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**Review of Peter Gordon's
*Adorno and Existence***

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Abstract

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Peter Gordon's *Adorno and Existence* is a beautiful and compelling piece of philosophical and intellectual history. Elegantly written and immaculately researched, Gordon's text stages Adorno's complicated and conspicuously under-theorized relationship to "existentialism," or to an entire tradition of thinkers from Kierkegaard and Husserl to Heidegger and Sartre in whom Adorno saw "a paradigmatic but unsuccessful attempt to realize what would become his own philosophical ambition, to break free of the systems of idealism and to turn [...] 'toward the concrete.'"¹ For Gordon, it is Adorno's thoroughgoing commitment to materialism that "explains his particular fascination with existential ontology," Adorno seeing in these ontologies a reflection, even if a failed one, of his own insistence on the "preponderance of the object."² Read in this light, Adorno's encounter with existentialism provides a background against which to illuminate his own particular form of materialism, one that rejects any forced reconciliation of subject and object. Setting aside by and large the question of whether Adorno gets these existential ontologies "right," this broad framing makes *Adorno and Existence* a text of interest to anyone working on or around Adornian critical theory. It also forces Gordon to walk a fine line between generous exegesis and uncritical fidelity. I think it is one of the triumphs of this book to have combined seamlessly the most charitable defense of Adorno's readings of Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger with a critical distance

that will no doubt lead to renewed scholarly work on this aspect of Adorno's thought. In short, *Adorno and Existence* is a must read for scholars in Adorno Studies, illuminating a little discussed aspect of Adorno's thought and shedding new light on the character of his materialism.

Gordon's text is organized around Adorno's career-long engagement with the work of Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, from his 1933 habilitation, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* and his 1932 lecture, "The Idea of Natural History" to his 1963 Frankfurt Address published under the title "Kierkegaard once more," and his lengthy confrontations with Heidegger in both *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964) and *Negative Dialectics* (1966). In addition, there is a fascinating chapter dedicated to Adorno's little discussed book on Husserl, *Against Epistemology*, and numerous short and illuminating sections on Adorno's relationship to the works of Beckett, Sartre, Hölderlin, Jaspers, Benjamin, and Kafka among others. These shorter sections are among my favorite of the book. Brimming with original insights, they show that Adorno's general concern with existentialism's return to the concrete was widely shared in the philosophical and literary milieu of the post-war era.

Throughout the book, Gordon illustrates the textual rigor of Adorno's critique of Heidegger, Husserl, and Kierkegaard, contesting the commonly held notion that Adorno was simply a poor reader of these thinkers, and that his encounter with existentialism was primarily polemical. Instead, Gordon argues, Adorno reads Heidegger, Husserl, and Kierkegaard as exemplars of what Gordon names "the philosophy of bourgeois interiority," or the "tendency to esteem the contents of isolated consciousness over and against

¹ Peter Eli. Gordon, *Adorno and Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), xi.

² Ibid., 196.

the material world.”³ In Adorno’s estimation, existential ontologies represented a covert form of bourgeois idealism, a consistent privileging of subjectivity over objectivity that necessarily undercut their stated goal of returning to the concrete. Yet, he could not simply reject this idealism outright, as such a move would uncritically resolve the dialectical tension between thought and the world.⁴ Hence, Adorno’s constant return to the critique of these philosophies was, Gordon argues, an attempt to find in them “a paradoxical simultaneity, between their manifest failure and their real—if unrealized—promise.”⁵ In other words, it was an attempt to articulate a materialism cognizant of the necessarily unresolvable relationship between thought and the world under capitalism, precisely by scrutinizing the failures of other such attempts.

Although framed by Adorno’s shifting reading of Kierkegaard, to which I shall return in a moment, it is Adorno’s critique of Heidegger that lies at the heart of Gordon’s analysis. This is because, as Gordon carefully shows, it was in Heidegger’s work that Adorno saw the full-blown social and political costs of the philosophy of bourgeois interiority. Adorno’s critique of Heidegger rests on the claim that fundamental ontology ultimately turns history into nature, naturalizing existing social formations as necessary and unavoidable.⁶ Furthermore, for Adorno, this naturalizing of history results from the fact “that Heidegger’s neo-ontology subscribes to idealism in two key respects.” On the one hand, Heidegger’s thought contains an implicit commitment to the

“fantasy of holism,” and on the other hand, “neo-ontology stresses ‘possibility’ over ‘reality,’ since it describes existence primarily as a ‘project [*Entwurf*],’ that presses forward into the future.”⁷ With respect to the first point, Adorno sees in Heidegger’s implicit holism a tendency towards ontological tautology, fundamental ontology telling the story of how *Dasein* comes to be what it always already was, a logic that affirms *what is* as the very expression of being.⁸ In the context of Nazism and fascism, this naturalizing of existing social realities takes on a particularly horrifying character, the real hell of these social realities coming to be the implied realization of being itself.

Now Gordon is quick to point out that Adorno’s reading of Heidegger is far from uncontroversial.⁹ However, he provides a compelling defense of this reading. For example, he gives an absolutely marvelous account of Adorno’s essay “Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry,” in which Adorno shows that Heidegger misappropriates Hölderlin’s work by reading “the poems as affirmations of ‘unity [*Einheit*],’ and ‘total identity [*totale Identität*],’” in a way that is completely at odds with Hölderlin’s use of parataxis.¹⁰ Moreover, Gordon shows the influence of other critics of Heidegger, in particular Karl Löwith and Günther Anders, on Adorno’s critique.¹¹ For Gordon, one sees in Adorno the development of Anders’s “claim that Heidegger was an idealist *malgré lui*,” this implicit idealism leading to a dangerous naturalizing of the categories

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁸ Ibid., 101.

⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰ Ibid., 116-117.

¹¹ Ibid., 129-136.

of Being.¹² Gordon concedes that, in light of the growing question of Heidegger's Nazism, Adorno's critique of Heidegger develops a sharper, more polemical character in the thirty years between "The Idea of Natural History" and *Negative Dialectics*. At the same time, his reading nicely illuminates how Adorno's critique was hardly unprecedented, a fact that contests the oft-cited claim by defenders of Heidegger that Adorno was simply a poor reader of Heidegger's project.

Importantly, Gordon emphasizes the role Adorno's own intellectual biography plays in his critique of existentialism. This aspect of Gordon's project is foregrounded in his chapter on Husserl. Written during his years of exile at Oxford (1934-1937) and published in 1956, *Against Epistemology* is Adorno's little discussed critique of transcendental phenomenology. As Gordon notes, for Adorno, "the key problem of Husserlian phenomenology is that it seeks to discover the foundations of objectivity within the *horizon* of the subject" remaining necessarily "locked within the constitutive thesis of transcendental idealism."¹³ The constitutive thesis of transcendental idealism is not merely a privileging of subject over object but, more crucially, a commitment to "constitutive subjectivity," the more or less "seamless reconciliation between subject and object."¹⁴ It is this supposed reconciliation that Adorno fundamentally rejects in existential ontologies as a whole.

Gordon draws attention to the way in which this commitment to reconciliation must be thought not only within the context of the rising tide of fascism in Europe, but also

¹² Ibid., 134.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴ Ibid., 38.

against "the background of [Adorno's] exile and isolation" in Oxford. Alone in strange surroundings, having been forced out of Germany, and confronted by the death of both his Aunt Agathe and his long time mentor Alban Berg, it is perhaps little wonder that Adorno would be ready to "bury himself in the texts of classical phenomenology" and that the irreconcilability of the subject with the world would be foremost in his thoughts.¹⁵ These materialist moments of intellectual biography are fantastic, not simply for the insights they offer into Adorno's intellectual life, but also for the way they foreground Adorno's own insistence that theorizing existing social relations must be materialist through and through.

This question of what materialist insights Adorno garners from his encounter with existentialism brings us to what Gordon takes to be the lesson of Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard. Having tirelessly traced Adorno's critique of existentialism, a critique that began with his 1933 dissertation on the role of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's philosophy, *Adorno and Existence* ends with an analysis of Adorno's final essay on the Danish philosopher, "Kierkegaard once more" delivered in Frankfurt in 1963. In this essay, Adorno reads Kierkegaard as offering a critical resistance to existentialism's theme of constitutive subjectivity and the naturalization of history. More specifically, this lecture contests the prevailing glorification of Kierkegaard by Karl Jaspers and Emanuel Hirsch, who saw in him an expression of a nationalistic, German Christianity. For Adorno, this reading totally misses "the truth content of Kierkegaard's work" by obscuring his insistence on radical individualism in the face of logic of social

¹⁵ Ibid., 59.

conformity.¹⁶ In fact, Gordon argues that for Adorno one must “distinguish Kierkegaard from all of the so-called existentialists who appeared in the twentieth century,” as his “‘open’ style of philosophical argumentation [...] cultivates paradox and tarries with the negative, foregoing any premature bid for resolution.”¹⁷ Despite his commitment to a Christian theological framework, one that Adorno saw as fundamentally idealist, there is nonetheless a basic resistance to the reconciliation of subject and object in Kierkegaard’s thought. It was this fundamental resistance, Gordon argues, that Adorno wished to rescue from existentialism as a whole. Through a fascinating reading of Kafka’s “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” (The care of a family man), Gordon illustrates that Adorno was already thinking through this element of rescue, in the form of an “inverse theology,” from his very first work on Kierkegaard.¹⁸

Now, I do question how useful it is to articulate Adorno’s materialism in the term of “inverse theology.” There is no doubt that, as *Adorno and Existence* powerfully shows, Adorno’s encounter with existentialism crystallizes what would be the central commitment of Adorno’s materialism, namely, stalwart resistance to any form of reductive or “positive” materialism that promises a seamless reconciliation between subject and world.¹⁹ It is this commitment that Adorno saw as the unfulfilled promise of the philosophies of bourgeois interiority and which Gordon’s text convincingly connects to Adorno’s own insistence on the “preponderance of the

object.”²⁰ However, while I agree that one can articulate Adorno’s materialism through the lens of an inverse theology, reversing the traditional theological notion of redemption in order to take “an unflinching and unapologetic view of social suffering,” I am not convinced that the language of inverse theology helps us to concretize Adorno’s materialism as much as Gordon suggests.²¹ Why is the notion of an inverse theology better equipped than the language of Marxist political economy or the language of the commodity form to illuminate Adorno’s materialism? For example, when Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, “[i]f no man had part of his labor withheld from him any more, rational identity would be a fact, and society would have transcended the identifying mode of thinking,” this directly Marxist assertion seems to me a much more concrete way of articulating Adorno’s materialism than inverse theology.²²

This is not to suggest that Gordon does not, throughout *Adorno and Existence*, assert the importance of Adorno’s Marxism in his encounter with existentialism. Yet this key aspect of Adorno’s thought is never fully engaged, limited primarily to a few pages towards the end of the text.²³ This element remains the central issue that I wish Gordon had developed further. Now this is in part a selfish wish, as I would have loved to see what Gordon would have done with such an analysis. However, I also suspect that part of the reason this issue remains underdeveloped is that a more concrete, Marxist account of Adorno’s materialism would sit uneasily with a

¹⁶ Ibid., 183.

¹⁷ Ibid., 182.

¹⁸ Ibid., 173-182

¹⁹ Ibid., 197.

²⁰ Ibid., 196.

²¹ Ibid., 181.

²² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Bloomsbury, 1981), 147.

²³ Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 150, 161-162, 187-188.

materialism framed as an inverse theology. In any case, a fuller account of this theme would have only added to what is a truly spectacular book, and its absence does not change my assessment that *Adorno and Existence* will lead to renewed interest in Adorno's relationship to Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger, as well as existentialism more generally, and that it will inspire an entirely new and exciting body of literature.

Works Cited

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