

STRANGLING THE MALINCONTENTS: CRITICAL THEORY AND PSEUDO- CONSERVATISM TODAY

Ahogando a los descontentos: Teoría Crítica y pseudo-conservadurismo hoy

DAVID JENEMANN*

djeneman@uvm.edu

Fecha de recepción: 19 de septiembre de 2011

Fecha de aceptación definitiva: 10 de octubre de 2011

ABSTRACT:

Theodor Adorno's work on radio often focused on the authoritarian effects of the medium. Nearly sixty-five years later, these writings have proven particularly vital to understanding the rise of the American Tea Party Movement. This prescience, coupled with the Tea Party's own "discovery" of Adorno and the "evils" of critical theory demonstrate the ongoing necessity of the Frankfurt School's project.

Key words: Tea Party; pseudo-conservatism; authoritarianism; radio.

RESUMEN:

Los trabajos de Theodor W. Adorno sobre la radio se centraron a menudo en los efectos autoritarios de dicho medio. Casi sesenta y cinco años después, estos escritos se han revelado particularmente vitales para la comprensión de la ascensión del movimiento americano del Tea Party. Esta anticipación, junto con el descubrimiento de Adorno y de las "lacras" de la teoría crítica por parte del Tea Party, revelan la persistente necesidad del proyecto de la Escuela de Frankfurt.

Palabras clave: Tea Party; pseudo-conservadurismo; autoritarismo; radio.

* University of Vermont.

Here is a test for followers of the contemporary American political scene: What year was the following description written?

The restlessness, suspicion and fear manifested in various phases of the pseudo-conservative revolt give evidence of the real suffering which the pseudo-conservative experiences in his capacity as a citizen. He believes himself to be living in a world in which he is spied upon, plotted against, betrayed, and very likely destined for total ruin. He feels that his liberties have been arbitrarily and outrageously invaded. He is opposed to almost everything that has happened in American politics for the past twenty years... Indeed, he is likely to be antagonistic to most of the operations of our federal government except Congressional investigations, and to almost all of its expenditures. Not always, however, does he go so far as the speaker at the Freedom Congress who attributed the greater part of our national difficulties to "this nasty, stinking 16th [income tax] Amendment."

If you guessed that this quotation came from the last five years and described a follower of the American Tea Party Movement, you'd be off—and by more than half a century. Instead, these words were written by the great US historian Richard Hofstadter in 1954 at the height of the McCarthy era in an essay describing the "dynamic of dissent" against both New Deal liberalism and traditional Eisenhower conservatism, dissent, Hofstadter claimed, "powerful enough to set the tone of our political life and to establish throughout the country a kind of punitive reaction"¹.

It is not surprising that this pseudo-conservatism Hofstadter describes resonates with the contradictory admixture of political and social beliefs advocated by today's Tea Party Movement, the political figures it courts (Sarah Palin, Rick Perry, Michelle Bachmann and others) and the media personalities who benefit from the furor they whip up (Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Andrew Breitbart). The quasi-libertarian, anti-tax rhetoric of the Tea Party and its "selective nostalgia"² for the U.S. Constitution has its analogs in the Cold-War era reactionary politics Hofstadter analyzes ("paranoid style," he calls it). What perhaps will be surprising however is that Hofstadter "borrows" his critique of the inherent irrationality of

¹ Richard HOFSTADTER, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt" [1954-1955], *The American Scholar*, (Winter 2007), <http://theamericanscholar.org/the-pseudo-conservative-revolt/>.

² That TPM supporters simultaneously want to honor the founders' Constitution and alter the same document highlights the political flexibility of the symbols they draw on. The TPM supporters' inconsistent view of the Constitution suggests that their nostalgic embrace of the document is animated more by a network of cultural associations than a thorough commitment to the original text." (Andrew J. PERRIN, Steven J. TEPPER, Neal CAREN, and Sally MORRIS, "Cultures of the Tea Party," Conference Presentation, American Sociological Association, Las Vegas, August, 2011. Accessed via <http://perrin.socsci.unc.edu/9/22/11>).

the pseudo-conservative “from the study of *The Authoritarian Personality* published five years ago by Theodore [sic] W. Adorno and his associates.”

Hofstadter was onto something. When thinking about the continuing relevance of Adorno and the rest of his colleagues from the Institute for Social Research, it strikes me that in America the time is especially ripe to take a lesson from their sociological work on the phenomenon of authoritarianism and its irrational cultural and political manifestations. The 2012 election cycle should prove especially fruitful—if at the same time mind-boggling—for this field of inquiry. With viable US presidential candidates openly disputing the science of global warming (Perry), the teaching of evolution (Bachmann), and the very idea of a federal government as enshrined in the Constitution (take your pick), while at the same time invoking supernatural powers by praying for rain (Perry, again) or blaming God for making it rain (Bachman, again)³, American voters are being treated to —and in many quarters embracing— a slate of candidates who proudly eschew rationality. In this they are abetted by a mainstream media unwilling to challenge their wildest assertions and a more dogmatic, inflammatory group of personalities who fan the fires of anti-government conspiracies and vestigial anti-communist fears by couching their opposition to progressive taxation under the banner of “class warfare.”

Critical theory seems uniquely able to speak to these times. From the Institute’s pre-exile work on “Authority and the Family,” to their sponsored research projects in the United States, which came under the heading of “Studies in Prejudice” and finally to the “Group Experiment” led by Adorno and Friedrich Pollock, there is a clear and consistent preoccupation on the part of the “Frankfurt School” with the types of irrationality, nativism, and latent violence evident in social phenomena like the Tea Party Movement. And Adorno’s work is particularly acute when it comes to the cultural manifestations of these phenomena. What is curious is that —at least with regard to our present political moment— Adorno is at his most pertinent in some of his least well-known and less widely read works, many of them stemming from his often unhappy encounter with American social-science research methods.

³ As was widely reported, immediately after Hurricane Irene (a storm which caused extensive damage and flooding in my own state, Vermont) Bachmann told a group of elderly Floridians, “I don’t know how much God has to do to get the attention of the politicians. We’ve had an earthquake; we’ve had a hurricane. He said: ‘Are you going to start listening to me here?’ Listen to the American people because the American people are roaring right now.” In the interest of scrupulous inquiry, I should say that she later claimed she made that comment in “a humorous vein”.

To consider just one example: in the mid 1940s, Adorno produced a short monograph on the psychological techniques of the California radio demagogue Martin Luther Thomas. Adorno's project was at once an off-shoot of his earlier American work on radio and a logical extension of the Frankfurt School's ongoing commitment to the Studies in Prejudice series, a massive, multifaceted treatment of the roots, expression and effects of anti-semitism and bigotry in both Europe and—importantly—in post-war America.

Adorno's involvement with the project was extensive. Not only was he —famously— the “theoretical” voice of *The Authoritarian Personality*, as Max Horkheimer's right hand man, he was also in large part responsible for coordinating the efforts of the different authors and research teams, reading and editing manuscript drafts and interfacing with the various research bureaus and funding agencies who were stakeholders in the project, among them Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research and the American Jewish Committee.

In *The Psychological Techniques of Martin Luther Thomas*, Adorno uses the proto-fascism of an obscure radio personality as a way to engage the culture industry *in extremis*, a fact he alludes to directly by linking his take on the pseudo-individuality Thomas promotes in his listeners to the “oppressed mimesis” articulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. If, as Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, “in psychoanalysis, nothing is true except the exaggerations,” we could well say that for Adorno, in the critique of the culture industry, the only things true are likewise its most extreme cases. But these cases tend to cast a light on the whole organization of mass culture and political discourse as it articulates itself through various technological forms and distribution networks—what Adorno will elsewhere call the “physiognomy” of a given broadcast medium. Here there is a real consistency between *Current of Music*, the *Thomas* book and *The Authoritarian Personality*. And these texts bear revisiting, I believe, not merely as historical curiosities, but also for the way that in them —perhaps even more so than in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *Minima Moralia*, Adorno captures precisely the state of our own contemporary political discourse—one even more hyperbolic and reactionary than the one the Frankfurt exiles encountered 65 years ago.

Hence, in the *Thomas* book, Adorno summarizes Thomas' fears this way: “The nation is in dire jeopardy. The impending triumph of the devil in communism, the ‘progressive spirit’... and the plots of ‘those evil forces,’ all make for this disintegra-

tion”⁴. Compare this then to American media personality Glenn Beck’s claim during his rambling keynote address at the 2009 Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC): “This is the disease. This is the disease in America. It’s not just spending, it’s not just taxes, it’s not just corruption. It is progressivism... Progressivism is the cancer in America and it is eating our Constitution.”

While the words are eerily resonant, what seems to be important here is not so much the substance but the style of these figures and what marks the necessity and salience of Adorno’s critique is the way that the demagogic techniques of one era mirror the other. Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, and their ilk are masters, not so much of constructing coherent arguments for or (more likely) against a particular political position or ideology, but instead of a nearly aphasic associative technique in which the merest coincidences and contingencies are articulated as necessities and evidence for conspiracy (Witness Palin’s resignation speech when she left Alaska’s governor’s office or any of Beck’s weird philological blackboard lectures.) Here, Adorno anticipates both Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” and the Tea Party almost clairvoyantly:

It is one of the main tricks of... to dignify this atomistic thinking as a kind of intellectual process. By reproducing in his speeches the vagueness of a thinking process confined to mere associations... Thomas provides a good intellectual conscience for those who cannot think. He cunningly substitutes a “paranoiac” scheme for a rational process.

The ultimate aim of these strategies, Adorno claims, “is probably not so much the selling of false argumentation as the complete breakdown of a logical sense within the listeners and eventually the collapse of any meaning that the idea of truth may have for them”⁵.

And the stakes of these strategies become plain in the *Authoritarian Personality*: As Adorno and his colleagues explain in an oft-quoted section, the willingness to capitulate to irrational authority in one’s conscious life suggests an underlying tendency toward “violence, anarchic impulses, and chaotic destructiveness in the unconscious sphere.” And what’s liable to be destroyed by these barely contained impulses should they be unleashed is the very fabric of democracy itself: “The pseudo-conservative is a man who, in the name of upholding traditional American

⁴ Theodor W. ADORNO, *The Psychological Techniques of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

values and institutions and defending them against more or less fictitious dangers, consciously or unconsciously aims at their abolition”⁶.

I am certainly not the first to notice Critical Theory’s relevance to contemporary political developments in the United States or the resonance with Tea Party rhetoric. Just as Hofstadter saw Adorno as the key to the critique of McCarthyism and the rise of the Goldwater Republican, scholars today are once again taking advantage of the insights of the Studies in Prejudice project and the Institute’s work in America to conduct a thoroughgoing analysis of a new breed of conservatives. Following in the wake of his translation and reconstruction of the *Gruppenexperiment* and *Guilt and Defense*, sociologist Andrew Perrin and his colleagues have begun an empirical analysis of the Tea Party Movement, in part using *The Authoritarian Personality* as their guide. And stalwart defender of critical theory Martin Jay has recently brought his considerable knowledge and theoretical sensitivity to bear on “the lunatic fringe” of American political culture⁷. But part of the reason why Perrin and Jay’s work is necessary is that the right has, perhaps inevitably, taken notice of the Frankfurt School and not surprisingly has been blaming it for many of America’s perceived ills from the breakdown of the family to the stupidity of the mass media (the latter is particularly curious given the usual reading of the culture industry critique as overly critical of popular culture).

Noteworthy among this era’s pseudo-conservatives is Andrew Breitbart, who, in his book *Righteous Indignation*, lays at the feet of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and their colleagues everything that has gone wrong with America in the last sixty years and suggests that their work in exile was a conspiracy to bring about the ills the Tea Party Movement fights against today. As the media watchdog organization, Media Matters, reported, in the advance proofs of the book, Breitbart’s “righteous indignation” regarding Adorno’s trenchant critique of his adoptive exile home shaded into exactly the irrational violence Adorno cautions against in his exile writings: “Adorno was wrong,” Breitbart claims in a section subsequently altered for final publication. “[California] was paradise. To the rest of the world, America’s vision was a vision of paradise. And these Marxists were here to try and destroy the

⁶ Theodor W. ADORNO et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950), 675-76.

⁷ Martin JAY, “Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment: The Frankfurt School as Scapegoat of the Lunatic Fringe,” *Salmagundi Magazine*, nos. 169-189 (Fall 2010-Winter 2011), <http://cms.skidmore.edu/salmagundi/backissues/168-169/martin-jay-frankfurt-school-as-scapegoat.cfm>

best lifestyle man had ever created. If I could go back in a time machine, I would go back to strangle these malcontents”⁸.

Given the virulence of the tea party’s rhetoric and the fact that it is now being used not only to whip up a pseudo-conservatism for our time, but to try to discredit the first –and still most salient defense against it, I propose that defenders of critical theory’s ongoing relevance should perform something like a “double switch.” We shouldn’t use critical theory to critique the Tea Party but instead, we should use the Tea Party to make a case for critical theory. Here I am following Jay’s lead when he suggests that the “lunatic fringe” pays Adorno et al. a back-handed compliment:

“If there is one positive implication of these developments, it is the perverse tribute today’s radical right pays to the School’s acuity in revealing the workings of their deplorable ideology and its origins in their political and psychological pathologies. In looking for a scapegoat for all the transformations of culture which they can’t abide, they have recognized the most acute analysts of their own condition. In the fog of their blighted understanding, they have discerned a real threat.”⁹

And it’s the very perversity of the radical right that suggests an equally perverse conclusion: It’s only critical theory at it’s most extreme—not the Adorno of *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics*, but instead the under-utilized Adorno, the discredited Adorno, the discarded Adorno—that can counter the extremity of our political climate. Beck and Palin, Breitbart and Perry make the case that the most outrageous parts of Adorno, his deepest cultural pessimism, his sociological doom-saying, are closest to the truth. Much of the historical dismissal of Adorno has turned on an assumption that human beings are too multi-faceted, too nuanced, too –we hope– rational for his direst pronouncements to be correct. Only the fringes of society work the way Adorno claims. But what the Tea Party Movement shows us is what happens when the fringes take over, a world in which only the exaggerations –but especially and horrifically the exaggerations– are true.

⁸ Jeremy SCHULMAN, “I Would Go Back To Strangle These Malcontents’: Andrew Breitbart’s First Draft”, *Media Matters* (April 29, 2011), <http://mediamatters.org/blog/201104290022>

⁹ Martin JAY: “Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment”, ob. cit.