

TELLOS

Number 55

Spring 1983

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VON HASELBERG: A frightening secondary meaning of progressive consciousness, a "progressive stage" thereof, comes to light there.

ADORNO: *D'accord*. I would even say that the thought which does not shoot subjectively into an open and unsecured realm beyond objectivity is no longer progressive, now that objectivity — the very essence of whatever is the case — has become a fetter upon the potential lying in this objectivity, close enough to touch.

EDUCATION FOR AUTONOMY*

by Theodor Adorno and Hellmut Becker

ADORNO: The requirement of autonomy or independent thinking seems self-evident in a democracy. To clarify this claim, I would like to refer to the beginning of Kant's short treatise, *A Response to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* There he defines tutelage — and thus also implicitly its opposite, autonomy — as self-incurred when its causes are not a lack of understanding but a lack of the resolve and courage to use one's understanding without the guidance of another. "Enlightenment is humanity's emergence from self-incurred tutelage." I believe this forthright program of Kant's is extraordinarily relevant today. Democracy, embodied in the institution of representative elections, depends on the moral development of each individual. If the result is not to be regression, then society presupposes each individual's ability and courage to use his own reason. If this aim is lost sight of, then all talk of Kant's greatness is merely idle lip service, just as when someone points out the statue of the Grand Prince-Elector in the *Siegesallee* in Berlin. If the concept of a German intellectual tradition is to be taken seriously at all, then tendencies of this kind must first be rigorously opposed.

BECKER: It seems to me that up until now our entire educational system in West Germany has not been oriented toward the ideal of independent thinking. If you take the simple case of our three-track educational system, schools for the so-called highly talented, schools for the moderately talented, and many schools for the so-called "untalented" students — then the school system itself demonstrates a certain primary unfreedom. I believe that we do not do justice to the whole question of autonomy and independence unless we first surmount through enlightenment the false concept of "talent," which defines our educational system. We recently published a volume of reports by the German Educational Council called *Talent and Learning* in which we tried, on the basis of 14 reports from psychiatrists and sociologists, to make it clear that talent is not something given in advance, but depends on the challenge to which the individual is exposed in order to develop. This means that "talent" is something that can be learned. In this light, the possibility of stimulating in each person "learning through motivation" becomes a special form of developing intellectual autonomy.

*This discussion was broadcast on Hessian Radio seven days after Adorno's death on August 6, 1969. It was originally published in *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit* (Frankfurt, : Suhrkamp, 1970),

Of course, this requires a school system that does not perpetuate class-specific inequalities, but instead, through a dissolution of class-specific barriers at the early childhood stage, makes the development of autonomy possible in practice through learning motivation based on an extremely differentiated program. In other words, this means developing intellectual autonomy not through a single-curriculum school, but by abolishing the traditional three-track system and by establishing a highly differentiated educational program at all levels. Only in this way can individual autonomy be developed. This is a process that becomes all the more important when the individual must maintain independence in a world that increasingly seems to determine him through external mechanisms of control.

ADORNO: I would like to support what you have been saying from a completely different angle. Actually, the significance of our conversation lies in the fact that we touch upon the same questions from different fields of experience and view the results as an experiment, as it were. The impact of my own efforts (if one can speak of an impact at all) has in truth nothing to do with individual talent, intelligence, or similar categories. Rather, it has to do with the fact that, through a fortunate series of events over which I had no control, in my own education I was not subjected to scientific mechanisms of control, as is otherwise so often the case. Thus, I have always dared to think "risky" thoughts — which most people are otherwise cured of at a very early stage, when they obtain the level of what is called assistant professor — in this tremendously powerful mechanism of control known as the university. It turns out that knowledge itself is rendered so sterile and impotent by these mechanisms of control that it then needs what it itself despises in order to survive. If this view is correct, then this fetishization of talent (which is, of course, still very closely linked to the old romantic cult of genius) should be abolished. This standpoint also coincided with the psychodynamic finding that talent is not at all a natural disposition (although perhaps a natural residue would have to be conceded; one should not be puritanical about this), but that in terms of the ability to express oneself linguistically, etc., talent is in a large measure a function of social conditions. Thus, even the conditions for independent thinking on which a free society depends are determined by the unfreedom of society.

BECKER: At this point I would prefer to refrain from reviewing all the related arguments. However, it should be noted, for example, that everything Basil Bernstein has discovered about linguistic development in the small lower-class child, and which Oevermann then developed further in Germany, very clearly shows that conditions for life-long lack of autonomy can be established at the very beginning of socialization. Incidentally, I listened with amusement to your autobiographical remarks, for perhaps it is no accident that today we are both scholars, albeit atypical ones, and for this reason alone we are capable of discussing the concept of independent thinking.

ADORNO: Yes, if we really concentrate on the pedagogical process the strange thing about the problem of intellectual autonomy is that even in pedagogical literature — and this is something truly frightening and very German — one does not at all find that decisive partisanship for "education for autonomy."

With some friendly help I recently scanned educational literature on the problem of intellectual autonomy. Instead of autonomy, one finds an existentially tinged concept of authority, of allegiance, or other horrors; concepts that sabotage the concept of autonomy and thereby not only implicitly but quite openly work against the conditions for democracy. I am of the view that these attitudes should be denounced once and for all. One must show what foulness Germany is exposed to, now as always, even

concerning a question so securely lodged in the realm of intellectual endeavor as autonomy.

For example, in Ernst Lichtenstein's influential book, *Education, Authority, Responsibility — Reflections on a Pedagogical Ethics*, one reads: "Are we not troubled precisely by the reality of an enormous and rapid decline of a sense of authority, respect, confidence, and faith in a valid order, a decline of allegiance in all spheres of life, so that sometimes any positive and constructive education at all seems imperiled?" I do not care to dwell on the slogans Lichtenstein serves up here. But the thing we should note in this connection is that he is not speaking of ties based on a position whose objective truth one assumes or has reason to assume (as one does with Thomism of the medieval period, on the basis of the spiritual situation of the era). Instead, here it is advocated that, for some reason or other, order and allegiance are good, regardless of what happens to autonomy or independent thinking. About 30 or 40 pages later, Lichtenstein adds: "What does 'autonomy' really mean? Literally, self-rule, self-determination. That is already a confusing notion." One wonders: confusing for whom? "For the concept. . . inevitably smacks of the idea of an absolute, legislative, sovereign reason, which would claim to be the only standard in education. This condition of the 'autonomous man' . . . is unacceptable for a Christian." But surely Kant was a Christian! "But historical reflection has also shown that the idea of a pedagogy based on pure reason is simply false. Educational goals are never axioms of thought, never rationally grounded or universally valid." I believe that philosophically one can indeed criticize the concept of pure reason and the illusion that the world is the product of absolute spirit; however, one must not then deny that only through thought — and precisely through imperturbable and persistent thinking — is it possible to determine the correct practice in general. That in the above case the philosophical critique of idealism is simply conflated with the denunciation of thinking I find to be horrid sophistry. It must be done away with in order to put a spark to this foulness so that it might explode.

BECKER: I don't really know whether foulness can explode, but. . .

ADORNO: I believe it is chemically possible. But whether it is socially possible, I don't know.

BECKER: The question goes considerably beyond Germany and German thinking. A few years ago the announcement that Caroline Kennedy was becoming "a more and more adapted child" made the rounds of the American press. That the goal of adaptation is considered the main success of early childhood education is a fact that should give us some cause for thought; for this brand of pedagogy arose in a world that is very far removed from the effects of German idealism.

ADORNO: Stamped more by Darwinism than Heidegger. But the results are very similar.

BECKER: That's just what I meant. I believe that when carefully studied, the question of intellectual independence is a world problem. I visited Soviet schools for several weeks. It was terribly interesting to see how in a country that carried out the transformation of relations of production a very long time ago, extraordinarily little has changed so far as the lack of childhood education for autonomy is concerned, and that an authoritarian style of instruction continues to prevail in the schools. It is a truly interesting phenomenon to see how education for dependency dominates the world now as before, although the age of enlightenment has been in the making for some time, and although Marx as well as Kant has something to say on this subject.

Now in the quotation you just cited, something struck me: the claim that the idea of

autonomous humanity is unacceptable for the Christian. It is interesting that the whole Christian Reformation, from the Confessing Church to the Council, increasingly revolves around the so-called autonomous Christian. We certainly cannot take into account theological problems here. But it can surely be stated that there is in both churches today a theological interpretation that takes the concept of autonomy as seriously as Kant, and therefore in fact questions in earnest the traditional structure of the two churches.

ADORNO: That is certainly so. Kant's own short essay attests to this fact, when he expressly mentions that within the church of his day there were possibilities for autonomy as he envisioned it. But you are right that the problem is not just a German problem but an international one. And, if I may say so, it is a problem that goes far beyond the bounds of the political system. In the United States it is really the case that two different demands collide; on the one hand, powerful individualism that accepts no heteronomous instruction; on the other, the idea of adaptation, derived from Darwinism via Spencer — precisely the "adjustment" that was practically a magic word in America 30 or 40 years ago, and which immediately shackles and curtails the very independence that is proclaimed in the same breath. Incidentally, this is a contradiction that runs throughout bourgeois history. That such diversely structured ideologies as the vulgar ideology of pragmatism in America and Heideggerian philosophy in Germany agree on precisely the same thing — the glorification of heteronomy — is a confirmation of the theory of ideology, insofar as even intellectual themes that sharply contradict one another in content can suddenly coincide in their attitude toward society, i.e., in what they want to maintain or protect. Just as, in general, the agreement between Western positivism and what is left of metaphysics in Germany is rather appalling. Actually, these points of contact virtually amount to a declaration of bankruptcy on the part of philosophy.

BECKER: Incidentally, I noticed something else in the passage you read. Is it legitimate to use autonomy in this form as a counter-concept to authority?

ADORNO: I genuinely believe that a certain amount of evil is being perpetuated through the use of the concept of authority. I believe that, as the person responsible for *The Authoritarian Personality*, I have a certain right to point that out. First, authority itself is essentially a social-psychological concept and does not directly mean the social reality itself. In addition, there is a technical authority — i.e., the fact that one person understands something better than another — that cannot simply be disregarded. Instead, the concept of authority derives its value from the social context in which it occurs.

However, since you have just brought up the subject of authority, I would like to mention something about the socialization process in early childhood. This theme concerns the relation of social, educational, and psychological categories. The way one attains psychological autonomy is not simply by protesting against every kind of authority. Empirical studies in America, as carried out by my late colleague Else Frenkel-Brunswik, have shown precisely the opposite, namely, that so-called well-behaved children tend to become autonomous and critical men and women more so than refractory children, who then as adults immediately gather 'round the beer table with their teachers to rally 'round the same slogans. But the process is such that children — Freud called this the normal development — generally identify with a father figure, i.e., an authority, they internalize it, appropriate it, and then in a very painful process that always leaves scars, they learn that the father or father figure does not correspond to the ego-ideal that they learned from him; and thus they break away

from him. Only in this way do children become mature people. I believe the factor of authority is presupposed as a genetic factor in the process of maturation. But this fact must be no means be used to glorify and remain satisfied with this stage. Were this to occur, then not only would psychological deformities result, but also manifestations of immaturity in the sense of the artificially induced stupefaction that today is omnipresent.

BECKER: I believe it is important at this point that the process of breaking away from this authority is of course necessary, but that on the other hand, without the encounter with authority, the formation of identity would be impossible. This claim entails a series of complex and contradictory consequences for the structure of our educational system. It means that there can be no meaningful school without teachers but that, on the other hand, the teacher must see clearly that his task consists in making himself superfluous. This dual role is so difficult because in the context of contemporary debates, the danger exists that the teacher may behave in an authoritarian manner, so that the pupils disregard him. The result is that this entire process, as you have just described it, is practically destroyed by a false confrontation. The consequence then is a pseudo-autonomy of students that ends in superstition and dependence, but not in independent thinking.

ADORNO: I agree completely. The problem of immaturity today may be seen from another, less familiar viewpoint. In general, one says that society, according to Riesman's expression, is "controlled from the outside," i.e., it is heteronomous; and it is often insinuated that — as Kant does in the same vein in his essay on Enlightenment — individuals fundamentally accept without resistance whatever almighty facticity places before them and inculcates into them, as if what now exists must continue as such.

I said before that the mechanisms of identification and detachment never occur without scars. I would also like to apply this claim expressly to the concept of identification itself. Our listeners have surely heard of the concept of "role" which, since Merton and Parsons, has played such an enormous part in contemporary sociology. People generally fail to notice that in the concept of role itself, which was of course derived from theater, the non-identity of humanity with itself is prolonged. That is, when the concept of role is made into a social standard, this inevitably perpetuates a state in which humanity is not what it is intrinsically, i.e., it remains non-identical. I find the normative turn of the concept of role appalling; it is something that should be attacked with all critical energies. But phenomenologically, i.e., as a description of a state of affairs, there is something to it. It seems to me that for most people, identification with the super-ego — which defines them and from which they cannot break free — is always unsuccessful. Hence, the fact that countless people internalize the oppressive, brutal and overpowering father, even while remaining incapable of achieving this identification, precisely because the resistances are too strong. Because they failed at the identification, because there are numerous adults who really just pretend to be the adults they never became, they must attempt to overplay and exaggerate their identification with such models, boasting and feigning adult behavior in order to make more credible, to themselves and others, the role that they themselves failed to achieve. I believe that this type of immaturity can be found among certain intellectuals.

BECKER: I would think not just among intellectuals; if we apply the concept of role to society as a whole, we would discover quite similar phenomena in all social strata. Let us take the situation of a workplace, where even the individual worker, apprentices

or office workers, precisely when they are not happy with the situation, play roles — roles taken from all possible contexts. I believe that if we apply the consequences drawn from the concept of autonomy to the work process as a whole, we must make drastic changes in our whole vocational training system. I would like to refer again to the Education Council and the recently published recommendations for training apprentices. The fact that in Germany we still have apprenticeship programs, which, if we disregard a few very exemplary large businesses, really stem from a pre-industrial era, actually leads to our perpetuating forms of dependency and making on-the-job training virtually take the form of animal training. At any rate, very often we run into difficulties. For example, we facilitate the supply of certain material skills, but constantly fail at the same time insofar as we do not simultaneously provide the necessary autonomous attitude. Consider the case of someone who previously was an accountant and is made superfluous by the introduction of equivalent technology. Now, if this person must be retrained as a programmer, it becomes necessary not only for him to learn new skills, but also to become familiar with another conceptual framework, or orientation as well. In this vein, it would then be necessary, e.g., that he learn a foreign language, even if he never really needs it, because it opens up a new horizon of experience. This combination of vocational training as such with a new conceptual horizon is something that is still very much absent in our whole concept of vocational retraining. I consider it important because in a world like the present one, the call for autonomy can almost serve as a disguise for the universal suppression of autonomy; and because it is very important to translate the possibility of autonomy into concrete educational terms.

ADORNO: Yes, this factor certainly also plays a role. Without presuming to judge authoritatively in this particular area, I would like to add parenthetically that maturity requires a certain degree of ego firmness, as it emerges in the case of the bourgeois individual. The possibility — often demanded today, and one, I admit, that is inevitable — that instead of developing a firm ego, one allows it to adjust to ever-changing situations, harmonizes in a very problematic way with the psychological phenomenon of ego weaknesses. For instance, let us take the case of people who lack a fixed idea of their own profession, adjust relatively easily, and thus easily learn a new job. Whether this disposition really contributes to maturity and independence or whether the same people prove immature by then losing their heads at the sports arena on Sunday, remains an open question.

BECKER: I hardly need to mention the dialectic of Enlightenment. Suffice it to say that, of course, the same process of emancipation that makes enlightenment possible threatens it in return by virtue of ego-weakness or the danger thereof.

ADORNO: Yes, this danger is extremely serious. This brings us, I believe, to the very crux of our discussion. Kant, in the work that I used as a point of departure, answered the question: "Are we now living in an enlightened age?" with: "No, but probably in an age of enlightenment." Hence, he defined autonomy not as a static, but quite deliberately as a dynamic category, as a becoming and not a being. Whether we can today similarly say that we are living in an age of enlightenment has — in view of the inconceivable pressure which is exerted on humanity — become very questionable, by virtue of the objective character of society and also because of the planned control of even the sphere of inner nature by the culture industry. If we are not to use the word autonomy as an empty slogan — just as the conservative mentality shallowly counterposes autonomy to obligation — then we must recognize the indescribable difficulties confronting autonomy today, and I believe we must speak to this point.

Of course, the reason is the contradiction embodied in the fact that the society in which we live is heteronomous, i.e., no one in contemporary society can really lead a life that is self-determined; and as long as this is true, society so shapes men by countless intermediary agencies and channels that they swallow and accept everything within this alienated heteronomous form. This phenomenon then extends even to institutions, to the discussion of political instruction, and similar questions. The real problem of autonomy today is whether and how one — and how this "one" is defined is another major question — can counteract this tendency.

BECKER: In this context, it seems to me that one of the most important tasks in reform is to abolish education according to a fixed canon and instead to provide a program of varied course offerings, i.e., a school with a wide series of choices and extensive internal differentiation within the individual subjects. The whole series of "maturity games," as they have taken place, e.g., in the conventional type of student co-determination, will receive an entirely different meaning when the student, as an individual and as part of a group, himself plays a part in determining the curriculum and the choice of subject matter. In this way, he will be not only better motivated to learn, but also more disposed to regard what happens in school as resulting from his own decisions — as opposed to some that are predetermined. I am very well aware that even this system can also be turned into a facade and in reality used as an instrument of technocratic selection. But I do not believe it has to develop in this direction. It seems to me that in the often confused manifestations of student opposition today, there is a legitimate core to which one should respond by giving the students a chance to participate in the determination of their education.

ADORNO: It seems to me that as much as all this may be desirable, it remains too much embedded in the institutional framework of the school. At the risk of being scolded as a philosopher, which I happen to be, I would like to say that the form in which autonomy is being realized — something that cannot be simply presupposed, insofar as it would really have to be achieved in all aspects of modern life — consists in the fact that the few people who are in favor of it must work energetically to make education an education for contradiction and resistance. I could envision one attending commercial films in high school (but in the grammar schools, too) and quite simply showing to the students what a fraud they are, how full of lies, etc., or in the same way immunizing them against certain Sunday morning radio programs that play happy and carefree music, as if we were still living in a "healthy world" (a term that gives true cause for alarm); or reading a magazine with them and showing them how they are being taken for a ride by an exploitation of their own instinctual needs; or I can imagine a music teacher who does not happen to come from the youth music scene analyzing hit songs and showing why these hits are incomparably worse than a movement of a Mozart or Beethoven quartet, or a really genuine piece of modern music. Thus, one simply tries first of all to arouse the awareness that men and women are constantly being deceived, for the idea that "the world wants to be deceived," applied globally, has become the mechanism of immaturity today. That these relations become conscious to everyone could perhaps best be attained through the method of immanent critique, for it is likely that no normal democracy can afford to be openly against this type of enlightenment. However, I can well imagine the film industry immediately complaining if one tried something like this, claiming that we were trying to disseminate one-sided ideological propaganda and simultaneously harming the economic interests of the film industry, which is so terribly important to the German budget. Interventions of this nature would all have to be incorporated

into a coherent whole in order to promote autonomy and independent thinking. BECKER: Yet, one still does not know whether the films demystified in this way would still radiate a definite attraction; and thus the film industry itself might be inclined to capitalize on the efforts at demystification as a kind of advertising gimmick, rather than to seek immediately to eliminate it.

ADORNO: But one can spoil them for young people. Every age produces the expressions appropriate to it, and some of these expressions, such as "to be turned off," are very good. I would very strongly advocate an educational approach of "turning off."

BECKER: I would like to bring up one more question that has always disturbed me. Let's imagine for a moment that we did everything we have just been discussing: we would have a differentiated school system in which the range of offerings produces corresponding motivations to learn. In addition, this policy would result not in selectivity according to false concepts of talent, but advancement beyond the respective social barriers by an accompanying compensatory education. We could thus clear the way for some basic conditions for autonomy and independent thinking, and we would do similar things in the area of professional training. The question remains whether, were this to happen, the enlightened, critically conscious person might not then still be "remote-controlled" in his behavior, and thus, in this apparent maturity, not really be autonomous in the fundamental sense envisioned at the beginnings of the Enlightenment. I do not believe this is an objection to everything we have been saying. But it is, so to speak, a warning about the optimism that is possibly connected with it. I would just like to say that this autonomous individual is constantly in danger — in danger of becoming non-autonomous, as you pointed out a while ago.

ADORNO: I would like to stress this danger emphatically, for the simple reason that not only society as it is keeps humanity dependent, but because every serious attempt to assist humanity toward intellectual independence — I avoid the word "educate" intentionally — is exposed to considerable resistance; and because everything bad in the world immediately finds advocates who will prove that precisely what one intends is already long since obsolete, no longer relevant, or utopian. I would prefer to close our conversation by urging reflection on a fact that is all too easily repressed precisely in the zeal of the will to change: that attempts really to change our world drastically in any particular field are immediately exposed to the overpowering force of the status quo and seem condemned to impotence. Whoever wants to change things can apparently do so only by making this impotence itself and his own impotence as well into a factor of what he does.