



## Negative Dialectics

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**Negative Dialectics.** By Theodor W. Adorno. Translated by E. B. Ashton. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973. Pp. xv, 416. \$17.50.)

*Negative Dialectics*, originally published in West Germany in 1966, was Adorno's major and most ambitious statement of his program. It is the equivalent among his works to Heidegger's *Being and Time* or to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. It does not stand alone. The *Jargon of Authenticity* (New York, 1973; Frankfurt, 1964) and the article "Fortschritt" in *Stichworte* (Frankfurt, 1969) were written initially as parts of *Negative Dialectics* but were published separately. 'Dialektische Epilegomena' in *Stichworte* (Frankfurt, 1969) were also written as responses to political and philosophical issues aroused by *Negative Dialectics*. These texts are inseparable from the rest of Adorno's work in a further sense. They amount to an experimental attempt to state a method apart from its practice when the special nature of that method is that it is inseparable from its practice. Thus they complement Adorno's many writings on music, literature, philosophy, and sociology. It might be said that the very decision to write *Negative Dialectics* was an admission of failure. If it is a failure, it is a magnificent and important one.

The large and varied corpus of writings by the many philosopher-sociologists belonging to the Frankfurt School have revolved since the 'thirties around the question which Marx posed in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: "How do we now stand in relation to the Hegelian *dialectic*?" They asked this question for the era and generation after Lukács'. The experiences of that generation included the triumph of Fascism, the lack of any proletarian revolution, the establishment of doctrinaire Marxism in Eastern Europe, and the flourishing of nondialectical philosophies and sociologies in Western Europe and America. Adorno began the first page of *Negative Dialectics* with a proposition which has become infamous: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed" (p. 3).

In the book Adorno decodes the history of thought. He claims that the history of philosophy has been the history of what he calls "identity thinking" and he demonstrates that another mode of thinking, which he calls "nonidentity thinking," or negative dialectic, is possible and necessary for the valid cognition of social reality. To perceive the nonidentity in the concepts and theories of nondialectical philosophies and sociologies is to perceive how their central concepts are not "fulfilled by their objects." Unlike other writers in the Marxist tradition, Adorno is not denying the laws of identity or

noncontradiction. Nor does he propose an alternative set of theoretical concepts. Nondialectical philosophies and sociologies are not located in a social structure which is known independently of them. That structure is derived from the antinomies found in those bodies of thought. This is called the "immanent method."

The text is riddled with paradox and polemic. Paradox arises because Adorno is in the inherently paradoxical position of presenting a critique of a universally prevailing mode of thought without relying exclusively on that mode of thinking himself. His style is thus designed to induce his reader to think in that different way which he believes is desirable and possible. It is an indirect exhortative method. There is polemic because although Adorno concedes that the works of Husserl, Heidegger, and Lukács reveal the "ontological need" to grant "priority to the object," to break out of epistemological subjectivism, he demonstrates that they have failed and have relapsed into subjectivism. As he dramatically puts it, they have "broken out into the mirror" ([sic], p. 84). There is no scholarship in these chapters: no sympathetic and detailed discussion of what is characteristic or original about another man's ideas. Precisely because he is concerned to sublimate this tradition, he takes certain liberties in his construal of it.

*Negative Dialectics* is a very uneven book. The Introduction and Part Two, "Negative Dialectics: Concept and Categories," are among the most original and sustained pieces that Adorno ever wrote. The exemplars or "models," as he called them, which form the second half of the book, are poor. The reader would do better to look elsewhere in Adorno's *oeuvre* where there are finer ones.

E. B. Ashton, in his Translator's Note, sets the text in its political and philosophical context. He offers several sensitive hints for understanding Adorno's presentation. It is therefore astounding when Ashton suggests that Adorno *thinks in English* (p. xv). One of Adorno's reasons for returning to Germany from America after the Second World War was that the English translations of his work distorted his ideas so much. He believed he could only say what he had to say in German (cf. his essay "*Auf die Frage: was ist deutsch*" in *Stichworte*, pp. 110-2). Furthermore, Adorno deliberately uses his own language so that it is syntactically and semantically difficult even for the German-speaking reader to read. He is a latter-day Nietzsche, too, whose most lucid expression may contain all manner of equivocation. Ashton's opinion has influenced his translation, as has his commitment "to put Adorno's thought into English" (p. xiv) in addition to his task of translating Adorno's text. This robs the

ideas of their *raison d'être* by assimilating them to the very idiom they are designed to resist. Adorno discusses "thought" and "spirit," their identity and nonidentity modes, using impersonal constructions. Thought and spirit are not attributed to "us" but are frequently personified, sometimes by dramatic metaphor. This is a strategy crucial in presenting a dialectic from the point of view of the object, for an attempt "to see beyond the subject" (p. 376), even though that dialectic only admits people in their concrete social relationships. Ashton has turned all the passive constructions into personal ones. This results in a completely different text. Equally bad, Ashton has frequently retranslated terms from the tradition with which Adorno is debating. Adorno relies on his reader's engagement in that tradition, and on the reader's automatic recognition of a word or expression as Marx's or Hegel's. Ashton has made the text familiar where it should be unfamiliar and unfamiliar where it should be familiar. There are many other mistakes and omissions on his part. An index would improve the edition.

Adorno explains one of his motives for writing *Negative Dialectics* as the desire "to transcend the official separation of pure philosophy and the substantive or formally scientific realm" (p. xx). Yet even those social scientists versed in the traditions of German social thought and sympathetic to the search for alternatives to philosophical and sociological positivisms may be disappointed to find that Adorno is a man with a message and that the message is deeply pessimistic. It is that society and consciousness are almost completely reified. The concept and theories of reification are notoriously elusive. Adorno seems to mean that critical consciousness, including his own, is almost impossible. History, in some sense, has come to a halt. *Negative Dialectics* is an attempt to break out of this unbreakable paradox and to invite others to do so too. But Adorno's message and his guilt at having survived Auschwitz make him write like the man whom he says that he became in his dreams—"the emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier" (p. 363), as if his thinking was crippled from then on. This is not to say that his message is wrong. Anyone who is involved in the possibility of Marxism as a mode of cognition *sui generis*, at a time when critical consciousness can no longer be even "imputed" to an ideal-typical class as Lukács could do in 1923 in *History and Class Consciousness*, must read Adorno's book.

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**The War Disease.** By Norman Z. Alcock. (Oakville, Ontario: CPRI Press, 1972. Pp. 238. \$6.00, cloth; \$3.00, paper.)

This work is an interim attempt to formulate a precise definition of the causes of war. To accomplish this task, the author seeks to provide a catalog of the findings of peace research in order to synthesize the results into a theory of war.

The book is subdivided into thirteen chapters. The introductory chapter establishes the tone of the work. Chapter two very briefly mentions and seemingly dismisses (although many are to reappear in later pages) a host of popular single-factor approaches to explaining war. The next nine chapters are dubiously segregated by the alleged disciplinary source of the empirical evidence to be considered: biology, anthropology, history, "mathematical modeling," sociology, psychology, economics, political science, and the "laboratory." The evidence presented is nowhere near as representative of the "essential streams of contemporary science" as the author claims. While a number of topics are mentioned, most are handled superficially. For example, the biology and anthropology chapters rely quite heavily on Sigmund Freud, Konrad Lorenz, and Robert Ardrey. The history chapter consists of a brief overview of a portion of L. F. Richardson's *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels*. The sociology chapter discusses beliefs, attitudes, and public opinion but only as illustrated by a few CPRI surveys. The economics chapter is restricted inexplicably to a few studies of the early 1960s which investigated the possible economic impact of disarmament. Other chapters have similar problems; but a major shortcoming of the book is that the chapters fail to catalog adequately the findings of peace research.

The last two chapters deliver a disappointing synthesis and a supposedly related "dynamic two-phase theory of war" which can be summarized in five statements: (1) Territorial disagreements, reinforced by ideological differences, lead to tensions. (2) Tension causes leaders to become aggressive and to escalate their arms expenditures; to increase their power still further they simultaneously form alliances with compatible allies. (3) Under the strain of increasing armament expenditures, domestic conflict increases, which slows down military spending. (4) Although the rate of increases in armament steadily diminishes, the absolute arms level continues to grow. At this point the "military mind" considers going to war for two reasons: (a) the country is as strong as it will be for several years, and (b) a war