

Thomas Franck (Liège University-Humboldt Universität) **The Reception of Adorno's Critical Theory in France. From the Hegelian Conception of Totality to the Critique of Heidegger's Ontology**

A commonplaceabout the presence of Adorno’s Critical Theory in France, during the 50’s and the 60’s, consists of the idea of a difficult, even impossible, reception of his thought. According to Miguel Abensour, the philosopher would have suffered a relative indifference in the French intellectual field as well as the transfer of his thought would have only been effective after his dead, in the 70’s and in the 80’s[[1]](#footnote-1). I suggest to question and to criticize this commonplace by studying documents of the second half of the 50’s and of the early 60's, postulating that those documents attest and requalify the reception of Adornian works. To realize this investigation, I will focus on different types of discourses, like intellectual French journals which translated and commented Adorno, such as *Arguments* and *Communications*, on conferences he pronounced in Paris, on his correspondence with French intellectuals and on translations of his works. I have to specify, in this introduction, that Adorno himself really cared about his own French reception, as this letter to Alex Lindenberg from the 9th November 1959 shows it: „*Selbstverständlich bin ich an der Frage der französischen Übersetzung der ‘Minima Moralia’ aufs lebhafteste interessiert und würde mich sehr freuen […]*[[2]](#footnote-2)*“*. Moreover, the philosopher corrected translations that Lindenberg sent to him, adding terminological comments and stylistic suggestions in French and also requesting the help of two specialists who judged Lindenberg’s translation to far from the text („*nicht nahe genug am Text“*) and not meticulous enough („*nicht sorgfältig genug*[[3]](#footnote-3)*“*). Correspondences with Robert Minder, Karl Löwith, Georges Friedmann, Lucien Goldmann, René Leibowitz or Edgar Morin show, if no actual reception, at least intensive attention to Adorno’s work and requalify Abensour’s belief of a minimal presence of the Frankfurter Critical Theory in France during the 50’s and the early 60's.

I will focus here on the evolution of Adorno's discourses in France, especially on their relation to Hegel's and Heidegger's philosophy. In the early 60's, the Frankfurter philosopher paid more attention to the critique of Heidegger's ontology than to the dialectical critique of Hegel's conception of whole (which corresponds to his interests in the 40's and in the 50's). This must be understood in relation with the particular presence of Heideggerianism in France, even and sometimes more in the left field, which leads Adorno to talk about "Heideggéromanie". After a first time criticising Hegelian conception of totality in the theory of totality, which corresponds with works published in *Arguments* (a journal published between 1956 and 1962), conferences at the Sorbonne and contacts with Marxists such as Goldmann, Friedmann and Morin between 1956 and 1959, Adorno develops his materialistic and dialectical critique of Heideggerian ontology, during the Conferences at the College the France in 1961 and in his work on *Kulturindustrie* published in *Communications* in 1964. This transition influenced by the confrontation with French area is crucial to understand Adorno's philosophical and personal evolutions. Indeed, the *Negative Dialektik* must be read in relation with conferences, commentaries and translations produced in different French Institutions at the end of the 50's and in the beginning of the 60's, as Alain-Patrick Olivier showed it in his article "La reception d'Adorno dans les institutions françaises d'enseignement". Furthermore, the three Conferences at the Collège de France, "Le besoin ontologique", "être et existence" and "Vers une dialectique négative" are the basis of several chapters of the *Negative Dialektik*. Even if these conferences are prepared during the Frankfurter seminars on "Ontologie und Dialektik", it is relevant that Adorno chose the French conferences to expose and to put in question his negative dialectics. This shows the true importance of Adorno's relation with France in the constitution of his thought.

**From "Hegel et le contenu de l'expérience" (1958) to "Le besoin ontologique" (1961)**

In the issue 14 of *Arguments* published in 1959, Kostas Axelos gives an introduction of Adorno's philosophy and of the Frankfurter School's Critical Theory. At the same time, some fragments of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* and of *Minima Moralia* are translated by Alex Lindenberg and Hans Hildenbrand. But the most important text is the publication of the conference given by Adorno at the Sorbonne in 1958 entitled "Hegel et le contenu de l'expérience". In this work, Adorno studies several concepts such as *Erfahrung*, *Totalität* and *Identität*:

Hegel, à qui on reproche abstraitement son idéalisme, en lui opposant pêle-mêle les écoles phénoménologiques, anthropologiques et ontologiques, a introduit infiniment plus d’éléments concrets dans les pensées philosophiques que toutes ces tendances, et cela, non parce que son « sentiment des réalités », ou sa vision historique auraient contrebalancé son imagination spéculative, mais bien par la vertu de sa démarche philosophique première, à cause même, pourrait-on presque dire, du caractère expérimental de cette spéculation même. C’est l’expérience d’un esprit qui ne se laisse pas intimider, c’est une foi confiante dans la possibilité propre à l’esprit philosophique de *pénétrer un jour la totalité du réel et ses composantes, mais non pas en dénaturant cette totalité sous forme d’inventaires, comme le fait l’activité scientifique* : c’est cette expérience qui fonde de nos jours l’actualité de Hegel[[4]](#footnote-4).

In a contradictive legacy of Hegel's philosophy, particular experiences must be understood in relation with the whole but through their significance contradictions. What Adorno has developed since his works on music and art published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforshung*, well synthetized in the *Philosophie der neuen Musik* published in 1949 and translated in French in 1962, is the idea that details are parts of the whole. Much more, their inherent relation with the whole can't be analysed as insignificant details, as fortuity senses, but as constitutive meanings of the contradictive structure of the whole. Not just a synthesis between subject and object (as Hegel conceived it), the whole's structure in modern art is the exposition of social separations of these two entities, of alienated mediations that influence their relation. Thus, Adorno's first philosophical dialogue with France (he went in France in 1937, 1949, 1951 and 1952 but didn't really create a dialogue) is an inherent, we could say an immanent, discussion of Hegel's conception of totality in an aesthetical perspective.

As Danilo Scholz has studied it in his article "Tout seul dans le pays de l'heideggérianisme", this first Hegelian time will give rise to a more polemical confrontation with French intellectuals due to Adorno's consciousness of the emergency of Heidegger's critique. The beginning of the first Conference at the Collège de France is a good indication of this evolution of Adornian discourses' polemical dimension:

L'ontologie philosophique, et en particulier l'ontologie dite existentielle et fondamentale de Heidegger, a conservé en Allemagne son pouvoir de fascination. Ses implications et engagements politiques sont oubliés. Mieux encore : se réclamer de ces ontologies équivaut actuellement à un brevet de bonne pensée et de bonnes mœurs. Peut-être suffira-t-il bientôt d'inscrire dans les questionnaires officiels, sous la rubrique « religion » ou « confession » : « croyant à l'être », « Seinsgläubig »[[5]](#footnote-5).

This unpublished discourse attacks, with irony, those who believe in the being, those who accept Heideggerian ontology as a religion, those who are "Seinsgläubig". The project of this philosophical and political critique of Heideggerian philosophy's presume fascist component is the result of its success in the French Marxist area that use to distinguish Heidegger's political commitment and his philosophical content. What Adorno argues is that ontology is a reified thought which accepts the ontico-ontological distinction and that considers the ontic sphere as inauthenticity unworthy of transformation. In contradiction the ontological sphere would be protected and isolated from ontic's inauthenticity and would be a reified thought precisely because of its incapacity to emerge from the social and contingent experience and to transcendent and transform it. The evolution of the following conferences given at the Collège de France, and especially "Vers une dialectique négative", try to expose a substantial critique of reified thought and to show how this critique must be immanent, dialectical and negative. I suggest to understand this critique as a reaction through Heidegger's works on technique that have been exposed and valorised in the journal *Arguments* and that were appropriated by French Marxists. Adorno can't accept the phenomenological critique of cultural industry, technique or mass media, precisely because of its lack of radicalism (no temporality, no historicism, presupposed consciousness, no reflection on mediations that create alienation and reification), and he reaffirms the necessity of a materialistic dialectics of social reality.

**Two delays: a misunderstanding due to a post-phenomenological context and to late translations**

These conferences at the Collège de France in 1961 are generally considered as a failure. But this failure is, in my opinion, not enough and not completely explained. Some argue that Merleau-Ponty's death just after the conferences (the philosopher was one of the target with Sartre) or the strangeness of the topic and the erudition of the German philosopher would have contributed to the misunderstanding. I would defend here two hypothesis. On the one hand, I suggest that the context was not propitious to a so radical critique of Heidegger because of the important presence of phenomenology in French history of ideas and its progressive critique; and in the other hand, that the delay of translations created a confusion between Adorno's Hegelian immanent critique and his attack against Heidegger's ontology. Conferences at the Sorbonne, their publication in *Arguments* in 1959 ("Hegel et le contenu de l'expérience") and in 1961 ("Technique et musique") and the translation of the *Philosophie der neuen Musik* in 1962 influenced the reception of Adorno's image as a Hegelian philosophising with and against Hegel.

I will develop my first hypothesis with this remark of Edgar Morin, that shows the great influence of Heidegger on Marxist intellectuals such as Edgar Morin, Kostas Axelos, Georges Friedmann or Lucien Goldmann:

[…] tous les discours sur l'arraisonnement, la technique, me parlaient tout à fait. Je dois dire qu'à travers Axelos, nous publions d'ailleurs [dans *Arguments*] ce qui commence à être mal vu par beaucoup : un texte de Heidegger. Nous publions aussi un texte d'Adorno sur Hegel et "le Principe d'identité". Nous étions très éclectiques – et pourtant Dieu sais qu'Adorno haïssait Heidegger ! J'aimais beaucoup Adorno et je ne pouvais pas comprendre comment il pouvait réduire, désintégrer même, l'importance de la pensée de Heidegger[[6]](#footnote-6).

Morin's incomprehension is a good indicator of the general perception of Adorno's radicalism. I have to notice first that, in the inheriting of Existentialism, phenomenology took an important place in the French intellectual field, and the Colloque de Cerisy in 1955 on Heidegger's thought constituted a kind of apogee. Furthermore, the journal *Arguments* published Heidegger's text on identity ("Dialectique et philosophie : le principe d'identité", 1958), commentaries on technique and presented his thought as a real critique of technique. Meanwhile, evolution of structural anthropology and emergence of non-phenomenological Marxist perspectives (such as Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser and Barthes) contributed to distance from this Heideggéromanie. Thus, Adorno's critique must be understood, on the one hand, as to radical for phenomenology's heirs and, in the other hand, as overpassed for those who emancipated from phenomenology. What illustrates well this ambivalence are the reaction of Merleau-Ponty, who assisted to the conferences and was shocked, and the absence of some young figures of Marxism or from the left side thought (Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze). It would be necessary to understand the following collaborations between Adorno and the actors of the journal *Communications*, created in 1961, on the basis of this misunderstanding. Indeed, the differences between Morin's, Friedmann's and Barthes' reformism and Adorno's radical critique about cultural industry and mass media are influenced by a reaction to the polemical dimension of the conferences given at the Collège de France: it can be seen in the comparison between Morin's article "L'industrie culturelle" published in 1961 in *Communications* and in Adorno's article "L'industrie culturelle" published in 1964 in the same journal.

In the continuity of these remarks, my second hypothesis postulates that the delay of the translation of Adorno's works created an interference in the comprehension of his critique of technique. This delay overlapped two moments of Adorno's thought, the Hegelian critique of totality in art (that corresponds to the 40's and the 50's) and the reject of Heidegger's ontology. I will focus here on the publication in 1962, by Gallimard, of the *Philosophie de la nouvelle musique*, a text published in Germany in 1949 and written during the American exile. The introduction of this philosophical essay is truly theoretical and methodological and focus on an immanent critique of Hegel's philosophy, completing the *Ästhetik* with the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*: "Hegel a raison contre lui-même"[[7]](#footnote-7) says Adorno. It is relevant to notice that the translators of Gallimard edition are Alex Lindenberg and Hans Hildenbrand, two collaborators of the journal *Arguments* who had already translated Adornian texts. One year after "Musique et technique" published in *Arguments*,The *Philosophie de la nouvelle musique* requalifies the commonplace about Adorno's elitism, his critique of technique and his analyse of alienated relation between subject and medium thanks to the Hegelian dialectics, read in a negativist way.

Plus cet esprit [l'esprit qui domine la nature] avance vers l'autonomie, plus il s'éloigne de la relation concrète avec tout ce qu'il domine, hommes et matériau pareillement. Une fois que, dans sa propre sphère qui est celle de la libre production artistique, l'esprit domine tout jusqu'au dernier élément hétéronome, jusqu'au dernier élément matériel, il commence à tournoyer sur lui-même, comme emprisonné, détaché de tout ce qui s'oppose à lui, dont la pénétration seule lui avait donné sens. La libération totale de l'esprit coïncide avec l'émasculation de l'esprit. Son caractère fétichiste, son hypostase comme simple forme de la réflexion devient manifeste à partir du moment où il se libère du dernier lien de dépendance d'avec ce qui n'est pas soi-même esprit, mais qui en tant qu'élément sous-entendu par toutes les formes spirituelles, est le facteur qui leur confère une substantialité.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In contradiction with Heidegger's critique of technique, which is a non-historical perspective, Adorno's rebuttal must be understood as a negativistic and immanent dialectics that start from the given material structures. These structures are necessary for the philosophical reflexion and for the artistic creation that are two inextricable moments of social structure's transformation. The spirit can't be totally isolated from the technical material, what Heidegger maintained, but its relation must be an autonomous repossession against reification and alienation produced by cultural industry and mass culture. In contradiction, the ontico-ontological distinction gives rise to two opposite positions through the social phenomenon: a condescending disinterest due to its presupposed inauthenticity or a semio-anthropological fascination, much more influenced by structuralism and anthropology. The first position can be analysed in Heidegger's critique of technique and the second in Morin's, Friedmann's and Barthes' studies on mass culture developed in the journal *Communications* in the 60's. Adorno's critique, if not opposed to technical evolutions, must be read in reaction through these two positions: against condescending disdain and against anthropological fascination, his critique of technical medium valorises repossession, autonomy and dialectical consciousness. This negative and immanent movement transforms industrial alienation of the subject by the medium in a lucid knowledge of its forms and structures that the subject appropriates, exposes and transcends.

In conclusion, Adorno's critiques of ontology, of reified thought and of cultural industry have been received and discussed in France in the end of the 50's and in the beginning of the 60's, but his radicalism linked to his Hegelian inheritance contributed to a relative misunderstanding. I would not deny the real influences produced by Adorno's Hegelian-Marxism in several thought, such as Goldmann, Friedmann or Minder, that are not exceptions but much more the result of their strong knowledge of German culture and German philosophy. Adorno's reception in France can't be resumed to an absolute disinterest or a misunderstanding neither to an evident movement of mutual comprehensions. As a thought profoundly immerged in the social and political actuality, Adorno's critical theory and its reception in France must be understood in strict relation with German philosophical inheritance in France, such as Heidegger and Hegel (I didn't focus on the importance of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard), and with French intellectual particularities, such as anthropology, structuralism and existential phenomenology.

1. Miguel Abensour, « Malheureux comme Adorno en France ? », dans *Variations*, n°6, p. 17-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Theodor W. Adorno, « Lettre à Lindenberg du 9 novembre 1959 », dans Fonds d'Archives Adorno, Frankfurt-Am-Main. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Theodor W. Adorno, « Lettre à Lindenberg du 27 juillet 1960 », dans Fonds d'Archives Adorno, Frankfurt-Am-Main. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Theodor W. Adorno, « Hegel et le contenu de l’expérience », dans *Arguments*, n°14, 1959, p. 29 (nous soulignons). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Theodor W. Adorno, « Le besoin ontologique », conférence au Collège de France, mars 1961, Fonds d'archives Adorno. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Edgar Morin, "entretien du 28 mai 1998", dans Dominique Janicaud éd., *Heidegger en France II. Entretiens*, Paris, Albin Michel, coll. "Idées", 2001 p. 231-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Theodor Adorno, *Philosophie de la nouvelle musique*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Tel", 1962, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.*, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)