

Adorno's position in the positivism dispute: A historical perspective

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Abstract

The article reconstructs Adorno's position in the German *Positivismusstreit*. It tracks the history of his thought from his first postwar lecture course at the University of Frankfurt, in WS 1949/1950, to his introduction for the 1969 volume *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*, later translated into English as *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.

Keywords

Dialectic, rationality, reification

Introduction

In 1961, Ralf Dahrendorf organized a conference at the University of Tübingen for the German Sociological Association titled “The Logic of the Social Sciences.” The conference’s main objectives were to clarify the differences between the three leading schools of thought in West-German sociology at the time – the Cologne School (founded by René König), the Münster School (led by Helmut Schelsky), and the Frankfurt School (represented by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno, 2002 [1947]) – and encourage a rational dialogue between the adversaries. These included, first and foremost, Karl Popper and Theodor Adorno but also Hans Albert and Jürgen Habermas, the latter of whom used the occasion to gain recognition as a newcomer in the “critical” social sciences (Borower, 1990).

The views presented by the Frankfurt School philosophers and sociologists gathered at the conference precipitated the so-called *Positivismusstreit*, a dispute in sociology that waged for almost 20 years, primarily in Germany but also elsewhere, and spanning the 1964 German Sociological Congress in Heidelberg, on Max Weber, as well as the

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notorious 1968 Congress in Frankfurt on late capitalism and industrial society, held as the German student movement was reaching its high-water mark (see Adorno, 1969; Stammer, 1965). The dispute eventually spilled over into the Luhmann–Habermas debate of the early 1970s and the extensive discussions it engendered through the rest of the decade (Habermas and Luhmann, 1971).

By the outset of the controversy, in 1961, the Frankfurt School and the form of sociology known as critical theory had achieved international prominence. The school of thought was driven in part by its opposition to positivism, although Horkheimer and Adorno carried out a considerable number of empirical studies in the 1950s and 1960s while they directed the Institute for Social Research. Crucially, however, Horkheimer and Adorno never embraced the positivism that informed these studies; rather, they saw their empirical research as a way to pay the bills when funding for their institute grew scarce (Ziege, 2009).

The interdisciplinary research agenda Max Horkheimer sketched out in 1931 for his inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt was already waning several years later, around the time the Institute for Social Research was relocated outside Germany (Horkheimer, 1993 [1931]). In 1937, Horkheimer pushed for a dialectical conception of history and a critique of science in the essay “Traditional and Critical Theory”; 10 years later, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he and Adorno went further, calling into question the meaning of science generally and decrying the “domination” to which they believed technical reason had given rise. The attempt to straddle the empiricism of American “administrative social research”, and a negativist history of philosophy was doomed from the start.

In this article, I reconstruct Adorno’s position in the positivism dispute from his first postwar lecture course in Frankfurt, in winter semester of 1949/1950, to the introduction he wrote in 1969 for the collected volume of essays *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. This period represents an important chapter in German postwar intellectual history, and initiated central developments in German sociology between the founding of the West-German *Bundesrepublik* and of the East-German *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* up to their unification.

Critical theory’s epistemic claims

In the winter semester of 1949/1950, Adorno held a lecture course for Horkheimer while he was on leave from the University of Frankfurt. The course, titled “Theory of Society,” provides some early indications of Adorno’s motives for his later critique of positivism. At the time, Adorno’s ideological whipping boy was not positivism, but pragmatism (Adorno, 2003: 112 f.; see also Dahms, 1994). Nevertheless, in the preserved lecture notes, he used the term positivism for the first time, and contrasted it with the “structural mechanism of a dialectical theory of society” (Adorno, 2003: 129). Adorno spoke out against the “formalization and instrumentalization of reason” and against the separation of method and object (Adorno, 2003: 127). Yet, while his main criticism was directed at the reification (*Verdinglichung*) of consciousness and theory, he argued that theory “must be as tangible [*dinghaft*] as the reality at which it aims” (Adorno, 2003: 127). In doing so, Adorno invoked the specter of a reality that is fleeting, which he believed was the case in the positions of Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel, shaped as they were by *Lebensphilosophie*.

The idea that a reified reality justifies a reified understanding of the social world is a remarkable claim, one at work in Adorno's study of Emile Durkheim and which I will address below in more detail together with Adorno's criticism of Weber's "interpretive sociology." This idea is a constant theme in Adorno's thought and goes all the way back to his first essay on empirical social research. In his 1952 "The Present State of Empirical Social Research in Germany" he argued that the "administrative need" for knowledge about social relationships by means of empirical social research is justified (Adorno, 1972 [1952]: 479). Moreover, he expressly stated that humanistic sociology urgently required a "correction" by incorporating empirical data from modern research methods. It was important not to conceal existing relations under a harmonizing veneer, but to make conscious what is the "case" (Adorno, 1972 [1952]: 481). Because the populations of modern industrial states were behaving more like mass crowds, Adorno argued, it was fitting to use an "inhuman" form of social research based on mass data and the determination of statistical averages. Although not every instance of data collection in empirical sociology fulfills a critical function, the nonideological spirit of such research struck Adorno as part of the Enlightenment tradition, which was what motivated him to devote more attention to empirical work. For all that, he held some reservations: social research ultimately stemmed from market research, and as such represented a new form of *Herrschaftswissen* – knowledge of mastery – for the purposes of technocratic administration.

Within 5 years, Adorno's reservations had gained the upper hand. In his essay "Sociology and Empirical Research," Adorno sought to distance himself from pure empirical sociology. He rejected the positivist tradition, with its epistemic ideals from natural science, in favor of an emphatic understanding of theory that took its cue from Hegel's dialectic and Marx's critique of political economy. A theory of society is "critical" insofar as it tries to do justice to the logic of "reality" (*die Sache*) by going beyond a mere identification of the facts and dissolving existing social relations "into a field of tension of the possible and the real" (Adorno, 1976 [1957]: 69). A critical theory that merits the name does not examine statistical trends, but objective developments. In particular, Adorno believed that the actual engine of societal development lay in the "tendency of the rate of profit to fall," which Marx described in *Das Kapital*. But he also stresses that such structural laws cannot be proven or contradicted using the standard techniques of empirical research, as the total is always more than the sum of its parts. This is the reason why Adorno categorically dismissed the idea that a "social atlas" drawn from statistical data could faithfully represent what keeps modern society together at its core (Adorno 1976 [1957] : 81).

In a 1960 lecture course "Philosophy and Sociology," Adorno honed his argument. Now his sights were set increasingly on Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. What fascinated him about Durkheim was that he, unlike Weber, emphasized the principal incomprehensibility of the "faits sociaux." Adorno believed that Durkheim's "chosisme" was an accurate reformulation of the fact of "reified" modern social relations, and he supported Durkheim's targeting of the humanistic tradition in German sociology, represented by thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Ernst Troeltsch. It is no accident that the Durkheim School was preoccupied with the collective consciousness of ancient peoples, in which the "meanings held by individuals" – the heart of Weber's interpretative sociology – played no role whatsoever. In Adorno's view, Durkheim accounted for the "unreason of society" by highlighting the obsessive character of society. Precisely, here lay a

“true moment” of Durkheim’s sociology, which Adorno placed in the tradition of European positivism founded by August Comte (Adorno, 2011: 55). At the same time, Adorno criticized Durkheim’s ideology on the grounds that a description of reified social relations is insufficient; the reified character of the social world must also be “derived” as something that has become and something that has been produced (Adorno, 2011: 57).

Adorno’s relationship with Max Weber was considerably more nuanced, as evidenced by this lecture, as well as by his 1964 lecture course “Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society.” Weber distanced himself from the humanistic tradition in Germany when he separated understanding (*Verstehen*) from its purely psychological interpretation and recommended “instrumentally rational action” as a heuristic starting point for reconstructing “the meanings held by individuals.” Adorno argued that Weber’s notion of “rationality” was “understandable” insofar as it included overarching societal developments in addition to the subjective motives of action. Weber’s comparative cultural studies and world history did not adhere to the methodological postulates of his own theory of science, and in this, Adorno saw a decisive advantage. Despite his intentions, Weber laid the central building blocks of a sweeping theory of society that he had opposed on fundamental grounds (Adorno, 2008: 111). To discern Weber’s theory of society and its “historico-philosophical structures,” one needed only to read the typologies developed in his sociology of law, politics, and religion against the grain (Adorno, 2008: 152).

On the role of contradiction in Adorno’s thought

Adorno was, therefore, well prepared when the German Sociological Association invited him to deliver a response to Karl Popper’s lecture “The Logic of Social Sciences” at the 1961 congress in Tübingen. Popper’s talk presented the position of critical rationalism in a series of theses; Adorno used the opportunity to free associate about his critique of positivism. Although Adorno lumped together the disparate forms of critical rationalism put forward by Popper and Hans Albert under positivism, his response paper showed restraint. Indeed, many observers concluded from Adorno’s avoidance of open conflict that there were more commonalities than differences between the rivaling camps. The explosive antagonism in the differing scientific understanding of Popper and Adorno did not become apparent until the debate between Hans Albert and Jürgen Habermas, and in Adorno’s long introduction to the 1969 *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (see Dahms, 1990).

The conciliatory tone that Adorno adopted in his reply to Popper’s theses should not fool us, however: the foundations of the methodological dispute lie here. At first, Adorno defended himself against the views of René König and Helmut Schelsky, who believed that sociological research should be restricted to an empirical determination of the facts. Adorno argued that sociology should not be viewed as a “young” science that can arrive at theoretical generalizations only through induction. What’s more, he believed that the scientific ideal of exactness is insufficient to capture the internal logic of societal development. Since modern society is characterized by a basic contradiction – one which Adorno does not further specify – reality opposes the “clean, systematic united of assembled statements” (Adorno, 1976 [1962]: 106). Adorno fundamentally rejected the application of logical consistency within a theory of society because the interaction between

“societal totality” and individual observations can only be accessed in a “dialectic” form (Adorno, 1976 [1962]: 108). Only in this way can methods be kept from breaking with their objects, as often happens in empirical social research. “Such knowledge,” Adorno argued, “is guaranteed by the possibility of grasping the contradiction as necessary and thus extending rationality to it” (Adorno, 1976 [1962]: 109). His model was Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, in which “civil society” is understood both as a “system of needs” and “a state of necessity and of the understanding” [*Not- und Verstandesstaat*]. For Hegel, the contradiction between the individual and the universal is only a “moment” that can cancel out within the development of reason and that finds its crowning achievement in constitutional monarchy. Adorno believed that these types of theoretical constructs, like those found in Marx, cannot be falsified by the methods of empirical social research. Their refutation is possible only through immanent critique, which instead of avoiding contradiction allows it to unfold dialectically (Adorno, 1976 [1962] : 112). Adorno held that the truth of a theory cannot be constituted by subjective individual attitudes collected through opinion surveys.

Like Popper, Adorno spoke out against sociological relativism – the belief that all social and political thought, not to mention everyday consciousness, is “standpoint bounded.” Adorno believed that the general ideological skepticism advocated by Karl Mannheim was not enough to avoid such a radically subjective perspectivism, which undermines every absolute claim to objective truth (Adorno, 1976 [1962]: 116). Hope for Adorno lay solely in the kind of ideological critique practiced by Marx in his examination of the bourgeois ideals of freedom and equality, where “the entity” is “measured against its concept.” Hence, the idea of a just society “is not to be contrasted with existing society in an abstract manner ... [R]ather it arises from criticism, from society’s awareness of its contradictions and its necessity” (Adorno, 1976 [1962]: 118). For Adorno, objectivity and normativity are inextricably bound, although not in a way as to allow prognoses: “The just organization of society is incorporated in the emphatic concept of truth without being filled out as an image of the future” (Adorno, 1976 [1962]: 122).

In the introduction to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* – criticized by Hans Albert in his postscript as being far too long – Adorno summarized the basic arguments that underlay his previous critique of positivism (see Dahms, 1994). He also made some new distinctions among positions within positivism, although he continued to put Popper and Albert in the positivist camp. He compared the “analytic theory of science” to an “infernal machine of logic” and characterized Ludwig Wittgenstein as “the most reflective positivist” (Adorno, 1976: 3). He described the logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap as the “final link” in a chain that extended from David Hume through Ernst Mach, Moritz Schlick, and Wittgenstein, and pointed out the antagonism between “the formal logical and empiricist currents” within positivism (an antagonism that persists today) (Adorno, 1976: 6). Also new was Adorno’s rehabilitation of the “pre-scientific” experience, which he contrasted with a purely scientific understanding of the world (Adorno, 1976: 19, 33). Nevertheless, he detected for the first time “a decisive developmental tendency for the whole of positivism” in which it “is consumed by increasing differentiation and self-reflection” (Adorno, 1976: 65).

Adorno’s student, Herbert Schnädelbach, argued at length for this view in his habilitation thesis, which was published as *Erfahrung, Begründung und Reflexion – Versuch*

über den Positivismus in 1971. Because of Adorno's unexpected death, he was unable to read the final version of the work, and Jürgen Habermas took over as supervisor. Tellingly, it was Schnädelbach who, in a 2010 interview, stressed that Adorno's linking of critical rationalism with positivism was unfair (Schnädelbach, 2010: 453). The observation should be seen as a rehabilitation of the views of Popper and Albert by one of Adorno's best-known students. Even Adorno, in 1969, noted that Popper's theory is "more flexible than normal positivism" (Adorno, 1976: 65).

Conclusion

In his postscript to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Hans Albert voiced unceasing disappointment about the project. Not only did he criticize Adorno for writing an introduction disproportional in length to the volume's other pieces; Albert argued that Adorno and Habermas fell prey to "their somewhat vague concept of positivism" (Albert, 1976: 284). He regarded their palpable aversion to formal logic and its postulate of logical consistency and their preference for a deductive approach as "embarrassing" – something that opened the door to philosophical and political irrationalism (Albert, 1976: 284).

Adorno himself justified this irrational tendency insofar as he believed that a theory cannot be more rational than its object. He believed that in the liberal phase of civil society, theory satisfied the criteria of a "system" that could be represented rationally through immanent critique; in the age of monopoly capitalism, this was no longer the case. Characteristic for this view are his remarks in the introductory lecture at the 1968 Congress of the German Sociological Association, in which he explicitly questioned the dialogical theory of scarcity: "It's conceivable that contemporary society cannot be contained within a coherent theory ... The irrationality of the contemporary social structure hinders its rational development in theory ... The regression of society runs parallel to that of its thinking" (Adorno, 1969: 17). Given these indications, would it not have made sense if Adorno's inconsistencies in his theory of society had occupied a more central place in the controversy that would go down in the history of German sociology as the positivism dispute?

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