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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

[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

[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

[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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Lally, Róisín. *Sustainability in the Anthropocene: Philosophical Essays on Renewable Technologies*. Lanham, Maryland and London: Lexington Books, 2019. 225 pp. (HB) $95.00. ISBN: 978-1-4985-8422-7

Róisín Lally's *Sustainability in the Anthropocene* provides a wealth of essays on the philosophical meanings and implications of renewable technologies, as well as glimpses of novel ways toward a sustainable future that integrate deeply meaningful ways of being for humans. The edited collection features some of the most reputable thinkers in the philosophy of technology, such as Don Ihde, Babette Babich, and Trish Glazebrook, as well as some newcomers with novel perspectives that need to be taken into consideration not only for fellow philosophers, but for anyone interested in the future of our increasingly vulnerable planet. The book is divided into four parts: defining sustainability, exploring the relationship between sustainability and particular renewable technologies, investigating sustainability and design, and finally examining sustainability and ethics. The authors engage in applications of various philosophers from the Continental tradition, most prominently the work of Martin Heidegger. I provide a brief summary of the various sections and highlight key arguments while providing some commentary with an aim to keep the conversation going.

The first part of the book, "Defining Sustainability," does an excellent job of demonstrating the polyvalence of the term "sustainability." We in environmental philosophical circles often point to the *Bruntland Report* of 1987 as a landmark document in defining sustainability. Here, sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[6] In her chapter, Cristina Pontes Bonfiglioli does an excellent job of showing how the Bruntland definition is clearly important, but its institutional context is necessarily limited when applied in other spheres. As she states, "Sustainability can be either a civilizing goal; a motivation for civil society organizations; a technological challenge for the industry; a political dispute in UN bodies; a marketing target for consumption; [or] a desired public image of virtually all contemporary corporations" (7). Given this wide array of meanings, it is important for those of us who use the term "sustainability" to be clear on what we mean by the term, as clarity of concepts is essential to the accuracy of any application of them. Before we embark upon the task of clarifying our concepts surrounding sustainability, however, we need to cultivate the ability to question our values and purposes as a civilization and think beyond the myopic lenses of economic progress and technological efficiency as Jan Kyrre Berg Friis argues in his contribution to this section (35). Otherwise, we may fall prey to what Michael Zimmerman has called "technological nihilism," that is, a technologically sophisticated world in which efficiency and productivity are

[6] The World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, 41.

maximized but a world that is ultimately devoid of meaning.[7] Many of the chapters in the subsequent sections attempt this very task.

While Part One asks what we mean by sustainability, Part Two features authors who engage in philosophical interpretations of specific renewable technologies. I find this to be the strongest section of the book. In the first chapter, Don Ihde shares his personal creative engagements with energy and power, and specifically with solar energy, which no doubt has helped guide his thought on his philosophy of technology (47-50).[8] As Ihde has become one of the foremost philosophers of technology, it is enlightening to see the ways in which his personal experiences have shaped his philosophical outlook. Trish Glazebrook provides a convincing narrative surrounding water and oil in her chapter, noting that by reducing water to a mere resource in a contemporary framework, we ignore that "indigenous knowledge systems harbor a saving power that immerses human understanding in the life value of water" (66). When we double-down on our oil accessibility through dangerous practices like hydraulic fracturing, which is extremely water-intensive and unsustainable, we are not only demonstrating the "'where there is a will, there is a way' sort of thinking that typifies the age of modern technology,"[9] but also failing to recognize water as anything more than a resource and are therefore disregarding the wisdom of countless indigenous traditions. Glazebrook has continued her project of championing the need to explore more sustainable practices that not only are time-honored and true but respect the natural world, and water in particular, as more than a repository of resources for human consumption (74).[10] Róisín Lally's chapter in this section deals with the question of wind turbines as a sustainable technology. Lally argues persuasively that our sole reliance on engineers and technicians to produce current wind turbine technology has failed, as it "uses fossil fuels, is excessively expensive, is disproportionately big, and is very quickly and effectively reducing land surface" (87). Taking a cue from the American sculptor Lyman Whitaker, she argues that we need more artists who design wind sculptures that are both aesthetically appealing and environmentally sustainable. I think Lally is exactly right, and her way of conceptualizing the integration of environmental sustainability with meaning is precisely the sort of work that this volume can inspire. Rounding out this part of the volume is a chapter by Babette Babich, who asks us to think beyond geoengineering and normative ethics by examining our human relations to meaning, value, and purpose. All of the authors in this section of the volume illuminate eco-friendly solutions that appropriately respond to technological nihilism. While the influence of Heidegger is palpable, the ways in which the authors move beyond Heidegger's thinking by providing practical examples is what is most impressive.

Part Three of the collection provides essays that investigate the relationship between sustainability and design. Dana S. Belu's chapter examines the environmental externalities involved in advanced reproductive technologies (ARTs) like cytoplasmic transfer and gestational surrogacy, including the need for transatlantic flights and the birth of unintended children in twins and triplets. She ultimately argues that "women's reproductive bodies show up as

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[7] Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[8] Cf. Ihde's robust range of work from *Technics and Praxis: A Philosophy of Technology* (Dodrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979) through *Heidegger's Technologies: Postphenomenological Perspectives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

[9] Casey Rentmeester, *Heidegger and the Environment* (London and Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 54.

[10] Cf. Trish Glazebrook and Matt Story, "Heidegger and International Development," in *Heidegger in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Georgakis and Ennis (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 2015).

extractible, techno-social resources that serve ARTs" (105) particularly through her example of transnational surrogacy between wealthy "first world" parents and women in India facing poverty. I think Belu does a nice job of showing a concrete example in which Heidegger's claim that human beings are "taken as *Bestand*," that is, as a resource, is exhibited,[11] but also of showing how questions of international social justice come into play in such an interpretation. In the next chapter, Brendan Mahoney provides the provocative thesis that "sustainable energy technologies potentially further the exploitative logic of fossil fuels in a subtler but more insidious manner precisely because they do *not* degrade the environment" (124). Essentially, he argues that in both sustainable technologies and fossil fuel-based technologies the natural world still shows up as *Bestand*, and while we may want to "pat ourselves on the back" for switching to sustainable technologies, we may still be left with what Zimmerman would refer to as a technologically nihilistic world. Seemingly influenced by Heidegger's call for a rootedness to particular lands, Mahoney urges designers to be respectful of the ways in which things unfold on their own terms in their specific ecological contexts.[12] I think Lally's example of Lyman Whitaker's work is a good example of what Mahoney has in mind, as is much of the work surrounding the Land Art Generator Initiative, founded by Elizabeth Monoian and Robert Ferry, which has become nothing short of a global movement.[13] In the final chapter of this section, Galit Wellner takes on a different realm by unpacking the concept of digital sustainability, a polyvalent term that can refer to digital preservation, utilizing big data to assist sustainability efforts, or open electronic government (137). After conceptually separating the various uses of the term, she maps some of the ways in which the digital realm can help us build a more sustainable world, including adding bar codes to textiles so the consumer can trace the products' origins, eco-tourism apps, and apps with tips on reusing food and clothing, among others. Wellner is right to point out that the digital is not going away, and we should leverage digital technologies to build a better world. She also shows us that there is danger in some of these digital technologies, as they can promote a panopticism whose logic mimics the panopticon penitentiary of Jeremy Bentham,[14] which has been brilliantly criticized by Michel Foucault as a system that "functions as a laboratory of power" that is able to "penetrate into men's behavior."[15] Thus any adoption of digital sustainability should be mindful of its potential positive and negative impacts.

The final section of the book investigates the relationship between sustainability and ethics. In his chapter, Lars Botin looks at whether or not the technological solutions to climate change will create a future that is "just, fair, or even appealing to humanity" (156). If we continue with our current approach, he thinks "we in the Western world will almost certainly be saved by scientific and technological solutions" (156), but those in impoverished and climate vulnerable countries may be left to the wayside. While I think that Botin's assurance that "we in the Western world" will be saved is not the guarantee that he seems to think it is, especially given the already obvious destruction that anthropogenic climate change has brought about,[16] I

[11] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 27.
[12] Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
[13] Cf. landartgenerator.org
[14] Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Punishment* (London, Robert Heward, 1830), 351-358.
[15] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977).
[16] Casey Rentmeester, "Do No Harm: A Cross-Disciplinary, Cross-Cultural Climate Ethics," *De Ethica 1*, no. 2 (2014): 5-22.

do think his claim that the task of building a sustainable, just, fair world where humans can live meaningful lives will require the recognition that facts and values are intertwined and emphasized more or less in different contexts and therefore multistable, a term he borrows from Ihde.[17] It is part of our job as philosophers to sift through these meanings and illuminate multistability. The next chapter in the section comes from Thomas M. Jeannot, who argues that "only a humanism that recognizes the full reality of the person, identifies the 'person as [the] key to reality,' and takes 'personal living' as its philosophical 'starting point,' can be a fully adequate response to our environmental crisis" (171). Jeannot adeptly navigates various philosophical and religious traditions, including environmental ethics, pragmatism, Catholicism, Marxism, and others, to show the multifaceted nature of being human in the attempt to show that any step towards environmental sustainability must begin with the human being, lest we fall prey to physicalism, which reduces human beings to their physical traits. Jeannot's critique of physicalism is appropriate, and he offers perhaps the most inclusive stance of anyone in the volume by integrating so many diverse thinkers. The final chapter by Daniel O'Dea Bradley is a fitting conclusion to the collection, as it chronicles some of the history of environmental philosophy and explains the rise of two recent movements of environmental pragmatism and ecomodernism. In it, Bradley aptly concludes by saying "unmoored instrumental reason sooner or later always becomes a terror," and while he states that "we seem even less well-positioned now than thirty years ago to escape instrumentalism" (211), he finds hope in environmental philosophy's rich history of reminding ourselves that while we are vulnerable and ultimately finite, we can still find meaning and purpose in responding to and participating in the goodness of nature. I think this volume has shown us some ways of doing just that, and I commend Lally for putting together such a robust collection on an increasingly important subject.

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[17] Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).