

Adorno in 1969: Adorno's Marxism and the problem and legacy of the 1960s Left in theory and practice [approx. 5,000 words]

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Précis

A certain legend of the '60s New Left has it that the Marxist critical theorist Theodor Adorno was hostile to student radicalism. This placed Adorno's legacy for progressive politics in doubt for at least two decades after 1969. Adorno had defended junior colleague Jürgen Habermas's warning of "left fascism" among 1960s student radicals, and challenged Herbert Marcuse's support for student radicalism, questioning its emancipatory character. Adorno's collaborator Max Horkheimer commented about the '60s radicalism, "But is it really so desirable, this revolution?" Infamously, Adorno called the police to clear demonstrators from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1969. Students protested that "Adorno as an institution is dead." Some months later, while hiking on vacation, Adorno suffered a heart attack and died. Eulogizing Adorno in 1969, Habermas raised two issues for the post-1960s reception of Adorno's work: 1.) Adorno's work was both inspiring and frustrating for the critique of modern society; and 2.) Adorno left little to suggest directions to take beyond a "meager reprise of Marxism." Fredric Jameson and others began revisiting Adorno's legacy around 1989, the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, to challenge the politics of postmodernism. The controversy over Adorno since the 1960s has been over the nature and character of Adorno's Marxism, which was formulated in the 1920s-30s, and has not been given a proper account.

This paper addresses Adorno's writings from 1968-69, such as "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," in light of the problems of Marxism dating from the 1920s-30s, the aftermath of revolution, civil war, counterrevolution and reaction in 1917-19. Habermas and others have rehearsed a typical motif in the reception of Adorno's work, that Adorno, as a last "Mandarin" intellectual, was grounded in his critical theory in an earlier historical epoch, namely the liberal capitalism of the 19th Century. However, what this fails to consider is that the formative experiences for Adorno's thought were those that defined 20th Century history: 20th Century capitalism is the central object for Adorno's thought, and one in which he himself is implicated, and not at all out of his element, as Habermas's characterization would suppose. The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 was the formative event of the 20th Century. The emancipatory moment of the Russian Revolution was the lodestar not only for all subsequent Marxism but specifically for the Marxian critical theory of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. As Horkheimer had put it in *Dämmerung* (Notes 1926-31, published in 1934): "The moral character of a person can be infallibly inferred from his response to certain questions. . . . In 1930 the attitude toward Russia casts light on people's thinking." So the question remains: In what ways was Adorno's thought grounded in and responsive to the formative experiences of Marxist politics in the 20th Century?