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Peter E. Gordon has written a compelling book entitled *Adorno and Existence* about Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno’s relationship to existentialism. Gordon admits in the very first sentence of his book that Adorno was not an existentialist, however, according to Gordon’s analysis, Adorno was intrigued by existentialism and tantalized by phenomenology through his academic career. Gordon offers a new research perspective on Adorno’s work which has often been bypassed by secondary literature. He suggests that, although Adorno is renowned as one who challenges philosophies of existence, his position as a critic is not as straightforwardly negative as one might think.

The structure of the work begins with early ontological matters, it moves to *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), then towards *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and finally to salvaging metaphysics. The form and the content of the book intertwine in a spiral which lures the reader in its undertow. In a laudable manner, Gordon offers a comprehensive view of Adorno’s often forgotten and marginalized writings and lectures. All in all, the sources he refers to in support of his endeavour are well chosen for the task in hand.

Despite the complexity and depth of the subject matter, the book reads well thanks to Gordon’s skills as a writer and his philosophical acumen (for instance, his book *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*, 2010, won the *Jacques Barzun Prize* from the American Philosophical Society). It would have been prudent and useful to readers if an accessible list of references had been included, and not only a list of aberrations, as this would save the reader from searching through the endnotes for titles which have been referred to. This small criticism aside, Gordon conducts encompassing and convincing research to demonstrate the importance of key existentialist thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger from the beginning of Adorno’s academic career through to the final days of his life. Gordon builds the story eloquently; he starts and ends with Kierkegaard and the structure is insightful as Adorno wrote his *Habilitationsschrift* (a second dissertation) on Kierkegaard, and lectured on his work during the last years of his career (a 40 year timespan).

It is not surprising that Gordon presents Heidegger as the main opponent and counterpart to Adorno’s thought as Gordon has analysed Heidegger’s philosophy in his other books and in numerous articles (e.g. Gordon 2003; 2007; 2013). In this text he tries to situate Heidegger’s phenomenological philosophy alongside Adorno’s social criticism; a daring and respectable
task. Gordon argues that Adorno’s central idea about the primacy of the object is an attempt to finish what existential philosophers had sought to accomplish before him. According to Gordon, Adorno’s relentless criticism of existentialists is a redemption of existence. When Adorno argues that Kierkegaard and Heidegger failed to overcome a lurking idealism, it is because he envisions his philosophy as “the overcoming of existentialism but also its fulfillment” (145).

Gordon is clearly aware of Adorno’s repeated criticism of existential philosophers as the book examines even the harshest parts of these writings, however, he claims this is a reversal recognition. For Gordon, as Adorno’s intensive interest in existentialism and phenomenology spans multiple decades, he must see a hidden potential in these philosophical systems despite the failings he makes explicit. This speculative claim gives ground to a deeper consideration and reframing of Adorno’s critical thinking. Gordon builds on the old and accepted truth about Adorno (that if he states something, he will denounce the very same thought just a couple of pages later) to point to some neglected ironies in Adorno’s works and reminds us that it is intellectually insincere to focus on isolated critical slogans. As Adorno writes in the Negative Dialectics; philosophy should not forget its clownish traits: “Philosophy is the most serious thing, but then again it is not all that serious.” (Adorno, 1966, 14)

Counting on the aforementioned trait in Adorno’s writings, Gordon is able to turn the tables around time and time again. For instance, he notes how Adorno criticizes époché (a method of phenomenological bracketing) which is supposed to help to catch the pure oneself; a method of understanding and seeing how the world exists for one. Adorno suggests that this method fails miserably, and is basically transcendental xenophobia. Despite this straightforward crushing, Gordon finds evidence on how Adorno goes beyond a mere superficial panning, and wants to seek truth in what he has just a moment ago considered to be phenomenological untruth. Adorno, according to Gordon, does not want to refute phenomenology through negation but, instead, he is on a quest to show how this “failure bears within itself a hidden philosophical insight.” (64)

As the text proceeds, it is easy to grasp Gordon’s primary objective; to show that Adorno has an intellectual bond with existentialism and phenomenology. Gordon takes the sheer number of references provided as proof of this. However, one cannot accept that Gordon necessarily gets it right when he suggests that Adorno did not specifically reject existential philosophy just because he returned to the same themes again and again over many decades. Adorno was always critical towards authoritarianism, for example, and he never ceased to question the socially shared insanity in the Western world but it would be wrong to suggest that, because Adorno wrote so much about authoritarianism he saw a hidden promise in authoritarian thinking and movements.

The text does contain some careless formulations occasionally, e.g. Gordon considers Adorno a satirical writer who tries to pop the balloons of rigid authority with his dry and poisonous wit and it could be argued that true satirists tend to offer something to replace their ridiculed targets but Adorno does not do this. Instead, he uses bitter humour to belittle shared cultural insanity, philosophical hypocrisy and individuals who are simply wrong (according to his perspective). In his mockery Adorno rarely offers sympathy for the target of his ridicule; instead, he is sarcastic and quite often smug in relation to the way he offends others. Interestingly, Gordon includes an extract of one of Adorno’s letters to Herbert Marcuse where he belittles Heidegger’s student Otto Friedrich Bollnow after the publication of The Jargon of Authenticity (December, 15, 1964): “Ernst Bloch phoned to say that because of the ‘Jargon’ Bollnow is
having a nervous breakdown. Let him.” (88). Adorno does give a charitable rationalization for his so-called satirical technique when he tries to embarrass people; he thought that once an authority is ridiculed its fragile nature is revealed (through laughter), then the followers of that authority would be keen to stop worshipping their former hero. This is the very same sociological thought on which Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* (1911) is based. Bergson argues that laughter is a form of social control and a tool to straighten people up from their silly habits. Sadly for Adorno, this does not justify every kind of banter, and a mere rationalization hardly turns a ruthless mockery into a more constructive form of satire.

At times, Gordon makes questionable rhetorical choices and one can identify a subtle smugness in formulations such as “Those who come to critical theory burdened with customary opinion...” (6), or “Adorno’s critical orientation can appear relentlessly negative, and many readers fail to see that his negativity still flows, however faintly, with a rationalist’s hope for a better world.” (11) If these points are to be taken literally, Gordon is suggesting that merited Adorno scholars are taking a ‘wrong’ approach and one might ask, where does this leave those who are new to Adorno’s work?

Similar accusations are present throughout the text as Gordon suggests that Adorno scholars who interpret his written works on existentialism as sidesteps and meaningless aberrations from the philosophical core do so neglectfully. Despite such criticisms Gordon himself displays intellectual lapses in relation to Heidegger as, though he acknowledges the controversies about Heidegger’s relationship to National Socialism, he claims that this should not cloud our vision of his philosophy. However, for the critical theorist truth is always historical and social circumstances must play a significant role. A shrug of the shoulders is not enough to allow one to bypass Heidegger’s engagement with National Socialism; this is a major issue of debate which has recently resurfaced due to the publication of the so-called *Black Notebooks* (2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

Whilst Gordon agrees that philosophical texts are part of a social whole (at least in Adorno’s case), he also claims that they cannot be reduced to this whole. It is on these grounds that he seeks to excuse the omission of any treatment of Heidegger’s relation to fascism in this text. Unfortunately, the rationale behind this omission not entirely convincing. Gordon allows himself privileges that he denies to others; he regards dubious writings by Heidegger as mere deviations (though some scholars argue that they are essential), and at the same time he claims that certain works by Adorno should not be neglected as they allow one to trace the development of his critical thinking. It is not entirely consistent for Gordon to claim that Adorno’s marginal texts are important (as one may understand them as intellectual test laboratories), but Heidegger’s marginal texts (which several scholars consider as representative of his philosophical thinking) should be considered mere sidesteps.

Gordon describes how the political and economic situation forced Adorno to emigrate from Germany to England in the 1930s, and how racial laws resulted in the decommission of his professorship. The situation resulted in Adorno having to complete a second doctorate at the University of Oxford in an intellectual environment where his enthusiasm for social theory was not shared. Gordon claims “it is against this sombre background of exile and isolation that we must understand Adorno’s readiness to bury himself in the texts of classical phenomenology.” (59) He makes a valuable point, but it again raises the issue concerning the importance of taking the social-historical situation into account when analysing the work of Heidegger.
Let us consider what remains untreated by *Adorno and Existence*; e.g. Gordon mentions Karl Marx twice and Sigmund Freud only once, yet both are highly influential thinkers in relation to Adorno’s intellectual development. The text concerns Adorno and existentialism so there is no need for a comprehensive study of these two critical thinkers; even so, a comparison of their influence on Adorno with that of existentialists’ would have been a valuable addition. Also, Adorno’s concept of *somatic impulse* (which is based on psychoanalytical thinking) is completely neglected by this text. Through this concept Adorno presents an individual with the possibility to feel that there is something wrong with the world without giving positive answers to the problem. Somatic impulse comes close to what Erich Fromm (Adorno’s former colleague and rival) calls ‘existential needs’; as they offer a dialectic but normative standpoint for both philosophy and social criticism. It would have been interesting to read about whether Gordon finds any connection between somatic impulse and, e.g. the phenomenological idea of ‘being in the world’.

All in all, *Adorno and Existence* is an important and insightful book as it highlights previously untreated features of Adorno’s intellectual development and his academic career. Gordon’s work presents an interesting historical and biographical study; his style concerns an original method which requires one to assemble clues that are presented through a complex story (which has not been told or fully understood before). In the style of Adorno, Gordon reminds us; that if one is to criticize something, it means that one has to make a serious and rigorous attempt to analyse the target of the criticism, otherwise the enterprise engages in nothing more than cultural chatter (a point which is well formulated and taken into account throughout Gordon’s work). It is unclear if jury will be unanimous with their verdict on this particular book as both phenomenologists and critical theorists may find the book, eventually, not entirely convincing. That said, Gordon succeeds in giving food for thought and opening up new perspectives to Adorno scholars about Adorno’s intellectual relationship to existentialism and phenomenology.

The gravest problems with the book (discussed above) lie on the meta-level and, if a brief speculation is allowed, Adorno would probably not agree with Gordon’s analysis in relation to Heidegger. Adorno, one of the sharpest critics of fascism in the 20th century, is portrayed as the saviour of Heideggerian phenomenology. Many philosophers argue (especially after the publication of the *Black Notebooks*) that there is an intrinsic connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and anti-Semitism. If this is the case, then Adorno himself would be rather appalled by Gordon’s conclusion: that Adorno is the one who wants to save Heidegger’s philosophical project. It is difficult to couple Heidegger (a member of the Nazi party from 1933 until the end of Second World War), and Adorno (a persecuted Jew who had to leave his motherland because of the atrocities committed by the Nazis). The historical burden is so heavy that it cannot by bypassed with a mere statement that the author does not agree with Heidegger’s fascistic tendencies but is not going to treat the question of how they are present within his philosophical works. Some scholars (e.g. Rée 2014, Losurdo 2014) argue that Heidegger’s anti-Semitic ideas taint only his person and do not impact deeply on the core of his philosophy. However, critics such as Peter Trawny (editor of the *Black Notebooks*) argue that Heidegger actually processed his anti-Semitic ideas philosophically. The issue of Heidegger’s anti-Semitism and its presence in Heidegger’s works should be taken seriously when discussing a critical thinker like Adorno (from a Jewish background) as it is significant in relation to understanding Heidegger’s legacy. Unfortunately, Gordon does not make such an attempt.

**Referred works**


