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## READING ADORNO IN A TIME OF CRISIS: ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF INTELLECTUALS (2)

Paulo de Medeiros

*It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again.*

Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 2016)



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Theodor W. Adorno died in 1969, at a time of profound crisis and change throughout Europe and other parts of the world. Clearly, that crisis was very different from the one confronting us today. Whereas 1968 ushered in a wave of radical social protests against the state and other institutions, the current crisis, even though it might bring about even more profound changes on a global scale, appears at first to be very different. This because of the immediate health threat that it represents to everyone, the very real possibility of a level of mortality without ready comparison in peace time, and the inevitable shock to the global economic system. Yet, it does not take much reflection to understand that to a certain extent the levels of unpreparedness for properly resisting the pandemic we are witnessing, as well as the various governmental measures being taken, also point out to a profound and systemic weakening of our ability to resist due to decades of imposed austerity measures that have syphoned vast amounts of resources into the hands of very few while leaving most everyone vulnerable amidst a crumbling post-industrial infrastructure. That this also had been going hand in hand with a return of the most xenophobic forms of nationalism, a refusal to confront Europe's postimperial ghosts, as well as renewed forms of radical and extreme right-wing movements, should not constitute a surprise to anyone. One could say that the culture of fear that has been propagated by even mainstream politicians everywhere, and the concomitant suspicion of intellectuals, experts, and all kinds of professionals, are responsible, in part, for creating the conditions leading to our current sense of helplessness. It is in light of this that I think it makes sense today, perhaps more than at any other time, to read Adorno.

In this regard a key point to start reading Adorno anew is the recently published text of his 1967 lecture to students at the University of Vienna, titled *Aspekte des neuen Rechts-radikalismus*. Although it had long been available as an [audio file](#), it was practically unknown until its actual publication in 2019, as part of a concerted effort to bring out all of Adorno's work by the publisher Suhrkamp. Its translation worldwide should be imminent, judging by the list of languages and countries to which rights have been sold (1).

Critical reception has been generally very positive and a common key has been how actual Adorno's analysis is, how it seems like he was writing now, thinking about the political crisis we confront today, rather than half a century ago. On the one hand even in our advanced, and to the most part, mature and solid Western liberal democracies, the immediate threat posed by the current epidemic reveals the extent to which we have been weakened by decades of ideologically-driven slashing of infrastructure, public safety and health, as well as a corrosive undermining of the very idea of collectivity. On the



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other hand – and it is no coincidence – this epidemic also contributes to, at the same time that it exposes, the rapid drift towards a politics of exclusion, hatred, and fear of everything that can be remotely labelled as foreign or simply as ‘other’. The ways in which right-wing extremism can latch on to, and inflame, fears of refugees, and the ways in which it exalts nostalgic notions of an imagined past imperial grandeur amidst claims for a renewed ‘sovereignty’ that flies in the face of what the concept can mean in today’s world, are parallel if not actually the same.

To be clear: today’s situation is not the same as it was in either 1967 or 1933. The current threats to basic democratic principles, to conquered and by now established rights, flows as always from monstrous inequality. But that in itself does not mean that we can simply look for the past and imagine we can know both the problem and the solution to current problems. Just as the world has undergone immense changes through the acceleration of global interdependency and the rise of finance capitalism, Adorno’s actuality does not reside in any crystal ball, but in an acute, lucid, and above all critical and self-critical take on societal forces. Adorno’s view was a ‘damaged’ view, as could not but be, given the extreme abjection of his then recent past, the near complete devastation of Europe, and with it, parts of the world, and the necessary abandonment of all kinds of illusions concerning humanity. As he so eloquently put it in *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*: ‘The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass’ (2). The fact that we have more than half a century of distance between us and the events of the mid-twentieth century should not lull us into any sort of complacency that ultimately is nothing other than a form of complicity.

The rise of finance capitalism out of capitalism’s various crises is also nothing new. Many observers such as Giovanni Arrighi, Fredric Jameson, and Joseph Vogl, to name but a few, have devoted significant attention to the intricacies of finance capitalism and how it feeds on, and undermines, our societies. Jameson, for instance, even appropriately drew a comparison between the operations of finance capital and an epidemic when addressing the work of Arrighi: ‘Thus, the system is better seen as a kind of virus (not Arrighi’s figure), and its development is something like an epidemic (better still, a rash of epidemics, an epidemic of epidemics). The system has its own logic, which powerfully undermines and destroys the logic of more traditional or precapitalist societies and economies’ (3). Vogl, who more recently has suggested seeing finance capitalism as spectral, that is, as beyond even the materiality of consumption, notes: ‘our task is to understand how the modern finance economy is attempting to come to grips with the world it has created in its image. It is a world in which “the specter of capital” appears as a cipher for those powers from which our present takes its laws’ (4).



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Adorno rightly noted that the return of a phantasmatic nationalism was not prevented in any way by increased globalization and the resulting limits placed on the autonomy of individual nations. If anything, we today have had ample proof of that. And, with Adorno, we can also attest to the fact that if anything, globalization will, as it has indeed, exacerbate the daemonic inherent in any ideological construction: 'often it is so that convictions and ideologies, take on their daemonic, their truly destructive character when, due to the objective situation, they are no longer substantial'.<sup>(5)</sup> Just as Adorno knew, in 1967, that the kinds of fascism and fascist groups that had sprung anew in a new period of crisis, should not simply be confused with older forms of fascism, so we too, today, should realize that the threats to our democratic system, more and more visible at least after the initial financial (and political) crisis of 2008, the inexorable plunging of ever growing numbers of workers into positions of complete precarity, and the always renewed fear of foreigners, will receive a new impetus from the current epidemic. The concern with protecting ourselves as individuals, as human beings, and citizens, obviously assumes priority when confronted with a crisis whose dimensions we still do not totally grasp. But we must remain vigilant, must not abandon the power of Reason as Adorno reminded us, to uphold truth, unideological truth, as Adorno put it (55), against the lies of the new, contemporary right-wing radicalism. For that, as Adorno also reminds us, is the responsibility of intellectuals.

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(1) Theodor W. Adorno. (2019). *Aspekte des neuen Rechts-radikalismus: Ein Vortrag*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp. *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*. Transl. by Wieland Hoban. London: Polity, Forthcoming. An English edition is announced for the Spring of 2020, translated by Wieland Hoban (Polity Press) and both Brazilian (UNESP) and Portuguese (Edições 70) can be anticipated.

(2) Der Splitter in deinem Auge ist das beste Vergrößerungsglas! Theodor W. Adorno. [1951] (2003). *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben. Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Bd. 4. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp. 55. Theodor W. Adorno. [1951] (2005). *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Transl. by E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso. 50.

(3) Fredric Jameson. (1997). 'Culture and Financial Capital'. *Critical Inquiry* 24.1. 246-265, 249. Giovanni Arrighi. (1994). *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Time*. London and New York: Verso.

(4) Joseph Vogl. (2015). *The Specter of Capital*. Transl. by Joachim Redner and Robert Savage. Stanford: Stanford University Press, x.

(5) Adorno, 13: 'es ist ja sehr oft so, daß Überzeugungen und Ideologien gerade dann, wenn sie eigentlich durch die objective Situation nicht mehr recht substantiell sind, ihr Dämonisches, ihr wahrhaft Zerstörerisches annehmen'.



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