradition without even considering a discontinuity. Leo Löwenthal's most productive days lay behind him; Otto Kirchheimer and Franz Neumann had always gone their own ways; Erich Fromm was now considered a "revisionist" from the perspective of the core of the institute circle; Friedrich Pollock had practiced theoretical abstinence since the discussion on state capitalism in the early '40s.

Not everything was different in a liberating sense. Someone who had graduated from a traditional philosophy department noticed irritating gaps in the Frankfurt canon. Those I considered the philosophical "contemporaries," the great authors of the '20s and '30s like Scheler, Heidegger, Jaspers, Gehlen, but also Cassirer, even Plessner, let alone Carnap and Reichenbach—they all did not appear in seminar nor lecture. If at all, they were mentioned then only in a *bon mot* like the one from Horkheimer: "If it has to be Jaspers then preferably Heidegger." The hermeneutic tradition from Humboldt to Dilthey was branded as Idealist. The Phenomenological School did not have a better position either: Husserl's development seemed to stop before his transcendental change.

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Of the Neo-Kantians only Cohen and Cornelius, Horkheimer's teacher, were mentioned with a certain respect.

The relevant history of philosophy seemed to end with Bergson, Georg Simmel and the Göttingener Husserl—hence before WWI. Only while reading the posthumously published inaugural lecture on the “Actuality of Philosophy” did I discover with a certain astonishment that Adorno must have taken a good look at Heidegger's *Being and Time* as an outside lecturer; *The Jargon of Authenticity*, which had been published shortly after that had not been able to convince me of this fact. Nevertheless, I have to add that this first Adorno lecture was not to remain the only one I visited over the course of one whole semester. I often attended the Hegel seminars. The absence of the philosophy of the '20s created a somewhat old-fashioned air of the Frankfurt discourse. Even stronger was the contrast to the spirit of the aesthetic and Freudian avant-garde that was expressed by Adorno in a radical way, from head to toe.

If I want to try and describe the change in consciousness and the impact of the mental influence that the daily contact with Adorno had brought about in me, then it is best captured by the distancing from the familiar vocabulary and the outlook of the very German historical humanities that are rooted in Herder's romanticism. The sobering sociological perspective on the complexity of the tied-up whole of a mutilated life-framework yet to be understood was connected with the trust in the analytical power of a negating thinking that would unravel the knot.

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