

ADORNO IN AMERICA: GERMAN EXILES AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Symposium at the GHI, December 9, 2003. Co-sponsored by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the GHI. Conveners: Keith Alexander (GHI), Helga Flores-Trejo (Heinrich Böll Foundation). Speakers: Detlev Claussen (University of Hannover), Jeffrey Herf (University of Maryland College Park).

This symposium brought together scholars from the greater Washington D.C. area to focus on Theodor W. Adorno. Professor Detlev Claussen, author of *Ein letztes Genie*, a recent biography of Adorno that used Adorno's original texts to illuminate his life and intellectual development, shared his knowledge of Adorno with the group. Professor Jeffrey Herf commented on Claussen's presentation and placed it in a broader perspective of postwar intellectual history.

Claussen emphasized the decade Adorno spent in the United States, asserting that Adorno would not have been Adorno if not for his American exile from Nazi Germany. According to Claussen, it was during his time in exile that Adorno matured intellectually, and the fact that he spent these years in the United States steered his intellectual development in a certain direction. Adorno came to America a German philosopher of the old school, while his scholarly and personal experiences in the United States equipped him with modern techniques of social research and new insights into himself and his European culture. This fusion of German philosophy and American empirical methods "freed traditional philosophy from dogma" and allowed Adorno to contribute to pioneering works such as *The Authoritarian Personality*. Another legacy of American exile that applied to both Adorno and Max Horkheimer was what Adorno termed "the experience of substantive democratic forms." This aspect of the American experience, captured in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, was completely unfamiliar to the Germans reading this work in the postwar era. Furthermore, Claussen noted that *Minima Moralia* "reads like an inverted tourist guide, in which the European begins to understand himself through exile."

Claussen also attacked many of the stereotypes about Adorno's American exile. He refuted the oft-repeated myth that the exiles from Nazi Germany fled to a culturally barren United States only to return to the Land of Poets and Thinkers once they no longer faced a mortal threat in Germany. By the same token, however, Adorno was not the conservative critic many painted him to be. Claussen traced the origins of these myths to both the anti-Americanism and the anti-intellectualism of the postwar period.

Also, while intellectuals increasingly looked to the “radically bourgeois” United States as a source of progress and change, exiles living there simultaneously kept themselves at arm’s length from their host nation. Claussen compared the pressure to adapt to the host country and blend in to its society to the pressure to assimilate historically experienced by Jews. While Adorno undoubtedly felt this pressure from the American “melting pot,” he observed that America also nurtured one utopian hope: “of being able to be different without fear.” According to Claussen’s interpretation, Adorno’s American exile enabled him to bring this hope back to a Germany that only recently had been very hostile to such an ideal.

Jeffrey Herf’s commentary on Claussen’s talk focused on what Herf identified as a central paradox inherent in the Frankfurt School’s thought as expressed by Adorno. Adorno was a strong defender of the particular and the individual against the general and the collective; however, his analysis of Nazism and the Holocaust relied on a general interpretation of the Enlightenment rather than a specific treatment of Germany. Instead of the Holocaust being a German catastrophe, from Adorno and Horkheimer’s perspectives, it was the Enlightenment that “radiated disaster triumphant.” This was quite compatible with the “multiple restorations” of the postwar period. As Herf put it, “the theoretical strategy of generalization, the indictment of abstractions rather than particularities of German history, made critical theory a much less bitter pill to swallow for generations seeking a usable past with which to fashion a new and decent society.”

Herf also singled out Claussen’s treatment of Adorno’s relationship with Thomas Mann as a particularly insightful part of the book, and noted that this relationship is important to understanding both Adorno and Mann’s metamorphosis during their time in America. Unlike Adorno, Mann’s work, especially *Dr. Faustus*, did not shy away from exploring specifically German guilt for Nazi atrocities and the resulting implications for being German in the future.

Nevertheless, Herf emphasized that Adorno made critical contributions to breaking the silence regarding the Nazi past that prevailed in the Germany to which he returned in 1949. Unlike Thomas Mann, Adorno and Horkheimer did not “give up” on Germany, but rather worked to restore a “different Germany” based on freedom and tolerance. Moreover, they created in Frankfurt an environment that produced a number of influential postwar academic and political figures who embodied the Left’s shift from embracing radical anti-fascism to espousing a culture of debate and discussion. Herf concluded his comments by noting that “it was no accident” that Claussen, himself a student of Adorno, became the most vociferous non-Jewish voice to condemn the extremes of the West

German Left during the 1970s and 1980s and to argue in favor of embracing liberal democratic values.

The discussion touched upon such themes as Adorno's legacy in post-war West Germany's process of coming to terms with the past; the reasons for the previous neglect of Adorno's American years in understanding and analyzing Adorno's life; and the special relationship between Adorno and his students. Claussen noted the importance of supplementing philosophical ideas with experience, and Herf noted the role of Adorno's frank discussions of Nazism in cementing the bond between Adorno and his students. Claussen wrapped up the discussion by reiterating the importance of Adorno's time in America for enabling him to combine social theory and social research. According to Claussen, this was the new element in Adorno's approach, and was the unique legacy of his "American experience."

Keith Alexander