Philosophy

Where is history leading us?

When Theodor W. Adorno’s “Minima Moralia” were published 70 years ago, it was a sensation. No other intellectual had ever delivered such an excoriating critique of the desolate state of modern society. Reason enough to reread the Frankfurt-born philosopher’s scintillating aphorisms

A guest contribution by Helena Esther Grass and Peter Neumann

There are not many philosophical classics that enjoy cult status. Theodor W. Adorno’s Minima Moralia, a collection of aphorisms published in 1951, is one such book, even if its author would probably have been less than delighted by its popular appeal. Adorno was not interested in pleasing people. And yet only a few years after the war his “Reﬂections from a Damaged Life”, as the only a few years after the war his “Refections from a Damaged Life”, as the only a few years after the war his “Refections from a Damaged Life”, as the book’s 153 aphorisms testiﬁed to just how ‘damaged’ life in the end of the war was. Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philosophical media star of a young federal republic on the path to self-discovery. For a generation coming of age, the aphorisms provided the intellectual tools to articulate a stinging critique of the spirit-Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philosophical media star of a young federal republic on the path to self-discovery. For a generation coming of age, the aphorisms provided the intellectual tools to articulate a stinging critique of the spirit-world that Adorno now turned to a centre ﬁgure in the eternal cycles of bourgeois-capitalist rationality and declared: “Only that which they do not need to know counts as understand-able."

Minima Moralia took a long time to be published. Seven years passed between Adorno pensing the initial sketches in his diary and the publi-cation of the book, and his reﬂections were unusually sharp in tone. Aloof, bitter, often disdainful. Many of his early readers not only considered the book too diﬃcult but were also repelled by its open display of moral superiority. Thomas Mann, who shortly after the end of the war warmly recommended the book to his publisher Gottfried Ber-mann-Fischer in New York, suddenly distanced himself a few months later from his fellow émigré neighbour in California, who had provided him with such invaluable insights into music theory while he was working on Doctor Faustus. While Mann never stopped supporting Adorno’s eﬀorts to publish the book, he now critiqued the book as “vittolic, overly caustic, overly intellec-tual”. Bertram-Fischer was also un-able to overcome his dislike of Adorno’s “extreme cleverness”. The manuscript remained shut away in a drawer, its explosive intellectual power initially unrecognized. When the collection of aphorisms was ﬁnally published by the newly founded Suhrkamp Verlag, it was the intellectually un-modeled popular appeal. Adorno was not interested in pleasing people. And yet only a few years after the war his “Refections from a Damaged Life”, as the book’s 153 aphorisms testiﬁed to just how ‘damaged’ life in the end of the war was. Adorno the philos-Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philoso-Adorno the philosophical media star of a young federal republic on the path to self-discovery. For a generation coming of age, the aphorisms provided the intellectual tools to articulate a stinging critique of the spirit-world that Adorno now turned to a centre ﬁgure in the eternal cycles of bourgeois-capitalist rationality and declared: “Only that which they do not need to know counts as understand-able."

Minima Moralia refused to comply with people’s desire to draw a line un-der the past. Adorno called attention to the patterns of experience that had not only led to the “Zivilisationsbruch” (civ-ilizational rupture) of Auschwitz but which, after the war, were still ﬁrmly entrenched in the society of the Ade-nauer republic. For Adorno, any talk about re-establishing a foothold. Adorno’s book was a loud and clearly audible warning against sleepwalking into a false sense of security. “The only true thoughts are those, which do not understand themselves”

Minima Moralia is a critique of the Enlightenment. This links it with Adorno’s earlier work, “Dialectic of Enlightenment”, published in 1947. Because one of the core arguments put forward by both Adorno and his congenial colleague Max Horkheimer was that in showing no restraint in its thirst for validity nor restricting itself to particular ﬁelds of knowledge, Enlightenment has a ten-dency to mutate into its opposite: mythology. It becomes a blind, domi-nating force that nulls its own emancipatory potential. Historically, all that remains of the Enlightenment’s pro-mise to liberate humanity is an end-less incremental logic of techno-sci-entistic thinking which not only de-prives reason of the space to develop, but nulls it into a false belief in its own freedom. History becomes our doom. Which is why we are called upon to intervene. His critique is ambiguous in that it clings to the promise of the Enlighten-
ment even as it tries to save it from becoming a perversion of itself. Adorno argues that the Enlightenment, the ability to think for oneself, must be rescued from its exaggerated claims and fatal self-deceptions, which can all be traced back to its origins in antiquity. After the moral catastrophe of Auschwitz, more Enlightenment rather than less was needed to prevent something similar from ever happening again.

It is when we look behind the criticisms of the Enlightenment’s blinkered belief in progress, however, that the real target of the Minima Moralia emerges. Adorno’s “small ethics” essentially questions whether in the hyper-rationalized modern age it is possible even to still speak of a “right life” when the social framework arrests the proper development of social freedom. Adorno laments that what was once known as ‘life’ has been utterly corrupted by the magic of the modern commodity world. Whereas in antiquity the ‘good life’ was universally regarded by philosophical thought as the ‘greatest good’, today it has been trampled flat by an obsession with reification that has permeated all areas of life. Adorno’s most urgent question is this: whether and how ‘life’ can succeed in a world that systematically shuts out, and in the worst case even destroys, a life worthy of the name?

The legacy of the Enlightenment is still at stake

Even today, more than thirty years after the much-proclaimed ‘end of history’, the inner connection between Enlightenment and reason, between sovereign freedom and a successful life, is once again up for debate. On the surface, life in the twenty-first century may appear anything but ‘damaged’. There can certainly be no comparison with the situation after the end of World War II. Yet the spread of Covid-19 has exposed just how porous the moral varnish of a public that considers itself enlightened really is. Authoritarian regimes and far-right parties are celebrating victories all around the world by questioning the achievements of the scientific community and deliberately ignoring or even wilfully distorting rational arguments in the name of ‘free’ thinking.

Seen in the context of these gloomy and even ominous prospects, Adorno’s “Reflections from a damaged life” have lost nothing of their tremendous relevance even seventy years on. The legacy of the Enlightenment is still at stake. Jürgen Habermas, the successor of the critical theory founded by Adorno and Horkheimer in particular, once referred to this as “the unfinished project of modernity”. The question of where history is headed – if indeed it is headed in only one direction and at only one speed these days – is more crucial today than ever.

BACKGROUND

The Adorno Research Centre is an interdisciplinary research network. Founded in 1993 by sociologist Prof. Dr. Stefan Müller-Doohm, since 2007 it has been based at the Institute of Philosophy and headed by Prof. Dr. Johann Kreuzer. The aim of the centre is to link the various research activities on Adorno, Walter Benjamin and critical theory with the goal of enriching the discourse on Adorno’s work and providing inspiration for further research. It inquires, for example, into the relevance and diagnostic power of Adorno’s thinking for today’s world. First published in 2011, the research centre’s “Adorno Handbook” plays a critical role here. A second extended and updated edition is now available. The Adorno Research Centre also offers seminars on classic works of critical theory as well as contemporary related topics. They are open to anyone interested in such topics. The network also organizes specialist international conferences – such as the one held in November at the Oldenburg Kunstverein to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Minima Moralia.