

Theodor W. Adorno, Gershom Scholem, and the 'German-Jewish Dialogue'

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Abstract

The publication of the correspondence between Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem in 2015 is a major landmark, offering fresh insights into their personalities and the remarkable intellectual relationship and growing personal friendship between them. In this short piece, some of the evidence for the intensity of the relationship between Adorno and Scholem is presented, followed by a discussion of their shared emphatic negation of the notion that any such thing as a 'German-Jewish Dialogue' had existed prior to 1933. Henceforth, anyone who wants to continue dismissing Scholem's remarks about the non-existence of a 'German-Jewish dialogue' prior to 1933 out of hand in the cavalier fashion in which it has become common-place to do so will need to reckon not only with Scholem but also with Adorno.

Keywords

Theodor W. Adorno – Gershom Scholem – Walter Benjamin – Jewish/non-Jewish relations – German-Jewish relations

The publication of the correspondence between Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem in 2015 is a major landmark, offering fresh insights into their personalities and the remarkable intellectual relationship and growing personal friendship between them.¹ Parts of the correspondence had previously been published elsewhere, but only now that the surviving letters are available in their entirety does one gain a real sense of the multi-faceted thirty-year

1 A. Angermann, ed. *Theodor W. Adorno. Gershom Scholem. 'Der liebe Gott wohnt im Detail.' Briefwechsel 1939–1969* (Berlin 2015).

conversation between these two intellectual giants of the 20th century. The picture that emerges is all the more intriguing, given that they were unlikely intellectual bedfellows. Yet it is evident from the correspondence that a profound friendship developed between them over time that was characterized by trust and genuine affection. Their cooperation on the first two-volume edition of the collected letters of Walter Benjamin – one of Scholem's closest friends since their student days and an important associate of the Institute of Social Research – played an important role in intensifying their relationship. Scholem evidently had a knack for friendships of this kind. His correspondence with Leo Strauss offers an obvious point of comparison.² Strauss described his interest in Scholem's work as 'that sort of interest that we take in things diametrically opposed to our [own] outlook,' and referred to Scholem as 'the first person to give me an idea of the opposite extreme that engages me.'³ Yet in full awareness of their fundamental differences, they maintained a close collegial friendship. That said, the intellectual affinity between Adorno and Scholem was clearly rather more intense than that between Scholem and Strauss. There is a great deal to be said about this correspondence.⁴ In this short piece I will present some of the evidence for the intensity of the relationship between Adorno and Scholem and then focus specifically on their shared emphatic negation of the notion that any such thing as a 'German-Jewish Dialogue' had existed prior to 1933.

As early as 1942, Scholem informed Adorno that, on points of agreement and disagreement alike, he was greatly enthralled by his writings.⁵ Commenting on Adorno's essay on the correspondence between Stefan George and Hugo von Hofmannsthal in the memorial volume for Benjamin published by the Institute of Social Research in 1942,⁶ Scholem wrote in 1945 that

I'm sure you won't hold it against me if, as a desperate non-Marxist, I presume to see that, given the methodology you have appropriated, your

2 I have discussed the correspondence between Scholem and Strauss in 'After the "Strauss wars"; *East European Jewish Affairs* 40(1) (2010) 61–79, DOI: 10.1080/13501671003593683.

3 L. Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3 (Stuttgart 2001) 700, 725.

4 For a more detailed discussion see my article on the relationship between Adorno and Scholem in the forthcoming issue of *sans phrase*. For an extraordinarily erudite and lucid account of the systematic affinities evident in the deep structure of Adorno's and Scholem's thought, see A. Martins, *Adorno und die Kabbala* (Potsdam 2016).

5 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 48.

6 Th.W. Adorno, 'George und Hofmannsthal. Zum Briefwechsel: 1891–1906,' in M. Horkheimer and Th.W. Adorno, eds., *Walter Benjamin zum Gedächtnis* (Los Angeles 1942), now in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.1, 195–237.

analysis too – I often remarked this to Benjamin, where this was extremely palpable – ultimately fails to bring home your anarchist élan and your anarchist tendency, on which many of your most probing insights are predicated. Yet a great deal emerges along the way.⁷

Scholem's critique in this instance notwithstanding, his formulation encompassed an acknowledgement of the fact that Adorno did indeed formulate probing insights, albeit, not because of, but despite his Marxism.

In 1961, Scholem sent Adorno an Open Letter to Hans Joachim Schoeps, which had been published in Germany in 1937 and evidently touched on issues that had come up in conversation during their meeting in Frankfurt in October 1961.⁸ In response, Adorno explained that he found the Open Letter

extremely important in a number of respects, above all in terms of the problem of the constitutive significance of tradition, an aspect of which – namely, the epistemological – has been preoccupying me for quite a while. Apart from your marvellous formulation about the concrete, which I already knew from the Benjamin correspondence, I was particularly affected by the concordance of our polemical attitudes towards the existential sphere. (...) What you, drawing on the traditional explication of doctrine, say against the attempt to translate theology into relational immediacy is something at which I arrived from an altogether different corner, namely, the untruth of the existential position itself, that resorts to fraud and incense to present the immediacy of subjective experience as transcendent. Why I consider this coincidence to be so important is easily explained: if one arrives at the same core from two points of departure that are so different, this is surely evidence for the truth of the matter.⁹

Some readers may be particularly surprised to read that in 1963, Adorno wrote to Scholem that

I am currently very intensely engaged with the 'Unhistorical Aphorisms' on the Kabbalah.¹⁰ It won't take a lot of guesswork on your part to appreciate

7 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 58.

8 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 253.

9 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 257–258.

10 On Scholem's 'Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala' see D. Biale, 'Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah: Text and Commentary,' *Modern Judaism* 5 (1)

that this issue is particularly important to me. All other things being even, none of your writings surely express such a deep theoretical affinity to Benjamin, especially his theses on the philosophy of history. On the other hand, the text is fiendishly difficult and although I am well and truly used to a lot, I would not pretend to have understood it fully. Presumably that is impossible anyway without knowledge of the original texts. Yet the matter is of such great importance to me (...) and it would be of the utmost significance that you fully unpack the speculative-dialectical connections you hit on the head with a mallet [with the aphorisms].¹¹

Scholem explained in response that

I have committed a definite sin by agreeing to the publication of the Unhistorical Aphorisms. Mind you, I assumed, as formulated in one of them, that nobody would notice them anyway and that the most secure way of hiding them would be to print them in a *Festschrift* of that kind. Now you want a commentary. Whatever next? This sort of thing only transpired in the olden days when the authors simply wrote the commentaries themselves, which, if they were clever, generally expressed the opposite of what was formulated in the text. I know better than to place myself in the nettles. As far as my aphorisms are concerned: run if you can.¹²

Four years later, Scholem, in turn, commented in some detail on Adorno's *Negative Dialektik*.¹³ In his subsequent letter, Adorno expressed his satisfaction that Scholem had not only identified but also sympathized with the recovery of metaphysics that was at the heart of the book, and added how pleased he was, Scholem's criticisms notwithstanding, about 'our unio in haeresia'.¹⁴ Scholem

(1985) 67–93. This text also features in the correspondence between Scholem and Strauss. On 23 March 1959, Strauss wrote to Scholem: 'You seem to think, and I believe rightly, that the time has now come for letting the cat – or rather her 10 invisible kittens – out of your old sorcerer's bag. I like the auras and the inaudible purrings of those of them of whom I have become aware, but they do not feel at home with me because I do not know with what to feed them, and even if I did, I am almost sure that I could not get the proper food for them' (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 738).

11 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 278.

12 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 280.

13 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 407–411.

14 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 413, 415.

had written that he had never read 'a more chaste and self-restrained defence of metaphysics.'¹⁵

When Werner Weber of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* asked Adorno later that year whether he would write a contribution on the occasion of Scholem's 70th birthday,¹⁶ Adorno first wanted to assure himself that Scholem would approve. He was fairly confident, though, that Scholem's approval would be forthcoming, given that in the many years of their exchange 'sufficient common substance has crystallized between us'.¹⁷

1968 was in various ways an especially difficult year for Adorno. He was particularly taken aback by a public controversy concerning his role in the publication of Benjamin's works, which took a heavy toll on him. The first issue for 1968 of the monthly journal, *Merkur*, which was widely read among intellectuals, contained texts by Hannah Arendt and Helmut Heißenbüttel both of whom heavily criticized Adorno. Arendt's text was the first part of the German version of the Benjamin chapter in her *Men in Dark Times* (1968) and enraged Adorno and Scholem in any number of respects, foremost among them her contention that Benjamin had not been a philosopher and held philosophy in contempt.¹⁸ Heißenbüttel accused Adorno of publishing Benjamin as a means of self-aggrandizement while at the same time manipulating and suppressing those texts that would reveal the true – and for Adorno inopportune – character of Benjamin's intellectual project.¹⁹ When Scholem – who had previously been inclined to shrug off the controversy – realized how deeply it had affected Adorno, he wrote to the editor-in-chief of *Merkur*, Hans Paeschke (1911–1991), to criticize the way in which Adorno had been denounced by Arendt and Heißenbüttel, and sent a copy of the letter to Adorno. In response, Adorno wrote on 14 March 1968, referring specifically to Scholem's letter, that 'it is no

15 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 407.

16 Adorno's 'Gruß an G. Scholem. Zum 70. Geburtstag' was published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 5 December 1967. See Th.W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 20.2 (Frankfurt/Main 1997) 478–486.

17 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 427.

18 H. Arendt, 'Walter Benjamin I. Der Bucklige,' *Merkur* 22 (238) (1968) 58 and *passim*. The German rendition was not simply a translation of the English version in *Men in Dark Times* but was partly reworked to incorporate a bluntly polemical reckoning with Adorno and Scholem, directly referencing their edition of Benjamin's letters as a crucial point of contention, as well as Horkheimer and Adorno's student and collaborator, Rolf Tiedemann, who had written the first doctoral dissertation on Benjamin, published as *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt/Main 1965), i.e. clearly identifying Benjamin as a philosopher.

19 H. Heißenbüttel, 'Zu Walter Benjamin's Spätwerk,' *Merkur* 22 (238) (1968) 179–185.

exaggeration when I say that little has ever given me as much pleasure. It is hardly common among men of our age to make this sort of thing explicit, but this expression of solidarity has affected me to my very core.²⁰

Adorno's genuinely substantive response to the whole controversy consisted of a request to Scholem to afford something 'of which only you are capable,' namely, an account of Benjamin's relationship to Jewish mysticism. 'I find it hard to avoid the impression that a noteworthy analogy exists between the way in which the late Benjamin accepted Marxism, as it were, hook and sink, and his earlier relationship to Kabbalah, which he could not access first-hand either.'²¹ An account by Scholem, elucidating Benjamin's relationship to Jewish mysticism would be 'the most important contribution to the interpretation of Benjamin that could possibly be made.'²²

On 29 April 1969, finally, Adorno recommended Ulrich Sonnemann, for whose *Negative Anthropologie* he had written a foreword, to Scholem. Sonnemann was in Israel for several weeks and Adorno had advised him to get in touch with Scholem. 'He belongs to the hardly numerous human beings,' Adorno wrote, 'who, at a mature age, and in absolute freedom, have moved decisively towards the intellectual project for which Horkheimer and I stand and with which I know that you too are, at a deeper level, affiliated.'²³

Add to this their shared contempt for Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt; the fact that Adorno dedicated his study of Arnold Schoenberg's opera, *Moses und Aron*, to Scholem;²⁴ that on one occasion he sent one of his dream transcripts to Scholem;²⁵ that they regularly tried to coordinate their Swiss holidays so that they could meet; and that Scholem 'immediately came from Jerusalem to Frankfurt' following Adorno's sudden death in August 1969,²⁶ and there can surely be no doubt that the relationship between Adorno and Scholem had become a meaningful and affectionate friendship, in which both felt able to speak openly and honestly and both could readily acknowledge mutual differences without detracting from their appreciation of the deep-seated commonalities and affinities between them.

20 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 473.

21 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 463. Adorno wrote 'hook and sink' in English.

22 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 462.

23 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 521.

24 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 283. See Th.W. Adorno, 'Sakrales Fragment. Über Schönbergs Moses und Aron,' first published in 1963, now in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 16, 454–475.

25 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 264. For the dream transcript in question, see Th.W. Adorno, *Traumprotokolle* (Frankfurt/Main 2005) 74–76.

26 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 526.

As Asaf Angermann, who has edited and expertly annotated the correspondence, points out in his editorial postscript, one of its major contributions lies in the fact that it reveals, for the first time, the full extent of Adorno's sense of alienation in post-war Germany.²⁷ Which brings me to Adorno's response to Gershom Scholem's vehement denial of the notion that a 'German-Jewish Dialogue' had existed in any meaningful sense prior to 1933. This denial remains a crucial focal point in the study of relations between Jews and non-Jews in the German-speaking lands, though, as a general rule, *ex negativo*: distancing oneself from Scholem's self-evidently nonsensical comments on the matter has effectively become a rite of passage for any scholar in the field unwilling to be branded a maverick (much in the same way as any self-respecting anti-antisemite in Imperial Germany would distance him- or herself from the awful suspicion of being a 'philosemite'). The cavalier fashion in which Scholem's remarks are dismissed out of hand is facilitated not least by the fact that the relevant statement Scholem published in 1964 actually discussed two issues:²⁸ on the one hand, the question of the 'German-Jewish Dialogue,' on the other hand, the extent to which post-emancipatory German Jewry, as he saw it, had sold out and would have succeeded in making itself disappear, had Jewish nationalism not emerged at the 11th hour to rescue (some of) it. The fact that the latter is patent nonsense does not, however, automatically invalidate the former.

None of this is news, of course. What will most likely be news to many, however, is the fact that Adorno vehemently expressed his agreement with Scholem's denial of the existence of a 'German-Jewish Dialogue' prior to 1933.²⁹ Having received an offprint of the relevant text from him, Adorno wrote to Scholem as follows:

I at least want to put it on record that I am entirely d'accord with your response to Schloesser³⁰ (...) One just needs to hear a term like

27 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 542.

28 G. Scholem, 'Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch,' in M. Schlösser, ed., *Auf gespaltenem Pfad. Zum neunzigsten Geburtstag von Margarete Susman* (Darmstadt 1964) 229–232. Reprint in G. Scholem, *Judaica II* (Frankfurt/Main 1970) 7–11.

29 For a more detailed discussion of Scholem's intervention, see L. Fischer, 'Selbstverleugnender Deutschenfresser? Anmerkungen zu Gershom Scholems Einstellung zu Deutschland und den Deutschen,' *sans phrase* 5 (2014) 232–240; 'Gershom Scholem and Post-war Germany Revisited,' in Mirjam Zadoff and Noam Zadoff, eds., *Scholar and Kabbalist: The Life and Work of Gershom Scholem* (Leiden forthcoming).

30 Technically speaking, Scholem's text was a letter in which he explained to the editor of the *Festschrift* for Margarete Susman, Manfred Schlösser, why he would not contribute to

Jewish-German dialogue after what has happened to feel nauseated and it is the plain truth that such a dialogue never took place and that even the greatest Germans like Kant and Goethe wrote things that do now seem like the logs the little old woman dragged to [Jan] Hus's stake. It amounts to a truly abysmal irony that the interest in Jewry qua Jewry, rather than in individual Jewish figures, becomes more pronounced in Germany only now, after there are no longer any Jews there.³¹

If further proof were needed that Adorno was by no means paying lip serve to Scholem merely in order to be polite or avoid potential conflict, it is provided by the way in which Adorno continued. He wrote:

If I returned [to Germany] all the same, all I have to show for myself are individual reasons: the possibility – temporarily – of working without any fetters or controls. Against this backdrop I would like to tell you that I was profoundly moved by the sentences in your letter to Benjamin, in which you tell him that a much more terrible danger inheres in his attempt to identify with a collective than in any suffering precipitated by loneliness, and by your subsequent formulation about suicide.³²

Adorno was referring to a letter Scholem had written to Benjamin on 6 May 1931, in which he wrote:

Self-deception can all too easily turn into suicide, and the cause of revolutionary orthodoxy would well and truly be too high a price to pay for yours. Your yearning for community, and be it the apocalyptic one of the revolution, endangers you far more than the horror of the loneliness that speaks from some of your writings and on which I would much rather place my bets than on the metaphorical thinking with which you cheat yourself out of your vocation.³³

There would be a great deal to say about both of these passages but my concern in this particular instance is simply to demonstrate that Adorno's reaction to Scholem's intervention was neither superficial nor owed to conventional

a project that was programmatically committed to the notion of a 'German-Jewish Dialogue' prior to 1933.

31 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 357–358.

32 Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 358.

33 Quoted in Adorno, Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 358.

politeness. Instead, Adorno's response was deeply serious and heart-felt and demonstrates that Scholem's vociferous protest, not least, had led Adorno to reflect critically upon some of his own crucial life decisions.

Put bluntly: whoever wants to continue dismissing Scholem's remarks about the non-existence of a 'German-Jewish dialogue' prior to 1933 out of hand in the cavalier fashion in which it has become common-place to do so will henceforth need to reckon not only with Scholem but also with Adorno. In a world in which reason still counts for something, this should precipitate rather more thoughtfulness in future.