



Authority, Identity, Society: Revisiting the Frankfurt School

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John Abromeit

Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, £64.99 hbk (ISBN: 9781107006959), 456 pp.

Matthias Benzer

The Sociology of Theodor Adorno

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, £64.99 hbk (ISBN: 9781107000094), 278 pp.

Much recent social theory prides itself in being able to do without the concept of society. Not without reason: throughout the history of sociology, ‘society’ tended to mean *national* society, so that the abandonment of ‘society’ has often been motivated by a commendable cosmopolitan commitment. Those who, driven by such commitment, instead operate with less ambiguous, more descriptive concepts such as ‘network’ might find it worthwhile to revisit ‘society’ in a context that does not equate ‘society’ with ‘nation’, of which the Critical Theory of the ‘Frankfurt School’ is a key example.

Many key concepts of contemporary social theory are rooted in theoretical traditions that predate Critical Theory and are related to those that Critical Theory set out to challenge. For example, Adorno (1989: 271) commented that ‘the concept of role, lifted without analysis from the social façade, helps perpetuating the monstrosity of role-playing itself’. The notion that all members of society perform ‘roles’ is valid and useful on the descriptive level but does little more than stating the fact; for Adorno and Horkheimer, it implies an acting *for others*, heteronomy and therewith domination. Although within conditions of domination, some forms of play-acting may well be empowering and enjoyable, the aspect of compulsion in role-playing can only be theorized with the help of a critical concept of society. Likewise, the ontological (Spinozist) ‘monism’ of current left-wing anti-dialectical theorizing (Deleuze, Negri) was anticipated and rejected by

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Adorno (1994: 17, here from the translation by Dennis Redmond, 2001 [<http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>], accessed 7 July 2013) thus:

If one objected ... that dialectics for its part grinds everything indiscriminately in its mill down into the mere logical form of the contradiction, overlooking ... the true polyvalence ... of the simply different, one is only displacing the blame for the thing onto the method.

Adorno argues that *society* reduces the multiply different into the contradictory, a fact of reality that theoretically informed emancipatory practice aims to *challenge*. Dialectics takes account of and alerts to the (social) fact, for which it relies on the concept of society: unless society is recognized as a ('material') agent of domination, the reduction of 'the multiply different' must seem to be the work of false thinking.

Arguably suffering from being hidden by its own familiarity, the Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno focuses with *society* on an *abstractum* (although a very real one), and it is this focus that allows it to address a wide range of questions in their connectedness that in other contexts tend to appear as isolated 'issues'. The concept of 'society' denotes in Critical Theory a specifically modern form of sociality whose theorization revolves around the concern with the question how subjects can overcome their dependency on a societal reality which they themselves create, a problem that much contemporary theory addresses as the problem of 'structure and agency'. By centring theory in the concept of society, the source of its dynamic coherence, Critical Theory attempts to avoid both the fragmentation of an assemblage of sub-disciplines and the strait-jacket of system-thinking.

The motor that drove the founders of Critical Theory was the practical concern with how to counteract and challenge fascism and authoritarianism; sadly this is still now a timely concern. The remedy is, accordingly, to push Enlightenment to the point where it transcends its own limits: therewith the concept of society is linked by a practical-political, perhaps moral, concern to questions of epistemology and of how to think. The emphasis on the need to promote a form of education that aims at the ability to think in 'autonomous logical processes' as a key element of anti-Fascism and the resistance to totalitarian tendencies in general feeds into current debates on education, and indeed the influence of Critical Theory is most noticeable presently in this area (Docherty, 2011; Gur-Ze'ev, 2005; McArthur, 2013).

Critical Theory remains driven by the difficulty of challenging both positivism and metaphysics without falling back into either. Horkheimer and Adorno pioneered this dialectical endeavour in the 1920s, maintaining that on the one hand, social theory needs a robust empirical base but on the other hand empirical research not explicitly framed by speculative, conceptual, normative theory cannot make claims to truth. Contemporary debates such as that around 'critical realism' re-articulate this problem and need to be mindful of its earlier formulations. Related questions such as, why human beings in important ways do not act the way rational choice theory expects them to, remain as urgent as they were nearly a century ago, and also the struggles against (racial, gender and other) essentialisms, teleologies ('grand narratives'), identity-thinking and -politics – struggles that are now on the back foot (Gilroy, 2012) – are in desperate need for broader theoretical support.

The two monographs by Abromeit and Benzer do a great service in helping along a re-engagement with the tradition of which Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Theodor

W. Adorno (1903–1969) are chief exponents. The two books, both of which are based on the study of primary sources, are written in styles that hardly could differ more: Abromeit's Horkheimer-book is a primarily historical presentation that engages in exegesis of key texts mostly in chronological order, covering the period from Horkheimer's birth in 1895 to 1941, whereas Benzer's systematic-logical presentation rarely references historical context and draws in each of its chapters on the entire range of Adorno's writings: Adorno's position is shown not in its gradual emergence but from the perspective of its most developed stage, *Negative Dialectic* being one of the most quoted works. Furthermore, while Benzer almost completely disappears behind his subject matter, which he presents in a detached manner, Abromeit frames his argument within an evaluative, historical narrative (presenting the Horkheimer of the 1930s as the most genuine representative of Critical Theory who seems to have lost his bite around 1941): in this respect, Abromeit and Benzer represent two opposed approaches within the wider literature on Critical Theory.

Abromeit's book begins with two biographical chapters on Horkheimer's childhood, youth and student years, describes in the third chapter Horkheimer's break with 'consciousness philosophy' (Kantian and neo-Kantian idealism) and his early work on the history of philosophy, and in Chapter 4 his appropriation of Marxism in his first critiques of epistemology and the sociology of knowledge. Chapter 5 (complemented by an 'Excursus' placed after Chapter 8) describes Horkheimer's and Fromm's crucial and pioneering adoption of psychoanalysis. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 discuss three of the main concerns of Horkheimer's writing in the 1930s, namely his concept of materialism, his proposition of an 'anthropology of the bourgeois epoch' and his reworking of 'dialectical logic'. A second 'Excursus', perhaps the most exciting part of the book, retraces Horkheimer's relationship with Adorno, a dimension that contributes a lot to understanding both writers' work. The last chapter discusses Horkheimer's writings from the first years of the Second World War.

Benzer describes Adorno's sociology as a 'sociology of society' (B2):¹ for Adorno, the concept of society is central to sociology, and although it resists definition, sociology cannot examine anything without it. Sociology is not 'about' society, though; rather, it involves 'reflection upon social moments within any given area of social matter' (B3). Adorno consistently emphasizes the double character of sociology, responding to 'a solidified capitalist society, seemingly operating above the heads of humans, which is nonetheless maintained by nobody but these humans' (B5). Benzer writes that it is dialectical reality which produces dialectical sociology. In his first chapter, 'Nothing under the sun' (... escapes society), Benzer discusses the concept of all-encompassing society that is central to Adorno's work in 'three key aspects ... – social estrangement, social dependence and social integration – and their interconnections' (B15). 'Nothing under the sun' is a most useful introduction into the heart of Adorno's Critical Theory – the concept of society – particularly for recognizing and taking seriously the centrality of its Marxian elements. The remaining five chapters of the book deal with key aspects of how Adorno 'did' sociology: Chapter 2 deals with the empirical base on which Adorno develops his analyses; the third chapter discusses what 'theorizing' actually means in Adorno's case and what it 'does' in relation to the empirical materials. Chapter 4 explores how social critique motivates and shapes Adorno's sociology and in what relation research

stands to 'praxis'. Chapter 5 deals with how Adorno writes, or rather, composes texts. The last chapter, 'Sociology and the non-social' connects back to the first chapter on the concept of the social. Benzer's discussion of what in Adorno is 'the non-social' is a discussion of what remains outside the increasingly closed totality of society, chiefly including the critique and meta-critique of metaphysics.

Benzer identifies at the heart of Adorno's Critical Theory a notion derived and developed from Marx's critique of political economy:

Adorno emphasises that capitalist exchange relations require the exchanging parties to adopt a specific mode of thinking: the principle of identification or identity thinking. The exchange and identity principles are said to be ... akin to one another. Identification is 'schooled in exchange'. (B18)

Furthermore, Adorno appreciated Durkheim's demand sociology examine society as so many thing-like *faits sociaux*, social facts for 'instructively register[ing] the problem of social estrangement'. Society confronts individuals as a strange, autonomous object: impenetrable, inscrutable, overwhelming, obscure, irresistible. However, differing from Durkheim, Adorno insists that what appears as fate 'could be turned around by humans' (B20): 'Adorno understands estrangement rigorously as social estrangement' which refers to 'experiencing a human, historical reality as a thing'. Sociologists face the double task of acknowledging 'estrangement' without taking it at face value (B21). Another dimension of Adorno's use of the category of 'estrangement' is the experience of dependence. One's survival in modern society depends on paid work; work will be paid only 'if it meets a function which society acknowledges as legitimate' (B24). This legitimacy is generally measured in terms of profitability. Benzer points out that for Adorno social dependence is 'dependency of all individuals on the totality which they form' and which they therefore are able to abolish, too. Not to belittle the reality of social estrangement means, however, not to be naïve about the difficulty of the task: 'the social web has been spun ever more tightly'. Although commodity exchanging society produces, and presupposes, 'identity-thinking', it also leads to the erasure of identity: when 'everything that exists' is only a 'being for something else', everything must be equivalent and fungible. 'The individual ... can only survive by relinquishing its individuality' (B33).

Benzer writes that Adorno takes Marx's argument about the fetishistic mental process that is involved in commodity exchange 'a crucial step further': 'identity thinking does not guide people's conception of products alone, but their conceptions of all objects and living beings'. Even ideas that are apparently (i.e. to an extent, actually) contrary such as racial classification and the notion of universal human equality 'demonstrate the current prevalence of the identity principle': 'making the dissimilar comparable' by reducing it to abstract, generic categories, be that abstract race or abstract humanity (B37). Adorno's approach resonates in this respect with current discussions on race and cosmopolitanism from a variety of backgrounds.²

Horkheimer and Adorno developed their perspectives in the 1920s and 1930s when the defeat of proletarian revolutions had very practically deconstructed teleological and positivistic readings of Marx, at least in the minds of Marxists without party alignment. Horkheimer and Adorno sharpened their discourse through engagements with the main

contemporary philosophical tendencies (and, in Horkheimer's case, the history of modern political philosophy in general): especially Kant, Hegel, neo-Kantianism, the Hegel revival, vitalism and phenomenology.

Abromeit points to the central importance for Critical Theory of Horkheimer's work in the 1930s on 'the anthropology of the bourgeois epoch' (A261). Horkheimer links the bourgeois character to 'a specific type of cruelty and repression of both self and others', discussing the cases of 14th-century Cola di Rienzo, 15th-century Savonarola, Luther, Calvin and Robespierre. Horkheimer's analysis pivots on the role of asceticism in these bourgeois leaders' efforts to form modern individuals, of the unconscious in the movements they led and aspects of religious fanaticism, irrationality and anti-intellectualism (A270). Abromeit points out that Horkheimer's account challenges Max Weber's theory of rationalization and also offers 'an alternative materialist explanation of the phenomena of charisma' (A272). Horkheimer puts particular emphasis on the character of public speech in the 'bourgeois epoch' (A273): public speech – from Savonarola to Hitler – attempted something that it had not attempted in antiquity, namely 'to change the listener's character'. The listener is 'not supposed simply to be convinced of something, he is supposed to "go into himself", improve himself, ... become a new person' (A274). While Horkheimer's analysis (and subsequent work of the 'Frankfurt School' that developed from it) was formulated to illuminate key aspects of the Fascist movements of the first third of the 20th century, a new reading could provide deep-historical contextualization of 'reactionary modernist' movements also of the present.

In terms of Critical Theory's philosophical, especially epistemological, underpinnings, Horkheimer and Adorno developed a position that aimed to challenge and overcome empiricism and positivism as much as rationalism, metaphysics and idealism. Horkheimer argued that also empiricists fail to challenge rationalist-metaphysical (Cartesian) assumptions (A307), while the intellectual climate that contributed to the Fascist takeover involved *both*, a growing tendency of scepticism about the sciences, implying a *return of metaphysics*, and positivism's *attack on metaphysics* and rationalism. In his critique of logical positivism Horkheimer points to 'its elimination of the active, self-reflexive subject of knowledge, its rejection of the distinction between essence and appearance, and its abstract negation of universals' (A311); all of these themes are still part of contemporary debates in the social sciences.

How Critical Theory's dual rejection of positivism and metaphysics translates into methodology can be gathered well from Benzer's book. For Adorno, any experience or observation can produce empirical material, which means that empirical research need not necessarily mean 'method-guided research'. Indeed Adorno warned that 'the application of methods threatens to reduce the horizon of observation to their predetermined scope', especially when the methods are too rigid and schematized (B54). In the late 1930s, though, when he joined the Institute, Adorno was instrumental in the development of combined empirical methods for gathering data. After his return to Germany after the Second World War, Adorno became one of the country's main advocates of method-guided research that should counter-balance Germany's un-empirical tradition. Most famously, Adorno was involved in the Institute's early 1950s 'Group Experiment' that employed focus groups with overall 1800 participants to explore contemporary Germans' attitudes to issues including national sentiment, the Allied occupation and the Holocaust.

A specific understanding of ‘materialism’ is evident especially in the late Adorno, namely the emphasis on the corporeal and the (quasi-ontological) postulate ‘that suffering should not be’. For Critical Theory, the right life presupposes ‘sensual happiness’; the good society will be one that has replaced ‘process, doing, fulfilling’ with ‘lying on the water and looking peacefully at the sky’ because in it no-one ‘go[es] hungry anymore’ (B140). The critique of labour that underlies Adorno’s position here seems highly relevant to the contemporary context, when even expanding capitalism consistently fails to find ‘employment’ for very large groups in society while others work too much to even dream about floating on water.

Benzer points out that ‘numerous texts’ in Adorno’s ‘late sociology’ discuss possibilities of social change. He takes as an example Adorno’s (1998/1963) essay on ‘Sexual Taboos and Law Today’ that is supportive of liberal reform but frames its argument in a way that anticipates by more than a decade critiques by Foucault and others (B141): acceptance signals integration, rather than liberation of sex. Adorno’s support for specific liberal reforms is based on a rejection of the liberal narrative of gradually progressing humanization and liberalization of society. Furthermore, Adorno warns against ‘pseudo-activity’ that merely serves the reproduction of the status quo by feigning control over reality and allowing ‘activists’ thereby to live ‘the lie’ (B147). Adorno, different from, for example, Zygmunt Bauman, ultimately holds ‘commodity exchange relations’ responsible for developing the pressure that drives people to accepting ‘dangerous collective thought patterns’ (B157).

Abromeit’s book on Horkheimer makes a strong case for the need to study the ‘early’ Horkheimer as a ‘point of departure for a renewal of Critical Theory today’ (A18). Abromeit’s repeated implication that Critical Theory after 1941, especially *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, turned into a less than critical theory, and that this should largely be blamed on Adorno’s growing influence, is unconvincing, but the reader can easily ignore this narrative of decay and rely for the period post-1941 on others such as Benzer. The latter does for Adorno’s post-Second World War sociology what Abromeit does for the pre-Second World War Horkheimer. His book shows that a renewal of Critical Theory ought to come from Adorno’s late work as much as from Horkheimer’s early work.

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Notes

1. In the following, I refer to Abromeit 2011 as ‘Axxx’ and to Benzer 2011 as ‘Bxxx’.
2. Postone (1996: 372) argues for ‘a new form of universalism, beyond the opposition of homogeneous universality and particularity’. Balibar (1991: 54) comes to similar conclusions concerning the ‘paradoxes of universality’.

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