Book Reviews

Adorno, Theodor W. Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism, translated by Wieland Hoban, Cambridge et al.: Polity, 2020, 72pp. $12.95 ISBN 978-1-509-54145-4

With Theodor Adorno's *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism* one of the most timely and incisive commentaries on the contemporary crisis of democracy addresses us from the past. Although the reflections, originally presented by Adorno in a talk at the University of Vienna on April 6, 1967 to which the Union of Socialist Students had invited him, are meant to speak to a particular moment in German politics, they transcend their historical context: they provide fundamental insights into the mechanisms at work in populism, authoritarianism, and nationalism—ideological "revenants" that, for Adorno, lead to manifestations of right-wing extremism as long as the socio-economic and socio-psychological conditions that historically have enabled fascism remain in place. The far-sighted, at times almost oracular, yet tangible quality of the considerations—Adorno's analytical framework invites an application to the age of Trump, Johnson, and Orban—explains why this talk has been met with broad public interest since its publication last year: after it had only been available as an archived audio recording for decades, it appeared on the *Spiegel* magazine's list of bestselling nonfiction books and was almost immediately translated into English.[1]

In 1967, Adorno's concern about the resurgence of far-rightist ideology is occasioned by the success of the ultranationalist National Democratic Party of Germany, which, since its foundation three years earlier, had managed to enter six (out of eleven) state parliaments. To Adorno, the resonance of radical nationalist slogans among the population is no surprise but the effect of a culture of repression that disavows the working through of Germany's totalitarian past and the memory of the Shoah. In addition—and here Adorno's analysis goes beyond 20th century German political history—he identifies major factors in the social, economic, and political realm that cause a general atmosphere of fear and threat in which "new" extremism can develop or, rather, resurface long after fascist mass movements have collapsed. In the first sections of the talk, Adorno emphasizes the importance of two objective factors in bringing about this atmosphere across society: the unbroken "tendency towards concentration of capital" (2) and the ever-advancing process of automation which brings with it the "specter of technological unemployment" (3). The segments of society primarily affected by these conditions are the petty bourgeoisie as well as farmers and others who live in rural areas. What makes them particularly receptive to neo-fascist ideology is, if not the actual experience of downward mobility, the very real possibility of permanently falling behind, of losing privileges and status. Adorno's remarks are a powerful reminder to those on the left who, whether in the 1960s or today, have failed to acknowledge that the discontent, frustration, and anger of many in the lower middle class do not

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[1] The German version, *Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradikalimus*, has been published in a separate edition. Like the English translation, it includes an insightful epilogue by contemporary historian Volker Weiß. The text is also included in the volume *Vorträge 1949-1968*, newly added to Adorno's collected writings.

simply spring from nostalgic or otherwise "backward" investments and irrational orientations. While there is an element of narcissistic insult to their perception and mood, their sense of being caught in a downward spiral first and foremost results from the unequal distribution of burdens in an increasingly globalized and technologized economy.

Yet, Adorno makes clear that the manner in which those whose economic, social, and political inclusion is threatened respond to their situation is profoundly misdirected. This, for instance, becomes apparent in their "hatred of socialism" (3) and communism or, rather, of what is imagined under these labels (see pp. 19-20). On Adorno's account, such aggressive resentment must be understood in terms of displacing responsibility: the groups who experience or anticipate social relegation do not hold the existing "apparatus" accountable but shift the blame to those who they perceive to have undermined and weakened the capitalist system through criticism. Adorno shows that such perceptions do not emerge out of nothing but get incited and reamplified by representatives and profiteers of the very economic system that generates widespread precarity: without schematically suggesting an intrinsic or necessary convergence with right-wing extremism, he reminds his audience that "big industry" tends to have no reservations to enter into alliances with such radical forces as long as it is narrowly focused on its immediate economic interests—and that "industrial backing" (7) had played a major role in the rise of fascism during the inter-war period.

Adorno's reflections on these objective conditions are complemented by social-psychological considerations on subjective enabling conditions for a resurgence of extreme nationalism. With reference to the 1950 study *The Authoritarian Personality* which he co-authored, he examines how the prevailing sense of uncertainty is countered—or, more accurately, gets repressed—in desperate ideological over-identification. While it might seem paradoxical that extreme nationalist ideology unfolds its "demonic" and "destructive" force anew at a moment when the nation-state is losing its former status in processes of supra-national integration, Adorno holds that it is precisely their recognition of these processes—and, thus, of the "fictitious," "spectral," and "outdated" character of radical nationalism—that explains the uncompromising, fanatic commitment of its adherents. Among other things, this "broken" or ambivalent attitude of commitment and doubt finds expression in defiance as well as in a fascination with visions of apocalyptic doom, a willingness to embrace not only risk but "catastrophe" (see pp. 4-5 and 9-10). [2] For Adorno, it is this combination of objective and subjective elements which provides the fertile ground for right-wing extremism to grow. Of course, this extremism is "new" only insofar as it is contemporary but ultimately arises from unchanged structures and pervasive patterns within modern capitalist societies—or, politically speaking, from the failure of these societies to realize anything more than "formal" democracy (see p. 9).

Reminiscent of his mature investigations into the "culture industry," Adorno rejects the notion that such extremism might reflect, let alone satisfy genuine needs and desires of the "masses"; he instead insists that it is actively and deliberately fabricated through power strategies and techniques deployed by "manipulative types" (see pp. 14-16). [3] Adorno systematically

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[2] With a focus on the German context, Adorno points to the figure of Wotan in Richard Wagner's *The Ring* as an archetype for thus "wanting the end."

[3] It is this element of being "tailored" or "manufactured" that leads Adorno to replace the term "mass culture" with the term "culture industry" which avoids the misinterpretation that such pseudo-culture might "arise spontaneously from the masses themselves." See Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered" (1963), in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, London/New York: Routledge, 98.

dissects the arsenal utilized by these types who, insinuating constantly and against all evidence to already have achieved "great success," exploit a climate of uncertainty and "palm their [agenda] off" on the most disoriented and fearful. It encompasses the openly or latently anti-Semitic designation of "enemies" such as "communists" and "intellectuals"; the appeal to "foreign domination" (36) short-circuited with "foreign workers" and the "sell-out" of the national economy; the reference to martial terms like "traitor," which goes hand in hand with a rampant "punitiveness;" and the use of "lies," which, permanently repeated, take a "cumulative effect" over time that is deeply detrimental to public discourse. By mixing "anecdotes" with pseudo-objective "concrete" data, manipulators increasingly discredit and prevent everything that resembles an actual exchange of arguments. As propaganda turns into "the substance of politics" (13), a "vulgar idealism" that is merely pragmatic and devoid of all content suffices to create a followership united around promises of future or restored greatness. The atrophy of rationally grounded political discourse culminates in a perversion of the very term democracy when right-wing extremist puppeteers cast themselves as agents of "true democracy" (24)—as if a firm commitment to respect, to non-violence, or to universal rights were not a necessary condition for the existence and legitimacy of democratic politics.[4]

What often reads like a lucid commentary that exposes the playbooks of Steve Bannon or Stephen Miller also engages with the question how neo-fascist machinations can be fought back against. In Adorno's view, all kinds of "ethical appeal" are bound to remain futile in a climate in which terms like "humanity" are associated with an allegedly aloof, elitist inter- or post-nationalism and, thus, likely to incite fury. For "the art of opposing this" (26) to yield tangible results, Adorno identifies other methods as imperative: an appeal to the "central" or "real interests" that are at stake—he mentions the negative consequences of right-wing extremism for its supporters as to homogenizing, disciplining effects on the private sphere or as to renters' protection and affordable health care (see p. 17 and p. 37); a parrhesiastic approach that explicitly names specific "tricks" of leading extremist figures and outlets as well as their overarching "gigantic psychological rip-off" (39); and a pointing out of "elements of projection" that are at work when "authoritarian personalities" seek redemption in radical ideology, unreserved hostility, or obedience to "their master's voice"[5]—even though he admits that such a "turn inwards" (38), due to the self-enclosed, self-reinforcing, and therefore "unresponsive" character of their commitment and mindset, is hard to achieve.

While Adorno's trust in the "full force of reason" and "unideological truth" can appear to be divorced from an era of post-truth politics, technologically enhanced large-scale misinformation campaigns, and deep ideological division, the warning that concludes his reflections is all the more appropriate and urgent today: whether neo-fascist movements will be regarded as mere "scars of democracy" or as having inflicted fatal injuries on democratic systems decisively depends on our own readiness and capacity to overcome "resignation" and a "harmfully spectator-like relation to reality" (40). Instead of regarding new right-wing extremism as if it was a "natural disaster," we have to be involved, responsible "political subjects." In the

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[4] While rather brief, these remarks by Adorno are strikingly similar to an almost contemporaneous public intervention by another leading theorist that has also been published for the first time recently: Hannah Arendt's sharp criticism of elements of nationalism in Western democracies, formulated in her 1963 *Nation-State and Democracy*.

[5] Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," 99. In examining how certain culture-industrial techniques produce conformism and "blind, opaque authority," exploit "ego-weakness" through, e.g., the "star system," and, thus, chip away at the foundations of democratic societies, the essay is an ideal complement to *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*.

short run, this means to become artists of opposition and resistance; in the long run, it means to gradually disable the factors that allow for its all too regular reappearance.

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