

# ILLUMINATING PATHS WITH WHISPERS OF DISSENT. ULRICH SONNEMANN'S OVERLOOKED CONTRIBUTION TO CRITICAL THEORY

*Iluminando caminos con susurros de disenso.  
La desatendida contribución de Ulrich Sonnemann a la Teoría Crítica*

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## 1 AN INDEPENDENT THINKER AND ASTUTE OBSERVER OF CURRENT AFFAIRS

To read the writings of Ulrich Sonnemann is to be immersed in a luminous, fulminant language. Refined formulations, uncommon idioms and lucid insights converge explosively like *lightning*—the Latin origin of fulminant. This effect results largely from Sonnemann's confidence in the psychoanalytic technique of association, which he regards to be no less valuable than logic and reason in the context of philosophical thinking. He would in fact go so far as to say that excessively rational and systematic perspectives can impede the understanding of phenomena that go beyond established frameworks of thought. Consequently, an over-emphasis on purely systematic thinking causes one to lose sight of elements that matter in the real world.

Lightning-like perceptions do not, however, arise effortlessly. Sonnemann is convinced that, in addition to being able to associate freely, philosophical language must also take its time if it is to properly convey its insights. His writing style is in this way fulminating and almost overwhelming, requiring the reader to possess the same powerful breath of patience and concentration. He ardently defends the use of a complex, hypotactically structured language to match the complexity of the subjects discussed. Language cannot be plain if its subjects are not.

Some might view this project as elitist and detached, but Sonnemann was far from being an ivory tower philosopher. He frequently found the right words, not

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only for intellectual history's most delicate topics, but also for daily politics and everyday observations. Being a perceptive analyst of current events, he was recognized as an intellectual who fearlessly addressed social issues. For instance, his 1963 book *Land of Unlimited Unreasonableness: German Reflections (Land der unbegrenzten Zumutbarkeiten: Deutsche Reflexionen)* was a bestseller in West Germany, despite its challenging language. Still, there is a dramatic contrast between the recognition he received during his lifetime and the reception of his writings in recent decades. Today his ideas seem almost forgotten and he receives little mention in literature on the history of Critical Theory.<sup>1</sup> The decline of a literary style associated with essayistic writing can be linked to the ascendancy of analytic philosophy and may at least partially explain Sonnemann's fade into obscurity.

Nevertheless, Sonnemann's work has been experiencing a kind of renaissance for some time now, also in an international context.<sup>2</sup> This rediscovery has been facilitated by the publication of Sonnemann's writings, entitled *Schriften* and edited by Paul Fiebig in collaboration with Elvira Seiwert at zu Klampen Verlag since 2005. Conceived as ten volumes, eight have already been published.<sup>3</sup> The chronology of the works loosely governs the structure of the edition, which is further organized by content grouping. Volumes 1 and 2 primarily consist of Sonnemann's psychological writings during his American exile, with additional texts on related themes from earlier and later periods. His most famous and important philosophical work, *Negative Anthropology (Negative Anthropologie, 1969)*, is present in volume 3. This is followed by four volumes (4-7) of commentaries on postwar German society. The scope and scale of Sonnemann's work in this section reveals the varied approaches he took as an interventionist philosopher. Specifically, he acted as a political commentator (volume 4), critically engaged with the 1968ers (volume 5), advocated for a more liberal rule of law and scrutinized the West German judiciary system (volume 6), and, finally, demonstrated a keen awareness of German language culture and its political implications (volume 7). Listening as a philosophical sense, parti-

<sup>1</sup> To give just a few examples, Sonnemann is referred to only in a footnote in Clemens Albrecht et al.'s (1999) publication. As well he is mentioned in a single subordinate clause by Rolf Wiggershaus (1986). The author of *Negative Anthropology* is not even acknowledged in the chapter on anthropology by Axel Honneth and Albrecht Wellmer (1986). Finally, none of Sonnemann's texts are included in the academically established canon of Critical Theory, for instance in Axel Honneth's collection of texts (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for example Johannßen 2018. For an overview of more recent works on Sonnemann, refer to Heinze & Mettin 2021.

<sup>3</sup> <https://zuklampen.de/buecher/editionen/ulrich-sonnemann.html>.

cularly in matters of time and history, is an idea that had surfaced already in Sonnemann's early texts but became an increasingly prominent focus after *Negative Anthropology*. This is documented in volume 8. Sonnemann's literary pursuits, such as the novel *The Thickets and the Signs* (*Die Dickichte und die Zeichen*, 1963), will also be accessible again in the forthcoming 9th volume, followed by miscellaneous works in volume 10.

As much as Sonnemann could assume that the audience of his time was familiar with its own current events and contexts, today's readers may not readily understand many of his allusions and references. The editors' attentiveness in providing detailed comments to render the texts comprehensible within their respective temporal contexts is an outstanding accomplishment. It hereby becomes evident that Sonnemann's writings are not simply historical artifacts but can instead be seen as models for interventionist thinking that remain germane today.

In the subsequent sections I present a few selected examples of how Sonnemann's fulminant language illuminates its subjects and thus contributes to enlightenment. Following the edition's structure, I offer a rough sketch and compendious interpretation of Sonnemann's work. Before we delve into that, a brief biographical exploration is called for in order to shed light on his independent and unique intellectual character.

## 2 DETOURS TOWARDS CRITICAL THEORY

So, who exactly was Ulrich Sonnemann? Apart from limited (one could also say marginal) academic circles, few will be able to answer this question. Beyond the sphere of German-speaking Critical Theory, those best equipped may be psychology students educated at the New School for Social Research during the latter half of the 20th century. Notably, during his exile in America in the 1950s, Sonnemann served as an Associate Professor of Psychology at this institution. In 1955, he published the book *Existence and Therapy*, which popularized the concept of *Daseinsanalyse* (Existential Analysis) in America. *Daseinsanalyse* is an integration of existential philosophy with psychiatric and psychoanalytic techniques and was particularly practiced by Ludwig Binswanger, a Swiss psychiatrist and medical director of the famous sanatorium in Kreuzlingen. Sonnemann's first work in English,

*Handwriting Analysis as a Psychodiagnostic Tool*, had already been published in 1947 and remained on the syllabi of the New School until the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

Handwriting analysis and existential psychology are indeed strange obsessions for a later critical theorist associated with the so-called Frankfurt School. Both genres have a reputation for being esoteric and dubious. They also bear little resemblance to enlightened and Marxist-informed social theory, which is the cornerstone of Critical Theory. But Sonnemann's academic career as a whole, not only his path to Critical Theory, was anything but straightforward. He was born in Berlin in 1912 to an artist mother and a family that included influential journalists and newspaper publishers of the Weimar Republic. He studied sociology and philosophy in Berlin, Freiburg, and Frankfurt am Main, but as an anti-fascist of Jewish descent, he left Nazi Germany as early as 1933. In Switzerland, he wrote his dissertation on social thought in the work of H.G. Wells (*Der soziale Gedanke im Werk von H.G. Wells*) and was actively engaged in psychology. Being in Belgium during the German offensive against the West in 1940, Sonnemann was initially interned and transported to France, before finally being taken to the Gurs camp. He successfully escaped the camp in 1941 and emigrated to the United States (cf. vol. 1: 427-433). While in the U.S., he worked as a psychologist, offering services to the military during the war, working in social institutions, and running his own practice in New York.<sup>5</sup>

Not until 1956 did Sonnemann return to Germany. It was at this point that he shifted his focus from phenomenologically influenced *Daseinsanalyse* towards critical social theory as it was being pursued at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Sonnemann's *Negative Anthropology*, published in 1969, reveals the thought processes and experiences that led him to this position, despite having had no direct contact with the Institute's leading members until 1957. After publishing his essay on 'positive thinking' as a universal business culture phenomenon (*Die Glücksdressur: Ein Phänomen der Managregesellschaft*) in *Merkur* in 1957, Adorno made contact with Sonnemann and a close friendship developed. Adorno attempted to help Sonnemann secure a permanent professorship in Germany but was repeatedly unsuccessful, as is evidenced in their correspondence (cf. Adorno & Sonnemann

<sup>4</sup> The New School Bulletins are available digitally:

<https://digital.archives.newschooledu/index.php/Detail/collections/NS050101.01> (19.10.2023)

<sup>5</sup> For additional remarks on Sonnemann's American exile experience, see Fuss 1982 and Mettin 2019.

2019). It wasn't until after Adorno's death that Sonnemann finally obtained a permanent professorship in social philosophy at the University of Kassel in 1974. This appointment was his first beyond a visiting position, by which time he was already sixty-two years old. He continued to teach here until shortly before his passing in 1993.<sup>6</sup>

### 3 FROM EXISTENTIALISM TO NEGATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

This brief outline of his life still leaves open the question of how Sonnemann aligned himself with the concepts of Critical Theory. Sonnemann first formulated an existential and constructive (or 'positive') anthropology that aimed to liberate individuals from systemic limitations, including economic ones—an idea that is explored in *Existence and Therapy*. However, according to Sonnemann's later insight, the liberal appeal to freedom alone cannot facilitate a liberation of society. It is first of all necessary to understand *why* individuals in modern societies frequently behave less freely and more like machines— and why that is *necessary* for socio-psychological reasons. By working through the internal contradictions within his own theory, Sonnemann arrives at a new idea of freedom within a *negative* anthropology as “unlocking of the human from its defamation and absence” (“Erschließung des Humanen aus seiner Verleugnung und Abwesenheit”, vol. 3: 244). This concept was first introduced in his essay “Die Glücksdressur”, but he elaborated on it most extensively in his book *Negative Anthropology*, which is beautifully subtitled *Preliminary Studies on the Sabotage of Fate (Vorstudien zur Sabotage des Schicksals)*.

The philosophical shift significant in Sonnemann's thinking is observable between, first, the flawed notion that freedom epitomizes the ultimate nature of human existence, disregarding the absence of actual freedoms, and, second, the realization that under given circumstances, the only place where an indelible moment of human liberty can be discovered is in the midst of current limitations. This second notion of freedom includes the use of critical thought to articulate the contradictions and restrictions in which human beings become entangled. In its ability to present a subtle yet clear objection to the absence of freedom, this kind of critical thinking avoids arrogance. This whispering, which is just the beginning as one thinks for oneself, is the initial stride towards real freedom, as it has the

<sup>6</sup> For more details on Sonnemann's life and academic career, see Schmied-Kowarzik 1992 and Eidam & Schmied-Kowarzik 1994.

potential to escalate to the thunder of a resounding protest in order to reach a goal that can only be realized by society as a whole.

Meanwhile, it is evident to Sonnemann that all too many human affairs take place *as if* in accordance with natural laws instead of reason. But this apparent determinism can be disrupted when people see through their unfreedoms, for the benefit of real freedom yet to come. Sonnemann's approach thereby challenges the scientific ideal of objective observation without personal involvement. Inquiries of science require a personal commitment that demonstrates an interest not only in one's own humanity but in the cause of humankind. Accordingly, Sonnemann views the pursuit of knowledge as a quest for a truth transcending the image of a closed world, governed by merely causal relationships. His *Negative Anthropology* articulates this idea, with reference to Hegel and Adorno, as follows: "For the truth is not the whole—but rather seeks to be realized through humankind." ("Denn das Wahre ist das Ganze nicht— es will es durch den Menschen erst werden." Vol. 3: 63)

Relying on principles of Critical Theory, Sonnemann intentionally subverts the operational scientific division of labor. The demand for interdisciplinary cooperation is often naively believed to overcome this division, but Sonnemann argues that it actually exacerbates the problem. The author's wide-ranging works present a comprehensive view of the human condition. They are based on certain fundamental assumptions that solidify the critical research perspective, whatever topic it may be. Practicing sociology or psychology requires consideration of philosophical problems—and vice versa. In that regard, Sonnemann's intellectual pursuits included examining not only the theoretical, philosophical problem of freedom but also its practical and political application, such as the right to speak with genuine autonomy. Through analyzing everyday speech habits, Sonnemann illustrates the limited liberty experienced in Germany in his era, aiming to assist in removing those limitations.

#### 4 GERMAN REFLECTIONS

And this leads us directly to Sonnemann's political commentaries on contemporary events, which are not peripheral to his philosophy, but rather constitute a critical element of his negative anthropological approach. For instance, he has a favorable view toward dissenting students confronting their parents' Nazi past dur-

ing the 1960s. And yet Sonnemann notes with great disappointment that certain fatal patterns in the thinking and actions of the 68ers resemble aspects of Germany's past. He labels this tendency a form of 'institutionalism' distinctly German in character. Sonnemann examines several materials that he attributes to this lack of spirit, such as theoretical papers, interviews, speeches, flyers, and even wall newspapers. What Sonnemann identifies in those documents is a confessional language that evokes "Carl Schmitt's friend-foe thinking" (vol. 5: 327) and does not tolerate any nuances or deviations. An example of this is when protesting students see all events in the Eastern bloc as progress, or all movements of Western societies as bourgeois-liberal ideology. As a result, there is a "replacement of analysis by conceptual fetishism" occurring through certain "a priori theoretical formulas" (vol. 5: 359).

Sonnemann was very close to Adorno's position in his criticism of the student protests, which was by all means solidarity-based. They both stressed the political relevance and value of unrestricted *thinking* that cannot always serve political action. Even practical forms of freedom require thought and verbal elaboration, or in philosophical terms: spontaneity. Without such spontaneity—simultaneously practical and theoretical—even well-intentioned actions cannot be considered human.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to language, Sonnemann referred to Germany as *The Land of Unlimited Unreasonableness* in his 1963 book. And especially in Germany, it seemed crucial to investigate verbal inhumanities that may result in tangible injustices. Sonnemann examined this phenomenon in post-war German jurisprudence. In analyzing several legal cases, he highlights not only the judges' scandalous personal ties with the unjust court system and state apparatus of the Nazi regime. Even more so, the language used by the courts often sabotages the rule of law by injecting personal bias into objective evaluations. A well-known example is the case of Vera Brühne. Despite any solid evidence, she was convicted as an abettor to murder due in part to the press portraying her as morally bankrupt based on her multiple love affairs. It is particularly disappointing to Sonnemann that there is hardly any critical public response to that glaring injustice (cf. vol. 6: 282–438).

What Sonnemann demands in the face of Germany's highly dubious state and judicial practices is independent oversight, something reminiscent of the system of checks and balances he came to know during his time in American exile. Repeat-

<sup>7</sup> It is no coincidence that Adorno dedicated his "Marginalia on Theory and Practice" to Ulrich Sonnemann as a gesture of solidarity on Adorno's part (cf. Adorno 2003).

edly, Sonnemann compares the German system with the Anglo-Saxon and French traditions of civil society, where liberties were attained through revolutions. This absence of a civic tradition is responsible for the “blatant inhumanity” exhibited by the German public and judiciary system: a mentality, according to which “judges are *only* human, too,” as Sonnemann writes (vol. 6: 512). He emphasizes the negative intonation of the term ‘only’ in a scenario in which humanity presents itself as a deficiency or weakness rather than an essential component of justice.

For Sonnemann there is a broader context to German society’s silence in cases where the rule of law is violated. Consequently, his critical analysis of justice leads to a more general critique of language. Volume 7 of Sonnemann’s *Schriften* presents his skill in identifying political ideologies through an adeptness at detecting incongruities in the everyday German language. He relies on the “jurisdiction of the ear” (vol. 7: 199) and its ‘Hellhörigkeit’ (clairaudience) to achieve this feat. Exempli gratia, Sonnemann offers a compelling critique of how the German language is taught in schools, arguing that rather than fostering responsible citizenship through language education, it reinforces a conformist mentality. Thus, students tend to adopt a nationalist language and corresponding patterns of behavior and thought, instead of cultivating independent thinking. Similar to Adorno’s *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, Sonnemann’s language critique also proves to be a critique of ideology. Unlike a traditionalist attitude that adheres to archaic worldviews— as seen in “Weltanschauungs-” and “Erbauungssprachen” (vol. 7: 21)—this critique demonstrates the importance of being attentive to how language is used, listening carefully for nuances, and sharpening one’s awareness for details.

## 5 TRANSCENDENTAL ACOUSTICS AND CRITIQUE OF THE TYRANNY OF THE EYE

Sonnemann’s final writings are extensively documented in the eighth volume of his collected works and center around this kind of rehabilitation of auditory perception. While he practiced critical listening throughout his life, developing a philosophical framework for the ear as an organ of cognition became the primary theme of his later work. Regrettably, Sonnemann could only outline his planned book entitled *Transcendental Acoustics* before his passing in 1993.

Language, this time as a decidedly acoustic phenomenon, once again plays a crucial role for Sonnemann. Yet its importance has been overlooked in the history of philosophy, which favors vision as the primary organ of perception. According to Sonnemann, even written language goes beyond mere letters and as well includes the sound of words, albeit only audible to the inner ear. Thus also the formal, logical and quite abstract language of theoretical philosophy is always physically expressed. The ‘long breath’ of concentration needed to read a lengthy sentence is literally just that—a prolonged in- and exhalation—which is an inherent component of the sentence’s structure. Modernity, however, is increasingly dominated by the homogenous, abstract, and hectic pace of business. While the potential of hearing is seldom realized due to a culture of selective or ‘hard’ listening, Sonnemann claims that the sense of sight is burdened by various duties that hinder its capabilities. This capitalistic vision focuses on inspection and inventory and is mainly instrumental, overshadowing the much broader potentials of reason. Sonnemann labeled this phenomenon ‘ocular tyranny’.

Emphasizing Kant’s contributions to the subject, Sonnemann follows the philosophical trajectories of this misunderstanding of the human senses. During a 1982 lecture at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, he provides a clear explanation: „In ‚The Critique of Pure Reason‘ [...] time is defined, along with space, as *Anschauungsform*, one of the two insurpassable moldings within which all our visual experiences, both those derived from perceptions and those analogous to them as presentations on imagery, find their place. In the English translation, *Anschauungsform* is wrongly rendered as form of *intuition*, depriving it totally of its inambiguously optical connotation, *anschauen* means clearly not to intuit, but to look at, to glance. Now, why should time be just that? Because any movement, itself already presupposing space, by which time is measured, indeed is a phenomenon addressing itself to our eyes, but the simplest rhythm is not. It is the ear, not the eye, to which according to its constitution any phenomenon of *pure time* must address itself, so time is an *Anhörungsform*, not *Anschauungsform*, and that has truly vast consequences.“ (vol. 8: 212, English from the original.)

Does salvation lie in rediscovering the ear? It should be noted that music, whether entertaining or serious, is utilized as an instrument for the culture industry. A potential misunderstanding ought therefore to be avoided. Despite Sonnemann’s belief in ‘ocular tyranny’, the auditory sense should not be lauded as inherently critical any more than the act of seeing should be disparaged as if it were inher-

ently reifying. The unique strengths and limitations of sensory perceptions must be reflected upon in each case, and perception must be considered in relation to thinking. Relying solely on listening as an unimpaired sense to navigate deceptive circumstances is not viable. Sonnemann has emphasized this point on numerous occasions, such as the following: “The downside is that, compared to television—which can be somewhat stupid—radio used to be considered more, let’s say, intellectual—but unfortunately this is no longer the case. More often than not when you turn on the radio, you will hear a pneumatic beat that immediately assaults your ears.” (vol. 8: 461)<sup>8</sup>

A great deal of effort is required to counteract the tyranny of the ocular. Sonnemann has relentlessly taken on this endeavor in his work as an author, crafting his texts with an emphasis on sound, raising a plea against the prevalence of visual thinking as well as the aloofness of colloquial, official and scientific language. Inspired by Nietzsche, he advocates reading with the ear rather than just with the eye, in order to restore the sensuality of words and sentences. The eros of language is also a pleasure of thought.<sup>9</sup>

## 6 COMING TO AN END?

It is thanks to the editor Paul Fiebig that, although Sonnemann was no longer able to write his book on transcendental acoustics, he could at least record some thoughts on the relationship between the experience of time and auditory perception, in the form of interviews. The result of these conversations was three posthumously broadcast radio programs. As if in retrospect, the main themes of Sonnemann’s philosophy are gathered here once again, but now developed and applied to concrete musical material. For instance, in the opening movement of Joseph Haydn’s Symphony No. 70 in D major, Sonnemann notes “though elements may appear to repeat, they are not exact repetitions. Each iteration is not merely a variation, but rather a novel variation that alters the original theme, so that what happens before our ears is really the self-organization of time in its constant passing.”

<sup>8</sup> Original: „Das Schlimme ist nur, daß es früher gegenüber diesem immer schon etwas dümmlichen Fernsehen den Hörfunk gab als in besonderem Grade, na, sagen wir ruhig mal: intellektuellen, und daß das leider neuerdings auch nicht stimmt. Wenn man das Radio einschaltet, kann man in neun von zehn Fällen sicher sein, daß man auf diesen Preßlufthammertakt stößt, der springt einem in die Ohren, sofort.“

<sup>9</sup> For more details on Sonnemann’s Critical Theory of Listening see Mettin 2020; refer also to Dankemeyer 2020 for the eros of listening.

(vol. 8: 461)<sup>10</sup> No strict dividing line thus runs between the old and the new. Correctly understood, it is rather a matter of transitional forms. The new emerges frequently from the past (like past experiences and knowledge), and the past can be reinvigorated or renewed. However, this does not imply that we should merely rehash old ideas or hold on to historical monuments. Instead, we can think about the unfulfilled potential within the past, still waiting to be discovered (cf. Seiwert 2017: 202). Rejecting the past based on utility and instrumental reason alone might suggest that innovative ideas simply fall from the sky. But precisely this way of thinking keeps us trapped in the present, stuck in a never-ending cycle of repetition, like Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same.

Getting rid of everything deemed obsolete—on the grounds that it is not expected to lead to new discoveries—is the approach that academia takes toward both research subjects and its own members. With increasing speed, academics of the new generation are being dismissed after acquiring degrees that do not necessarily qualify them for critical thinking. Other skills are currently in demand. This practice of cleaning up is by no means new and Sonnemann himself was already affected by it. Today his use of language is often considered unwieldy and difficult to understand, prompting some to recommend its removal. This kind of suppression is likely deliberate insofar as Sonnemann's elegant, essayistic writings represent a challenge to the often careless nature of contemporary language, particularly in academic discourse (cf. Hesse & Braunstein 2021). The publication of Sonnemann's writings is all the more significant and deserving of merit, since it undermines the threat of these texts being completely forgotten in light of a culture's dwindling language skills. As Sonnemann aptly puts it, "The future is the externalized renewal of memory. Therefore, forgetfulness has no future." ("Zukunft ist von außen wiederkehrende Erinnerung; daher hat die Gedächtnislosigkeit keine." Sonnemann 1994: 13.)

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<sup>10</sup> Original: „daß selbst dort, wo sich etwas zu wiederholen scheint, es dies nicht wirklich tut. Es gibt immer wieder Abwandlungen, die eben nicht bloß Abwandlungen sind, sondern in denen sich etwas Neues einfindet, was die Paraphrase oder Variante bereits verändert, so daß, was sich vor unseren Ohren ereignet, wirklich die Selbstorganisation der Zeit ist: der Zeit in ihrem beständigen Übergehen“.

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