

A letter and reply on Theodor Adorno

Stefan Steinberg
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The following letter was written in response to the article, “German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk defends racist remarks by central banker.” It is followed by a response from the author of the article, Stefan Steinberg.

I am disheartened, to say the least, by the author’s ignorance of the work and ideas of Theodor Adorno, the great Marxist philosopher of the 20th century. His and Horkheimer’s book *Dialectic of Reason* (1941) is primarily a response to German Nazism and fascist/authoritarian social dominance in the rest of the industrialized world of the time. Their recommendation (the book is a series of essays) is that the Enlightenment project has failed to live up to its own social promise of universal human betterment, as it bought in to capitalism, and that more and truer enlightenment, not less, is required.

Adorno was also throughout his teaching, writing, and public life (he died in 1969) the chief opponent of the work of Martin Heidegger, the one-time Nazi philosopher, and of fascist and establishment thought in general. He had a famous run-in with leftwing student activists in Frankfurt in the last several months of his life, but that was caused by his consistent (and finally tragic) opposition to authoritarianism, wherever it appeared in post-war German life. Adorno was a lifelong antifascist and pro-socialist philosopher, in the best sense of the word. Instead of retailing ignorant received opinion, the author of your article should do some serious reading and thinking of his own.

RD

Dear RD,

I disagree profoundly with your characterization of Theodor Adorno as “the great Marxist philosopher of the 20th century”. You are not the only person to hold this view of Adorno, but that does not make your standpoint any more correct.

From the very start of his work as a leading member of the Frankfurt School, Adorno rejected the basic maxim of Marxism, which stresses the primacy of economic relations in determining social and political relations. Both Adorno and the head of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer, regarded such a standpoint as inadequate to explain new political phenomena, in particular the emergence of fascism in Germany. Drawing from the work of Sigmund Freud, they sought to explain the rise of National Socialism predominantly through psychosocial factors.

Instead of seeking to determine the roots for the emergence of fascism in the play of living political forces and parties against a background of economic crisis, the leading members of the Frankfurt School authored essays and undertook a series of

sociological studies to explain a conclusion they had already drawn—i.e., the complete political impotence of the working class.

In his notes and writings published under the title *Twilight* (1928-1934), Horkheimer titles one section, “The Impotence of the German Working Class.” Already by this time, he had concluded that the integration of the working class into the capitalist process of production rendered it unviable as an agent for socialism. Adorno agreed with this position. In his history of the Frankfurt School, Rolf Wiggerhaus concludes with regard to this period: “None of them [the leaders of the Frankfurt School] put any hopes in the working class...Adorno expressly denied that the working class had any progressive role to play.” (*The Frankfurt School—Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, MIT Press, 1992, p. 123)

While denying the economic and political roots of fascism and writing off the working class as an agency for progressive change, Adorno’s position with regard to Stalinism was no better.

In line with the standpoint adopted by many left-wing German intellectuals exiled by fascism—i.e., “As long as Hitler is alive, there can be no criticism of Stalin!”—Adorno explicitly advocated silence over Stalin’s monstrous suppression of the Left Opposition.

At the height of the Moscow Trials Adorno advised, “At the moment the most loyal position is to keep quiet.” In a letter to Horkheimer, he pleads that the group should “keep discipline and publish nothing which could lead to Russia being harmed.”

Just a few years later the Soviet and international proletariat paid a terrible price for such exercises in apologetics when Stalin joined Hitler in a pact that provided the National Socialists the time they needed to complete their preparations for the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Demoralised by the emergence of fascism and Stalinism, Adorno and Horkheimer increasingly junked what was left of their socialist phraseology in the 1940s.

In his book on the Frankfurt School, Zoltan Tar notes that the reaction of Adorno and Horkheimer to the urgent political problems of the period was to entirely jettison the notion of class analysis: “In their writings of the 1940’s Horkheimer and Adorno increasingly replaced the conceptualisation of class conflict by the concept of the conflict of man versus nature, as part of a theory of universal domination. The term ‘class’ vanishes from the terminology of Critical Theory. A combination of sociological and psychological factors, such as the withering away of every revolutionary working class movement, the zenith of fascist conquest, the diminishing hope in the possibility of genuine socialism in the Soviet Union, and the author’s isolation in

America, accounts for this shift.” (*The Frankfurt School*, Schocken, 1985, p. 80)

Dialectic of the Enlightenment

All of the frustration and despair with which Adorno and Horkheimer regarded developments in Germany (and also America, where they spent their longest period of exile) were expressed in their Messianic text *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* jointly written in 1944, and published three years later. The book set itself the task of “nothing less than the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”

How did Adorno and Horkheimer account for the descent into barbarism in the middle of the twentieth century? In an anecdotal and at times thoroughly abstruse text, Adorno and Horkheimer reach back into history and evoke the travels and travails of Odysseus to justify an attack on rational thought, science and technology. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the two leaders of the Frankfurt School develop a dialogue with the French writer Marquise de Sade and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, only to conclude that barbarism is the inevitable result of any attempt made by man to exert control over nature.

Drawing in part from the criticism of modern capitalist society undertaken earlier in the century by the German sociologist Max Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno declare that *instrumental rationality* (i.e., the attempt to scientifically understand and transform the world) inevitably leads to the domination of the individual. Echoing Nietzsche’s own misgivings over progress (“‘progress’ is a modern idea, which is to say it is a false idea”), Adorno and Horkheimer write: “The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression.”

Identifying rationality with the conceptions advanced by the great Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that, irrespective of the form and composition of society, the attempt to control nature through science inevitably leads to domination: “terror and civilization are inseparable...It is impossible to abolish the terror and retain civilization.”

It is widely acknowledged that Adorno was the principal author of the texts contained in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

To summarize:

1) Adorno (and Horkheimer) rejected from the outset the Marxist axiom of the primacy of economic relations in determining social and political relations.

2) Adorno (and Horkheimer) repeatedly stressed their conviction that the working class is politically “impotent”.

3) Adorno refused to address and condemn the Moscow Trials even though he and other leading members of the Frankfurt School were quite aware of what was taking place in the Soviet Union.

4) In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno (and Horkheimer) substitute the Marxist conception of alienation as the specific form in which workers are divorced from the product of their labour in

capitalist society into a general malaise doomed to plague mankind in every sort of productive society. For Adorno, the only chance of redemption was a form of utopia that rejected the principle of production. He wrote: “Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and out of freedom, leave possibilities unused...lying on the water and looking at the sky, being, nothing else without any further definition and fulfillment...none of these abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of perpetual peace.”

5) Adorno and Horkheimer increasingly rejected a class analysis of society, beginning at least by the Second World War.

All of these positions are incompatible with a Marxist outlook or the struggle for socialism.

Finally, you write that Adorno was the chief opponent of the work of Martin Heidegger. It is true that Adorno wrote his book *The Jargon of Authenticity* in opposition to elements of Heidegger’s thought. But the relationship between the two of them was ambivalent to say the least. In the thirties, Horkheimer and Adorno spoke very positively of Heidegger’s work. Even after the war Adorno asked Horkheimer to write a review of Heidegger’s book *Holzwege (False Trails)*, noting that Heidegger “in a way...is not all that different to us”.

A number of authors have pointed out the similarities between the thought of Adorno and Heidegger—in particular their similar conception of alienation and above all their treatment of art and culture as a refuge or substitute for political and philosophical engagement. (See, for example, Chapter 24 in Rüdiger Safranski’s *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*.)

There is no doubt that Adorno, Horkheimer and other members of the Frankfurt School possessed considerable intellectual abilities. They stand head and shoulders above the self-inflated obscurantist Peter Sloterdijk. But under the extremely challenging political conditions of the 1930s, Adorno was unable to comprehend and explain the root causes for the emergence of fascism and Stalinism. This was to have disastrous consequences for the subsequent political, theoretical and philosophical orientation of the Frankfurt School.

During this period of enormous setbacks for the international working class, the continuity of a genuine Marxist and socialist analysis was preserved and advanced solely by Leon Trotsky and his supporters in the International Left Opposition.

Stefan Steinberg



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