Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Origin of Negative Dialectics by Theodor W. Adorno; Walter Benjamin; Frankfurt Institute; Susan Buck-Morss

The Frankfurt School. The Critical Theories of Max Horkeimer and Theodor W. Adorno by Zoltan Tar; Michael Landman

Gillian Rose


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ALAN MACFARLANE

Cambridge University


"... the dialectic is not a finished theory to be applied mechanically to all the phenomena of life but only exists as theory in and through this application" — Georg Lukács

The reception of the Frankfurt School in the English-speaking world to date displays a paradox. Frequently, the Frankfurt School inspires dogmatic historiography although it represents a tradition which is attractive and important precisely because of its rejection of dogmatic or "orthodox" Marxism. This tradition in German Marxism has its origin in Lukács' most un-Hegelian injunction to take Marxism as a "method" — a method which would remain valid even if "every one of Marx's individual theses" were proved wrong. One can indeed speculate whether philosophers like Bloch, Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno would have become Marxists if Lukács had not pronounced thus. For other Marxists this position spells scientific "suicide."

Both the books reviewed here indict the Frankfurt School for betraying a Marxist canon; yet they neither make any case for the importance of the work of the School nor do they acknowledge the question central to that body of work: the possibility and desirability of defining such a canon. As a result, both books overlook the relation of the Frankfurt School to Marx for which they are searching. Another result is that both books reinforce all

the old stereotypes of the Frankfurt School instead of offering new interpretations as they proclaim. Thus Benjamin’s work is “mystical,” “Kabbalistic,” and the works of Adorno and Horkheimer are “elitist,” “pessimistic,” and “apolitical” (B-M 188, 219, 223; ZT 174 f.). Worst of all, it ensures that the literature will remain esoteric by accusing it of esotericism.

Susan Buck-Morss seeks to explicate the philosophical “method” of Adorno’s mature work *Negative Dialectics* by tracing the origin of his thought to his early relationship with Walter Benjamin, rather than to his later collaboration with Max Horkheimer when he became a member of the Institute for Social Research. The book has a biographical structure. The first few chapters document Adorno’s early life and burgeoning friendship with Benjamin from whose non-materialist works Adorno is said to have taken his own “method.” In the central part of the book this “method” is shown “in action” by close discussion of Adorno’s writings of the same period. Three concluding chapters tell the story of the intellectual and political disputes between Adorno and Benjamin in the 1930s over surrealism and the technological reproduction of works of art. Adorno’s achievements were to interpret bourgeois thought as expressing “unintentionally, social truth” and to interpret art “as a form of scientific knowledge” (xiii). Adorno’s version of Marxism is criticized for lack of political commitment (42), for elitism (35), and for social blindness (137). Adorno’s “method,” “a form of secular revelation” (xiii), turns out to have more in common with Husserlian intuitionism than with Marxist analysis (96).

The organization of Buck-Morss’ book has bizarre consequences. *Negative Dialectics*, certainly Adorno’s most important book, was written in the early 1960s and published in 1966. Buck-Morss uses Adorno’s purported “Benjaminesque” writings of circa 1931 to explicate Adorno’s “method” of negative dialectics and shows it “in action” by discussing his work up to 1950 only. Consequently the central ideas of *Negative Dialectics* are nowhere examined in their own right, and the changes and development in Adorno’s position between 1950 and 1966 are not acknowledged, although this was the period of his most important work in philosophy, sociology, and aesthetics. *Negative Dialectics* is referred to only in the light of the early lectures instead of vice versa. Far too much weight is given to the early “Benjaminesque” work, and other work of the same period is underplayed. As a result both the early and the later work is distorted.

Benjamin and Adorno are, in effect, taken out of the history of philosophy, sociology, and Marxism. Benjamin’s early work is described as “strange and singular” (77), and he is said to have suffered from “intellectual schizophrenia” after he became involved with Marxism (141). His famous *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, for example, apparently marks “a retreat from political commitment and a return to the language of
theology as the only remaining refuge for the ideal of the revolution" (162, 168 f.). Adorno's initial relationship with Benjamin is presented as symbiotic and discipular, and the other sources of his thought receive no sustained emphasis. Once Adorno's abandonment of the view of the proletariat as the "subject/object" of history, the universal class, is established (42) there is no discussion of Hegel, Marx, or sociology except in a few, very odd footnotes (206, n. 186; 216-217, n. 63). The second of these notes makes one question the author's familiarity with Marx, whose thought is said to be "ontological" and "Feuerbachian" in 1844, and later to have been concerned with "economics, that dismal science"; this was Carlyle's nickname for "the Social Science . . . which finds the secret of this Universe in supply and demand," — hardly Marx's world view. Benjamin's central notion of origin (Ursprung) is presented in a footnote in which the reader is told to interpret it for him or herself (263, n. 84). In fact, substantive discussion of many ideas is hazarded only in the notes.

There is something deeply amiss in Buck-Morss' separation of Adorno's "method" from its use. Although she notes that Adorno makes no distinction between theory and method (64), she constantly refers to his "tools" and to their "application." One of these "tools" (74) is the notion of "unintentional truth" (77 f.), which idealist philosophy unwittingly "expresses." This insight, which gives rise to Adorno's "method" of "profane illumination," is contrasted with the more conventional Marxist critique of ideology which Horkheimer is said to have continued (xiii, 66 f.), and which is defined as criticism of "the ideological, social function of ideas" (xiii). Both poles of this contrast are misconceived. *Ideologiekritik* in Marx's writings consisted of treating bourgeois philosophy and political economy as both revealing and distorting underlying social relations. Adorno's "immanent criticism" is squarely in the same tradition and is not particularly original. Buck-Morss seems to have devised the idea of "unintentional truth" by hypostatizing Adorno's rejection of Husserl's notion of the intentional constitution of meaning. It is not surprising that on the next page Adorno's "materialist premise of unintentionality" turns out to be materialist only in a pre-Kantian sense (78), and that, at the beginning of the next chapter, his "method" turns out to have more affinities with Husserlian intuitionism than with Marxist theory (96). This presentation of Adorno's "method" prevents Buck-Morss from seeing the connection be-

5. For example, Adorno "follows [Kierkegaard] in pursuit, armed with the tools of dialectical criticism to shoot holes in existentialism" (119). "Tools" which "shoot"?

6. For example, "Under Adorno's interpretative gaze, this historical image represents unintentional truth and demonstrates that these concepts are false (while the Marxist concepts are proved to be true)" (117). A "gaze" makes an "image" "represent" "unintentional truth"? An "image" "demonstrates" or "proves" something? Some (unspecified) concepts are "false" and some (unspecified) "Marxist" concepts are "true"?
tween Adorno’s program to “liquidate idealism” and his analyses of “the social conditions of music” which, she stresses, were “quite distinct” enterprises (65). It thus obscures the way in which Adorno’s analyses of literature and music were a Marxist and sociological answer to the theories of meaning of Husserl and of Heidegger.

At the time of the 1931 and 1932 lectures, Adorno was corresponding with Ernst Krenek, the composer.7 These letters and the article on the social position of music, which appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1932, reveal, as does his critique of philosophy, his distance in the early 1930s from the views of Benjamin; they also reveal his dedication to the development of a Marxist and sociological aesthetic which did not rely on the illumination of “historical images” or on “the construction of constellations,” but on a generalization of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism and on the analysis of change in the production, exchange, and distribution of intellectual and artistic works.8 Buck-Morss alludes to Adorno’s use of Marx’s categories (23, 27) and mentions his sociological ambitions in the footnotes (218-219, n. 89; 237, n. 34); but these aspects of his thought are not considered central to the exposition of Adorno’s “method” of “secular revelation” (132). It is difficult to avoid the impression that because of Adorno’s imputed “total refusal to deal with the problem of revolutionary praxis” (24) — a thesis which is, however, denied in the concluding chapter (187) — and because of the imputed importance of the influence of Benjamin, Buck-Morss has herself turned Adorno into that strange kind of intuitionist which he is criticized for being.

This approach leads to false problems and to false solutions. Buck-Morss points out that Adorno attributes a radical import to the works of artists who had no conscious political purpose, and she argues that this becomes in his hands a justification for an intellectual and artistic elite (32 ff.). In spite of an earlier section on Adorno’s attention to artistic form (43 f.), and the later discussion of his rejection of Husserlian intentionality, Buck-Morss neither takes seriously Adorno’s refusal to base the social analysis of works on the imaginative reconstruction of an artist’s intentions, nor his sociological definition of artistic and philosophical form as social fact. For Adorno the political significance of a work cannot be assessed by reference to the consciousness of the artist. Instead, he compared the extremes of artistic reactions to the prevailing social conditions of production, reproduction, exchange, and distribution of works, and analyzed the consequent contradictions within and between such works. For they represent “the torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add

It is no accident that Buck-Morss’ argument produces another statement of the old myths that Brecht was in “solidarity with the workers’ empirical consciousness” (151), but Adorno was concerned only with changing the consciousness of the artist and not with the effect of art on its audiences (34, 36, 41). Both Brecht and Adorno wrote as artists on the difficulties of circumventing existing consciousness. Both aimed to undermine and change “empirically existing consciousness” by attending to the form of the work of art, to the relation between the structuring of meaning in a work and how that meaning might be received or distorted in a capitalist society. They differed in their theories on how a radical restructuring might be achieved. Since Buck-Morss considers that Adorno’s “most important contribution” was to “redeem aesthetics as a central cognitive discipline” (xiii), it is difficult to understand in what that contribution is judged to consist.

The three concluding chapters on the “Adorno-Benjamin dispute” are unconvincing because the preceding discussion has attained no purchase on their fundamental theoretical differences. Thus Adorno is said to have accepted Benjamin’s “mandate” from the Theses on the Philosophy of History “to negate the idea of history as progress” (168). But Adorno’s greatest difference from Benjamin concerns philosophy of history. Adorno certainly rejected any historical telos but insisted that “Universal history must be construed and denied.” It must be construed in order to comprehend social formation and deformation, but denied as the realization of the world spirit. By contrast, Benjamin’s hermeneutics rests on an historical ontology based on the notion of the recurrence of the origin. Buck-Morss unfortunately seems to take the “origin” or the “archaic” in the Theses in the sense of regression or degeneracy (296, n. 35), and does not stress its organizing role in both Benjamin’s early and later thought. Her tendency merely to label the “theological” and the “political” in the Theses and in Adorno’s reception of them (168 ff.) prevents her from understanding that Benjamin’s view of history is far more relentlessly negative than Adorno’s. The same oversight vitiates propositions such as “nothing he [Adorno] wrote was untouched by Benjamin’s personal [sic] language and unique epistemological method” (170). The last phrase may be merely a careless expression, but it ignores the way in which Benjamin’s thought

consists of a radical rejection of traditional epistemology. Adorno argued, against Heidegger as well as against Benjamin, that to reject epistemology for an historical ontology is inherently self-defeating, and he insisted on a return to a transformed epistemology. Buck-Morss has not only missed the differences in their construal of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, but also their different engagements with Nietzsche’s interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of history.14

Buck-Morss loses the larger context of the debate over expressionism by choosing surrealism as one of the issues on which Benjamin and Adorno disagreed. The debate over expressionism linked the Marxist emigrés during the 1930s and after and involved Lukács, Brecht, Wittfogel, and Bloch as well as Benjamin and Adorno. The important issue of the relation between fascism and expressionism is thus not raised.15 The discussion of surrealism between Benjamin and Adorno was only part of the task of understanding and contributing to the larger debate as critics and as artists. The problem in all these cases may be the author’s decision to discuss Adorno’s work only up to 1950. For if Adorno’s dispute with Benjamin is important, then its repercussions in the rest of his life’s work must be considered as well. Furthermore, criticism of Adorno can hardly hope to be cogent when his major works remain unexamined.

Zoltán Tar’s book covers the Frankfurt School from 1923-1974. It seeks to assess the intellectual contribution of Horkheimer and Adorno to Marxism and to “‘scientific sociology.’” However, its organizing thesis is that the thought of Horkheimer and of Adorno has made no contribution to either Marxism or to sociology. This case is argued in the three central chapters in which the writings of Horkheimer and Adorno are adjudged by means of a comparison with briefly stated ideal-types of Marxism (40-42) and of “scientific sociology” (166-168), and are situated in their “biographical and existential matrix.” Thus the first chapter discusses Horkheimer’s early life and the influence on him of Judaism and of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, defines Marxism, and sets out Horkheimer’s deviation therefrom. The second chapter discusses Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s interpretation of fascism, the critique of domination and of modern science, and The Authoritarian Personality. Horkheimer is criticized for establishing a new Naturphilosophie, and the chapter concludes with an assessment of the effects of exile on the two men. The third chapter discusses Adorno’s postwar writings on sociology, which are criticized for blurring the

distinction between art and science (137-138), and reemphasizes the continuity of the influence of Judaism and of pessimism on the early and later work of both Horkheimer and Adorno. The conclusion of the book is that "Critical Theory is another existentialist philosophy."

The manner in which these conclusions are reached is improper. Tar indicts Horkheimer and Adorno for founding "another existentialist philosophy" based on "an irrational uncontrolled intuitionism" (151). "Existentialism" is nowhere defined in the book, and Tar uses the notion in a host of unrelated ways, covering "the kaleidoscope of . . . thinkers and writers of a diverse political and intellectual spectrum that ranges from Heidegger, . . . to Rilke, Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Horkheimer, and Adorno" (205). In this sense anyone can be accused of "existentialism." In fact Tar has himself adopted an "existential" and biographical method in a study which sets out to assess the intellectual contribution of Horkheimer and Adorno to Marxism and to sociology. He himself uses the saws of a pop "existentialism" in order to bait his prey. "One important element in Adorno's work [we are not told which] can also be traced to the influence of those times: the fear and anxiety [Angst] of modern, alienated man" (171). Tar attempts to discredit Adorno in an ad hominem and disingenuous fashion by quoting a passage from Minima Moralia in a way which implies that it is Adorno's personal confession of his desire to lounge indolently on Californian beaches (11). In fact, the quotation comes from a passage in which Adorno is musing about life in an ideal society. But, according to Tar, Horkheimer's and Adorno's acceptance of the Jewish "ban on images" (185, 188) prevented them from ever describing an ideal society. The Jewish background of both men is presented solely as a destructive influence on their thought. Tar does not discuss Horkheimer's development of a Marxist sociology of religion, although it is probably Horkheimer's most important achievement. Adorno was raised as a Catholic, not as a Jew, and his religious identity depended on his changing relationship to Catholicism. Moreover, as Marcuse has recently reminded us, "Marxist theory is not family research."

The same utter lack of respect for theory is manifested by Tar's mode of assessing Horkheimer's and Adorno's contribution to Marxism and to sociology. In two paragraphs (40, para. 1; 42, para. 2) a series of characteristics of an antediluvian Marxism are listed in a way which begs every question which Marxism has ever raised. Horkheimer's and Adorno's deviations from this roster of duties are then listed in another series of equally

17. Letter from Adorno to Krenek, 7 October 1934, in Briefwechsel, 46.
bald and unexplicated characteristics (42-43). After this, Horkheimer has no chance, and, although his trial continues for another chapter and a half — during which all sorts of miscellaneous and irrelevant witnesses are brought in, from Heidegger’s embrace of National Socialism (87) to the poetry of Hsün Tzu (99-100) — the condemnatory verdict is a foregone conclusion (120).

Adorno and sociology receive similar treatment. Five criteria of a monolithic “scientific sociology” are extrapolated from contemporary physics and biology with a few ostensibly supporting quotations from a multitude of sociological sources (166-169). To calm any doubts about these fantastic criteria we are assured that they are accepted by “the community of social scientists” (169). That the definition of sociology is in no way related to the previous definition of Marxism, and the very idea that Marxism or sociology can be defined in these arbitrary ways indicate quite clearly why Tar is not able to understand the work of Horkheimer and Adorno as part of a debate about what Marxism or sociology or Marxist sociology might be. Tar’s general conclusion, that Critical Theory represents “the situation ... of the marginal bourgeois-Jewish intelligentsia” (205), displays the same casual and descriptive use of theoretical concepts.

The two books have a striking number of features in common. They both claim that the thought under examination has more affinities with phenomenology or existentialism than with Marxism, and the case is made largely by referring to the kind of language employed by Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer.19 They both concentrate on Adorno’s redefinition of art as “science,” which Buck-Morss judges to be his greatest achievement, Tar his most serious failure. They both interpret Adorno’s aesthetic concerns, his artistic temperament (B-M xiii; ZT 155), as the source of his critique of philosophy and of sociology, and do not see his aesthetics as the logical and sociological fulfillment of his critique of the other disciplines. Both books rely on a biographical approach, and give a theological interpretation of the thought of the three writers in a way which is at the same time polemical and descriptive. Once the claim of the thinkers to have any relation to Marxism has been dismissed, there is no attempt at any “immanent criticism”: criticism which would do justice to the theoretical complexity of the work, locate it within the various traditions to which it belongs, and criticize its shortcomings, political, philosophical, or sociological, by examining its internal structure.

19. For previous attempts to link Lukács and “Western Marxism” with phenomenology and existentialism, see Lucien Goldmann, Lukács and Heidegger towards a New Philosophy (1973), transl. William Q. Boelhower (London, 1977); and Paul Piccone and James Hanson, “Introduction” to Enzo Paci, The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man (Evanston, Ill., 1972), xix-xxxv.
The unifying theme of Adorno's critique of philosophy, from his inaugural lecture of 1931 to *Negative Dialectics*, is his critique of the philosophy of Heidegger. The first part of *Negative Dialectics* consists of a sustained analysis of Heidegger's work; *Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), published separately but originally part of *Negative Dialectics*, traces the dissemination in Germany between the wars of an intuitionist and existentialist vocabulary which was inspired by the writings of Heidegger, and which, in Adorno's view, amounted to a particularly pernicious parapolitical ideology. The subtitle of *Jargon of Authenticity* is taken from Marx: "On German Ideology." Adorno's writings on Husserl can be understood only in the light of his work on Heidegger. Even his book on Husserl is designed to defend in part Husserl's relapse into traditional epistemology in order to oppose Heidegger's abandonment of it.\(^{20}\) His strongest criticisms of Husserl's "intuition of essence" (*Wesenschau*) show how the idea depends on a philosophy of reflection and how uncritical it is because each "essence" is accorded the same status. In his criticism of both philosophers Adorno demonstrates how the internal contradictions in their work display the same structure as the mechanism of commodity fetishism. Buck-Morss has one footnote on Adorno and Heidegger (239, n. 56), and no mention of Adorno's 1940 article on Husserl in which the latter's notion of "the intuition of essence" is criticized.\(^{21}\) She does not discuss the importance of Heidegger in *Negative Dialectics* and in all Adorno's earlier writings on philosophy, or the fundamental role of Marxist concepts, especially "reification," in all those writings. Tar does not discuss Adorno's critique of philosophy at all and thus does not even acknowledge Adorno's lifelong attack on existentialism. One cannot begin to take seriously the argument that Adorno or the Frankfurt School represent a form of Husserlian intuitionism or existentialism unless their attempt to provide a Marxist critique of these schools of thought is at the center of the discussion.

Both authors consider that it was highly original of Adorno to redefine art as "science." Both construe this to mean that art is a reflection of social reality (B-M 175; ZT 155) which may be apprehended by a form of "seeing" or "vision" (B-M 132; ZT 150-151). Not surprisingly, Buck-Morss argues that this "aesthetic model" has its "limits" (132 f.), and Tar, that Adorno has "blurred" the distinction between art and "science" (137) for the sake of "an irrational, uncontrolled intuitionism" (151). However, Adorno's maxim that "art is a form of cognition *sui generis*" (quoted in ZT 154) is not original in the context of the tradition of German philosophical aesthetics, whether Marxist or non-Marxist (from Kant to Lukács), and, far from transforming art into "science," it reaffirms the autonomy of

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aesthetic form as a mode of cognition; it reaffirms that art cannot be reduced to any other form of knowledge. For this reason art cannot be a "reflection" of social reality which calls for a kind of "vision" in order to be apprehended. Buck-Morss and Tar have overlooked Adorno’s attack on the aesthetics of reflection because they have not understood his attack on the philosophy of reflection. They therefore overlook what Adorno put in the place of the old aesthetics: a Marxist sociology of art based on the thesis that a contradiction has developed between the forces and relations of (artistic) production. This sociology is designed to interpret the most ostensibly "subjective" and "irrational" aspects of art as social fact and to offer a sociological explanation of the "autonomy" of art.22

These mistakes arise from the way in which the texts have been read. For the ideas can be understood only by interpreting the stylistic features, while the stylistic features can be understood only in relation to the central ideas. If the central ideas such as "reification" or "nonidentity" are not explicated, then the reading is bound to founder in the wealth of surface features. The interpretation becomes atheoretical and descriptive; "pointillist," is how Buck-Morss allows her approach to be characterized (237, n. 33). If the style is not read from a methodological point of view, as a presentation of the central ideas, then no amount of description of its formal features can grasp those ideas. The reading becomes polemical and admonitory ("Stubbornly, Adorno held onto his basic tenet . . ." [B-M 175]). It would seem, therefore, to be no coincidence that both of these books take refuge in a biographical approach and offer a theological interpretation of the writers whose work they examine: Tar by referring constantly to the Jewish background of Horkheimer and Adorno and Buck-Morss by employing a vocabulary of revelation to describe the ideas and "methods" of Benjamin and Adorno. They have taken the writings literally but not seriously enough.

The more general consequences of this approach are also considerable: it obscures instead of illuminating the large and significant differences within Marxism, and it prevents the Frankfurt School tradition, whatever its faults, from being assessed as an alternative to current philosophies and sociologies.

Gillian Rose

University of Sussex