

# From Berg to Beyoncé

Adorno and Politics: 1st Istanbul Critical Theory Conference, Boğaziçi University

The organizers' opening address to this conference laid out an ambitious aim: to weigh up the *Aktualität* of Adorno's critical theory in its capacity as a heuristic, pedagogical tool for the analysis of current political crises in Turkey and beyond; to go 'with Adorno, beyond Adorno' by applying the precepts of his negative dialectic to 'concrete' historical struggles – struggles that demand directives for decisive action (or at least far-reaching reform). This was a timely task, given recent developments in Turkey, including the intimidation and imprisonment of numerous critics of the Erdoğan regime. The desire to probe Adorno's oeuvre for underdeveloped themes that may yet yield such political directives was clearly reflected in the conference programme – particularly in a noteworthy session on critical theories of race, which appears to have come closest to fulfilling the conference brief. Other sessions devoted to teasing out such blind spots focused on what was variously portrayed as Adorno's tacit programme for an ecological education, his embryonic notion of non-human agency and his implicit theory of (Jewish) collectivity. Common to these presentations was a sense of urgency, a deliberate disavowal of academic piety in favour of breaking new ground – even if this *modus operandi* occasionally lost sight of its supposed ground in Adorno. The result was a mixed bag.

On the race panel, for instance, the speaker's erudite efforts to map Adorno's reflections on anti-Semitism onto other forms of racism and xenophobia was certainly coherent, at least if one concedes the validity of his original analysis. To be sure, during the mid-1960s Adorno did finally acknowledge racially motivated atrocities, particularly in South Africa; but even if his sporadic and belated asides on non-European calamity could be developed further, Adorno's suggestion that such events are simply further stations along a path that leads us seamlessly from the slingshot to the megatonne bomb surely suffers from a pervasive formalism. By that token, would it not be overly psychological to suggest that

the civil war in Yugoslavia, for instance, is simply the revenge of humankind's repressed mimetic comportment – a mimesis of death? This issue finally came to a head during the discussion in this session: what is really gained from extending Adorno's model in this direction, particularly in the Turkish context? Neither Erdoğan's unceasing discrimination against the Kurds nor his continued silence about the Armenian genocide was discussed at any length.

By contrast, one of several presentations on the theme of education suggested that Adorno's pedagogical writings – particularly 'Education to Maturity' – are unable to deliver on the most pressing political issue *du jour*: ecological 'sustainability'. For all of Adorno's exaltations about the instrumental domination of nature, a programme for an education towards ecological 'maturity' is said to have eluded him – an exclusion that would leave his thought politically deficient in the face of mounting environmental pressures (global warming, fracking, peak oil and so on). Of course, such claims aren't without precedent. They were echoed in J.M. Bernstein's keynote, which made several half-hearted references to 'energy' and 'water policy' as part of a longer litany



of post-modern ills. Eminent eco-Adornians, such as Deborah Cook, have gone down this path before – for better or worse. But even if the speaker’s environmental concerns are legitimate, the paper’s strategy was puzzling: if Adorno simply *lacks* a programme for a green education, then why invoke his name at all?

It is arguably *Aesthetic Theory*, as the philosophical summation of Adorno’s writings on art, that remains his most living text. Its power lies not only in its theoretical generalization of the arts into a concept of art that is historically dynamic; its list of dialectical pairs is still useful for thinking about art today. Categories deployed in the ‘Adorno and Contemporary Art’ panel, with reference to experimental film and performance art, for instance, included technique/technology and construction/expression. If there is a politics in Adorno’s writings on art, as the panels on ‘Music and Politics’ and ‘Aesthetics and Politics’ evidenced, it is a politics of form – specific examples surveyed were the literary form of parataxis and his notion of music’s language-character. As was apparent in presentations addressing Adorno’s absencing of the question of Jewish collectivity in his reading of Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*, or his aversion to jazz in the historically specific form of big-band dance music, one of the political blind spots in Adorno’s

conception of autonomous art is its individualistic assumptions and its consequent inability to think positive forms of artistic collectivity.

Following on from these themes, Susan Buck-Morss’s keynote, ‘Adorno Today’, began with the cultural politics of 1968 – the emancipatory potential of which, we were reminded, Adorno failed to recognize – and moved rapidly into the present, with a PowerPoint montage of struggles, depicting the Arab insurgencies, Occupy movements and Gezi uprisings – which were problematically mediated via their reduction to ‘mimetic acts of street demonstrations’. She then turned to a letter written by Adorno in 1937 to Erich Fromm, in which he outlined his ideas for a project ‘on the feminine character’ – a sort of proto-Marxist-feminist attempt to ground an analysis of gender through the commodity form – in order to address questions of feminism and patriarchy more broadly. Portraying Adorno as falling prey to the very fetishism he sought to criticize, she moved to consider Adorno’s fetishistic gaze in relation to his remarks on Alban Berg’s 1937 opera *Lulu*, in which the lead character succumbs to her fate as victim-commodity.

The then of Berg was brought into a dialectical constellation with the now of Beyoncé, and her recent visual music album *Lemonade*, in which, it





was argued, the female body ‘defies’ such a fate. The analysis of *Lemonade* as an example of a politicized popular art, contra Adorno, however, remained unnuanced and one-sided. Clearly what makes *Lemonade* political is its subject matter – its depiction of *black* female bodies, references to Malcolm X and Black Lives Matter – not its form: an extended music video. As bell hooks has noted, the fact that ‘[c]ommodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers’, and that ‘Beyoncé’s audience is the world ... of business and money-making’, did not seem to be at issue for Buck-Morss; nor the possibility that the incorporation and rendering consumable of such content has a potentially depoliticizing effect. Adorno’s ‘torn halves’ of autonomous and dependent culture are not two types of product (artworks and commodities), but two types of cultural commodity in which immanent or heteronomous determinations prevail. It is possible for popular music to be critical and self-reflective on this model – although Adorno may not have underwritten this view – but the point is that such products inevitably come right up against the contradiction most central to his argument: art’s struggle with the commodity form. As bell hooks contends, *Lemonade* ‘is the business of capitalist money making at its best’.

Buck-Morss’s talk pinpointed some conspicuous omissions in the programme. One notable oversight concerned the possibility of a feminist philosophy developed on the basis of Adorno’s work – a prospect that has recently provoked some original perspectives from the likes of Rebecca Comay. Moreover, although Adorno’s ambiguous relationship to liberalism was

repeatedly foregrounded, his singular readings of Marx (and their implications for the *Wertkritik* developed by some of his students) remained largely unexplored. This lacuna was filled by the repeated invocation of Wendy Brown’s loosely Foucauldian account of neo-liberalism, *Undoing the Demos*, which was intended to problematize Adorno’s privileging of the individual – however qualified his use of this term may be.

The conference began with an announcement that next year’s event would focus on Hannah Arendt – an indication

that the notion of ‘critical theory’ being worked with here was meant in a much broader sense than its specifically Frankfurt heritage. A frustration that seemed to be felt by numerous conference participants appeared to stem from the particular conception of ‘politics’ – construed in a narrowly pragmatic sense – with which the organizers wanted to approach Adorno’s work. Whether his writings can cater to such expectations, though, is questionable – particularly in light of his troubled relation to the German student movement and its aftershocks. (It is telling that Hans-Jürgen Krahl was barely mentioned, whereas the spectre of Habermas loomed large.) The frequent contortions and generalizations that had to be imposed on Adorno’s concepts to align them with many of the participants’ prevailing views of ‘politics’ ran the danger of emptying them of their critical force and historical specificity. This is not to suggest that Adorno’s legacy must be piously guarded against its *Aktualisierung*. To this extent, Buck-Morss’s criticism of his ‘dutiful sons and daughters’ is surely apt. But it does leave open the question as to whether (and how) abstract philosophical concepts can be picked at will to illuminate a given political terrain. If Adorno’s thought is to bear on, say, the rise of neo-fascism and nationalistic sentiments in Turkey and elsewhere, then more thorough mediations are necessary than a general appeal to various forms of non-identity set against a more or less opaque image of authoritarianism – from Erdoğan to Trump.

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