



Journal of Adorno Studies



11/2025
DOI: 10.7413/joas008

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No Refuge for the Homeseekers

SEBASTIAN TRÄNKLE

Questions regarding the actuality of Adorno's thinking often ring hollow, posed time and again at various conferences and colloquia, which neatly comb through his oeuvre. Their aim is to identify the contemporary pertinence of his thinking, isolated from those aspects which appear to be of no more use. This tendency has informed a currently widespread attitude, which is articulated in the warning: one may only ever think with Adorno if one also always thinks against him. In short, Adorno's thinking is measured against what is considered actual, timely, present in theory and practice. One could hardly do more violence to him. For Adorno's thinking, above all, considers what is actual, timely, and present to constitute the very object of critique, and aspires for what is potential, untimely, and absent. This is the movement that animates his *critical* theory.

Adorno's critical theory is trenchant precisely where it appears to be offensive, irritating, or challenging. This is no coincidence. Instead of presuming that something is gained for all possible critique in the solidification of a normative foundation, his is a critical theory that

assumes the form of a negative moral philosophy. If the latter were not averse to all principles, unfolding instead in close contact with its socio-historical objects, one of its first principles would read: “[E]s gehört zur Moral, nicht bei sich selber zu Hause zu sein.”¹ As in many other instances, this sentence, from the aphorism “Refuge for the Homeless” found in *Minima Moralia*, cannot be translated exactly. The English translation renders it as: “[I]t is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.”² It thereby misses the crucial tension between the literal and the figural meaning. Adorno produces this tension by use of the German idiom “*bei sich selber zuhause*,” which in the given context may mean both “at home *in one’s home*” and “at home *in one’s own self*.” The aphorism is infamous for its final sentence about living rightly in the wrong life, maybe the most abused of all of Adorno’s sentences. But it is also a prime example of his exemplary thinking, sustained by a playful ambiguity.

On the one hand, the aphorism deals, quite literally, with habitation, which has become precarious under conditions in which economization has stretched into the most intimate corners of private life. On the other hand, habitation is also evoked as a metaphor already established in social theory: its stated precariousness expresses a condition that Siegfried Kracauer, concretizing Georg Lukács’ cultural-critical diagnosis by analyzing the late Weimar salaried masses, specified as “spiritually homeless.”³ There is a factual connection between the two meanings: what appears as a spiritual or cultural malaise is the implication of a social organization that, despite material abundance, systematically fails to satisfy basic needs such as housing.

Adorno’s sentence, implying the immorality of being at home, exhibits the same twofold meaning. On the one hand, it refers to making oneself at home within one’s own four-walled domicile, retreating into “a genuine, but purchased, stylish apartment.”⁴ Admittedly, such a retreat, which today defines the form of life of a post-bourgeois affluent milieu, is the luxurious variant of a wrong habitation. Adorno already had this in mind as he concurrently mentions a majority forced to dwell in trailer parks and slums. On the other hand, its more general meaning of being at home *in one’s own self* turns the sentence into a maxim. However, within the framework of a negative moral philosophy, any maxim can only be formulated as a negation. Thus, the sen-

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 43.

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London/New York: Verso, 2005), 39.

3 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quentin Hoare (London/New York: Verso, 1998), 88. Adorno’s aphorism reuses the title of the chapter containing this quote.

4 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 38. Translation altered.

tence spells out a rejection of subjective escapes out of objective, social misery. Such attempts are precisely the order of the day, and not only when it comes to habitation.

A materialist theory of society reveals such attempts to be modes of reaction to experiences of social crisis. The impossibility of being at home in the world fuels the urge to at least be at home in one's own self. Such a constellation, already described by Adorno, determines our present: all individuals experience their individual particularities as irrelevant for society; everyone is replaceable and interchangeable. At the same time, there is growing pressure to assert oneself, to throw everything one is and has into the struggle for self-preservation, that is, into the market and competition. The neoliberal activation of the individual seems above all to valorize its particularities.⁵ They are declared to be an economic resource and treated as "human capital." Yet such an activation engenders a thorough adaptation of all individuals to the demands of the social whole. Consequently, the often politically motivated valorization of categories such as particularity, difference, and identity reveals its ideological quality.

The morality criticized by Adorno, which calls for being at home in one's self, can be deciphered as a striving for identity. In this context, it is of secondary importance how identity is defined, as an individualistic or, as can often be observed today, as a collectivistic category. What is decisive is the way it functions: an alleged particularity is held up against a universal perceived as an abstract external power. In the process, the former takes on an equally abstract, reified form: that of absolute difference demanding unconditional recognition. On the one hand, materialist critique emphasizes how meagerly particular such a particularity is, how much it is itself socially determined in form and content. It is no coincidence that the categories utilized today are mostly collective ones, those of cultural or even ethnic identity. On the other hand, dissolving their semblance also reveals that being identical with oneself is, if not outright impossible, hardly desirable. To be "wholly oneself," Adorno counters with Marcel Proust, would rather mean "being absolutely differentiated"⁶; in other words, precisely not permanently at home in one's self.

Practicing critique in the spirit of Adorno, one has to aim for all current promises of meaning or identity. It is not enough to target ideologies and movements that are obviously reactionary. Forms of thought and practice

5 See e.g., Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject* (London: SAGE, 2015).

6 Theodor W. Adorno, "Zu Proust," *Noten zur Literatur*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 669–675. My translation.

declaring their progressive aspirations are not to be taken at face value. They too must first be subjected to the scrutiny of ideology critique. That means conceiving them as part and parcel of the existing and thus of a current ideological constellation. For thought claiming to be materialist, this also entails always interpreting cultural and political phenomena with reference to the critique of political economy. Such a critique of ideology gains its strength from withstanding the pressure to profess and identify with any of the socially established alternatives. Whoever refuses to get involved in any pregiven theory and practice is not only never at home in oneself; they are also never at home in the present. Their thinking is therefore untimely, not actual, but aimed at actualizing what is here and now merely as a potential: a habitable society.

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