

Critical inheritance

Jörg Später, *Adornos Erben. Eine Geschichte aus der Bundesrepublik* [Adorno's Heirs: A History of the German Federal Republic] (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2024). 60pp., €40 hb., 978 3 51843 177 1

In Frankfurt, the news of Adorno's sudden death in August 1969 struck like a thunderbolt. The author, who only twenty years earlier had returned to Germany from exile as a perfect stranger, had in the meantime become something of an icon. His lectures and seminars attracted hundreds of interested attendees, his presence was highly sought after by the media, and his public interventions – raising a critical voice in the desolate theoretical and political landscape of postwar West Germany's economic miracle – had come to exert a remarkable influence. This was no small achievement for a thinker whose prose made no concessions to a general readership whatsoever and who articulated an attitude deeply hostile to all forms of conformism. Yet the shock of his unexpected death was not solely due to his intellectual stature. Around Adorno and the Institute for Social Research, a unique biotope of critical thinking had crystallised, bringing together several generations of intellectuals and theorists: from disciples and young professors of philosophy and sociology to social researchers, assistants and students. Some of them were not merely driven by cultural-theoretical concerns or academic ambitions, but saw in critical theory an intellectual and political endeavour they felt was their own. For all of them, Adorno's death marked a rupture, leaving a void that seemed impossible to fill. In the months that followed, it became increasingly clear that the circumstances which had made Frankfurt a central hub of philosophical and social thought – and one of the main centres of the German student movement – were extraordinarily fragile. Institutionally, Adorno's passing provided an opportunity to turn the page and bring an end to Frankfurt's uniqueness as an enclave of critical theory. Politically, the extra-parliamentary left began to distance itself from Adorno, who was increasingly dismissed as an old-fashioned figure – too rigid and detached from political praxis. As a result, those who sought to continue the theoretical and political positions inspired by Adorno's work suddenly found themselves in a state of uncertainty and apparent marginality. How could they move forward? Was it possible to remain faith-

ful to the master's legacy, or was it necessary to reformulate critical theory to keep it alive? And, if so, on what terms?

Jörg Später, who in 2016 published an excellent biography of Siegfried Kracauer, now offers a comprehensive exploration of the intellectual and theoretical landscape that developed around Adorno in Frankfurt. His book maps Adorno's influence from his return to West Germany in 1949 until the early 1990s, navigating the pivotal moment of Adorno's death and the subsequent dispersion of his disciples. These followers pursued their respective paths across diverse intellectual spheres and theoretical orientations. *Adornos Erben. Eine Geschichte aus der Bundesrepublik* [Adorno's Heirs: A History of the German Federal Republic] is, in this regard, a truly monumental work and an indispensable contribution to understanding the trajectories of German critical theory after Adorno. Based on meticulous and well-documented research, Später's work provides a rich and nuanced overview of the broad spectrum of positions that emerged from the Frankfurt milieu. His analysis brings together a wide array of figures with little in common beyond their connection to Adorno. These range from loyal disciples such as Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann to Alexander Kluge, writer and leading figure of the New German Cinema, and the prominent philosopher Jürgen Habermas. It also includes philosophers such as Alfred Schmidt and Karl-Heinz Haag, and figures like Ludwig von Friedeburg, who later became Hesse's Minister of Culture. The book further discusses sociologists such as Gerhard Brandt and Helge Pross, as well as key leftist thinker Oskar Negt, feminist scholar Regina Becker-Schmidt, and the recently deceased Elisabeth Lenk, an unclassifiable disciple of both Adorno and Breton. The complexity of this intellectual landscape is further enriched by Später's inclusion of other critical theory exponents such as Peter Szondi, Hans-Jürgen Krahel, Peter Bulthaupt, Günther Mensching, Albrecht Wellmer, Christoph Türcke, Detlev Claussen, and Gertrud Koch, among others. However, one might have expected a deeper engagement

with figures from the musical and artistic domains, where Adorno's influence was particularly significant. Similarly, authors such as Ulrich Sonnemann or the pioneers of the New Reading of Marx, Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt, are perhaps covered too briefly. Despite these gaps, the book's primary focus is on the development of a 'school' around Adorno. Später offers a comprehensive perspective on the diverse and often conflicting positions that claim Adorno's legacy. He convincingly illustrates that this legacy has never been without contention, giving rise to differing interpretations regarding the relevance and meaning of Adorno's thought and critical theory. To fully appreciate the book's achievements and potential limitations, it is essential to recognise that it is primarily a work of intellectual history rather than a theoretical analysis. Drawing from an extensive corpus of texts, unpublished correspondences, and interviews, Später meticulously traces the intellectual and theoretical trajectories of those who once belonged to Adorno's circle. In doing so, he offers a compelling portrait of the evolving landscape of West German intellectual life between 1960 and 1990.

Although it is nominally focused on thirteen 'heirs', this work is not solely centred on individual trajectories. Rather, it reconstructs the contexts of theoretical and intellectual production that enabled these trajectories and shaped their distinct characteristics. A key aspect of this involves highlighting Adorno's own context of intellectual production in Frankfurt. His relationships with his future heirs emerged from various fields of activity. Foremost among these was his teaching, which attracted several generations of students. Additionally, his role as director of the Institute for Social Research introduced new research methods imported from the United States, and this led to the training of young sociologists to apply them. His intellectual and theoretical pursuits, public interventions, and theoretical-political positions within a Cold War-era West Germany – marked by the silencing of the National Socialist past and the economic miracle – also played a significant role. It was these different areas of engagement, rather than a clearly defined set of doctrines and positions derived from his thought, that shaped the character of the 'school' that came to crystallise around Adorno in Frankfurt. Consequently, Adorno's influence did not result in a unified theoretical stance but instead produced heterogeneity. For instance, Ad-

orno's connection with figures such as Brandt, Friedeburg and Pross can only be understood within the context of the Institute's empirical social research work, while his influence on Schmidt and Schweppenhäuser stemmed more directly from his teaching. Meanwhile, individuals such as Negt and Lenk approached him primarily out of theoretical-political concerns, as did Becker-Schmidt later on. Others, such as Habermas, arrived in Frankfurt after completing their doctorates to begin their academic careers as assistants. Adorno's relationship with Tiedemann arose from their shared interest in Walter Benjamin's work, whereas his friendship with Kluge was rooted in personal affinities. In summary, the links between Adorno and his 'heirs' were based on diverse circumstances and interests, not all of which were strictly theoretical in nature. This diversity resulted in highly varied trajectories. Therefore, if one is willing to follow Später in considering this a 'school', the term should always be placed within quotation marks.

Später's book primarily focuses on the fate of this intellectual environment after Adorno's death. The narrative unfolds with the struggle for Adorno's succession at the University of Frankfurt and the Institute for Social Research. Student associations, eager to ensure the continuation of critical theory, demanded that one of Adorno's disciples – Negt, Schmidt, Schweppenhäuser or Haag – take over his chair. However, various factions sought to dismantle what had crystallised around Adorno in Frankfurt. In this context, Habermas's nomination of philosopher Leszek Kołakowski sparked conflict and acrimony among those advocating for Adorno's intellectual legacy, ultimately leading to the students blocking the appointment. Eventually, Horst Baier, a disciple of Helmut Schelsky, secured the position, marking a significant rupture. Additionally, the shift in the Institute for Social Research's focus toward empirical sociology, particularly labour relations and social conflicts – what Später terms a 'proletarian turn in the scientific field' – made it clear that the so-called 'Frankfurt School' had become a thing of the past. Its members were compelled to seek opportunities elsewhere. Indeed, of Adorno's direct 'heirs', only Alfred Schmidt remained at the University of Frankfurt. The presence of critical theory persisted mainly through the seminars conducted by Peter Bulthaupt and Günther Mensching, which continued independently even after their temporary contracts ended



in 1976. Critical theorists such as Rolf Tiedemann, Christoph Türcke and Karl-Heinz Haag – who had already left academia – were frequent attendees at these seminars. Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Adorno's devoted disciple, emerged as the central figure in these gatherings. Having secured a position in Lüneburg during the 1960s, he gradually established a working group there. Meanwhile, Habermas had relocated to Starnberg, where he formed a new branch of the Max Planck Institute dedicated to social sciences and began working on what would later become his *Theory of Communicative Action*. Oskar Negt, whose legendary seminars in Frankfurt had attracted hundreds of students in the late 1960s and who had become a leading figure of the new left, eventually accepted a position in Hannover. There, he sought to reunite many of the rebellious Frankfurt students, who had scattered following the untimely death of Hans-Jürgen Krahl, and to lay the groundwork for a new phase of critical theory outside Frankfurt.

The 1970s were dark and hostile years for critical the-

ory, due both to the protest movement's shift towards armed struggle and increasingly anti-intellectualist positions, and, above all, to the official reaction of the Federal Republic, which fostered a climate of persecution against left-wing intellectuals. In this context, Später traces the individual and collective trajectories of Adorno's heirs from von Friedeburg's attempts as Minister of Education in Hesse to implement an educational reform based on participatory and democratic principles – which faced strong resistance and ultimately ended in bitter failure – to the conflicts surrounding editions of Benjamin's works, which continued the disputes that had plagued Adorno in the 1960s, now directed against Tiedemann. Später also examines the consolidation of production contexts for Adorno's heirs in Hannover, Lüneburg and Starnberg, which are portrayed as more 'provincial' environments than Frankfurt. He provides a succinct account of the formation of a 'Frankfurt group' around Schweppenhäuser in Lüneburg, where the latter was able to develop his 'pedagogical eros' and bring

together figures aligned with critical theory. Further, the book explores the challenges faced by the Hannover group led by Oskar Negt. Although Negt did not succeed in creating a cohesive school there, Hannover nevertheless provided a favourable environment for collaboration. Peter Brückner worked closely with Negt, along with other figures who had studied in Frankfurt. Among them were Peter Bulthaup and two central figures in exploring the intersection of critical theory and feminism: Regina Becker-Schmidt, who during this period began developing her theory of double socialisation, and Elisabeth Lenk, who, following her work on the relationship between aesthetics, critical theory, surrealism and literature, eventually gravitated towards the feminist magazine *Die schwarze Botin* [*The Black Messenger*]. Beyond his work in Hannover, Negt played a pivotal role in the Sozialistische Büro group, which, through the journal *links*, became an important reference point for the German left in the 1970s. This group sought to articulate an anti-authoritarian alternative to the increasingly dogmatic and action-driven tendencies of the extra-parliamentary opposition. Negt sent Detlev Claussen, one of his most distinguished doctoral students and a former member of Krahls group, to contribute to this effort. During these years, Negt also began his collaboration with Kluge, a relationship to which Später devotes considerable attention. This partnership produced key contributions to post-Adornian critical theory, including *Public Sphere and Experience* (1972) and the monumental *History and Obstinacy* (1981).

At Starnberg, Habermas began developing a line of work based on new theoretical coordinates that distanced themselves from Adorno's approaches. In its initial phase, this work was marked by his debate with Luhmann's systems theory. Später highlights the theoretical trajectory of Habermas, noting his growing interest in discourse theory and the study of language theory, while also emphasising his involvement in the theoretical and political disputes within a West Germany that was increasingly shifting to the right. As Habermas's works and public influence grew, a particular reading of the evolution of critical theory began to crystallise around him. In this context, the contributions of Helmut Dubiel and Alfons Söllner stand out. The latter played a crucial role in reviving the legacies of Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer, contrasting their work with that

of Adorno and Horkheimer. Meanwhile, Dubiel's *Wissenschaftsorganisation und politische Erfahrung* (1978), translated into English in 1984 as *Theory and Politics. Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, argued that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* represented a departure from the original critical theory project, a perspective that would exert a decisive influence on the prevailing understanding of 'classical' critical theory both within and beyond Germany for decades. Subsequently, Wolfgang Bonss and, of course, Axel Honneth joined this discourse. Honneth, in particular, examined the evolution of Habermas's work and its divergence from Adorno's ideas in an essay significantly titled 'Von Adorno zu Habermas. Zum Gestaltwandel kritischer Theorie' ['From Adorno to Habermas: On the Transformation of Critical Theory'].

Although, in presenting some aspects of this evolution, Später tends to downplay the role of career strategies and personal interests, his depiction of the disputes that erupted in the 1980s over the meaning and validity of critical theory remains highly compelling. Habermas's project in Starnberg did not reach a satisfactory conclusion, leading to his return to Frankfurt in 1983. He brought with him his monumental *Theory of Communicative Action*, published just two years earlier, which had already achieved global recognition. Of course, for Habermas, returning to the former centre of critical theory after more than a decade could not mean a return to the past. His approach represented a fundamentally different proposal, grounded in new premises. At the same time, he framed it as a 'paradigm shift', suggesting an 'overcoming' of the 'old' critical theory and its aporias. Meanwhile, at a time when French philosophy was gaining increasing international influence, Habermas began to associate Adorno's thought with the same anti-rationalist and politically problematic tendencies he identified in poststructuralism. This inevitably led to tensions. These tensions were particularly evident when, shortly after his return to Frankfurt, he organised the first major conference on Adorno – where, apart from the inaugural lecture by the aging Leo Löwenthal, Alfred Schmidt was the only direct disciple of Adorno to be invited. The *Frankfurter Adorno-Konferenz* in 1983 presented a chorus of voices dismissing the old master as irrelevant and obsolete, while rallying around the theory of communicative action. This created unease, not only among figures like Schweppenhäuser – who had not

even been invited – but also among a younger generation of scholars, such as Mensching and Türcke, who continued to see Adorno's critical theory as a viable foundation for articulating a critique of contemporary society. In response to the perceived bias of the Frankfurt congress, the *Hamburger Adorno Symposium* was held in May 1984. In an effort to consolidate the 'invention of tradition' of critical theory in a Habermasian framework, the subsequent years saw a series of major conferences in Frankfurt, including ones on Horkheimer (1985), 'The Frankfurt School and its Consequences' (1986), and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1987). This attempt to establish hegemony over the interpretation of the classics and the contemporary relevance of critical theory, in turn, provoked responses such as Detlev Claussen's inaugural lecture in Hannover in 1985 and the 1989 publication of the significantly titled *Uncritical Theory. Against Habermas*. Später interprets these struggles among various heirs and followers as a 'struggle for recognition', playfully alluding to Honneth's famous concept. However, given the asymmetry of power relations – between those imposing their hegemonic, self-serving interpretation of the critical tradition with the institutional backing of the University of Frankfurt and a publishing house like Suhrkamp, and an increasingly prominent figure with significant influence beyond Germany – the title *Critique of Power* might have been a more fitting description.

Without any doubt, the comprehensive, choral perspective presented in Später's book is an invaluable resource for anyone seeking to explore the trajectories of post-Adornian critical theory in the Federal Republic of Germany. The book also addresses the so-called *Historikerstreit* – the heated debate over Germany's National Socialist past – highlighting the crucial role of Habermas's intervention in countering attempts to justify Nazi crimes as a mere reaction to the excesses of communism. However, Später does not confine himself to recounting the well-known aspects of this controversy. His work also sheds light on the significance of discussions about the meaning of Auschwitz, which, since the late 1970s, had been advanced by authors such as Micha Brumlik, Detlev Claussen and Dan Diner, alongside the so-called Frankfurt Jewish group. These circles, building on the contributions of Adorno and Horkheimer, initiated an important process of reflection within the German left on the nature of anti-Semitism, thereby reclaiming another

crucial dimension of the critical theory legacy.

Yet, despite its undeniable merits, certain aspects of Später's work are debatable – not only in terms of the figures he prioritises or those he omits, but also in his apparent attempt to downplay Adorno's Marxist roots and their influence on critical theory. In addition, although the book's tone is generally balanced and impartial, the author's inclinations inevitably come through. In this regard, the respect and sympathy with which he treats most of his subjects – including figures as ideologically divergent as Jürgen Habermas and Elisabeth Lenk – contrast with the more critical tone he occasionally adopts when discussing authors such as Rolf Tiedemann or Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Some of Später's reservations about their theoretical and personal choices – such as their willingness to remain in the shadow of their former masters – may be understandable. However, it is telling that the book's harshest judgments are directed precisely at authors whose contributions, while of great significance to the tradition and evolution of critical theory, have received less public recognition.

Probably the greatest contribution of Später's work lies in how its broad perspective transforms and complicates the prevailing understanding of what has come to be called the 'second generation' of critical theory. In the account presented in this book, the widely held belief that a 'Frankfurt School' continued to exist after the passing of its founding members – and that, through successive updates and generational transitions, it has now entered its third or fourth generation – is exposed as a mystification. Später demonstrates how Adorno's death marked a decisive rupture, bringing an end to the intellectual environment that had formed around him in Frankfurt. What emerged from its remnants and the subsequent dispersion of its members was a series of disparate intellectual trajectories, theoretical experiments and controversies with no clear common denominator. In fact, the only unifying element among the figures discussed here is the absent figure of the master – and, in several cases, their relationships with him were shaped more by circumstantial factors than by shared theoretical commitments. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that the history presented in this book is one of Adorno's discipleship within the German Federal Republic, rather than a comprehensive account of the subsequent development of critical theory. This approach intertwines the

strictly theoretical dimension with personal, political and institutional trajectories. As a result, the distinctive features of Adorno's critical theory are often blurred. In several passages, Später refers to it as merely a 'style of thinking'. However, such a definition, which excludes any further determination, effectively leads to its dissolution. Even if Adorno's critical theory were reduced to a style of thought, one might still argue that dialectics should be considered one of its defining characteristics – a criterion that would, in turn, exclude a significant number of those presented here as his heirs.

If Adorno's work can be regarded as a living tradition of thought, one capable of leaving an indelible mark on successive generations, then a proper understanding of the subsequent trajectories of critical theory and its potential relevance need not begin with his immediate disciples, nor remain confined to the narrow boundaries of Germany. That would, undoubtedly, be a different story but it is worth remembering that theories may be inherited, but not as possessions handed down through a line of succession.

Jordi Maiso

Waiting for the rupture

Cameron Abadi, *Climate Radicals: Why our Environmental Politics Isn't Working* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2024). 192pp., \$18.00 pb., 979 8 987 05364 5 pb

In this era of climate catastrophe, there is no shortage of 'what is to be done' style interventions. Like Lenin's famous pamphlet, many focus on laggard class consciousness in a time of looming crisis. The injunction to activists is usually the same: stop what you're doing, comrade, you've misunderstood something.

So it is with Cameron Abadi's *Climate Radicals: Why our Environmental Politics Isn't Working*. The book is a comparison of climate politics in Olaf Scholz's Germany and Joe Biden's United States. Given both eras have just imploded under the weight of their contradictions, the book's timing is slightly unlucky. But more than just analysis, Abadi sets out to address normative questions around climate change and political action. These will undoubtedly retain their urgency in Friedrich Merz's Deutschland and Donald Trump's America.

Abadi is a deputy editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine and the co-host of its *Ones and Tooze* podcast. The latter is structured like a philosophical dialogue – Abadi plays the eager student of economics to Adam Tooze's wise master. Tooze, for those unfamiliar, is a ludicrously prolific professor of History at Columbia University. His name has also become associated with a whole subset of well-educated, youngish men who sought a political home after the failure of the Bernie Sanders campaign. Tooze has described his work as offering a kind of self-

flagellating class politics for the professional-managerial class. Given their close working relationship, it is safe enough to assume that Abadi has something similar in mind with *Climate Radicals*.

Abadi argues that democratic politics are creaking under the weight of climate change: as we are seemingly incapable of doing what we all agree is necessary, things are taking on a neurotic tone. *Climate Radicals* is framed as a report on the radicalisation of climate politics in response to democracy's actual and imagined shortcomings. Abadi is quite neat with his definitions. 'Democratic politics' here means electoral politics and the purely institutional management of political antagonisms. He defines 'radicalism' as 'an affinity for solving problems by seeking out their source.' Abadi acknowledges that this could include wildly different kinds of politics: even European Central Bank executives might be radicals according to this definition (albeit technocratic, top-down ones). So he clarifies at the outset that his focus will be on politics that emphasise political purity over compromise, and direct, coercive theories of change.

Abadi devotes much of the German section of *Climate Radicals* to the activist groups Letzte Generation (LG), Ende Gelände (EG), and Fridays for Future (FFF). All three agitate outside democratic politics, which can never give them their desired break with the capitalist