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Introduction and Table of Contents

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Contents

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Series Preface</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi

PART I THREE PORTRAITS

1 Martin Jay (1969), 'The Permanent Exile of Theodor W. Adorno', <i>Midstream</i> , 15, pp. 62–69.	3
2 Irving Wohlfarth (1979), 'Hibernation: On the Tenth Anniversary of Adorno's Death', <i>Modern Language Notes</i> , 94, pp. 956–87.	11
3 Leo Löwenthal (1984), 'Recollections of Theodor W. Adorno', <i>Telos</i> , 61, pp. 158–65.	43

PART II PHILOSOPHY AS CRITIQUE

4 Fredric Jameson (1967), 'T.W. Adorno, or, Historical Tropes', <i>Salmagundi</i> , 2, pp. 3–43.	53
5 Gillian Rose (1976), 'How is Critical Theory Possible? Theodor W. Adorno and Concept Formation in Sociology', <i>Political Studies</i> , 24, pp. 69–85.	95
6 Susan F. Buck-Morss (1977), 'T.W. Adorno and the Dilemma of Bourgeois Philosophy', <i>Salmagundi</i> , 36, pp. 76–98.	113
7 Robert Hullot-Kentor (1984), 'Introduction to Adorno's "Idea of Natural History"', <i>Telos</i> , 60, pp. 97–110.	137

PART III CULTURE AND SOCIETY

8 Andreas Huyssen (1983), 'Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner', <i>New German Critique</i> , 29, pp. 8–38.	153
9 Peter U. Hohendahl (1992), 'The Displaced Intellectual? Adorno's American Years Revisited', <i>New German Critique</i> , 56, pp. 76–100.	185
10 Nico Israel (1997), 'Damage Control: Adorno, Los Angeles, and the Dislocation of Culture', <i>Yale Journal of Criticism</i> , 10, pp. 85–113.	211
11 Robert W. Witkin (2000), 'Why Did Adorno "Hate" Jazz?', <i>Sociological Theory</i> , 18, pp. 145–70.	241
12 Rose Rosengard Subotnik (1977), 'Why is Adorno's Music Criticism the Way It Is? Some Reflections of Twentieth-Century Criticism of Nineteenth-Century Music', <i>Musical Newsletter</i> , 7, pp. 3–12.	267

- 13 Max Paddison (1991), 'The Language-Character of Music: Some Motifs in Adorno', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, **116**, pp. 267–79. 277

PART IV REASON, DOMINATION, AND THE SUBJECT

- 14 James Schmidt (1998), 'Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*', *Social Research*, **65**, pp. 807–38. 293
- 15 Jürgen Habermas (1982), 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*', *New German Critique*, **26**, pp. 13–30. 325
- 16 Christopher Rocco (1994), 'Between Modernity and Postmodernity: Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* against the Grain', *Political Theory*, **22**, pp. 71–97. 343
- 17 Deborah Cook (1995), 'The Sundered Totality: Adorno's Freudo-Marxism', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, **25**, pp. 191–215. 371
- 18 Anson Rabinbach (2000), 'Why Were the Jews Sacrificed? The Place of Anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*', *New German Critique*, **81**, pp. 49–64. 397

PART V ART, TRUTH, AND UTOPIA

- 19 Richard Wolin (1990), 'Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*', *Representations*, **32**, pp. 33–49. 415
- 20 Raymond Geuss (1988), 'Art and Criticism in Adorno's Aesthetics', *European Journal of Philosophy*, **6**, pp. 297–317. 433
- 21 Albrecht Wellmer (1984), 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', *Telos*, **62**, pp. 89–115. 455
- 22 Shierry Weber Nichol森 (1991), 'Toward a More Adequate Reception of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*: Configurational Form in Adorno's Aesthetic Writings', *Cultural Critique*, **18**, pp. 33–64. 483
- 23 J.M. Bernstein (2004), 'Mimetic Rationality and Material Inference: Adorno and Brandom', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, **581**, pp. 7–23. 515
- Name Index* 533

Introduction

Over the last several decades, the reputation of Theodor Adorno has loomed ever larger. His significance as a cultural critic and literary theorist is, by now, well established and his contributions to the philosophy of music are widely recognized. His pivotal role in the development of the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School has been extensively documented and his contributions to the understanding of mass culture have sparked much debate. And, with the ongoing publication of his manuscripts and lectures, there has been an increased appreciation of the broader philosophical commitments that animate his work.¹

This collection documents the English-language reception of Adorno's work. It begins with general assessments of Adorno's achievement by Martin Jay, Irving Wohlfarth, and Adorno's colleague, Leo Löwenthal (Chapters 1–3). Subsequent essays examine Adorno's conception of philosophy (Part II), the concerns that informed his writings on culture and society (Part III), the relationship between reason, individuality and domination that he saw as defining the modern world (Part IV) and his account of the significance of art (Part V).

Biographical Sketch

Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund-Adorno was born in Frankfurt am Main on 11 September 1903.² He came of age in a household marked by material abundance (his father, an assimilated Jew, was a wealthy wine merchant) and cultural refinement (his mother, of Corsican descent, had pursued a career in opera prior to her marriage). As a young man, he vacillated between careers in music (Adorno was trained in composition and made an early name for himself through his music reviews) and academia. Studies in philosophy at the University of Frankfurt brought him into the orbit of the philosopher Max Horkheimer, who would remain a lifelong friend, while his interest in music led him to Vienna where he studied composition with Alban Berg and became part of the circle around Berg's teacher, Arnold Schoenberg. He returned to Frankfurt and submitted his *Habilitationsschrift* (a second dissertation required for the awarding of a professorship) to the philosopher Hans Cornelius in 1927, but withdrew the application once it became clear that Cornelius was not well disposed towards the study, which examined the place of the unconscious in recent philosophy. A subsequent *Habilitationsschrift* on the work of Søren Kierkegaard was accepted by the theologian Paul Tillich and published as *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Adorno, 1989). The book appeared in bookstores on 27 February 1933, the day Adolf Hitler, taking advantage of the emergency powers provisions of the Weimar constitution, consolidated his rule.

¹ Adorno's published works were collected in Adorno (1970). Letters, lecture transcripts and unfinished works have appeared, or will appear, in Adorno (1993a).

² For recent accounts of Adorno's life see Müller-Doohm (2005), Jäger (2004) and Claussen (2003).

At the time, Adorno was a *Privatdozent* (a rank roughly equivalent to lecturer) in philosophy at Frankfurt and had an informal affiliation with the Institute for Social Research. The Institute had been established in 1924 and was explicitly Marxist in orientation, though independent of any party affiliation. After the appointment of Max Horkheimer as director in 1931, it became increasingly interdisciplinary in its approach – embracing psychoanalysis and emphasizing the importance of empirical research, including an extensive study of working-class attitudes.³

The Institute was among the earliest targets of the National Socialist state. Its facilities were seized, and its associates – including the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, the sociologist Leo Löwenthal, the economist Frederick Pollock and the philosopher Herbert Marcuse – went into exile. In the confusion, Adorno lost contact with Horkheimer and remained behind, but eventually found refuge at Oxford University. After contact was resumed, he moved to Columbia University in New York, where the Institute had resumed its activities. During his American exile he began the close collaboration with Horkheimer that would result in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). Other works from this period include *The Philosophy of New Music* (Adorno, 2006a), which explored the diverging approaches taken by Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky, and *Minima Moralia* (Adorno, 1974), a series of reflections on the experience of exile. He also served as the ‘musical consultant’ for Thomas Mann’s novel, *Doctor Faustus*, and collaborated in a research project on anti-Semitism that produced *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno *et al.*, 1950).

In 1949 he returned with Horkheimer to Frankfurt and re-established the Institute for Social Research. Drawing, in part, on work originally written in exile, he produced a flood of essays and critical studies in the areas of music, literature, cultural criticism and philosophy that secured his reputation as one of the dominant figures in the intellectual life of the Federal Republic of Germany. He succeeded Horkheimer as director of the Institute in 1958 and played a leading role in the so-called ‘Positivist Dispute’ – a series of debates about the nature of the social sciences (Adorno *et al.*, 1976) – and in public discussions of the need for Germans to confront their complicity in the atrocities of the National Socialist era (Adorno, 2003). *Negative Dialectics*, which Adorno characterized as a presentation of his ‘anti-system’, was published in 1966 (Adorno, 1973).

In his final years Adorno became entangled in controversies with student radicals, who attacked him for what they regarded as his complicity with the established order, a complicity they saw as betraying the implicit thrust of his own work. In turn, Adorno became increasingly critical of what he regarded as the mindless and nihilistic activism of these ‘left-wing fascists’. In the spring and early summer of 1969, demonstrators disrupted his courses. Depressed and exhausted, he cancelled his remaining lectures and withdrew to a resort in the Swiss Alps, where he died of heart failure on 6 August.

³ For the history of the Institute, see Wiggershaus (1994) and Jay (1973).

Philosophy as Critique

Minima Moralia closed with a passage that can serve as both a summary of Adorno's philosophy and a reminder of the challenges such a summary faces:

Knowledge has no light than the one that shines on the world from redemption: everything else exhausts itself in reconstruction and remains a piece of technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. (Adorno, 1974, p. 247)⁴

This task, he argued, is 'the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge'. But it is also 'utterly impossible' because every attempt to see the world in a different light will inevitably be marked by 'the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape' (Adorno, 1974, p. 247).

From his earliest writings, Adorno regarded the claim that philosophy provided a comprehensive account of the world as worse than fraudulent: it betrayed a contempt for the particular, the unique, the individual, which would find its fullest expression in the totalitarian state. Rejecting attempts to impose abstract categories on the world, he was leery of discussions of 'method' abstracted from substantive concerns. Such a separation was, for him, yet another aspect of the principle of domination from which he was trying to extricate himself. As a result, accounts of Adorno's work have been forced to tease out an understanding of his approach from an examination of the ways in which he went about applying it.⁵ In one of the earliest extended discussions of Adorno's work in English, Frederic Jameson (Chapter 4) focuses on his contributions to the philosophy of music and then draws analogies to his discussion of Hegel (Adorno, 1993b). In what remains one of the more insightful surveys of Adorno's thought, Gillian Rose (Chapter 5) works from a different direction. Concentrating on his essays on sociological theory (Adorno, 1970) and drawing on the critique of 'identity thinking' in *Negative Dialectics*, she sees Adorno as engaged in an immanent critique of sociological concepts that was roughly analogous to Marx's critique of classical political economy.

Subsequent studies have clarified the extent to which many of the themes that dominated Adorno's later work were present from the start of his career. Of particular importance were his discussions with Walter Benjamin and his reading of Benjamin's study of baroque German drama (Benjamin, 1977). In Chapter 6 Susan Buck-Morss examines Benjamin's influence on Adorno's 1931 Frankfurt inaugural lecture (Adorno, 1977), while Robert Hullot-Kentor's study of Adorno's 1932 lecture 'The Idea of Natural History' (Adorno, 1984) traces Adorno's discussion of the fatal intertwining of myth and enlightenment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to his earlier critique of Martin Heidegger and Georg Lukács. In this early text, Hullot-Kentor sees the origin of an insight on which Adorno would draw down to his last work, the

⁴ I have modified the translation, in part incorporating the suggestions in Richter (2006), which provides an extended discussion of this passage.

⁵ For general discussions of Adorno's thought see Rose (1978), Jay (1984), Jarvis (1998), Brunkhorst (1999), Bernstein (2001) and Hullot-Kentor (2006). Useful collections of essays include Huhn (2004) and Gibson and Rubin (2002).

posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno, 1997): the idea that works of art carry out a 'critique of reification by way of reification' (p. 149).

Culture and Society

The majority of Adorno's works fall within the ambiguous genre that goes by the name of 'cultural critique'.⁶ While roughly a third of his publications were concerned with music (chiefly Western concert music from the nineteenth century onward, but also a number of controversial essays on 'jazz' and 'popular music') (Adorno, 2002), he also published a series of influential essays on literature (collected in his *Notes to Literature* [Adorno, 1991]). He also made pioneering forays into what would now be characterized as studies of 'popular culture', including a lengthy examination of the *Los Angeles Times* astrology column (Adorno, 1994) and a study of the impact of radio broadcasting on music (Adorno, 2006b). All of Adorno's studies of culture are distinguished by a refusal to view works of 'high culture' as somehow immune from the social forces whose impact he traced in his studies of mass culture. His comments on the marketing of the conductor Arturo Toscanini were every bit as cutting as his discussions of Hollywood films and, when offering examples of works that carried traces of utopia, he invoked Harpo Marx as well as Gustav Mahler (Adorno, 2002, pp. 314–15).

Much of Adorno's writing was shaped by the experience of exile, and discussions of the impact of that experience figure prominently in discussions of his analysis of the culture industry. Criticizing the tendency to see Adorno's work simply as the reaction of a German 'mandarin' exiled in Hollywood, Andreas Huyssen (Chapter 8) emphasizes the extent to which Adorno's work drew on arguments that had already been elaborated, prior to his exile, in his studies of Richard Wagner (Adorno, 1981). Questioning the image of Adorno as a 'displaced intellectual', Peter Hohendahl (Chapter 9) traces similarities between Adorno's work and that of American critics of mass culture. And in Chapter 10 Nico Israel's reading of *Minima Moralia* explores the extent to which Adorno's account of the 'mutilations' of exile life are a good deal more complex than the smug apology for European high culture that careless readers take it to be.

The essays by Rose Subotnik, Robert Witkin, and Max Paddison explore differing aspects of Adorno's writings on music.⁷ Subotnik's essay (Chapter 12) stresses the degree to which the distinctive features of Adorno's musical criticism can be traced to his account of the fate of the individual in modern society. In Chapter 11 Witkin finds similar concerns at the heart of Adorno's much-criticized writings on jazz. Paddison (Chapter 13) provides yet another example of the way in which Adorno's writings on culture open onto broader questions in social theory by showing how his comments on the relationship between language and music draw on Max Weber's account of the progress of rationalization in Western culture.

⁶ Adorno's chief contributions are available in Adorno (1967) and Adorno (1998). For discussions see Cook (1996) and Witkin (2003).

⁷ For general discussions, see Paddison (1993) and Richard Leppert's introduction in Adorno (2002).

Reason, Domination, and the Subject

The theory of society that provided the broader context for Adorno's cultural criticism found its most complete expression in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002), written with Horkheimer in the early 1940s and published in 1947. It is a work that is as wide-ranging in its concerns as it is enigmatic in its articulation. The first of its three chapters examines the relationship between enlightenment, mythology and the scientific domination of nature. Two excursus follow: one dealing with the *Odyssey*, the other with the unlikely coupling of Immanuel Kant and the Marquis de Sade. A second chapter is devoted to an analysis of workings of the 'culture industry', while the third considers various aspects of anti-Semitism, with a particular emphasis on the psychoanalytic concept of 'projection'.

My essay (Chapter 14) explores the genesis of the book and cautions against the tendency in much of the secondary literature to underestimate the degree to which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was fragmentary as much by default as by design. The essays by Jürgen Habermas and Christopher Rocco (Chapters 15 and 16) take a different tack and assess the implications of the book in light of subsequent discussions of modernism and postmodernism. Habermas's influential essay seeks to distinguish Horkheimer's and Adorno's approach from the positions of 'poststructuralist' writers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault by highlighting the ambiguous role that Friedrich Nietzsche's thought plays in the book. Habermas argues that, while Nietzsche provided a model for the book's 'totalizing' critique of reason, Horkheimer and Adorno (unlike later 'poststructuralists') did not follow him in adopting a 'genealogical critique' that employed categories of ancestry and origin as criteria for a critique of social relations and logical distinctions. Instead, they reconciled themselves to the 'performative contradiction' inherent in a critique that was so relentless in its unmasking of the connections between reason and power that it ultimately undermined the foundations on which it rested. Whereas Habermas argues that an alternative understanding of reason – one grounded in his conception of communicative rationality (see Habermas, 1984) – can provide a way out of the aporia in which Horkheimer and Adorno found themselves, Rocco offers a more positive assessment of the book's argument and sees it as mediating between French postmodernist critics and Habermas's conception of modernity as an 'unfinished project'.

In contrast to Habermas's and Rocco's focus on the book's relationship to Nietzsche, Deborah Cook (Chapter 17) and Anson Rabinbach (Chapter 18) stress its debts to Sigmund Freud. In a wide-ranging discussion of Adorno's understanding of the relation of psychology and society, Cook explores the similarities that Adorno saw between the functioning of the culture industry and the success of Nazi propaganda. Both exploited a personality structure whose capacity for autonomous individuality had been undermined, resulting in subjects that simultaneously identify with, yet resent, authority figures. Drawing on a wealth of archival material, Rabinbach documents the growing role that anti-Semitism came to play in Horkheimer's and Adorno's work, with a particular emphasis on the impact of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and the work of the French anthropologist Roger Caillois on their understanding of mimesis, a central – albeit ambiguous – concept in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In ritual acts of sacrifice, in the imitative practices of magicians and in 'the frozen terror with which all living creatures react to fear' (p. 404), Horkheimer and Adorno found hints of a relationship to nature that anticipated later rational practices and yet remained, in significant respects, radically different from reason.

Art, Truth, and Utopia

At the time of his death, Adorno was in the final stages of completing the long-projected work on aesthetics that, in conjunction with *Negative Dialectics* and a still to be written work on moral philosophy, would constitute his major philosophical statement.⁸ Published in 1970, the *Aesthetic Theory* has had, as Shierry Weber Nicholsen observes in Chapter 22, 'a slow and problematic reception' (p. 483) that cannot be attributed solely to the unfinished character of the manuscript. Owing to his rejection of modes of argumentation that proceed from a 'philosophical first principle', Adorno found himself forced to 'assemble the whole out of a series of partial complexes that are, so to speak, of equal weight and concentrically arranged all on the same level; their constellation, not their succession, must yield the idea' (Adorno, 1997, p. 364). It is no wonder, then, that much in this final work has remained deeply enigmatic. The essays assembled in Part V of this collection explore some of the main lines of contention.

Both *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* can, in part, be seen as attempts to provide the sequel to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that Horkheimer and Adorno had planned in the 1940s, but could not complete. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* traced the violence that had been unleashed by modes of thought that saw the world simply as an object to be controlled and manipulated. By focusing on the tension between concepts and what they attempt to grasp, *Negative Dialectics* sought to 'transcend the concept by means of the concept' (Adorno, 1973, p. 15). In much the same spirit, *Aesthetic Theory* attempted to show how works of art are carriers of truths that, while resisting conceptualization, can nevertheless be interpreted philosophically. This attempt, Richard Wolin argues in Chapter 19, shows us Adorno 'at his most utopian' (p. 416): only in the realm of art is the subject at last freed from the 'compulsion to objectify the Other for purposes of enhanced control' (p. 425). Whereas Wolin sees the truth that art discloses as a 'prefiguration of reconciled life' (p. 419), in Chapter 20 Raymond Geuss argues that Adorno understands artworks to reveal 'what the (social) world is *really* like, what its real deep-seated nature is ...' (p. 440). They provide images of utopia only at a particular historical moment – a moment that Adorno associates with Beethoven's work. Today, when society has lost 'its grasp altogether on *any* normative image of a qualitatively "better world"', the truths that artworks convey will take the form of the sort of 'negative utopias' that are found in the works of Samuel Beckett, the intended dedicatee of the *Aesthetic Theory* (p. 440).

In Chapter 21 Albrecht Wellmer maintains that, for Adorno, the truth of art resides in its capacity to reveal 'not the light of redemption itself, but *reality* in the light of redemption' (p. 460) – a reality that is 'unreconciled, antagonistic, fragmented' (p. 461). Art can do this, however, only insofar as it is able to bring about a synthesis of disparate elements 'which produces the appearance of reconciliation' (p. 461). In an attempt to understand how this synthesis is possible, Wellmer recasts Adorno's account of the relationship between truth, semblance, and reconciliation in the terms of Habermas's theory of communicative action. His concluding comments, however, suggest that such efforts may overlook one of the defining features of Adorno's work: the degree to which his writings 'have something of the

8 For studies of the book see Zuidervaart (1991), Nicholsen (1997) and the essays collected in Huhn and Zuidervaart (1997).

work of art about them' (p. 481). It is this aspect of Adorno's work that serves as the starting point for NicholSEN's analysis of the literary structure of the *Aesthetic Theory* (Chapter 22). In Chapter 23 Jay Bernstein pursues a similar concern, but uses different means: contrasting Adorno's understanding of the nature of dialectical reasoning with Robert Brandom's account of 'material inference', he calls attention to an aspect of Adorno's work that is even more insistent than Brandom's in resisting the temptation to assume that the only valid form of drawing inferences involves an appeal to 'higher order premises and abstract forms' and a good deal more consciousness of the extent to which traditions and social practices have been eviscerated by the triumph of instrumental forms of reasoning (pp. 521–2).

Conclusion

The disparate reactions that Adorno's works have sparked may, in part, stem from his commitment to a mode of presentation that insistently subverts conventional expectations about how texts should be structured. In Adorno's last writings, as Hullot-Kentor notes in Chapter 7, 'the entire structure of assumption, development, proof and conclusion has been discarded for a dialectic of the object itself' (p. 138). Works such as these defy summary; every gloss seems to miss something essential. This may explain why Adorno's writings remain so compelling: each new reading shows us how much we have missed, both in his texts and in the world whose rifts and crevices his works sought to illuminate.

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