

Adorno's Conception of Tradition Revisited

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There is sufficient evidence that the public sphere of advanced Western societies is in the process of a fundamental structural transformation, equal to that of the early modern age.¹ Driven by new electronic media, older modes of public communication such as print media have lost their dominant position. Especially, the rapid rise of social media has changed the format and nature of public debates and thereby transformed the character of public culture. This means that the question of tradition, raised by Adorno in the 1960s, has become urgent again. It is worth revisiting Adorno's response.

For Adorno, the point of departure was the transition from a premodern (feudal) to a modern society. Following Max Weber, he emphasizes the growing weakening of tradition under the conditions of a modern society based on a capitalist economy. However, while Weber and Marx emphasize the positive aspect

1 Jürgen Habermas, *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2022).

of this transition, highlighting the disadvantages of older societies and traditional cultures, Adorno stresses the loss of tradition as a serious problem for modern societies. They paid a heavy price for technological progress. Especially in the sphere of culture, Adorno considers the advanced stage of the capitalist mode of production a serious threat to the creation and reception of genuine artworks.

To be sure, Adorno is completely aware that his own understanding of the crisis is historically determined. As he argues in "On Tradition," early modern societies considered tradition an impediment to progress.² It was only at a later phase of this process that the disappearance of tradition was perceived as a loss, raising the question if and how tradition could be restored. It was at the stage of aesthetic historicism during the later 19th century that the return to older styles became a dominant response to the question of tradition. For Adorno, as he points out in his essay on functionalism, it was the wrong answer.³ The return to older forms of aesthetic production resulted in false traditions. Modernist aesthetic theory had to expose them as fake.

Nonetheless, for Adorno this necessary critique does not eliminate the problem. The pervasive destruction of tradition in the context of the 20th century culture industry points to a substantial loss. For Adorno, the culture industry defines a mode of aesthetic production and reception in which the authentic character of the artwork is threatened. This potential loss concerns elite culture no less than popular culture. The potential commercialization of all artworks deflates their aesthetic value. Under these conditions the critical question is: Is a genuine reception of artworks of the past possible at all? Put differently, can we still have a reliable tradition?

Adorno's theoretical reflections, responding to and competing with scholars and theorists like Ernst Robert Curtius and Hans-Georg Gadamer, focus on moments of memory and potential redemption. While Curtius' postwar project emphasized the restoration of a common European tradition, grounded in a shared medieval Latin culture, Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) not only reframed the method of the humanities by updating hermeneutic theory but simultaneously rearticulated the understanding of tradition, accentuating the critical importance of the classical as the stable ground for our historical orientation. What Curtius and Gadamer had in common was the unspoken rejection of the political and cultural rupture caused by National Socialism. They foregrounded continuity through the availability of tradi-

2 Theodor W. Adorno, "Uber Tradition," in *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 29-41.

3 Theodor Adorno, "Funktionalismus heute," in *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 104-127.

tion. While Adorno called for working through (*Aufarbeitung*) recent German history, conservative thought wanted to minimize the break, using the concept of tradition as a cornerstone for their argument.

Still, Adorno's literary essays make it clear that he was unwilling to eliminate the idea of a literary tradition. When he approaches poets like Goethe, Eichendorff, Heine, and George he touches on the question of tradition. In fact, in some of his essays the search for a sustainable tradition is the very center. In the essay "On Tradition," he suggests that the recuperation of tradition in the present can succeed only dialectically through determinate negation. Both the notion of historical continuity and the duration of the classical have to be sacrificed. Unlike Georg Lukács, Adorno does not trust the notion of a "heritage" (*Erbe*) that can be securely transferred from the past to the present, because he refuses to share Lukács' belief that state socialism in the East created a society free of repression that can heal the suffering of the past.

For Adorno access to tradition, while considered essential, is no longer secure. His reflections distinguish two perspectives. For the contemporary artist tradition can be reached only by way of rigorous refusal. His model is Beckett's *Endgame* where tradition is invoked in order to be mocked. The presence of tradition is legitimate only in the mode of parody. However, retrieving artworks of the past relies on a different procedure. Success depends on detecting elements outside the accepted "message" of the work, finding forgotten, seemingly insignificant moments. Adorno's interpretation of Goethe's *Iphigenie* is a good example for rereading a classical work. By shifting the emphasis from Iphigenie to King Thoas, from a European to a colonial perspective, Adorno rescues the play from its affirmative function within a Eurocentric world view.

More than half a century has passed since Adorno's essay. From the perspective of an advanced electronic media system the notion of a stable cultural tradition has become considerably more fraught. Structures that Adorno took for granted are no longer secure, among them the institution of criticism that contributed to the preservation of traditions in fields like music and literature. The revolutionary changes of digital media have established the equality of the participants, turning the masses into authors, but thereby also undermining the role of the expert critic whose familiarity with present and historical artworks was indispensable for the upholding of cultural traditions. The preservation of literary traditions appears to be tied to the survival of print media and the structure of higher education. The increasing marginalization of the humanities at the university level has negatively affected the continuous critical discussion necessary for an active and effective cultural tradition. What makes Adorno's intervention valuable today is its critical im-

petus, reminding us of the fundamental unresolved problems involved in the concept of tradition and of the need for its preservation.

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