

CHAPTER 12. Epilogue:

The Method of Negative Dialectics

There is something false about speaking of Adorno's "theories." In fact he had none, just as he had no "concept" of history.¹ And just as he typically defined concepts by their polar opposites ("history" by "nature," "individual" by "society"), so now he constructed whole theories out of opposing and contradictory tenets. His theory of fascism was based simultaneously on the premise of bureaucratic rationalization with its "instrumental reason" and the notion of the irrational, charismatic leader, two conceptions which Max Weber had developed to describe *mutually exclusive* realities. Adorno never gave up his characterization of society as fragmented, discontinuous (*brüchig*), and in a state of disintegration (*Zerfall*); he simply added to it the opposite idea, that it formed a closed, air-tight system, that "the total organization of society through big business and its omnipresent technology has ... taken unbroken [*lückenlos*] possession of the world and imagination...."² If Horkheimer's thinking described a dialectical pattern, Adorno's thinking *was* that pattern. He understood Hegel's "self-movement of the concept" not as a "theory of development,"³ but as a movement of thought in which "all categories are themselves and not themselves,"⁴ in which a concept was "observed so closely that it was maintained and transformed at the same time."⁵

In 1942 Adorno wrote three short pieces similar in format to Benjamin's theses on history.⁶ But whereas Benjamin juxtaposed opposites in a visual sense, using theological images (the angel of history, the Messiah, the chess-playing dwarf) to express historical materialism, its polar opposite, Adorno's pieces "developed" dynamically from one pole to another. He used dialectical argument to construct "models" of thought which, no matter where they began, always moved in the opposite direction. Hence an analysis of the authoritarian personality pointed to the character of the society which had produced it; but in any discussion of social structure, Adorno moved to a consideration of the psychology which reproduced it: In "Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie" (Reflections on Class Theory), his analysis of class society hinged on an

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analysis of mass psychology which prevented the experience of class,⁷ while in "Thesen über Bedürfnis" (Theses on Needs), his analysis of psychological needs turned in fact on an analysis of social constraints: "the idea that a revolutionary society would cry out for the bad performances of Hedy Lamar or bad soup from Campbell's is absurd. The better the soup, the more gladly they will do without Lamar."⁸

When he interpreted the history of class struggle, it was in terms of a theory of history as the ever-identical;⁹ but he addressed the ontological issues of anthropology in terms of historical change.¹⁰ He defined social atomization by social conformism, alienation by collectivization.¹¹ The suffering of the masses was identified as the inability to experience suffering;¹² sexual license was seen as an expression of bourgeois asceticism.¹³ On the philosophical level, Adorno criticized not only the dualism between alienated subject and reified object but simultaneously the identity between subject and object. This identity in turn took several forms: subjectivity was a box which entrapped the subject on the one hand; on the other, the subject alternately dominated the object and yielded to it to the point of its own extinction.

Adorno's originality lay not in the material substance of his theoretical arguments, but in the way he put them together. His work on anti-Semitism, for example, relied heavily on psychological concepts developed by Erich Fromm. But Fromm, who was just as insistent regarding the mutual mediation of psychological character and social structure and just as aware of the "double character" - in Freudian language, the ambivalence-of psychological phenomena, still wanted to construct a positive description of modern man. For him the goal of knowledge was to have something - a new and lasting theory - at the end, whereas Adorno, whose concern was a new social reality, saw in the desire to possess even a theory the risk of reproducing the commodity structure within consciousness. His was a negative anthropology, and its goal as knowledge was to keep criticism alive.¹⁴

The purpose of what in Adorno's case could be called "antitheories" was to avoid such conformism at all costs. This lends to negative dialectics the quality of quicksilver: just when you think you have grasped the point, by turning into its opposite it slips through your fingers and escapes.

But even though Adorno appeared to be arguing opposite positions simultaneously, what gave his models logical coherence was his identification of the point of convergence between opposites: in every case it was the structure of domination. That structure, which in turn converged with the structure of commodities, emerged whenever one side of a polarity gained the upper hand, thereby duplicating the social structure and enabling that structure to continue: If in thinking about reality the (reified) object was allowed to dominate the subject, the result was the reification of consciousness and the passive acceptance of the status quo; if the subject dominated the object, the result was domination of nature and the ideological justification of the status quo. Only by keeping the argument circling in perpetual motion could thought escape compromising with its revolutionary goal.

There was no waning of Adorno's commitment to revolution as both necessary and desirable. The problem was "not the possibility of barbarism after the revolution, but the hindering of revolution throughout the whole society."¹⁵ Even within the liberal-democratic language of *The Authoritarian Personality* one can find revolutionary statements, such as Adorno's comment "The argument that first the people should be changed before the world can be changed belongs to the old anti-utopian armory. It leads to a vicious circle...."¹⁶ Nor did he retreat from a Marxist position regarding the class nature of the revolutionary struggle:

It is true, of course, as a matter of economic and social fact, that the crucial role in the struggle against increasing concentration of economic power will have to be played by the working people....¹⁷

And he never gave up hope for social transformation, although he believed that hope could no longer express itself positively. Even that stultifier of consciousness, mass culture, when reflected upon critically, might foster revolutionary awareness, if only because the very ideology of equality and identity which it perpetrated illuminated the actuality of class differences as nothing more than "naked usurpation."¹⁸

Adorno's position had changed, however, in that his faith in the autonomy of culture, his belief that intellectual practice could successfully revolutionize its own material or "means of production," had been shaken. In recognition of the preeminent power of socioeconomic forces, his position had become actually more "Marxist" rather than less. He wrote with some candor:

In America I was liberated from a certain naive belief in culture and attained the capacity to see culture from the outside. To clarify the point: in spite of all social criticism and all consciousness of the primacy of economic factors, the fundamental importance of the mind - "Geist" - was quasi a dogma self-evident to me from the very beginning. The fact that this was not a foregone conclusion, I learned in America, where no reverential silence in the presence of everything intellectual prevailed, ... and the absence of this respect inclined the intellect toward critical self-scrutiny. This particularly affected the European presuppositions of musical cultivation in which I was immersed.¹⁹

The theme of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* was a criticism of "progress" in reason, which, failing a revolution in the socioeconomic structure, began to duplicate the characteristics of that structure and fell back into myth. In an essay on Schönberg which Adorno wrote just prior to this collaborative study (1940 - 1941), he made the same argument, as an act of self-criticism, regarding "progress" in music. The essay circulated among German immigrant intellectuals during the forties as an unpublished manuscript.²⁰ Thomas Mann, who had begun work on the novel *Doktor Faustus*, read it in 1943 with "a feeling of ... strange familiarity,"²¹ and he subsequently collaborated closely with Adorno on the musical theory on which the novel was based,²² referring to him as the "Privy Councillor" of the work.²³

The Schönberg essay and the introduction which accompanied its first

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publication in 1949 make it clear that Adorno had not altered his position as to the essentially dialectical structure of Schönberg's composing, and his description of the process was replete with the characteristic Benjaminian phraseology. He had not capitulated regarding his fundamental tenet that the validity of art rested on the artist's relation to his material rather than to the working class.²⁴ But whereas he had been formerly optimistic as to the progressive possibilities of intellectual practice, now he saw the danger that "non-conforming music," preserving its truth through "indifference to the public," allowed its "truth to wither":²⁵ "In the process of pursuing its own inner logic, music is transformed more and more from something significant into something obscure -even to itself."²⁶

Adorno's new argument was essentially this: Schönberg's atonal revolution had indeed succeeded in freeing the musical material from the tyrannical "second nature" laws of the bourgeois tonal system, but as a revolution within the superstructure alone, its liberating impulse could not be maintained. Atonality led to twelve-tone composition, the principles of which became a new musical dogma.²⁷ Schönberg used the term "model" to describe thematic material in his music, the identity of which remained throughout a series of variations. The material was

... all "the same thing." But the meaning of this identity reveals itself as nonidentity. The thematic material is of such a nature that to attempt to secure it is tantamount to varying it.²⁸

This description demonstrates that Schönberg's "models" were still prototypical of Adorno's own. But was Adorno not also aware that his philosophy was threatened with the same pitfalls as well?

In describing atonality's lapse into a new system, which he now interpreted as revolutionary failure, Adorno pointed to the principles of variation in the twelve-tone system - retrograde, or reversal of the tone row, inversion, and retrograde inversion - whereby, he claimed, the dynamic principle of variation turned static by falling back into a predictable and closed structure.²⁹ I have already suggested³⁰ that the same compositional techniques governed the structure of Adorno's essays: the principle of reversal found its counterpart in his arguments demonstrating that polar extremes were both true, that opposites converged; the principle of inversion coincided with his showing that what appeared to be subjective was objective, or vice versa: immanent criticism of texts revealed that theory was an image of social reality, while social physiognomics interpreted social reality as an image of theory. In the tone row, no one note had more significance than the others, and Adorno treated social phenomena similarly, so that, for example, "automobile junk yards ... drowned cats, all these apocryphal realms on the edges of civilization move suddenly into the center."³¹

The real issue is whether Adorno's attempt at a revolution within philosophy, modeled self-consciously after Schönberg, in fact succumbed to the same fate, whether his principle of antisystem itself became a system. The

whole point of his relentless insistence on negativity was to resist repeating in thought the structures of domination and reification that existed in society, so that instead of reproducing reality, consciousness could be critical, so that reason would recognize its own nonidentity with social reality, on the one hand, and material nature's nonidentity with the categorizing consciousness that passed for rationality, on the other. While the first of these (reason's nonidentity with reality) was the essence of Horkheimer's Critical Theory, the second (the object's nonidentity with the concept) was indebted to Benjamin:

Benjamin's concept of experience refers to the particular, and almost the entire effort of his philosophy can be defined as an attempt to rescue the particular. The disgrace in America consists of the fact that precisely here, where the particular is totally destroyed by the general, where in place of experience there exists the repetition of the ever-identical, the attempt is made to represent the particular as if it survived.³²

It cannot be disputed that despite its dialectical complexity, Adorno's position had an immanent consistency - indeed, he was philosophically the most stringent of all the Frankfurt "School." But at the boundaries of his thinking loomed a paradox which even dialectics couldn't dissolve. According to Adorno, "nonparticipation" (*nicht-mitmachen*) was absolutely necessary in order to keep alive the capacity for experience of the nonidentical:

... being consumed, swallowed up, is indeed just what I understand as "participation" [*Mitmachen*] which is so totally characteristic for the new anthropological [type] - the lack of curiosity. No longer wanting to know anything new, above all anything that is open and unguarded. The guardedness as well of the revolution....³³

But at the same time, in order to prevent identifying with the given, thought could never experience the new as new: "Only he who recognizes the most modern as the ever-identical serves that which would be different."³⁴

Hence, in the name of revolution, thought could never acknowledge a revolutionary situation; in the name of utopia, it could never work for utopia's realization. Adorno ensured perhaps too successfully that reason did not become "instrumental." For instrumental reason preserved a moment of "use value" which negative dialectics had to abandon. The result was that as opposites, they too converged: instrumental reason lost sight of rational goals, ceased to be a means, and became an end in itself; but negative dialectics abrogated political utility, and thus became an end in itself as well. The name of the constellation in which they converged was fetishism, and once again, twelve tone music provides the model.³⁵ Adorno recognized that twelve-tone composing, in an attempt to avoid the domination of tonality, adhered to rules more constraining than before: "It enchains music by liberating it."³⁶ But did he see that the logical structure of his own essays became increasingly predictable, so that, just as in twelve-tone composing,

Structure as such is to be correct rather than meaningful. The question which

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twelve-tone music asks of the composer is not how musical meaning is to be organized, but rather, how organization is to become meaningful.³⁷

In *Negative Dialektik*, Adorno warned that thinking must avoid making the dialectic itself a first principle - "*prima dialectica*"³⁸ But he was driven toward this in spite of himself, perhaps indeed by the "objective demands" of the material. When the principle of twelve-tone technique became "total," the dynamics of the new music was "brought to a standstill."³⁹ But when the method of negative dialectics became total, philosophy threatened to come to a standstill as well, and the New Left of the 1960s not unjustly criticized Adorno for taking Critical Theory into a dead end. The staticness, the quality of incantation, that he so criticized in Benjamin's work was not lacking in his own. Did the perpetual motion of Adorno's arguments go anywhere? Did they lead out of the bourgeois *intérieur* or simply hang suspended within it like the new art form of mobiles?

In his criticism of Husserl, Adorno praised this bourgeois thinker for taking idealism to its limits, claiming he had only to "step through the open door to the world of things"⁴⁰ in order to transcend idealism and escape the confines of subjectivity. But it is debatable whether Adorno himself made that step, which perhaps would have necessitated breaking the taboo against positivity. What he criticized in Husserl was ultimately true of himself: "the philosophical creator, who once planned a better social contract, is once again only the creator of philosophy."⁴¹

An acquaintance of Adorno once commented:

Adorno, as far as I can see, never took a trip out of the simple desire to see. Europe sufficed for him entirely. No India or China, no Third World, not the people's democracies and not the workers' movements.⁴²

This personal characteristic is perhaps not insignificant. The material of the philosopher in the bourgeois era is the written text, and no matter how much he "enters into it," he remains within a private sphere:

In his text, the writer sets up house. Just as he trundles papers, books, pencils, documents untidily from room to room, he creates the same disorder in his thoughts. They become pieces of furniture that he sinks into, content or irritable. He strokes them affectionately, wears them out, mixes them up, re-arranges, ruins them. For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.⁴³