

Book Reviews

ADORNO'S 'MINIMA MORALIA' IN THE 21ST CENTURY: FASCISM, WORK, AND ECOLOGY. By Caren Irr (Ed.). London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 181 pp.

Of all Theodor Adorno's major texts, *Minima Moralia* is the only one that has made the perilous crossing from the remote encampments of academic contemplation to the mainland of a general readership. In Germany, particularly, it remains his most widely read book, but its numerous translations have ensured it a broader reception throughout the world. First published in 1951, after the author had returned from wartime exile in the United States, it consists of 153 aphorisms, a number that seems from the outset to equip it with an elevated canonicity – three more than the Psalms, one fewer than the Sonnets of Shakespeare. The pieces were written in a Los Angeles teeming with the deracinated intelligentsia of crumbling Europe, between 1944 and 1947. Many of their shorter statements have become the best-known examples of Adorno's thought, and while the book is not lacking in flights of abstract philosophising, it is famously full of personal insights based on its author's state of cultural homelessness and the fragmentation of genuine experience in a reified society, presaged, he argued, by the all-encompassing consumer culture well on the way to completion in America. The book's subtitle, *Reflections from Damaged Life*, intends these meditations to be not so much a shoring of fragments against the ruins, not as a conservative Eliotian lament for what has been lost, but an active repudiation of what now exists, the excoriation of which begins with the objective damage itself.

Passing over the frankly bizarre assertion of the writer of the cover copy that *Minima Moralia* is a 'lesser-known work' of Adorno's, a dedicated volume of essays on the book is to be welcomed. It represents the proceedings of a one-day conference at Brandeis University in 2019, published in book form in 2021 to mark its source text's seventieth anniversary. Four pairs of contributions under the headings of fascism, the aphoristic form, the nature of work in the present day, and ecological concerns make for a series of productive inroads into the text, and there is an impression throughout that participants were invited to address themselves to a set of suggested passages, which crop up in the discussions with methodical regularity. Peter Gordon, one of the more perceptive of the present generation of Adorno scholars in the United States, contributes a thoughtful Foreword that sets the scene biographically, historically, and also in terms of the book's anticipation of the themes and methods that would characterise Adorno's later work.

Contributions to a multi-authored volume are, by their collective nature, uneven in tone and procedure. Jakob Norberg's tin-eared characterisation of *Minima Moralia* as an advice manual seems to suggest it would do well among the burgeoning sections of bookshops devoted to 'Smart Thinking', where business strategies and self-help nostrums proliferate. Wyatt Sarafin discovers he would rather talk about anything but Adorno, a failure of focus instantiated by his apparent belief that *Minima Moralia* was having its 'seventeenth anniversary' in 2021. Clangers like that were once the job of editors to edit out. The remainder of the volume, however, is much more inspiring.

The great theme of Adorno's text, outlined in the opening Dedication to his friend and colleague, Max Horkheimer, is the fate of subjective experience in the modern world. Where idealist philosophy, in Kant and Hegel, had elevated the individual to the level of being constitutive of the world around him, the richness and variegation of reality was in danger of being confounded. Now that the individual is the precise index of the damage inflicted by a reality that cares nothing for him, the truth might well emerge from articulation of the insults and injuries he suffers. 'In the period of his decay,' Adorno writes, 'the individual's experience of himself and what he encounters contributes

once more to knowledge, which he had merely obscured as long as he continued unshaken to construe himself positively as the dominant category.' These experiences could not be further, however, from the realms of the practical advice industry of life-coaches, who, as Caleb Shaoning Fridell puts it in 'Life Still Doesn't Live', 'pretend to liberate listeners while freeing them only from the possibility of recognising their own imprisonment'.

One of the most tenacious currents of criticism of Adorno's version of historical materialism is that, as Raymond Geuss has claimed in *Outside Ethics* (2005), his notion of the intuition that suffering ought to be abolished is 'undialectical' and 'undifferentiated', that it falls short because it does not engender a programme of ameliorative political action. The can-do briskness of this attitude is in SD Chrostowska's sights when she points out in 'Adorno's Senses of Critique' that '[t]he challenge facing critical theory is to dwell in despair ... since, without this, critique cannot give reason to hope, just as it cannot give hope to reason'. Adorno was constitutionally averse to the suggestion that all critique ought to be constructive, and as such already sworn to the status quo ante by accepting its terms. 'Only a god can save us,' Nazism's on-call metaphysician, Martin Heidegger, had told an interviewer from *Der Spiegel* in 1966, in the course of trying to explain away his erstwhile cheerleading for Hitler. Speaking to the same journal three years later, Adorno would counter that 'nothing but despair can save us,' for only despair illuminates the path to truth. In much the same vein, he had inverted Spinoza's famous dictum that truth is an index both of itself and of the false (*Verum index sui et falsi*): henceforth, it was falsity, errancy, the fallacious and the dishonest that indexed both itself and the countervailing truth. 'The wrong life cannot be lived rightly,' states one of the handful of single-sentence epigrams in *Minima Moralia*.

Andrea Dara Cooper offers a suggestive reflection on 'Adorno and Animality after Auschwitz', attending to the philosopher's contention that the mistreatment of animals is not simply a calamity for the victims, but already deadens the sensitivities of those who inflict it, in a way that paves the way for even greater barbarities. The suffering of creatures that lack reflexive self-consciousness throws a harsh light on human willingness to participate in the worst crimes, as in the autobiographical note in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) in which the small boy's image of the first human being was conceived in the sight of an innkeeper named Adam clubbing the scurrying rats in his courtyard. Cooper is less than satisfied that Adorno is sufficiently attentive to the imperatives of animal rights, 'highlighting the animal as a means to illuminate implications to the human'. That is the entire point, though: the greater humaneness that the animal ought to call forth in humanity would then result in human beings who would be properly intolerant of all cruelty. 'The possibility of pogroms,' Adorno states in *Minima Moralia*, 'is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze – "after all, it's only an animal" – reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings...' The transcending of the type of inhumanity often given the name of bestiality depends on seeing their mutual interlocking. The animals that populate Kafka's fables are ever-present reminders of their imbrication with the human, from the gigantic bug into which Gregor Samsa finds himself metamorphosed to the panther that replaces the hunger-artist in his cage to the satisfaction of the gaping crowds.

Thinking about the ramifications of creatureliness in 'Adorno's Anthropocene', Caren Irr confronts a more feral beast than those that perish in abattoirs, and that stands for the anonymous nature that the world of globalised capitalism, in the course of rushing the planet to its extinction, has spawned. 'The feral creature,' she notes, 'is a domesticated one that adapts to wildness; it is a weed, an invasive species', a development that she connects to Adorno's fascination with the wilful stupidity that seduces so many citizens of the administered world. Among the various techniques for the animation of frozen obtuseness on the terrene scale, Irr takes in irrationalism, self-interest and, perhaps surprisingly, romantic love. Oshrat Silberbusch considers the now notorious rhetorical leaps in Adorno's prose that allow him to move seamlessly from condemning sliding windows to detecting the physical habits in which fascism takes root. Her essay should be read in conjunction with her fine recent monograph, *Adorno's Philosophy of the Nonidentical: Thinking as Resistance* (2018).

Minima Moralia is, primarily and finally and incipiently once again, a catalogue of the multitudinous wrongs that modern life has coerced its clients, universally, to endure. If its strictures add up to a sociocultural physiognomy of a nation poised on the brink of global pre-eminence – the tough guys in their Cadillacs, the dinner-jacketed gent spurting a little soda into his post-prandial whiskey, the radio stations playing swing, the cinema audiences staring rapt at the monochromatically glowing face of Lana Turner – its reflections are more than mere period-pieces. They sounded the theme on which postwar societies have played tireless variations ever since.

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THEODOR W. ADORNO: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION. By Andrew Bowie. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 127 pp.

If those of us who have written introductory guides to the substantial corpus of Theodor Adorno's thought have felt it necessary to acknowledge, at least partly out of intellectual guilt, that the Frankfurt theoretician would utterly have repudiated such an approach, the task Andrew Bowie has taken on would appear to mandate nothing less than the penitence of the medieval flagellant. Oxford's Very Short Introductions series, inaugurated in 1995, now runs to more than 700 diminutive volumes on everything and everybody from Abolitionism to Zola.

Adorno is the first luminary of the Frankfurt School's inaugural generation to be included, having been inducted into the pocket-sized pantheon ahead of either Walter Benjamin or Herbert Marcuse. Bowie, whose previous works include an authoritative study, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (2013), dispenses with the *mea culpa* and plunges straight in with a reference to the interview Adorno gave to *Der Spiegel* in the year that he died. 'Herr Professor,' the interviewer begins, intending to refer to a recent explosion of student unrest, 'two weeks ago, everything seemed all right with the world,' only to be preemptorily cut off by the Professor: 'Not to me it didn't'.

In an age when, to recast the dictum of Friedrich Schlegel on the philosophy of art, what passes for critical theory usually lacks either the critique or the theory, it is more than ever essential to recall that the work of the Frankfurt School and its disciplinary foundation, the Institute for Social Research, was nothing if not a thoroughgoing assault on contemporary society and its shabbily culpable cultural forms. It is worth remembering this above all because, although the Frankfurt School has an unassailable place on the historical syllabus of politics, philosophy, sociology and cultural studies, and Adorno in particular is held to be one of the twentieth century's most versatile, original and provocative theorists, very little work being produced in these disciplines now actually bears much relation to the thinking of Frankfurt's first generation. Where it does surface, it is either too shallow or one-dimensional, lacking in dialectical proficiency, or else refused as hopelessly elitist or unrelentingly cheerless.

Andrew Bowie is a responsive and clear-sighted interpreter of Adorno's thought, by no means a blinkered acolyte but encouragingly resistant, except in one or two perennial instances, to the tendency to line up the familiar row of fairground ducks, against which traditional and analytic social theory has felt itself obliged to take aim. It is true, nonetheless, that Bowie is sensitive to a certain excess in Adorno's rhetorical idiom and, by extension, the substance of his arguments. On the opening page, a warning is sounded about the 'sometimes unnecessary obscurity of his prose style', a caution that is repeated a little further on, where we are told that his writing 'sometimes ... tips over into unnecessary opacity'. In a subsequent chapter on Adorno's philosophy of history, it is stated that he entertains a 'sometimes hyperbolic view of the "totality" of modern society'. These caveats are intended less in the spirit of *lasciate ogne speranza* than in the manner of the calorie counts on a