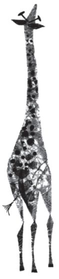
Journal of Adorno Studies

I 1/2025
DOI: 10.7413/joas020

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"I will leave that to you for further thought": On Adorno's Lectures[1]

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Translated by Thomas Bell

To write about Theodor W. Adorno's lectures means, above all, taking into account his impact in the West German Federal Republic of the 1950s and 60s. Indeed, Adorno gave most of his lectures after his return from years of exile in the United States, in the two decades between 1949 and 1969. He dealt with topics ranging from music and sociology to pedagogy, politics, and literature. The lectures delivered during the post-war years, up to 1954, often relate to the situation in Germany, ravaged by war and culturally desolate. At issue are questions of reconstruction, the rediscovery of the discipline of sociology after its suppression by the National Socialists, developments within new music, and the writer

1 The term "lecture" is a translation of the German word "Vortrag," which refers not only to academic lectures but also to public talks. Indeed, the current article focuses mainly on Adorno's often improvised public lectures, which are collected in the volume *Vorträge 1949-1968*, edited by the author; see Theodor W. Adorno, *Vorträge 1949-1968*, ed. Michael Schwarz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019). The English translation of Adorno's *Vorträge* will be published by Polity Press in due course.

Marcel Proust, whose works, Adorno claims, never received the reception they deserved in Germany.[2] Later lectures, such as those from the 1960s, also draw on the problem of the break with tradition. Adorno wanted to work against the prevailing amnesia in Germany. He spoke about conceptions of education during the period of German Idealism, about the young Karl Marx, about Frank Wedekind, about the Viennese School and the *Pierrot Lunaire* by Arnold Schoenberg.

These were hidden, dismissed, or repressed topics. Adorno's ambition was to bring such topics back into the discussion within the cultural climate of the Federal Republic during the Adenauer era. What was this climate? As Germany achieved economic stabilization, there were many attempts to return to tradition, *i.e.*, to a putatively undamaged tradition. The intoxication of reconstruction was matched by a frenzy of rediscovery, a faith in tradition and culture, that also served to cast off the experience of catastrophe and to repress individual guilt. In this context, Adorno asserts that cultural life is "characterized by its hollowed-out moment, its unfinished aspect, which is comparable to the not quite convincing, not quite true character of rebuilt cities."[3] This culture remains implausible, that which has arisen from the ruins remains unreal and shadowy, and the recognition of this is being drowned out by a bustle of activity.

Adorno wanted to oppose the decline of education (*Bildung*) and historical consciousness. But, for him, that project could not take the form of a restoration. There could be no appeal to anything venerable or to any fixed traditions. What had come before could not continue unabatedly. To reproduce traditional forms of culture and education would be to fall short of their very substance and meaning. The lectures follow an idea of tradition that does not consist of imitation and lifeless copying, but instead demonstrates a certain fidelity and living relationship to the past, but a past precisely in the process of transformation. Adorno already expresses this view in his first lecture after his return to Germany—on the problems of modern city planning.

Much space in the lectures is given over to reflections on education. This is especially so with those lectures between 1957 and 1963. They bear the following titles: "Individual and Society Today," "*Kultur* and Culture,"[4] "The Dependence of Educational Training Goals on Students and their Expectations," "The Unity of Research and Teaching under the Societal Conditions of

2 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 55ff.
3 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 468.
4 "Culture" occurs in English in the original.

the 18th and 19th Centuries," "Musical Education Today," and "The Concept of Political Education."

Why education? The insistence with which Adorno returns again and again to this topic indicates that it had become a problematic notion. One of the most disturbing revelations and one of the most poignant lessons from the time of National Socialism was that a "good education" does not necessarily protect against reversions to inhumanity. The Nazis were not simply a gang of barbarians, as the Swiss author Max Frisch had noted—a comment to which Adorno occasionally refers. Frisch mentions, for example, the National Socialist politician Reinhard Heydrich, who played a decisive role in the overall planning of the destruction of the Jews. But, as Frisch writes, he was also an excellent and extremely sensitive musician, who could converse eloquently, knowledgeably, and even admirably about Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. Nevertheless, this fine aesthetic education did not prevent him from devoting himself to brutal, murderous practices. Consequently, what type of education should be promoted, what modifications should existing education undergo, in order to prevent a repetition of mass murder and a relapse into barbarism? That is the question.

What, then, are the ends of education? Wilhelm von Humboldt regarded it as an end in itself, as "humanity's true purpose." He spoke, for example, of the "highest and most proportional formation of human powers into a whole."[5] This idealistic concept of education suffered increasing attacks during the 1950s, particularly among educators who were under the influence of a "realistic turn." Technical education became the focus of attention. Humboldt was accused of being out of touch with reality. His educational ideal was no longer viable; it had nothing to do with the real demands of the modern working world, and with those strict requirements necessary for high-level specialization and for obtaining qualifications for specific employment opportunities. While Adorno mentions certain limitations to the Humboldtian notion of education, he is not interested in simply scrapping the idealistic concept of education, which, indeed, implies a critique of society based on the division of labor.

Education, patiently and sustainably acquired over long periods of time, stands in tension with the established division of labor and its allocation of tasks. This is well-documented by Adorno's lectures, which are more than simply "wide-ranging" in scope. His overarching goal is to overcome the division of disciplines.

5 Willhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel, vol. 1 (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1960), 64.

With an emphasis on transcending individual disciplines, developing interconnected perspectives, and breaching the borders between philosophy and the individual sciences, Adorno was a popular contributor to the "studium generale." In this context, he spoke at the universities of Freiburg, Mainz, Braunschweig, and (most likely) Heidelberg. For the "studium generale," study groups were established or lectures were offered, particularly on topics that fell between academic disciplines. For example, when Adorno lectured within the "studium generale" program at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität in Mainz on November 8, 1961, and addressed the problems involved in connecting research and teaching, he spoke specifically about the necessities and dangers of scientific specialization, employing, as his intellectual source, the era of Idealism— Goethe, Hegel, and Humboldt.

However, the wide-ranging character of Adorno's lectures, which would lead him to the disciplines of pedagogy, visual arts, and city planning, had its limits. Adorno did not want to speak uninhibitedly on every imaginable topic, crossing over into dilettantism, and the numerous invitations he received only strengthened his awareness of what he wanted to avoid. In fact, Adorno often appealed to his own lack of experience and knowledge when justifying his refusal of invitations to speak on topics outside his areas of expertise.

Adorno's correspondence with event organizers was filed under the heading "Invitations" in his papers. In these folders, from "Aarhus" to "Zürich," one finds correspondence on lectures and public conversations, in which Adorno either participated or was invited to participate. In contrast to his radio broadcasts—for which Adorno frequently provided ideas to the editors or program managers—the initiative for speaking invitations typically came from local organizers. The character of these events varied: public, partially public, or for a private circle of participants.

In 1957, Adorno spoke about "Human Society Today" in the context of a continuing education series organized particularly for civil servants. Here, he addressed the consequences of globalization. It had created new dependencies between countries:

> If, a hundred years ago, there were dynastic wars in a country like Afghanistan, then those were essentially Afghan matters that had little impact on other powers. When something like that happens in Afghanistan today, then we can be certain from the outset that it is either a Soviet plot or about American oil interests, and that what happens apparently independently in such a country is, in reality, a function of the major power conflicts existing throughout the whole world.[6]

6 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 195.

A few years later, in 1961–62, the Cold War reached its apex. The arms race, which Adorno referred to as "insanity," moved the world to the brink of an abyss. Even if tendencies toward *détente* began to emerge in the following years, global dangers remained, and the problems facing human survival were so present and pervasive that working on art and culture became questionable for Adorno.

By 1960, West Germany had economically regained its footing, and at this time political culture began to change as well. There was progress in the development of a critical public sphere, as it reshuffled its system of values and began to challenge authorities and hierarchies. It was during these years that changes were already in the making that would lead to the political ferment of 1968.

In the context of these upheavals after the 1950s, a number of political-pedagogical lectures by Adorno had a very strong impact in the public sphere. Adorno was intensely interested in putting the issue of "Working Through the Past" on the agenda in Germany. He warned of a fascism that exists latently in contexts where democratic ways of life are not firmly established. If people do not make democracy their own, then fascist tendencies will continue to develop within outwardly democratic countries. Adorno pursued this topic in his lectures on "The Authoritarian Personality" (1960) and the "Concept of Political Education" (1963). But, a few years later, he found himself forced to address openly anti-democratic, fascist movements, both old and new. In 1967, he spoke about the right-wing radicalism that had virulently manifested itself in the election victories of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). Founded in 1964, the party had representation in state parliaments starting in 1966. With his lecture on *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism* (2020) Adorno reacted to the successes of the party—victories that had shaken trust in the democratic development of the Federal Republic.

Justifiably, Adorno was regarded as the great "Nay-Sayer" among German philosophers. He was suspicious of affirmative acquiescence and of apologetics. He believed that it was his task to actively avoid venerating values, providing recipes for improvement, and following the expectations of "constructive critique." Yet, his thinking did not lose itself in negativity. As little as he considered himself responsible for saying what needed to be done, and as skeptical as he was of particular reforms, he did not shy away from occasionally offering proposals and advice of practical significance. Several of his lectures formulate suggestions or serve as attempts at intervention, which gainsay his notorious negativism. In 1962, he provided concrete proposals on the connection between research and teaching in philosophy and sociology. Avoiding humanitarian or moralizing pleas, Adorno, in 1967, gave realistic recommendations for dealing with right-wing radicals. The accusation of be-

ing a theoretician lacking in practical relevance—or of being resigned to the circumstances—overlooks this aspect of his lectures, namely, their practical effectiveness. The lectures reveal instances of a reflective engagement that stands opposed to defeatism and cold indifference. And, insofar as they also oppose an "observational relationship to reality,"[7] they go far beyond theory.

Frequently, Adorno, as philosopher and intellectual, resisted universally dominant positions. In one lecture, he speaks against what he calls "bleating with the herd," and against the "tremendous clutter of clichés and stereotypes" associated with new music. In another place, he contends he wants to counter "the habitual ways of thinking that today are generally widespread in the German milieu."[8] Adorno saw it as his task to attack stale conventions and models of opinion. Consequently, it is all the more surprising when he sides with common sense, with pre-scientific human understanding:

> If I may give you a piece of advice, it is the following: you should not allow yourself to be particularly swayed by science; but instead, in God's name, you should rely on your own healthy human understanding, which today no longer, by any means, automatically agrees with science. [...] Do not allow yourself to become stupid; above all, do not be persuaded that that which thrives in the academic world now automatically represents higher knowledge; but, instead, realize that—in opposition to the official world of education—there is always at work among people a tradition of skepticism, of irony, of awakened consciousness, which is perhaps the best source humanity has at its disposal today to change the world.[9]

It may strike us as strange that Adorno should refer to an alternative "tradition," based on "awakened consciousness," that might have greater transformative potential today than the academic world of education. However, this is no exception; this view indicates—against stereotypes promoting the contrary view—just how distant Adorno is from elite conceptions and from hostility towards the masses.

Adorno's educational praxis, as manifested in his lectures, was particularly pertinent to non-academic audiences. From 1954 to 1962, he took part—eight times in total—in the "Hessian Collegiate Weeks for Continuing Education in Political Science." This series was intended as advanced training for civil servants. During these collegiate weeks, Adorno gave talks to laypeople and also spoke with them directly. More specifically, he addressed themes that were in no way associated with the areas of work represented by those government officials who were in attendance. Adorno was sometimes surprised by the lively participation and intellectual openness of his audience. One could

7 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 467.
8 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 111, 118.
9 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 214f.

speak there without decreasing the level of conversation, without reducing intellectual demands, and without improper pedagogical approaches to the material. Adorno was convinced that he could contribute to fundamentally promoting the listeners' understanding, *e.g.*, of difficult works of new music.

Adorno understood his improvised lectures, above all, as a foundation for discussion. The lecture was not to be perceived simply as a monologue or condescending pontification, but instead, it was intended to require critical thinking that would arise in the course of conversation. Adorno did not want a learning environment free from contestations. He wanted participants to provide commentary and to give answers. He was not disturbed, in any way, by contradictions and criticism. He writes:

> It is precisely that person, who seemingly speaks freely—as in a discussion, but without allowing it to actually become a discussion, without the other side finding the possibility to answer—it is this person who, in this manner, very quickly occupies this usurped position; and, with this type of lecture, I myself am never able to get rid of the feeling of embarrassment and inappropriateness, without, however, considering it better to simply brandish a manuscript and to read the audience to sleep.[10]

Adorno regarded the monologue as the occupational sickness of the university instructor. Furthermore, he understood his lectures as, first and foremost, stimuli to critical, autonomous thinking and as guidelines for further discussion. He believed that they should help listeners develop their abilities to make independent connections. For Adorno, therein also lay the liveliness of philosophical reflection. He quoted one of Immanuel Kant's ideas: one can "never learn philosophy, at the most one can learn to philosophize."[11] Adorno himself did not want to disseminate any type of ready-made educational content, but instead he encouraged people to use their own reason: *"I will leave that to you for further thought*."[12]

Regarding the problem of Adorno's comprehensibility, what can be said is that too frequently the problem itself is not properly grasped. For Adorno, the listeners' comprehension was vital. His lectures do not speak the language of exclusivity. For the most part, they are easier to grasp than his published writings. Concern for the audience's understanding and the lecture's effectiveness are more pronounced. There is a kind of situational deference at work here, a pragmatic approach to the audience, and a deliberate decision to begin with the consciousness of the listeners. For example, Adorno says to his audience that

10 Theodor W. Adorno, "Zum Problem des akademischen Unterrichts" (call number Ts 52304), Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, Frankfurt am Main.

11 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) A837, B865.

12 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 343. Emphasis added.

he wants to start "from your position, as I conceive it to be. I would like to try to develop answers from your own state of consciousness."[13]

Many of his lectures have an introductory, familiar, mediating or synoptic character. They require less prior knowledge, which consequently facilitates their reception. And, as Adorno was well aware, they also achieved their goal through the lighter element of spontaneity. In one letter, Adorno writes: I "repeated—most recently with my free improvisational Wagner-Lecture in Berlin—the experience that my things—as one says—'come across' better when I do not read according to a manuscript, which would simply be unavoidably dense and armored."[14]

What does Adorno mean when he speaks of his lectures as "free improvisations"? They were not completely unprepared. His art of lecturing is that of organized spontaneity: Adorno developed the lectures while speaking, relying on keywords that served to order or pre-structure his thoughts; they were reminders and guidelines. His notes sometimes also contain a detailed plan, a collection of quotes, or a more comprehensively outlined concept. The materials left behind testify to the type and degree of preparation.

"Improvisations on Wedekind" was the title Adorno gave to a lecture held on April 28, 1962, in the Darmstadt regional theatre on the occasion of a performance of Frank Wedekind's farce *The Love Potion*. Two days prior he prepared a few notes for his talk. A secretary typed out, and then augmented and amended them by hand. In this way, he produced a kind of template that functioned as a foundation for improvisation. "To pull out a manuscript and to read something about Wedekind would have something unspeakably ridiculous about it," Adorno says at the beginning of his lecture. But at the same time, he admits that he was not unprepared: "It will, indeed, be improvisations, and if I have written down something here, then, truth be told, it was only because I would have feared letting myself be so carried away that I would have inordinately stretched your patience."[15] Adorno knew that keywords provide a limiting function; they help maintain a trajectory and offer anchor points, so as to limit digressions, particularly on topics important to him and capable of spurring rhetorical *élan.* He sought only to avoid the erratic-associativeness of oral speech, insofar as it tends towards misleading detours and digressions.

Adorno cultivated a carefully articulated manner of speaking. Every syllable received its due. It is frequently said that Adorno spoke "like a book," that is, in publishable prose. He spoke fluently and in a relaxed manner, rich in paren-

13 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 78.
14 Theodor W. Adorno, *Correspondence* (call number Ru 85/1), Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, Frankfurt am Main.
15 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 330.

theses, building, every now and then, long arcs and periodic sentence constructions. He fascinated his audience through his rhetoric, his power of speech, and his passion for thought. In what is said there is hardly a trace of intellectual exertion; there is rather an appearance of effortlessness, as if what is said stemmed from a place of assured fluency.

That said, did he really speak "like a book?" Adorno's own answer: Never! He resolutely separated the spoken from the written word. For him, an improvisational lecture was radically different from a text prepared for publication. With regard to the spoken word, he once said: one "may lay claim to a certain liberality [...] one may take things with a pinch of salt."[16] The free—or better: half-free—lecture did not have to obey the strict linguistic and stylistic demands to which his essays and articles were subjected in advance of publication. Adorno's published texts went through multiple revisions, resulting, ultimately, in a finished and polished product. Of written works he demanded of himself conscientiously precise formulations, literary coherence, and rigorously enhanced textual density, all of which followed the principle of the work and his stylistic will. Lectures, on the other hand—measured by such standards—lacked something, for Adorno. He says, referring to himself: "But nothing that he says can satisfy what he demands from a text."[17] Authorial ethos and consciousness of form, as well as language-critical considerations, led Adorno to place slightly less importance on his lectures. Additionally, these authorial demands impelled him to hesitate to publish anything that had not been previously subjected, in repeated iterations, to the possibilities of refinement and correction inherent in writing. In general, Adorno refused to publish his lectures. He did not want something said in a fleeting moment to become permanently established. He did not want to accept authorial responsibility for anything that was intended to have an immediate effect, and in which he saw a great deal of insufficiency, roughness, imprecision, clumsiness, clunkiness, with the appearance of something dashed off. Precision of thought depends on formulation, and Adorno's precise linguistic thinking obtains its measure in and through the written text. The lectures, in his estimation, were of lesser importance. He always maintained a "*parti pris*" (partiality) for the written work.

Fortunately, the majority of his lectures have been preserved in the Theodor W. Adorno Archive, in the form of audio recordings and transcripts. The core collection of audio material belongs to Adorno's literary estate. Over the years, the archive has continually added to this material. Approximately thirty years ago, Rolf Tiedemann, the longtime director of the Adorno Archive who passed

16 Theodor W. Adorno, *Erich Doflein, Briefwechsel. Mit einem Radiogespräch von 1951 und drei Aufsätzen Erich Dofleins* (Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 2006), 237.

17 Adorno, *Vorträge*, 640.

away in 2018, developed plans for Adorno's *Posthumous Writings.* The project, as he conceived it, included plans for individual volumes containing Adorno's lectures, as well as conversations, discussions, and interviews. Tiedemann was, of course, conscious of the fact that it would be problematic to collect lectures and conversations under the label of posthumous "writings." Nevertheless, Suhrkamp Verlag and the Hamburg Foundation for the Promotion of Science and Culture made it possible to include all this spoken, improvised, and unwritten material in the posthumous edition.

For the publication of the lectures, the basic plan was to organize and archive everything in Adorno's literary estate related to the lectures or connected with them in any way. The idea was to provide an overview of when, where, and about what Adorno had spoken. The next step involved gathering together materials not already in the archive. To this end, research was conducted in radio archives, with a view to compiling the most complete collection possible of audio recordings in which Adorno participated. In this manner, it was possible to develop a detailed plan for a volume of lectures.

Insofar as it was possible, the preparation of texts for publication followed from the transcription of audio recordings. However, where only a written document was available, it was this that had to be accepted as the basis for the resulting text. In addition to the lectures, the volume also contains the keywords with which Adorno equipped himself and upon which he improvisationally relied. Furthermore, included are a comprehensive apparatus of annotations, an editor's afterword, and an index of names.

The manuscript containing the volume of lectures went to Suhrkamp Verlag, where Eva Gilmer suggested the idea of publishing Adorno's lecture on right-wing extremism first, as a separate volume. *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism* appeared in Germany in July 2019 with an afterword by the historian and journalist Volker Weiß.

The tremendous reception of this publication can be explained, at least partially, by the current widespread concern about a political situation that has greatly stimulated right-wing populist tendencies in Germany, in other European countries, and in America. Reviews have shown, sometimes strikingly, that there are far-reaching resemblances between the themes of the lecture and the present. There is quite a bit—for example when Adorno analyzes right-wing rhetoric—that could be correlated with today's right-wing populism, and in particular with the extreme wing of the "Alternative for Germany" (AfD), a party that, over the last years, has been on the rise. The timeliness of this lecture's publication has been repeatedly emphasized, although some commentators have also spoken about the limits of the lecture's actuality. In any event, the small book on *Right-Wing Extremism* has rocked the boat and triggered an important discussion. It was on the *Spiegel* Best-

seller List for six months; in that time almost 70,000 copies had been sold. Moreover, the public reception of this small text was in no way limited to the German context: Suhrkamp Verlag has already issued many foreign licenses for translation and publication around the globe, frequently in countries in which there are strong currents of right-wing populism. Hopefully, the entire volume of lectures, which helps to correct a one-sided image of Adorno and thereby achieve a better understanding of his intellectual endeavors, will also experience broad international reception.

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