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# **Neg— ativity** **& Revolution**

**Adorno and  
Political Activism**

Edited by John Holloway, Fernando  
Matamoros & Sergio Tischler

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# Negativity and Revolution

Adorno and Political Activism

Edited by  
JOHN HOLLOWAY,  
FERNANDO MATAMOROS  
and SERGIO TISCHLER



Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades  
Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla

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*John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros and Sergio Tischler*

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I

## Introduction to the Issues





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# 1

## NEGATIVITY AND REVOLUTION: ADORNO AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

*John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros, Sergio Tischler*

### I

This is not a book about Adorno; nor is it written by specialists in Adorno or set out to give a full and active portrayal of Adorno and his work. It is written, rather, by a number of people who consider it important for the development of anti-capitalist thought to read Adorno and particularly to develop his idea of negative dialectics. It starts from a simple question: why, in spite of everything, do we consider it important to develop Adorno's ideas? The "in spite of everything" refers to the difficulty of Adorno's language, but above all to the fact that he called in the police when students occupied the Institute of Social Research in January 1969.

### II

This book takes sides in a political-theoretical controversy. This is a controversy that grows out of the collapse of the USSR and of the Leninist conception of revolution. The debate has to do with the meaning of dialectics and its role in revolutionary thought.

It has become common in recent years to denounce dialectics and argue that the anti-capitalist movement should abandon the concept. This rejection grows out of an identification of dialectics with the "dialectical materialism" proclaimed by the USSR and the Communist Parties, and it is particularly strong in those countries in which the Communist Parties were highly influential,

politically and intellectually, especially France and Italy. The authors who take this position – Althusser, Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Derrida, Macherey, and more recently Hardt, Negri and Virno, among many others – see “dialectical materialism” as rooted in Hegel’s dialectic, and their criticism of Communist Party politics takes the form of a repudiation of Hegel and a declared preference for Spinoza.

The rejection of dialectics focuses principally on two related points. It is argued that dialectical thought leads to closure rather than openness. The typical Hegelian triad of thesis–antithesis–synthesis ends in a closing synthesis, which provides the basis of a view of history as a series of stages or steps. The synthesis is a reconciliation of opposites, the establishment, in other words, of a new *modus vivendi* between labour and capital. A recent article by Hardt and Colectivo Situaciones states the charge clearly:

The dialectical operation consists in putting an end to that which has none, giving a defined orientation to that which has no finality, taking (overcoming) the previous moments by rescuing what is useful (preserving) in the service of a new affirmation, prohibiting every consciousness of an irreducible diversity, of an excess which is not retaken... As final moment, this idea of the dialectic concludes open processes, synthesises in a final unity multiplicities without relations that are *a priori* determinable. (Hardt and Colectivo Situaciones 2007)

Related to this is the charge that the dialectical notion of contradiction means the suppression of differences, the reduction of a multi-coloured multiplicity of varied lives and struggles to the single contradiction of labour against capital. “The Hegelian dialectic destroys difference in two distinct moments: first it pushes all the differences to the point of contradiction, masking their specificities; and, precisely because the differences are emptied, as terms of a contradiction, it is possible to subsume them in a unity” (Hardt and Colectivo Situaciones 2007). The world is seen as a multiplicity of differences or singularities. The problem with the Hegelian dialectic is twofold: it pushes this great multiplicity into a single contradiction, and, because this contradiction is then devoid of content, it is easy to subsume it within a unitary synthesis. In

the practice of the Communist Parties, the rich variety of struggles was subordinated to a concept of the working class (labour as contradiction of capital), and this working class, a concept largely devoid of meaning since it had been abstracted from the richness of real struggles and subordinated to the discipline of the Party, could then be easily integrated into a new capitalist synthesis (a welfare state, for example).

Those who argue against dialectics do so, then, in order to reject the synthetic closure associated with Hegelian dialectics and to emphasise the richness of social struggle, which they see as a multiplicity of differences rather than a single contradiction.

The emphasis on difference rather than contradiction has had a considerable influence. Whereas contradiction appeared to fit easily with forms of organisation that pitted (or seemed to pit) the working class against capital, the concept of difference is accommodated more easily to an organisation of struggle that takes the form of a multiplicity of groups emphasising their specific identities as homosexuals, indigenous, women, blacks, and so on. For such struggles, the attraction of the concept of multitude is clear: multitude refers to the loose alliance of struggles against the existing form of oppression (capitalism, neo-liberalism, postmodernism, whatever one likes to call it).

In spite of the attractions of this approach, there are problems, however, connected principally with the questions of negation and contradiction.

In the extension of the rejection of the Hegelian synthesis to the rejection of dialectics altogether, there is a throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It is not only synthesis that is abandoned, but also the central notion of movement through negation. "In the radical philosophy of immanence it is not life that is absent but negativity, contradiction as the model of movement" (Hardt and Colectivo Situaciones 2007). Life becomes a positive concept rather than the struggle against the negation of life. There is in general a positivisation of thought. Struggles are seen as struggles for, rather than being principally struggles against. The centrality of crisis (a negative concept) is lost and replaced by an emphasis on restructuring (a positive concept). Refusal is marginalised (though

not denied) in the movement from the origins of autonomism (Tronti and his seminal article on “The Strategy of Refusal”) to the post-autonomism of recent years (represented in particular by Hardt and Negri). Irony of ironies, a theory of stages makes its reappearance in the form of changing “paradigms”: the world is to be understood at any particular moment in terms of the prevalent paradigm of domination. The rejection of dialectics, because it includes the rejection of negation, leads precisely to synthetic thought, a thinking that seeks to fit everything in place within the scheme of the dominant paradigm. This has not only theoretical but also political consequences: it can lead to a blurring of the distinction between negation and synthesis, between refusal and reconciliation, between an uprising and the reconciling government that follows the uprising.

The second problem is the abandonment of the idea of contradiction. The argument, as we have seen, is that the idea of contradiction operates like a straitjacket, forcing the infinite richness of life and struggle into a binary antagonism. The question, however, is whether this is the result of dialectical thought, or whether dialectics is simply reporting a process of antagonistic binarism that is actually taking place in the world. Capital is the name given to this process of antagonistic binarisation. Capital is not a thing but a social relation, a forced transformation of people’s activity into labour: an alien activity shaped by the requirements of producing profit. It is not dialectics but capital that is the name of the straitjacket that forces our multiple differences into the binary antagonism of exploited labour. The immense and multicoloured richness of useful-creative doing (useful labour, as Marx calls it) is forcefully reduced to abstract, value-producing labour: that is what capital means. Difference is reduced by capital to contradiction, to an antagonism against its own suppression. In all our variety and difference we are put in prison, the prison of capitalism. Dialectics is, then, the escape plan, the thinking-against-the-prison, thinking-against-the-wrong-world, a thinking that would no longer make sense if we were outside the prison of the wrong world – but we are not. To put aside the dialectical awareness (not creation) of contradiction is to forget that we are

in a prison, that we are living in a form of social organisation that daily reduces our infinite creativity to the monotonous process of producing profit. And that is in fact what happens with this line of thought: the concept of capital and capitalism fades into the background and the struggle is seen primarily not as one against capital but as a struggle for “real democracy.” This leaves out of sight the central issue of any struggle for change: the organisation of our daily doing, the struggle of doing against labour. Our doing pushes towards difference, yearns for a world free of contradiction, but for the moment it is entrapped within contradiction, within a world of coercion enforced by money. To assert difference, then, is to make an assertion against, but the possibilities and movement of this assertion against can be understood only if we understand it as the movement of a contradiction.

This book shares many of the concerns mentioned above – the use of dialectical thought to impose closure and impose uniformity on struggle – but insists that it is nevertheless important to defend and develop the concept of dialectics. What we need is not to reject dialectics as such, but only the synthetic understanding of it: to insist, in other words, on a *negative* dialectics, a restless movement of negation that does not lead necessarily to a happy ending. History is seen not as a series of stages, but as the movement of endless revolt.

Adorno’s importance, then, lies in the fact that it is he who develops the notion of a negative dialectic most directly, in his book of the same name. The opening words of the Preface declare his aim to be the freeing of dialectics from its positive heritage: “*Negative Dialectics* is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation: the thought figure of a ‘negation of negation’ later became the succinct term. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy” (1990: xix). For Adorno, as for all the authors we have mentioned, the starting point is the political-theoretical failure of orthodox Marxism: he writes “after the attempt to change the world miscarried”, after the “moment to realise [philosophy] was missed” (1990: 3). After Stalin, Auschwitz and Hiroshima there

are no certainties, above all no guarantee of a happy ending. That is why it is necessary to abandon the notion of dialectics as a process of negation leading to a synthesis, a negation of negation leading to a positive ending. The only way in which we can now conceive dialectics is negatively, as a movement of negation rather than of synthesis, as a negative dialectics.

Why dialectics at all, then? Simply because it is the only form of thought adequate to a wrong world. Dialectics exists because we are in the wrong place, in the wrong sort of society: “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction” (1990: 11). It is the wrongness of the world that makes dialectics or negative thought necessary. The wrongness of the world means that right-thinking and right-doing are necessarily negative, thinking against and doing against. If the world is wrong, then we are negative beings; our very existence is a movement against. For Adorno, the central category is non-identity, the movement against identity, against that which is. “The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder ... Contradiction ... indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived” (1990: 5). Non-identity is the subterranean movement of the refusal of identity, of that which is: “contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity” (1990: 5). Dialectics is sensibility to the movement of this refusal: “dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity.”

Dialectics understood in this way is a movement of breaking and opening. Non-identity breaks identity and opens the way to the creation of something new. The movement of non-identity is the movement of creativity. Non-identity is an overflowing beyond what is, it is change and self-change, creation and self-creation. To put non-identity at the centre of philosophy is to put negation-creation at the centre.

Dialectics, so understood, is a long way from the dialectics rejected by Deleuze, Guattari, Hardt, Negri and others. Hardt and Colectivo Situaciones have recently recognised the danger of identifying all dialectics with the synthetic, Hegelian dialectics and,

quoting Macherey, they suggest the need for an open dialectic: “What is a dialectic like here and now that functions in the absence of all guarantee ... without the promise that all contradictions on which it embarks will be resolved by right, because they carry in themselves the conditions of their resolution?” (Hardt and Colectivo Situaciones 2007). This is essentially the question asked by Adorno and the other members of the so-called Frankfurt School. The answer, Adorno suggests, can be conceived only in terms of a firmly negative dialectic.

### III

This book is a series of reflections on the challenge posed by the idea of a negative dialectic.

The short opening chapter by John Holloway asks why we should read Adorno and suggests that an answer can be found by confronting him with Tronti and the autonomist tradition from which he is so different but with which he nevertheless shares the starting point of negation/refusal. The most striking difference between Adorno and the theorists of the autonomist tradition is, of course, that they immersed themselves in direct political action (and many of them were imprisoned as a result), whereas Adorno held himself aloof from the student movement of the late 1960s. And yet ...? Adrian Wilding, through an examination of Adorno’s last lectures, discusses the complex relation between Adorno and the student movement in terms of Adorno’s warning of the dangers of “thought bowing irrationally to the primacy of practice” and his fear of being pushed into the role of guru or, worse, Pied Piper of the movement. Wilding warns against coming to simplistic conclusions and emphasises Marcuse’s strong defence of Adorno’s political importance, despite the fact that Marcuse himself took a very different position in relation to the student movement.

In the second part of the book we focus specifically on the central theme of negative dialectics as a critique of neo-structuralism. In his chapter on “Antagonism and Difference,” Alberto Bonnet centres his argument on the contrast between Adorno’s emphasis

on contradiction and the rejection by Deleuze and others of the notion of contradiction in favour of difference. He argues that the distinction has important political implications and that the emphasis on difference can easily lead to the theory and politics of liberalism. Darij Zadnikar takes up the same issue of the political implications of the rejection of dialectics and suggests that it is connected to the growth of a new “post-vanguardism” in the global movement against capitalism. A second short contribution by Holloway develops a similar point in terms of a contrast between positive and negative autonomism.

The third part of the book develops some of the key elements of the critique of mainstream revolutionary theory. Sergio Tischler focuses on the importance of Adorno’s critique of totality and his insistence on the importance of particularity. The crisis of totality is the crisis of a whole mode of understanding and organising class struggle – in short, the crisis of party-Marxism which received its highest theoretical expression in the work of Lukács. The movement of particularity (or of non-identity) is the driving principle of an emerging new constellation of class struggle. Werner Bonefeld addresses the question of the political richness of Adorno through a discussion of Adorno’s concept of the concept. The “constitutive character of the non-conceptual in the concept” (Adorno 1973: 12) unlocks the door to a critical understanding of class struggle as “permanent revolution”, the ceaseless movement of determinate negation. This movement breaks through the pessimism that gives the tone to much of Adorno’s work.

The book concludes with three chapters devoted to the themes of sexuality, art and metaphysics. Marcel Stoetzler opens up new directions with his exploration of the implications of Adorno’s concept of non-identity for the politics of sexuality, linking Adorno with discussions in feminist and gay theory and the critique of the idea that sex can be understood in terms of a simple binary division into male and female. Sexual dimorphism is, he argues, an aspect or expression of the increasingly genital organisation of sexuality and the sublimation of Eros in the service of modern capitalism. Fernando Matamoros takes us in a rather different direction with his incursion into the realm of metaphysics as



a starting point for the necessary criticism of the reified and repetitive world. He asks about Adorno's relation to metaphysics and the connection between his work and that of Benjamin and Bloch, and argues that the force of metaphysics is the critical utopia that can be found at the centre of the "dialectical carnivals of the everyday." José Manuel Martínez closes the book with a discussion of Adorno's aesthetic theory and its political relevance. He underlines the importance of seeing the "Aesthetic Theory" and the "Negative Dialectics" as a single project and suggests that they formed the basis for a richer understanding of social struggle in contemporary capitalism.

#### IV

This book is both an argument and an exploration. It argues that it is theoretically and politically important to develop the notion of a negative dialectic. But the argument is a challenge and an exploration. The movement of negation is a movement that detonates concepts, detonates power, detonates identity, detonates all that is familiar to us. It opens up a frightening, vertiginous, exciting world in which we are forced to question everything around us. The argument is a treading on unsafe ground, a feeling our way forward, an exploration of the world that opens up before us, theoretically and practically. Our argument is not the dogmatic one of certainty, but an argument that seeks to open, at times by provocation. We write in a context in which Zapatistas have made "*preguntando caminamos*" (asking we walk) a central principle of both political practice and scientific thought. That is the tone, then, of our argument and our exploration: *preguntando caminamos*, asking we walk.

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## 2

### WHY ADORNO?

*John Holloway*

#### I

**Why Adorno?** Adorno is difficult to read. Even worse, Adorno called in the police in 1969 when the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt was occupied by students. So why turn to him now when our aim is not to become experts on Adorno or the Frankfurt School, but to sharpen our critique of capitalism?

Rupture and revolt and fragility and uncertainty and openness and pain are at the centre of Adorno's thought: that is why he is so exciting.

The starting point, for him as for us, is the political-theoretical failure of orthodox Marxism: "after the attempt to change the world miscarried," after the "moment to realise [philosophy] was missed," as he puts it in the opening lines of *Negative Dialectics* (1990: 3). After Stalin, Auschwitz and Hiroshima there are no certainties, above all no guarantee of a happy ending. That is why it is necessary to abandon the notion of dialectics as a process of negation leading to a synthesis, a negation of negation leading to a positive ending. The only way in which we can now conceive dialectics is negatively, as a movement of negation rather than of synthesis, as a negative dialectics.

But why bother with dialectics at all when orthodox "dialectical materialism" had "degenerated into a dogma" (1990: 7)? Others (Negri, for example, but also the whole poststructuralist current – Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Virno, and so on – that is currently so influential in anti-capitalist thought) took the opposite route

and decided to reject dialectics and emphasise materialism. To focus on Adorno is to question the poststructuralist route taken by those authors.

Why dialectics, then? Adorno's reply is that dialectics is not a standpoint. It expresses, rather, the inevitable insufficiency of thought, the disjointed relation between thought and the objects of thought. "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder ... Contradiction ... indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived" (1990: 5). Thought identifies ("to think is to identify"), but that which is thought overflows the thought itself. Dialectics is thought's awareness of its own inadequacy, of the non-identity which is contained within, bursts from and overflows the identity which thought would impose. "Contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity" and "dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity."

That is the central theme of Adorno's thought: dialectics as the consistent sense of non-identity, of that which does not fit. It is both libertarian and revolutionary. It is libertarian because its pivot and driving force is the misfit, irreducible particularity, the non-identity that cannot be contained, the rebel who will not submit to party discipline. It is revolutionary because it is explosive, volcanic. If there is no identity other than the identity that is undermined by non-identity, then there is no possibility of stability. All identity is false, contradictory, resting on the negation of the non-identity which it suppresses, which it seeks to contain but cannot. And it cannot contain it, not just for some contingent reason, such as the inefficiency of the police, but because identification always runs behind the flow of non-identity, is never able to pin it down and hold it still.

It is clear that non-identity is the hero, the centre, the moving force of the world as Adorno presents it. But what do we understand by non-identity? Is it just a philosophical concept, or is it the conceptualisation of a social force? The answer, surely, is that *we* are non-identity. The force that does not fit, the force that contradicts all identification, the force that overflows is subjectivity,

*we*. And who are *we*? We are the subject, uncontainable within any definition. We can say that we are the working class, but that makes sense only if we understand “working class” as a concept that explodes against itself, a concept that bursts its own bounds.

Does Adorno actually say that *we* are non-identity? Not as far as I know. Perhaps I am reading him in a non-identitarian way, against and beyond Adorno. But how else can we understand non-identity? Non-identity can only be a force that changes itself, that drives beyond itself, that creates and creates itself. And where do we find a creative and self-creative force? Not animals, not god, not nature, only humans, we. Not an identitarian we, but a disjointed, ill-fitting, creative we.

This is not a liberal-humanist we, but an antagonistic, self-antagonistic we. We are part of an antagonistic entirety in which the “subject [is] the subject’s foe” (1990: 10). Dialectics exists because we are in the wrong place, in the wrong sort of society: “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction.” The dialectical *we* is the contradictory *we* who live in-and-against capitalist society, a non-identitarian class *we*.

## II

**Adorno Meets Tronti.** In his seminal article “Lenin in England” (published in 1964, two years before Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*), Tronti wrote, “We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to put the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class” (1979: 1). Words far removed from Adorno’s, yet here is the question, the interweaving of autonomist and critical theory. Tronti (and the other theorists-practitioners of *operaismo*) turned orthodox Marxism on its head and put working-class struggle (and not capital) at the centre of their analysis. Adorno (and the other

members of the Frankfurt School) turned orthodox Marxism on its head and put non-identity at the centre of their analysis. Adorno probably did not meet Tronti and quite possibly would not have wanted to, but we can make them meet.

“Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity.” Dialectics means thinking the world from that which does not fit, from those who do not fit, those who are negated and suppressed, those whose insubordination and rebelliousness break the bounds of identity, from *us* who exist in-and-against-and-beyond capital. This is surely the same as the autonomist project formulated by Tronti: less explicitly political, but it goes much deeper, because the attack on identity goes to the core of life itself, touches directly who we are and how we think. The autonomist project of *operaismo* was ambiguous precisely because it did not go far enough, because it did not question the identitarian concept of the working class as an identifiable group. It turns the capital–labour relation on its head, but to be consistent, it should have turned the whole world on its head; putting non-identity at the centre of the way we breathe and how we think. It is this limitation that leads, then, to the later unfortunate and stultifying union of some autonomist thinkers with poststructuralism, a tradition that denies the centrality of the subject and hence of working-class struggle.

The development of the autonomist project (the drive towards social self-determination) requires critical theory (just as, indeed, the development of critical theory requires the autonomist project, and not the social-democratic ruminations of Habermas, for example). Why? Because the autonomist project puts working-class struggle (or anti-capitalist struggle) at the centre of our understanding of the world, as driving force and not as reaction, and because the project of critical theory also puts working-class struggle (as non-identity) at the centre of our understanding of the world, as driving force, not as reaction. Am I, then, saying that we can replace “working-class struggle” for “non-identity” in Adorno: “dialectics is the consistent sense of working-class struggle”? Yes, but obviously only if we understand class struggle

as the movement of non-identity (a tautology, since non-identity can only be understood as movement). Thus: “We too have worked with a concept that puts identity first, and non-identity second. This is a mistake. And now we have to put the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the movement of non-identity.” Is this not doing violence to both Adorno and Tronti? Of course, but is it a creative violence, does it take us forward in the struggle against capitalism, against the identity of a system built on death?

Non-identity is creativity, identity is the negation of creativity: everything *is*. In capitalism, non-identity exists “under the aspect of identity” (1990: 5), creativity exists in the form of non-creativity, doing exists in the form of alienated labour. The strength of the subject exists as the “fallacy of constitutive subjectivity”: “to use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constituted subjectivity – this is what the author felt to be his task ever since he became to trust his own mental impulses” (1990: xx). Dialectics turns the strength of the subject against the fallacy of constituted subjectivity: the “subject [is] the subject’s foe” (1990: 10). Dialectics is the consistent sense of that which lies hidden: the non-identity that exists under the aspect of identity, the creativity that exists as the fetishised rule of things, the strength of the subject that is concealed by the “fallacy of constitutive subjectivity.” “Our thinking heeds a potential that waits in the object ... the resistance of thought to mere things in being, the commanding freedom of the subject, intends in the object, even that of which the object was deprived by objectification” (1990: 19). Dialectics seek to bring to light the power of human creativity that lies in all that negates that power, to understand the world and not just the capital–labour relation (understood in traditional identitarian terms) from the perspective of human creativity. That is why dialectics has to be at the core of the autonomist project and why the autonomist project has to be at the core of critical theory. Without that connection they both dry up, become academic playthings, and Adorno becomes an intellectual adornment, part of the culture industry which he hated.

“Thought as such, before all particular contents, is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it” (1990: 19).  
Life too.

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### 3

## PIED PIPERS AND POLYMATHS: ADORNO'S CRITIQUE OF PRAXISISM

*Adrian Wilding*

For many readers the philosophy of Theodor Adorno has become synonymous with esoteric intellectualism, cultural elitism, the isolation of the theorist from the social struggles of his day. The English philosopher Bryan Magee voiced this widespread feeling towards Adorno's thought back in 1978 in a television interview with another member of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse. He put it to Marcuse that Adorno's writings were "turgid," even "unreadable," and that they erected a barrier between the author and any political agent who might possibly realise their aspirations (Magee 1978: 72). Marcuse's response was surprising in its magnanimity, given what we know of the tensions between him and Adorno. He repeated a claim he had already made, that Adorno was "without doubt a genius," that he knew of no one "so equally well at home in philosophy, sociology, psychology, music." Whenever Adorno spoke, Marcuse continued, the words could be printed verbatim, so fully-fledged were his formulations. And the difficulty of the ideas Adorno expressed was testament not to a wilful obscurantism but to the opacity and contradictoriness of the social system he attempted to comprehend. Marcuse's spirited defence was echoed some years later in remarks by the leading light of the second-generation Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas. According to Habermas,

Adorno was a genius; I say that without a hint of ambiguity ... [He] had an immediacy of awareness, a spontaneity of thought, and a power of



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