

Intellectual Transfer: Theodor W. Adorno's American Experience

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By the late 1960s Theodor W. Adorno had already become a kind of institution in Germany. Adorno himself, appalled, was among the first to realize this. But at that point no one gave much thought to the fact that Adorno had also become a transatlantic institution. In 1967, when I was attending my first advanced seminar in philosophy, Angela Davis presented a paper and Irving Wohlfarth and Sam Weber were among the participants. All three played important roles in translating, introducing, and “mediating” Adorno and Walter Benjamin’s relation to a larger world. In 1969 Martin Jay came to Frankfurt. His work in the 1970s kept alive a consciousness of the relation between the European critical theorists Adorno and Max Horkheimer—both of whom had passed away by the mid-1970s—and Herbert Marcuse and Leo Löwenthal, who lived longer lives in California. In Frankfurt students of Adorno observed these milestones, reached in the face of critical theory’s often quite isolated and unhappy history, with a mixture of pleasure and distrust. For those who thought of themselves as inheriting a living tradition, it was disconcerting to be told that critical theory was already a closed book—an object of “intellectual history” rather than a framework of contemporary social analysis. In 1983 Jay became the first person to address the idea of “Adorno in America.” Unfortunately, despite Jay’s warnings to be on guard against anecdotes and clichés about either Adorno or the German émigré experience,

those clichés have come to dominate the very idea of Adorno and America. In the centenary of Adorno's birth, 2003, the German arts and culture media did their part to perpetuate the old legends. The ostensible literature of remembrance thus tells us yet again how the intellectual elites of Weimar escaped the Nazis by fleeing into the cultural wasteland called America, and how, after finding a place for themselves in the paradise of California during its golden age, they seemed to want nothing more than to return to their Germany, the land of *Dichter und Denker*. Alas, no documentary evidence, and certainly nothing from Adorno's pen, has retired these hoary narratives.

As stories like this are told and retold, the image of Adorno and that of the transatlantic relation harden into stereotypes. In Europe, anti-Americanism has long distorted accounts of Adorno's view of America. On the American side, the clichéd image of Adorno as an intellectual whose myopias supposedly made him less than normal dovetails with a highly distorting anti-intellectualism. Thus Adorno, we are told, had no clue about sports, blindly hated jazz, and never enjoyed himself at the movies, in front of the television, or anywhere else. This litany says less about Adorno than it does about intercontinental interaction in the bad sense. If we set aside the notion that America and Europe are self-contained entities, however, and if we begin to view their relation as a changing, historical one, Adorno's life and work can point to what was in fact a highly significant transfer of experience. Simply put: without America, Adorno would never have become the person we now recognize by that name. The man who fled from Hitler was a brilliant philosopher and artist with Left-radical sympathies, a barely thirty-year-old polymath bearing the name of Dr. Wiesengrund-Adorno. In 1949 a far more circumspect American citizen named Theodor W. Adorno returned to Europe. For many years thereafter, however, the suitcase always remained packed; only gradually, after attaining a professorship in Frankfurt in 1953, could Adorno see a future for himself as a convinced democrat and critical enlightener in West German society. Without Horkheimer's success in organizing the reestablishment of the old Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in 1949, Adorno most likely would not have returned to Germany. In 1953, when he made the decision to stay in Germany, his closest German acquaintances and friends in California, Thomas Mann and Fritz Lang, reacted with skepticism and displeasure.

The fact that Adorno changed his name in California in 1942 was neither incidental nor trivial. But it was not to suppress his Jewish heritage—as certain of his detractors have insinuated—that Adorno abbreviated his father's name to a *W*. At the time, it was far more relevant to downplay the German

overtones of Wiesengrund. According to his own account, Adorno's collaboration with Mann on *Doktor Faustus* brought Adorno closer to the German tradition than he had been. But the California period was also the moment of Adorno's departure from that tradition. He came to America a German philosopher and a *Privatdozent* from Frankfurt University;¹ he left America a social theorist and researcher, capable not only of writing *Philosophy of Modern Music* as an excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but also of making a decisive contribution to the pioneering study *The Authoritarian Personality*. Adorno did not mature into a philosophical sociologist in the good old German tradition; instead, he became a theorist who used empiricism to free traditional philosophy from dogma. It was precisely his theoretical sensibility that allowed him to break out of the narrow frameworks of social-scientific routine, making new forms of inquiry open to experience and opening up new aspects of experience to empirical research and theoretical conceptualization. But of course this is not how it is usually perceived. Take, for instance, the infamous episode involving Paul F. Lazarsfeld in 1938. We all know the clichéd version of this story, which reads almost like a sports headline: "American academic system pummels German philosopher! Another victory for American pragmatism, and a humiliating defeat for idealism!" Yet the headlines do not square with either the broad history of social research or even the specific events and people involved.

Lazarsfeld, for one, did not become an empiricist in America. He came out of the labor movement inspired by Austro-Marxism, with its unique mixture of enlightenment goals, scientific positivism, and progressive politics. Lazarsfeld's "radio barometer" was something he invented while in Vienna; his collaboration with Horkheimer went back to the final days of the Weimar Republic. It is true that the Princeton Radio Research Project, for which Lazarsfeld hired Adorno in 1938 as the musical director, was still making use of rather primitive "likes and dislikes" studies to investigate the musical preferences of its listeners. "Like or dislike" is a question of taste, yet this simple-sounding question can be approached seriously only with great difficulty. As Adorno pointed out, an intellectually and sociologically meaningful investigation of taste can take place only through an inquiry into the way objective constellations of social forces come to be manifest in subjects. Empiricists fear such questions the way the devil fears holy water, because these questions

1. The *Privatdozent* is a typical old German institution that means an adjunct professor who receives no pay.

call empiricism itself into question, and they do so on good empirical grounds, by requiring it to define what it thinks it is measuring. Adorno, who dared to ask this question in his first work as an empirical sociologist, initially met with the rejection that comes of violating a profession's strongest taboo.

In 1968 Lazarsfeld and Adorno both wrote memoirs of their experiences at the Princeton Radio Research Project and of their first encounters with one another. Both accounts have the charm of autobiographical reflections, and for that reason both must be approached with caution. Writerly intentions are altered in the process of writing, and these intentions are transformed again when read under different social circumstances. Lazarsfeld's "Episode in the History of Empirical Social Research" foregrounds an "Atlantic transfer" that, for him, meant the path from Vienna to the Ivy Leagues; Adorno's text reflects on the "scientific experiences of a European scholar" in New York and California between 1938 and 1953. Yet the difference between their accounts of transatlantic displacement, travel, and arrival is immediately apparent. Lazarsfeld wanted to and in fact did become an American scientist; he was celebrated worldwide as one of the leading American social scientists of his generation. This Adorno did not want, yet even in his self-understanding he did not remain a German philosopher. Rather—paradoxical as it may sound—it was in the United States that he became a European, one who, like his old friend Horkheimer, came back to Frankfurt via Paris. If one reads *Minima Moralia* for traces of a European self-awareness that was emerging in California, the conclusion is inescapable: *Minima Moralia* reads like an inverted tourist guide, in which the European begins to understand himself through exile. In choosing to research Paris as the last bastion of an old Europe, Benjamin had sought a similar self-understanding, and his refusal to break off his work led to his undoing. When Adorno, in New York, received Benjamin's surviving files, he did not merely obtain a set of notes toward an "incomplete research project." Contained therein were also Benjamin's insights—a kind of knowledge that a Lazarsfeld would have found wholly unsympathetic (not to mention unprofessional) had Benjamin, by a different set of circumstances, managed to make the Atlantic transfer in person. Adorno needed to return to Germany to complete the circuit, for only there could he bring Benjamin's work to press. Benjamin, who knew how to draw on the tensions between differentiated social formations as a source of intellectual insight and knowledge, had already shown the way: the relationship between France and Germany served as a thought model (*Denkmodell*) for both men.

Throughout the long nineteenth century France had embodied, from the German point of view, the utopian potential of a successful revolution that,

however, had not yet come to its emancipatory conclusion. In many respects, Marx's pre-1848 critique of Germany had already drawn its power from the social differential between east and west, a line then marked by the Rhine. But the twentieth century would become, from the European point of view, the American century. In retrospect, it seems strange that America's utopian potential as the land of unlimited possibilities was often identified by those friends of Adorno who least knew America: Alban Berg, for example. Or we might note here Benjamin's choice of a title for a collection of aphorisms that he wrote partly in anticipation of an American exile: *Zentralpark (Central Park)*. The more self-evident it became that the October Revolution had failed, the more it became clear—by the mid-1930s, inescapably clear—that hope and opportunities for change must be discovered in the most advanced society of the contemporary world. Yet American society was experienced as one whose revolution was already over: the emancipatory mind slipped from identification with the short-lived Napoleonic empire to an almost ontological view of America as a pure bourgeois society. “La Révolution est fini” was the implicit motto of a radically bourgeois American society largely antagonistic to European traditions. Social-revolutionary critique is unthinkable in a society in which the forces of enlightenment unfold their dialectic in the absence of a hostile ancien régime. Horkheimer and Adorno returned from America not as disappointed revolutionary critics but as dialecticians of enlightenment. The essence of the American experience—of what was new to the enlightened Europeans—consisted in what Adorno called the “experience of substantive democratic forms.” Those Germans who read *Minima Moralia* when it appeared in 1951 could hardly understand this, for democracy was for most of them still largely an imported good brought by the occupying power. The anti-American slant inherent to many of the German interpretations of *Minima Moralia* over the years should be viewed in terms of this social-historical context. In a new age, in which the lack of any alternative to democratic forms of social organization is a global experience, an opportunity beckons to discover again the utopian power of Adorno's social criticism.

The critical theorists' social criticism had great difficulty gaining traction in the American academic system. The politically astute émigré Horkheimer—who along with Friedrich Pollack developed the strategy for the Atlantic transfer of the Institute for Social Research—shied away from staging an open confrontation between a critical theory oriented toward social change and the academic system that served as its host. Yet it would be paradoxical to read into this reluctance the idea that the institute's research stood no chance of integrating into American society. Aside from the fact that the institute's advance

representative, Franz Neumann, had already garnered considerable popularity and acclaim by the 1930s and probably would have, if not for his untimely death, been a star in the American academy, one should also remember that Marcuse and Löwenthal clearly had an easier time surviving in academic America than they would have had in postfascist Germany. Thomas Wheatland has, moreover, demonstrated in a thoroughly documented dissertation, "Isolation, Assimilation, and Opposition: A Reception History of the Horkheimer Circle in the United States, 1934–1979," that these judgments can be made in terms of broader intellectual currents.² His study shows that the transfer of the institute to Columbia University disproves the cliché; the overall effect of the transfer was to give what had been the purely theoretical New York school of sociology a strongly empirical turn that allowed its ideas to displace the paradigms of the better-established Chicago sociological tradition. One suspects that Horkheimer, sensing the historical shape of the American academy, sought out Lazarsfeld for precisely these reasons. Lazarsfeld had ties to the institute dating back to the Weimar years, but, having emigrated several years before Horkheimer, he also had a wealth of empirical research experience to share. Out of gratitude for Horkheimer's help, Lazarsfeld made it possible for Horkheimer to bring Adorno to America in 1938.

The true differences between the two radio researchers, though, derived from their divergent conceptions of what they were doing in America: Adorno was the émigré, Lazarsfeld the immigrant. The different structures of expectation implied by these terms run through both men's recollections from 1968. My interest is to make these latent structures explicit—as well as to show, more generally, that the Atlantic transfer succeeds only if it entails a reciprocal process, whereby not just ideas but also experiences are brought across the divide. This experiential transfer must also involve an exchange that transcends the boundaries of the "academic" habitus, at least as it is narrowly defined.

On May 27, 1945, after the defeat of Hitler's army, Adorno presented a lecture at the "Jewish Club" of Los Angeles titled "Questions for the Intellectual Emigration." At the time, returning to Germany was not an immediate prospect for anyone, and relatively few anticipated the starkly bipolar world political order to come. For these reasons, the natural question presenting itself was how emigration would contribute to the new American century. Adorno addresses these issues from the start by distinguishing between

2. Thomas Wheatland, "Isolation, Assimilation, and Opposition: A Reception History of the Horkheimer Circle in the United States, 1934–1979" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2002).

immigration and emigration. Lazarsfeld's model of a research career in the United States—a career that might easily enough serve the war effort—stood comfortably within the tradition of secular immigration that had allowed millions of Germans to become Americans since the nineteenth century. It fit into Adorno's concept of immigration, born of direct life experience, as well. Most of the theorists in Horkheimer's circle had also become American citizens in the early 1940s, and several of them, such as Marcuse, had worked for the Office of War Information, producing social-scientific assessments of nations in the world war. Adorno—though he had had the privilege of being employed to work with Horkheimer on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and thus of drawing funds that the institute had managed to transfer to America—was by no means opposed to the others' efforts. Indeed, in the coming years his analyses of fascist agitators and the “authoritarian personality” were natural correlates to the intention to integrate into the American social science system. Yet Adorno also held fast to the experiential content inherent in the “émigré,” a category that connotes an ongoing awareness of violence, an awareness that inhibits the ability to identify wholly with the land of refuge. The inner compulsion to integrate into a new society—a compulsion that mirrors the rules of bourgeois society more generally—also echoes the central experience in European Jewish society, the pressure to assimilate. An immigrant society imposes on the immigrant a choice: either deny or reinvent one's life history and, with it, history itself. Under this pressure, Adorno developed, beginning in 1945, a third possibility: an intellectual program, as he put it, of “transferring that which is not transferable.”

Memory of tradition cannot be conclusively reconciled with the promise of liberation; even when the two principles can be alloyed, their bond is unstable and constantly risks falling into demonization or idealization. Yet this was the task that Adorno set himself in 1945. In anti-Americanism, a distorted social perception produces and internalizes the image of a wholly uncultured America; in anti-intellectualism, it produces a hypertrophic notion of culture that precludes social analysis. Today these seemingly mutually exclusive oppositions have become inseparable. The inflated culture concept has already, under the title of “cultural studies,” won scientific dignity for itself, either as glorified high culture or as ethnoreligious specificity. It is from this perspective that Adorno's program of transferring the nontransferable becomes contemporary for us once again. Adorno's critique of Lazarsfeld's naive empiricist idea of measuring culture—a critique that appeared, in thinly veiled form, in the 1945 lecture—directs itself not against an empirical American style

of science but against an uncritical acceptance of the developing culture industry.

Here, too, a clarifying word must be added: the culture industry is no American peculiarity; rather, America has, in the last hundred years, merely been ahead of the curve in the global trend toward commercializing intellectual production. Within this trend, Lazarsfeld's quantification of culture is of course wholly appropriate: it merely reflects the culture industry's drive to quantify itself for easing its own acceptance on the market. America is now, as in 1945—as Adorno stated—in “the most advanced position for observing” the development of society. It was out of the tension between advanced social developments and the cultural developments of a continental Europe lagging behind that Adorno's capacity for nonconservative cultural criticism began to emerge. Anti-intellectualism has, however, repeatedly tried to categorize Adorno as a conservative cultural critic—a role that he never sought. Adorno's recognition of how Weimar culture had undermined itself—a recognition that went hand in hand with that of the Soviets' barbarous cultural politics in the 1930s—was too deeply ingrained in him, both as direct memory and as part of his constitution as a European intellectual, to allow for such self-misunderstanding. With the Hitler-Stalin pact, European culture had lost its sense of a homeland; those who ultimately were fortunate enough to escape the destruction were, of course, disproportionately those who made it to America. In this sense, it is important to remember that the intellectual emigration was not made up just of Jews, even if Adorno's audience at the Jewish Club was almost certainly composed largely of Jews from German-speaking lands.

The text that Adorno used to reintroduce himself to the West German public was called “Cultural Criticism and Society”; this—not *Prisms*—was supposed to be the title of the book for which this 1949 essay serves as its introduction. It is in this, Adorno's opening foray into postwar German culture, that we find what is perhaps his most misinterpreted dictum: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” But how often do we hear the whole sentence? “The critique of culture finds itself confronting the last stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric—and that fact, that situation devours even the insight and intelligence that speak out about why poetry has become impossible.”³ This sentence encaps-

3. Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34. Translation modified. For the German see “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,” in *Prismen*, vol. 10.1 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 11–30.

ulates Adorno's attempt not to sacrifice the European experience to a globalized amnesia. The memory of the appearance of barbarism in the midst of culture makes his work contemporary: whereas cultural memory gains its right to exist only insofar as it is critical, the glorification of culture itself brings barbaric tendencies in its train. For this reason, it is not at all accurate to characterize Adorno as a neo-Marxist; if that were so, he not only would be boring but would also have been rightly forgotten. Lazarsfeld in his memoirs tried to portray Adorno as a neo-Marxist, but Lazarsfeld's interest lay in transcending the problem formulated by Adorno: to understand how human subjects consciously mediate objective social processes. The studies that Adorno himself undertook—of the effects of fascist agitators in America, of the techniques of horoscopes in the *Los Angeles Times*,⁴ of “how to look at television” (in 1953, at which point television viewing had been universal in California, the land of cutting-edge communication technologies, for about five years)⁵—all bear a kind of witness to a still-unresolved problem in the social sciences.

If one partakes in the belief, widespread even today in the scientific community, that culture and the subject can be unproblematically identified with one another, then Adorno's American experience may become irrelevant. But if one views this identification of culture with the individual as a residual marker of the experience of a modern immigrant society—the kind of society that the societies of “old Europe” have since become—one also recognizes the problem that Adorno's life and thought pose, as an aspect of experience that an uncritical science has lost the ability to articulate and analyze. In 1968 Adorno bequeathed to his German students and American readers “a kind of restitution of experience against its empirical treatment” in the form of a theoretical program. Even in remembering Adorno we must be conscious of how easy it is to diminish experience by stringing together adjectives and mistaking them for actual analysis. German, bourgeois, Jewish, half Jewish: each classification falls short of the concrete individual—and American citizen—who, out of a mixture of external pressures and free will, renamed himself Theodor W. Adorno in California in 1942. He wished

4. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth, and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (New York: Routledge, 1994).

5. Theodor W. Adorno, “How to Look at Television,” *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 8 (1954): 214–35. The essay first appeared in German in *Rundfunk und Fernsehen* 4 (1953), rpt. as “Fernsehen als Ideologie,” in *Eingriffe*, vol. 10.2 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 518–32; the English version was reprinted as “Television as Ideology” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 59–70.

to keep alive the remembrance of the conditions that had given him his intellectual physiognomy, yet he could not, nor did he want to, be identical with what he had once been.

In closing, I wish to refer to a remark, made by Adorno in the 1968 “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar,” that to my knowledge has gone unnoticed but that speaks both to the formative and to the historical dimensions of Adorno’s American experience, as well as to his attempt to raise that experience to the level of critical theory.⁶ As such, it is a remark that pointed (and still points) to the future of critical theory. Observing that it is characteristic of modern society to demand that the individual increasingly conform to society’s norms and thus identify with its demands, Adorno comments that this social fact would seem to require a dramatic revision of the foundational concept of identity. Without such a revision, he reasons, the embrace of identity amounts to the uncritical celebration of a backward-looking ideology that has the potential to displace humane praxis. Precisely insofar as modern society, which Adorno certainly interpreted through the all-purpose ideology of the “melting pot,” hoped to do away with the Old World, so it also kept alive a central concept of all utopias—the hope, as Adorno put it in *Minima Moralia*, “of being able to be different without fear.”⁷ Adorno’s American experience made it possible, for someone who had become conscious of himself in America, to return to Germany as a European intellectual—and indeed, to a Europe that did not yet even exist. Only through the mediation of America could Adorno become the kind of institution—and the body of thought—that brings intellectuals together from both sides of the Atlantic to think about the displacements and tensions of modern society.

6. Theodor W. Adorno, “Wissenschaftliche Erfahrungen in Amerika,” in *Stichworte*, appendix to *Eingriffe*, 701–38. For the English version see “Scientific Experiments of a European Scholar in America,” in Pickford, *Critical Models*, 215–42.

7. Theodor W. Adorno, “Mélange,” in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 114.