

Peter E. Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 2016, pp. 272, € 27.00, ISBN 9780674734784

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The hostility of Theodor W. Adorno to existentialism is well-known. Many view this hostility as a weak point of his otherwise rigorous philosophical thought. Indeed, Adorno's critique of so-called existentialism is often seen as a lapse into mere rhetoric. Peter Gordon's book, *Adorno and Existence*, justly attempts to correct such an oversimplified view. Not only, so he argues, is Adorno's dialogue with Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the proto-existentialist Husserl deeply philosophical, but the philosopher of the Frankfurt school also owes more to so-called existentialism than is usually admitted. The central thesis of the book is that existentialism was crucial in the development of Adorno's version of materialism: his negative dialectics.

Gordon masterfully reconstructs Adorno's lifelong engagement with existentialist thinkers and themes, from his inaugural address, *The Actuality of Philosophy* in 1931, to *Aesthetic Theory*, the manuscript that he left unfinished at his death in 1969. The chapters follow the main works that engage with existentialism, from *Kierkegaard* and *Against Epistemology* (in first and second chapter), to *The Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics* (in the third and fourth chapter), finishing with the lecture *Kierkegaard once more* (in the fifth chapter). Detailed discussions of key concepts are combined with a solid grasp of the intellectual context in which they originated. On several points in the book this is very illuminating. The originality of Adorno's *Kierkegaard*, for example, only becomes fully visible against the background of the German Kierkegaard-reception in the 20s and 30s. Gordon shows how Adorno's approach of the Dane's philosophy differs significantly from both the theological interpretations at the time (by Barth, Tillich, and Hirsch), as well as from the non-theistic, existentialist ones (by Heidegger, Jaspers, and Jean Wahl).

Adorno's critique of several thinkers has a common thread. As Gordon points out, he considered Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Husserl as philosophers of "bourgeois interiority". In epistemological terms, all three tried to break free from "constitutive subjectivity", as Adorno called it, in search of the

concrete. Paradoxically, however, the concrete reality that they sought access to remained structured by their subjective categories. Thus, instead of gaining knowledge of reality, these philosophies merely reproduce their own presuppositions. Ultimately, according to Adorno, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Husserl all presuppose an ahistorical and asocial subject, cut off from everything that is conceived as exterior. In *Kierkegaard*, Adorno's *Habilitationsschrift*, he terms such a presupposition as bourgeois interiority. As the word "bourgeois" already betrays, Adorno ties his epistemological critique to a broader social critique. In phenomenology and existentialist philosophy, Adorno sees nothing less than a return of the idealism that Marx and Engels criticised as ideology: a theory that serves to legitimate hidden relations of domination.

For readers of Adorno, this critique will be familiar. Their interest will be roused by what can be considered as the second half of Gordon's reconstruction: the question of the affinities between Adorno's thought and existentialism. Beginning with Kierkegaard, Gordon shows how Adorno detected in his work a passionate protest against "reification", as well as against the existing as such. Surprisingly, in 1940, this even leads Adorno to appraise Kierkegaard as an *opponent* of existentialist philosophy. In Husserl, who is discussed in *Against Epistemology* - a book with a bad reputation, but that Gordon restores to its rightful place within the Adornian corpus - Adorno sees the necessity of a sustained faith in reason. Even Heidegger, the *bête noire* of critical theory, provided him to some degree with a negative image for a materialist theory. Gordon draws our attention to a passage from *Negative Dialectics*: "Heidegger reaches the very borders [*gelangt bis an die Grenze*] of the dialectical insight into the non-identity in identity" (p.6). In this manner, through a discussion of Adorno's interpretations of Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger, the book traces Adorno's gradual conception of negative dialectics. Most importantly, Gordon claims, Adorno does not simply reject existentialism. Rather, his negative dialectics aims at a "*realisation of the promise existentialism betrayed*" (p.171): a "breakthrough" to the object.

Essential for understanding the difference, as Adorno conceives it, between his materialistic philosophy and its existential and phenomenological predecessors, is the "preponderance of the object" [*Vorrang des Objekts*]. This key notion in *Negative*

Dialectics points to the primacy of the object in thinking the object-subject relation. For although, so Adorno argues, every subject always necessarily is an object, the object remains what it is even if it is not an object-for-a-subject. As a consequence, no conceptualisation can ever exhaust the richness of the object. In other words, there will always be a resistance of the object, that which Adorno famously called “the non-identical”. In his analysis Gordon underlines that the otherness of the object is not something social or materialist, but something logical. Indeed, the primacy of the object “is in fact *logically presupposed* in the very concept of experience” (p.128). In contrast to such a cautious approach of the object, existentialism, according to Adorno, testified of identity-thinking. As already mentioned, the concrete reality it pretended to discover remained coloured by subjective categories. The only concreteness it allowed for was in fact a “pseudo-concreteness”, a concept that Adorno borrowed from Günther Anders. Thus, its concept of experience remained empty.

Next to entering upon Adorno's complicated metaphysical reflections, Gordon also discusses Adorno's confrontation with existentialism as a broader social-cultural phenomenon. Here his *Jargon of Authenticity* occupies the central place. What Adorno considered existentialist jargon - or “The Wurlitzer organ of the Sprit”(p.98), as he satirically described it – is a lexicon that profited from the historical process of secularisation. It endowed certain words, such as the Kierkegaardian “decision”, Heidegger's “mineness” [*Jemeinigkeit*], or “authenticity” [*Eigentlichkeit*] with a false aura, suggesting a depth that did not exist. Fascinating in Gordon's presentation is the almost black-and-white contrast that becomes visible between Adorno's condemnation of phenomena associated with the jargon - such as Heidegger, *Jugendstil*, Rilke, and jazz -, and his praise of Beckett and Kafka as heroes of literary modernism. In particular since these last two authors are commonly associated with existentialism. Beckett, according to Adorno, negates existentialism, for he “turns existential philosophy from its head back on its feet” (p.114).

An important theme of the last chapters of the book is what Gordon sees as the question of Adorno's “inverse theology” (p.93). What, he asks, is the relation between materialism and theology? Taking his clue from the well-known passage of *Minima Moralia* - that philosophy can only be responsible if it

contemplates things from “the standpoint of redemption” (p.35) - Gordon argues that for Adorno true materialism needs a criterion external to existence. Such a theological moment, as he explains, “does not contradict Adorno's materialism; it completes it” (p.197). Nevertheless, as the book rightly emphasises, the attempts that seek to present Adorno as a theologian in denial misconstrue his thought.

As mentioned, Gordon's masterfully reconstructs Adorno's engagement with existentialism. The lucid and concise way in which he writes about Adorno is no less than exemplary. Unfortunately, too often works on the critical theorist are steeped in his own terminology. When we recall Adorno's criticism of sanctified, repetitive language, this is highly ironical. In spite of its many virtues, a small critical remark can be made. For although Gordon, at several places in the book, hints at the criticism many have at Adorno's interpretations of existential thought and phenomenology (p.8, p.27), he leaves these fully unexplored. And although, in all fairness, the express intent of his study is to “elucidate what he [Adorno] thought” (p.XII), in my opinion the study would have profited from some suggestions as to what directions such criticism takes. Nonetheless, the book brilliantly succeeds in its aims. It indicates the path for a further exploration of the hidden affinities between one of the main theorists of the Frankfurt school and existential philosophy. Most of all, it does away with the prejudice that Adorno's opposition to existentialism was only based on irrational hostility.