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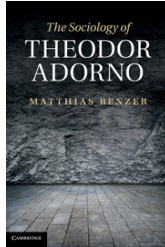
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The Sociology of Theodor Adorno

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3 Sociological reflection

In view of the untrustworthiness of observation and its factual data, Adorno makes an insistent case for their theoretical analysis. Theoretical analysis, like empirical research, is therefore a key theme in his reflections on sociology. It is also a major issue in contemporary social science debates. What distinguishes Adorno's writings on theoretical interpretation in sociological inquiry is that they question sociology's ability to offer conclusions on social life. Theoretical analysis constitutes another site for Adorno's negotiations of disciplinary boundaries. His sociologico-methodological ideas for theoretical interpretation draw heavily on epistemological considerations, while these epistemological arguments are usually forced to address sociological questions. This makes some criss-crossing between discrete areas unavoidable, especially in the first half of this chapter.

Theoretical analysis in sociology

Adorno's ideas for theoretical social analysis can be elucidated in three steps. First, the limitations of factual material must be clarified. The previous chapter repeatedly stated, without explaining, Adorno's caveat that empirical observations cannot adequately represent reality. Thus the role of theory and its mode of procedure in response to those limitations come into view, along with the problems and potentials Adorno's sociology develops in its theoretical dimension.

The social limitations of sociological material

Adorno's sociologico-methodological work strongly criticises 'positivist' social science. For Adorno, who admits to a precariously sweeping definition, positivism means observing, comparing and classifying phenomena; accepting factual materials, the positively given, as the basis for examining reality; and rejecting theoretical speculation (CM 8–9, SSI 246–7, VSI 17, 33). Positivism suffers from the 'naiveté that confuses

facts and figures . . . with [the world's] foundation' (HTS 74). Adorno took issue with positivist social science's philosophical underpinnings as early as 1931, combining his endorsement of logical positivism's emphasis on observation with misgivings about its uncritical acceptance of facts for the truth and its dismissal of all empirically unverifiable thoughts (1977: 125–6). In the mid-1930s, Adorno sought to attack 'positivist' sociology directly, although his target, Mannheim's sociology, arguably defies this label. Indeed, whereas Adorno's 1937 Mannheim essay describes 'Mannheim's attitude' as 'epistemologically positivistic' (VSI 33), 'Mannheim flirts with positivism' according to the same passage in its 1953 version (P 42). The 'positivist dispute' in German sociology between critical theorists Adorno and Habermas and critical rationalists Popper and Albert mainly took place in the final decade of Adorno's life.¹ One of Adorno's central arguments in these debates is that observation is not sufficient for grasping reality; that factual data constitute untrustworthy representations of the world. Focusing on the problems sociology encounters by virtue of being embedded in the same context it seeks to examine, Adorno conceptualises the limitations of empirical observations and materials as socially conditioned:

The inability to experience can by no means only be grasped as a result of individual developments, let alone developments determined by the laws of the species. The blinding of cognising consciousness against the subliminal arises itself from the objective structure of a society whose totality, jointed without gaps, obstructs the view onto that which continues to exist underneath the semblance of a reconciled condition. (SSI 194)

Adorno distinguishes between reality as it is subjectively perceived and objective reality itself. However unassuming the subject's observation of external reality, perception, he argues, receives impulses from, as well as always projecting subjective notions onto, reality. The perceiving subject reconstructs reality – 'recreates the world outside' – '[f]rom the traces [the world] leaves behind in its senses' (DE 155). Perception certainly receives impulses from the physical components of the individual's encounter with reality, from sensations and impressions. But in perception such impulses are always instantly worked into the subject's intellectual reconstruction of reality. Empirical material is never reality as it is but its subjective reconstruction. The devices subjects employ for recreating the world are concepts. Epistemology's putatively most concrete being, 'components of

¹ Popper (PD 290–1, 298–300) rightly underlined that this dispute involved no positivists. Frisby (PD xxix) saw Adorno as criticising 'a naive positivism . . . hardly at issue amongst . . . the disputants' – but, years after Adorno's death, added: 'even though it may remain in operation in much social scientific practice'.

impressions or “sensations”, are actually inseparable from ‘categorical moments’ (AE 148, see also HTS 57–8). ‘Perception ... can be interpreted ... only as a thinking performance, ... as “apprehension in intuition”,^[2] as categorisation’ (AE 154). The dependence of perception on reconstruction entails that reality is not encountered immediately (*unmittelbar*) but always conceptually mediated (*vermittelt*) (see also DE 159–60, ND 156). No language, no fact (JA 42).

Insofar as every sensing, thinking subject is a living human being, consciousness, Adorno argues, is an element of, and inseparable from, the spatio-temporal world (AE 156, 226–7, HTS 16–17, ND 184–5). Simultaneously, since all human subjects are socialised, consciousness is socially determined (see CM 11, ND 178–80). Crucially here, the process of reconstructing reality from sense traces inherent in all subjective perception operates under society’s regulation. What are social, Adorno specifies, are the forms, schemata or concepts at the subject’s disposal for reconstructing reality in observation: ‘in all categories of thought the objectivity of the social process is prior to the contingency of the individual subject’ (HTS 78, see also DE xvi, 65; 1999: 68). In concepts, Adorno contends, history has sedimented (MM 127). History is here understood as collective activities by which humans have been intervening in nature. Created for and in these interventions (ND 23; see also Cook 2007: 164–5), concepts are social phenomena. Since subjects conceptually reconstruct reality in line with the prevalent social conditions, observations and the factual data they procure are always subjectively as well as socially regulated (CM 221, NLII 63).³ Cognition is socially determined ‘down to every individual sense datum’ (HTS 63). Since social integration seizes the devices available to observation for grasping reality, empirical material does not merely represent reality, but has a characteristic social dimension.

Sociological observations and facts are no exception. Adorno criticises Mannheim’s method as inductive. Mannheim, he alleges, relies on empirical facts, supposedly established by unbiased observation, for forming general categorical frameworks (P 37, VSI 16–18). Mannheim tends to deny that no factual reconstruction of social reality is purely representative of what it designates, but also shaped by the ‘pre-ordered structure ... on which the scientific subject ... , along with its “experience”, depends’ (VSI

² Kant’s ‘synthesis of apprehension’ unites ‘manifoldness’ in ‘intuition’ (1999: 229). Critical of elementary dissections of consciousness (AE 157), Adorno nevertheless agrees that cognising objects involves synthesis; that receptivity is combined with spontaneity.

³ ‘[S]ociety’ being ‘immanent to experience’ (CM 250), Adorno’s ‘transition’ (MCP 45) from sociology to philosophy and vice versa is unsurprising.

33, see also P 43). More than thirty years later, Adorno reiterates that sociological observations bear a conceptual moment and that the concepts at the sociologist's disposal for reconstructing social life are socially pre-formed. Although empirical 'methods', for instance, 'are objective to the extent that they do not vary according to the individual psyche of the researcher who employs them, ... methods are themselves "functions" derived from the interaction of human subjects' (Drake 2004: 308). Society shapes even the simplest sociological encounters and the materials they procure (PD 27).

By saying that 'nothing under the sun' is now 'left outside' society, Adorno means that society shapes every facet of the world, including 'nature' (IS 65). For '[e]ven nature, seemingly untouched by [social labour,] ... is ... mediated' by humanity's self-preserving activities (HTS 68). Society thus affects factual reconstructions of the world also in that all objective reality, every detail possibly encountered, is subject to social domination. In sociological terms, the social whole mediates all social phenomena: human, intellectual, interpersonal and institutional realities. Where Mannheim seeks to classify a network of co-existing social forces irreducible to an economic basis, whose laws together determine a historically specific epoch (e.g. 1940: 173–90), he threatens to neglect that the underlying 'unity of the capitalist system' governs each facet of social life in turn (VSI 17). '[T]he phenomena' of sociology 'are all situated in a medium that shapes them decisively' (SoI 188): the 'universal social structure' (GS9.2 357). '[T]he behaviour of ... elements' registered by social research, e.g. opinions or attitudes, is 'to an eminent degree pre-determined by the context of the whole' (PETG 29). What is usually termed 'background study', the discernment of the cultural, economic, social preconditions of people's answers in interview or questionnaire material, constitutes one step towards the indispensable examination of capitalist society in its regulation of diverse aspects of social life.⁴ Society impacts on empirical sociological material or data also by affecting every phenomenon sociologists might observe.

Since empirical facts originate in the subject's socialised encounter with a socialised reality, society 'makes [facts] what they are' (ND 169, see also 307). As *Group Experiment* accentuates: 'In all facts, even in the ostensibly purely sensuous impression, there hides an element of the forming intellect, ... even our interest, which directs our attention to this tree or this house ... Something more encompassing enters both[,] ... the entire society, the entire history of humans judging objects, which is

⁴ PD 73–5, 83–4, SSI 536–7, 543–5, VSI 674–84.

simultaneously embodied by the objects themselves' (GEX 9). Due to society's regulation of the primary sociological observations that produce empirical data as well as of every single social detail observed, sociological material does not simply represent reality but is also characterised by a twofold social dimension: 'the facts . . . are conditioned' (PD 84–5); 'the factual particular has meaning to the extent that . . . the system of society . . . appears in it' (JA 41).

The untrustworthiness of sociological observation appears to stem from the dilemma that observable phenomena are determined by a social whole which cannot be observed as an 'immediate fact' (IS 108). Focusing on 'isolated', 'narrow sectors', empirical research is 'in principle' unable to address 'the central questions of the social structure' – the 'totality' – 'on which the life of humans depends' (GS9.2 358). Society enters but *hides* in 'dispersed facts'; hence they are 'always more than what they immediately seem' (JA 41).

Although these formulations sketch the problem of observation highlighted by Adorno, they do not exhaust his argument. The twofold social dimension of empirical material raises two demands. Society's reign over *subjective* reconstructions of reality means that the perceiving subject can understand reality only if it appreciates to what extent its observations and their factual materials are merely socially guided reconstructions and to what extent, by contrast, they actually represent traces of reality. Understanding the social conditions of cognition is indispensable to a faithful understanding of reality. This requirement reverberates in Adorno's statement that '[o]nly insight into science's inherent social mediations contributes to [its] objectivity' (PD 19). If factual material fails to disclose the social conditions of the observation that established it, it remains untrustworthy. Society's reign over single *objects* entails that a faithful engagement with reality must examine society as it determines objects. Grasping social phenomena correctly depends on recognising their mediation by the social whole. 'There is', Adorno states, 'something like a historical coercion in the movement of things. Subjects on their part are also conditioned by this historical coercion.' Cognition must 'account for this conditionality' (Adorno and von Haselberg 1965: 487–8). The twofold social dimension of empirical data, which they acquired by dint of society's regulation of observation and of all observable reality, must be revealed. Likewise, sociological investigations hinge on the disclosure of the sociological material's social dimension. Sociological facts must be understood 'as expression[s] of the social totality' (SSI 514, see also 195, 543–6, 581–2; PD 11, 76).

In contemporary capitalism, empirical intuition is particularly constrained in meeting these demands. Social integration occasions the

reification and solidification of society, culminating in social estrangement. Humans experience social reality as opaque, invariant nature. This obfuscation makes it especially difficult to grasp society immediately in its regulation of subjective observation. 'Humans cannot recognise ... society ... within themselves, because they are estranged from each other and the whole' (SP1 69, see also CM 254–5). In galvanised, opaque society, direct observations do not disclose the social conditions which regulate them. Hence it is not immediately discernible to what extent factual material represents reality as opposed to being guided by the social regulation of its subjective reconstructions. These circumstances also prevent perception from grasping society's domination of objects. Direct intuition, Adorno warns, fails to discern 'what migrated into the object as its law of movement'. The object's social content remains hidden behind the factual façade, 'concealed by the ideological form of the phenomenon' (ND 206). For sociologists, this means that the social whole, particularly in its current opacity, is imperceptible or unobservable in its characterising single social phenomena (IS 34): 'the facts ascertained do not faithfully reflect the underlying social conditions but rather they simultaneously constitute the veil by means of which these conditions, of necessity, disguise themselves' (PD 85). Empirically established individual 'opinion[s], attitude[s], mode[s] of behaviour', for instance, are at best skewed expressions of the 'essential laws of society' governing them, and usually do not reveal these 'conditions' at all (GS9.2 358–9).⁵ Factual material discloses neither the social conditions regulating subjective reconstruction in observation, nor the social components of individual phenomena. The twofold social dimension of empirical material, including that of specifically sociological data, is not immediately accessible.

Hence, 'that which is immediate to experience' is not the 'real cause' (HF 25). Facts 'build a solid wall in front of what is actually taking place' (CoM 110). Due to social integration, sociological facts have a twofold social dimension which – notably in galvanised society – is not immediately transparent. The 'subject's loss of experience in the world of the ever-same', and the untrustworthiness of its observations, 'designates the anthropological side of the ... estrangement process'; 'social estrangement consists ... in removing the objects of cognition from the sphere of immediate experience' (P 90). That 'society cannot be nailed down as a fact', Adorno argues (against positivist social science), 'testifies to ... mediation': 'the facts' are not 'final' (PD 11).

⁵ For example, the empirical fact that workers no longer believe that they are workers offers only a distorted articulation of the social conditions in which they live.

The role of theory

Adorno's 1931 critique of logical positivism already warned that empirical data required theoretical decipherment because they were not as 'final, . . . dee[p]' and 'indestructible' as some philosophers of science claimed (1977: 126). His later writings repeatedly emphasise that untrustworthy immediate encounters demand persistent reflection and interpretation: 'only speculation which . . . show[s] what really . . . lies behind the . . . facticity can . . . do justice to reality' (HF 30). In response to the limitations of empirical observation, theoretical analysis is given the task of disclosing the factual material's hidden social dimension.⁶ Yet no sooner does theory thus unsettle the facts' claim to truth than it begins to reveal its own severe predicaments.

Decipherment Adorno's sociologico-methodological work is shaped by his epistemological considerations, but it seldom reiterates these considerations in detail. It is helpful to outline some of the epistemological ideas before clarifying their significance for social research. According to Adorno, theoretical analysis involves self-reflection: theory examines cognition to distinguish the subject's reconstruction of reality from traces of reality itself. Yet this reflexive operation is only an initial critical step. If, to argue with the later Durkheim, notably with his interventions in the theory of knowledge in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995: 8–18),⁷ cognition's 'constitutive formants' have 'originated socially' (CM 257); if even individual sense data are socially governed, then any 'critique of experience' must 'attai[n] the latter's . . . historical, . . . social . . . conditionedness' (CM 250, see also DE 214, ND 198). Subjective observations being socially regulated, reflection must involve an analysis of the cognitive faculty in view of its social conditions. As much as factual material must be traced back to the subject's contributions, theory must also always trace the subjective observations which established the material back to their determinant social reality. Such an analysis conducts 'enlightenment . . . [a]s demythologisation', which is 'no longer only . . . reductio ad hominem, but also inversely . . . reductio hominis' (ND 187). The analysis aims to ascertain

⁶ In 1931, Adorno noted: 'One would seriously have to ask whether realist novels are still realistic at all: whether the faithful depiction of what appears does not also inadvertently adopt all that is semblance in that which appears and forgets what it veils; whereas only a break through the closed context of appearance . . . could . . . unveil the actual . . . reality . . . [T]his procedure justifies itself only by assimilating itself to social theory' (VSII 541). Decades later, Adorno would accuse theory-free positivist social science as unrealistic realism (S 145).

⁷ See also Adorno and Horkheimer's (DE 16) reference to Durkheim and Mauss 1963.

to what extent factual material is merely grounded in the social conditions steering subjective reconstructions of reality, rather than representing reality itself. Simultaneously, theoretical analysis must decipher the social content hiding inside the object. Knowledge of the object depends on knowing how the social totality affects it. By combining both operations, theoretical interpretation unearths from the material its social dimensions. 'Critique means nothing but the confrontation of a judgement' – and '[p]erception' is a 'rudimentary judgement' (AE 157) – 'with the mediations inherent to it' (AE 153). Theoretical analysis highlights those of the material's elements that are rooted in the social regulation of subjective observation, instead of representing objective reality, and those that originated in society's determination of the object.

Adorno's Mannheim critique addresses his demand for the 'correction of ... "facts" in the process of theoretical cognition of society' directly to sociology. '[D]escriptive facts relate' to society 'like semblance to reality'. Sociology requires a conceptual-theoretical framework which can unlock the material in its social being (VSI 34). In the 1930s, Adorno was becoming increasingly aware of the resourcefulness of Horkheimer's work for his own sociological thinking. Adorno and Horkheimer agreed that positivism's fundamental flaws were its orientation on crude facts, its neglect of their social relativity and its unwillingness to analyse them theoretically and with a view to social change (A&H1 242–5). Adorno's central inspiration (A&H1 322) was Horkheimer's *The Latest Attack on Metaphysics*.⁸ The early empiricists, Locke and Hume, argues Horkheimer, still raised the question of the knowing subject's involvement in science. Recent currents like the Vienna Circle, where 'verification through perception is the Alpha and Omega' (Horkheimer 1995: 142–3), are unconcerned about it: they disregard the distinction between facts constructed in subjective observation and reality (1995: 151–2, 155–7).⁹ Horkheimer defends the theoretical penetration of factual material, but adds that such analyses cannot be accomplished by examining the perceiving subject. The subject's empirical reconstruction of reality is directed by concepts, language and ultimately social life (1995: 144–5, 151, 157–60). Hence it must be established to what extent empirical material is characterised by the social conditions of perception. Reflections upon factual data, Horkheimer concludes, require a theory of society to access their 'historical situation' (1995: 159). Accepting facts

⁸ Horkheimer's (1995: 188–243) *Traditional and Critical Theory* states the following ideas more lucidly. Adorno read *Latest Attack* as Horkheimer's 'first ... , very authentic' formulation of 'our position' on sociological positivism (A&H4 820–1).

⁹ Many years later, Adorno repeats this comparison (without citing Horkheimer) (PD 54).

as truth manifests the ‘inability to grasp what exists as the result of the social life process in which the individual participates, . . . the estrangement of the product of social labour’ (1995: 156).

A quarter-century later, Adorno reiterated his call for theoretical analysis in sociology in response to a talk by Popper at the 1961 Tübingen conference that sparked the ‘positivist dispute’. Adorno’s reply does not reject Popper’s (PD 87–90) notion that scientific knowledge is unstable because cognition proceeds as continuous critique of solutions to problems, rather than accumulating observations. But the devil is in the detail. Adorno questions his interlocutor’s view that solutions must be ‘accessible to factual [sachlichen] criticism’. This sounds ‘at least ambiguous’ to Adorno. Popper implies that theory functions as a set of hypotheses which must be wholly criticisable with reference to facts, thus granting empirical material the status of a falsifier which Adorno thinks it does not deserve: ‘facts . . . are not the last thing to which knowledge might attach itself.’¹⁰ Adorno would certainly like to see problematic theoretical statements negated. His method for doing so is immanent critique, the exposure of flaws within a theoretical framework (PD 112–13). He seldom concedes that sociological material can falsify theorems. Adorno adds that mutual critique within the scientific community, which Popper (PD 95–6) deems a basis for objectivity, cannot exempt putative sociological knowledge from theoretical critique either. ‘[S]cientific thought control’, itself socially conditioned, motivates Adorno’s suspicion that the ‘critical impulse is at one with the resistance to the rigid conformity of each dominant opinion’ (PD 112, see also 29–30).

The judgement that Adorno had no ‘regard for’ Popper’s ‘views’ (Goldstein 2004: 270), or that the two thinkers ‘courteously talked past one another . . . present[ing] shorthand recapitulations of their positions on the philosophy of science’ (Wiggershaus 1994: 568; see also Müller-Doohm 1996: 155), threatens to belittle the subtle intersections between the talks. Frisby (2004; see also PD xxvii–xxx) offers a more nuanced reading, explaining why the dispute was so difficult for the disputants to have and elucidating differences in philosophical grounding as well as further points of direct contention between Adorno and Popper. This is not to deny that Adorno’s vision of sociology’s theoretical task from this period is informed by his epistemological convictions. Sociology, Adorno

¹⁰ The ambiguity hinges on Popper’s term *sachlich* (Adorno, Albert *et al.* 1989: 105–6), which resonates with ‘empirical’, ‘factual’ and ‘objective’. Adorno hears mainly empirical undertones. Indeed, Popper states that problems arise from the ‘discovery’ of ‘contradiction[s] . . . between supposed knowledge and . . . facts’ (PD 88) and that the ‘main function’ of ‘observations . . . is to check and refute . . . our theories’ (PD 299–300).

maintains, cannot rest with empirical material but ‘requires . . . reflection’ (1972: 127): ‘so-called empiry free from theory is . . . merely ideology, result[ing] . . . in things of the façade’ (PETG 62). The ‘wall’ of facts before reality ‘can be torn down only by speculative thinking’ (CoM 110). The socialisation of subjective observations and all single social phenomena ensures that sociological material is ‘structured through the . . . social totality’ (PD 106). The totality can only be deciphered theoretically (S 146). Theory is summoned to interpret factual material with regards to the material’s social dimension and the underlying conditions of capitalism (IS 21–2, SSI 195, 581–2). Thus sociology ‘attempt[s] to emphasise the mediation of the facts . . . by the whole of society’ (SoI 184). Adorno invokes the concept of ‘social physiognomy’ once more. It involves ‘interpretation’, ‘becom[ing] aware of the totality in the features of social givenness’ (PD 32). In advancing socialisation, interpretation is ever more urgent: ‘the more the particular is defined as a mere object belonging to the universal . . . the more the so-called facts become a mere cloak veiling what really exists’ (HF 30).

Liquefaction, reciprocity, perpetual negation The ‘life’ of ‘thought’, Adorno argues, ‘strikes [einschlägt]’ empirical materials like lightning (MM 126). By accentuating the material’s social dimension, theory illuminates what the material hides. Thus theory spotlights the material’s inability to reveal of its own accord to what extent it is socially suffused. Thought dispels the myth that observation and its material faithfully represent the world and unsettles their claim to truth. Theoretical sociological analysis shows that sociological material cannot disclose social reality and ‘relativize[s] critically the cognitive value of appearance’ (PD 84). Thought ‘liquef[ies], through the self-reflection of science, what has become congealed through science’ (HTS 73).

Here Adorno’s sociology reveals one of its most problematic consequences. In its attempt to discern the material’s social dimension, theoretical analysis encounters a familiar predicament. Social integration entangles ever more aspects of human and material life in the exchange relations that make up contemporary society. Although Adorno insists that the resulting ‘complexity of the apparatus’ and the ‘opa[que]’, ‘overpowering conditions’ could be deciphered – they are ‘the work of humans [Menschenwerk]’ (VSI 329) – he seems to think that the socialised society’s complexity constitutes a problem. In capitalism, ‘the apparatuses of production, distribution and domination, as well as economic and social relations and ideologies are inextricably interwoven’ (ND 264). Sociology, Adorno warns his students, ‘has to do with an infinitely complex object, even if this object does not confront us in [a] . . . complex

form' (IS 83).¹¹ His warning may invite the sceptical reply that the adaptation of all facets of the world to one form of socially organised production and distribution should facilitate social research (see PETG 72–3). Yet in adapting the world to contemporary 'capitalism', integration is adapting phenomena to 'something immensely complicated and ... immensely complex' (PETG 163), recalcitrant to conceptual explication (PETG 44–5). The task of theoretically investigating individual social phenomena with reference to this densely interwoven web of social relations is extremely hard to master.

In another passage, Adorno carefully heeds the possibility that 'modern society' is 'objectively' less 'opaque' than it seems 'to sociologists'; that the 'age of large organisations' has the 'tendency' to remove 'complex social mechanisms of mediation'; and that the incomprehensibility of society may be a 'projection' of those no longer able to live independently within it (SSI 523). Yet even if this is the case – and Adorno hesitates to affirm it – a further predicament remains. Theoretical analyses would need to relate the empirical material's social dimension to society's *historical* context: to interpret the fact in its 'eminent historicity, its historical implications', not 'as something natural' and 'unalterable' (IS 149). Social integration, which culminates in the reification and solidification of social life, frustrates this endeavour. 'The more unrelentingly socialisation seizes all moments of human and interpersonal immediacy, the more impossible to remember the having-become [das Gewordensein] of the web; the more irresistible the semblance of nature' (ND 351). Society hides its human reality and 'confronts us as something strange, objectified, reified' (PETG 151). '[T]he moment of the non-transparent and opaque ... constitutively belongs to the concept of a 'society' which has come to operate 'above the heads of humans'. It is no coincidence, Adorno repeats, that 'Durkheim ... defined the social fact ... through ... constraint', 'equated the blind, collective regularity [Regelhaftigkeit] with the actual object of sociology', and, 'in contradistinction to the teaching of ... Weber', described this object as 'not "comprehensible"' (SSI 503). 'Only an accomplished theory of society could say what society is': 'could' implies that in 1966, after decades of study, Adorno still feels unable to do that (S 146). As elaborated in Chapter 1, the most instructive perspective on exchange society and the single phenomena it regulates attainable by theory today is a double perspective which holds conflicting notions of society as invariant object and human, historical process in suspense.

¹¹ '[I]n the web of the through and through socialised humans, an ever larger measure of structures and contexts confronts the individual no longer as a comprehensible but as an overwhelming fact', the authors of *Group Experiment* explain (GEX 16).

Adorno's discussions of estrangement, dependence and integration proved as thoroughgoing as exchange society proved elusive. Adorno repeatedly arrives at statements on society such as: 'both . . . that [all living things] *are* under a spell and that they *appear* to be under a spell, are probably equally valid' (HF 173). Given these 'difficulties with really penetrating present society' (PETG 12), theoretical interpretations of the material's social dimension – of its mediation by the social whole regulating observations as well as the objects and social phenomena observed – will currently scarcely be completed and regularly yield inconclusive results. Theory can offer perspectives on the data's social dimension, on social phenomena governed by exchange society and on exchange society itself. This allows it to unsettle facts, which obstruct such perspectives. But sociologists face serious obstacles to mastering their analytical tasks conclusively.¹²

Hence the investigation must continue. For Adorno, this means abiding by his conviction outlined earlier. Without empirical facts, sociology would become 'rampant, unbridled theory' (IS 25, see also PETG 25). Sociology must saturate itself anew with material. Yet factual reconstructions of reality are socially limited. Sociological data are in turn always subject to the theoretical examination of their social dimension – an endeavour which is currently unlikely to succeed, so sociologists are faced with the task of re-engaging with facts once more.

'The greatest danger threatening this discipline today', Adorno accordingly cautions his sociology students, 'is that of becoming polarized . . . into the mere observation of facts [Tatsachenfeststellung] on the one hand, and the irresponsible declamation of true or alleged insight into the essence of things, on the other' (IS 21–2, see also PETG 105, VSII 644). Adorno sees only one way of avoiding this danger: sociologists must ensure the interaction between establishing empirical material and its critical theoretical interpretation (IS 25, 34, SSI 186, 486–7). '[W]ithout a theory of the whole . . . there is no productive individual finding [Einzelfeststellung]; without immersion in empiry . . . the truest theory can degenerate into a delusional system. The tension between both poles is the vital element of our science' (VSII 706); 'their reciprocity [Wechselwirkung] . . . constitutes the concept of the dialectic' (IS 25). This process of 'relat[ing] to facts' and 'mov[ing] by criticizing them' (MM 126) cannot be interrupted. Observation and theoretical analysis are incessantly referred to one another.

¹² Bonß (1983: 207) describes Adorno's 'tentativ[e]' theoretical penetration and interconnection of seemingly unrelated fragments of social life as 'experimental testing of theoretical outlines [Entwürfe]'.

A mode of thinking which can neither develop pure thought constructs nor accept socially limited facts for reality can no longer fulfil the demand for final positive knowledge (see also CM 16–17).¹³ Reflections on sociological material certainly offer perspectives on empirical phenomena in light of their social dimension, and even spotlight aspects of the social whole. Yet as long as these perspectives remain partial and inconclusive, theory remains a ‘thought about the results’ which ‘is never . . . a seizable result’ itself. Sociology must always re-engage with factual material. However, the material is untrustworthy and hence no sociological result either: ‘every formulation of a problem in the humanities or social sciences [geisteswissenschaftliche Problemstellung], be it a statistical diagnosis of modern sociology, urges, so as to be cognition at all, towards philosophical theory’ (VSI 354). Faced on one side with inconclusive, even conflicting theoretical perspectives and on the other with the socially conditioned incongruence between reality and its empirical reconstruction, sociological thought assumes the role of continuously exposing those conflicts and this incongruence. Thought moves through repeatedly exhibiting the gap between concept and reality by negating the claim of factual reconstructions to represent reality trustworthily and by exposing the contradictions of theoretical analyses of empirical phenomena governed by exchange society. ‘[U]nderstanding and interpreting’, Adorno states, ‘entails negation’ (HF 134). In sociology, it entails the simultaneous critical negation of empirical material and theoretical statements. Sociology is neither conclusive theory nor grounded in facts and figures. It is relentless demythologisation.

Perpetual negation generates ‘consciousness of non-identity’ (ND 17). Non-identity, Adorno specifies, designates that ‘concept and . . . thing . . . are not one’ (HTS 70–1, NLII 63). One or more properties of reality elude its conception, or reality lacks properties its conception ascribes to it. Negation as recognition of non-identity highlights ‘the impossibility of capturing in subjective concepts without surplus what is not of the subject’ (AE 147). Evidently, non-identity thinking yields little by way of positive knowledge. Adorno admits that negative, unpositioned meditations cause vertigo (ND 42).¹⁴ Yet he is convinced that as long as reflection can exhibit cognitive failures, including the social limitations of factual

¹³ *Group Experiment*, Adorno emphasises, is not called ‘experiment’ for nothing (GS9.2 378).

¹⁴ Adorno’s 1966 concession might have been motivated by a conversation with Kracauer in 1960: ‘I told Teddie that many of his articles . . . made me just dizzy; that I had often the feeling that other interpretations might be as conclusive . . . I traced . . . my dizziness to the fact that he seemingly deals in substances without, however, actually being attached to any substance. Hence the arbitrariness, the lack of orientation’ (A&K 514).

reconstructions of reality and the shortcomings and conflicts of theoretical analyses, the assertion of non-identity is imperative.

Experiencing society ‘That is little enough’, to use a phrase Adorno (MCP 125) borrows from Bloch (2000: 165). The ‘whole demand of cognition . . . does not consist in mere perceiving, classifying, and calculating but precisely in the determining negation of the respectively immediate’ (DE 20). Yet theory provides few positive results. Adorno’s reflections on the sociology of exchange society, which simultaneously takes place in this society, unearth severe problems from its theoretical dimension. Nevertheless, theoretical analysis has the capacity to sharpen sociology’s focus on social reality. The reciprocity between empirical observation and theoretical interpretation enables sociology to obtain perspectives on phenomena in relation to exchange society and on exchange society itself which are beyond the reach of empirical observation, notwithstanding that these perspectives are open to further scrutiny.

Theoretical negation creates a further opportunity for greater awareness of society. Analyses of the material’s social dimension suggest that society is a force governing subjective thought and the objective world. Reaching for perspectives on phenomena in their social mediation and on the ‘total system’ (PD 32) manifesting in facts, theory also highlights that without interpretation, the material’s social dimension remains opaque. Theory negates the identity – exposes the non-identity – of factual reconstructions and reality. By unsettling facts as flawed because they fail to represent social reality adequately, negation stresses that society holds power over all subjects and objects as well as remaining intangible to immediate observation. Critical thought generates the experience of the ‘[i]mpenetrability and strangeness of the whole . . . which lies beyond the grasp of immediate . . . experience’ (P 89). The subject gains consciousness of exchange society in its closely integrated, frozen state, in which it befalls individuals as omnipresent yet intangible essence. The experience of the contradiction between conceptions of reality and reality involves an experience of the strange and solid world surrounding humans. That is little enough, but it is not nothing.

So little is it, though, that even the experience of society *qua* impenetrable instance is unacceptable as a conclusion. ‘[T]he essential laws of society . . . are more real than the factual, within which they appear and which deceptively conceals them’, but society is neither absolute, nor intransigent. The ‘essential laws . . . shed the conventional attributes of their essentiality [Wesenhaftigkeit]’. Only where negation can proceed to dispute society’s essentiality can it keep contributing to a proper

awareness of exchange society. Here negation reaches the limits of its services to sociology. Disputing the equation of society and essence is not enough: society's 'essential laws ... would have to be named as the negativity, which makes the world the way that it is, brought to its concept' (ND 171). Society would have to be deciphered as an 'antagonistic structure' consisting of 'relationships which are reified and nevertheless [relationships] of living subjects'. 'Where social experience perceives domination', for instance, 'the historical explanation of the latter is the task of critical theory' (SSI 194). Sociology cannot but continue its inquiries into exchange society in close touch with empirical material and in view of its social dimension. 'The estrangement of living humans from the reified social powers could be penetrated only by a theory which derives this estrangement itself from the social conditions' (VSII 676).

Ultimately, sociological theory aims to fulfil a demand Horkheimer and Adorno raise for cognition generally: to decipher empirical materials 'as mediated conceptual moments which are only fulfilled by revealing their social, historical, human meaning' (DE 20). The subjective contributions to establishing empirical material would have to be read as human activity in specific social conditions. The conditions regulating subjective observation – *prima vista* invisible and initially emerging as essential – are not 'ahistorically identical, transcendental, but ... changing and historically comprehensible' (Adorno 1977: 125). Moreover, theory must decipher society inside the single social phenomenon – unobservable and initially experienced as petrified objectivity – as the human product that it is, and 'test ... insights into essence [Wesenseinsichten] against the ... historical conditions under which the phenomenon ... has come into being' (IS 22). The ideas covered in this chapter provide more depth on the theoretical tasks of sociology compared with the considerations in Chapter 1. What re-emerges as sociologically instructive in this context, though, is precisely the double perspective – correspondent with sociology's double character – of society as a petrified, reified, estranged authority which is nonetheless the work of humans and historically transformable.

Theory in sociological research

It is not immediately evident how the methodological considerations above translate into social research practice. A better grasp of the theoretical dimension of Adorno's sociology hinges on understanding the operation of theoretical analysis in his sociological investigations of

specific social phenomena. Several of Adorno's works illustrate this operation. The next two sections draw upon writings from 1938 to 1953 and from the 1960s respectively. This distinction is not primarily chronologically motivated, but reflects differences in the ways in which theoretical analysis manifests itself in the two bodies of text.

Reflections on mass culture

Chapter 2 saw Adorno's American sociology draw materials from various empirical sources. Regardless of their source, Adorno deems such factual reconstructions untrustworthy because they conceal their social dimension. The following passages illustrate his corresponding efforts to discern the sociological material's social dimension with the help of the concepts informing his theory of exchange society. By revealing what the material conceals, theory not only suggests new perspectives on social life but also unsettles the claim of facts to being sound representations of reality.

Theorising radio Adorno's involvement in Lazarsfeld's 1930s radio research highlights the impact of his concern with theoretical analysis on his sociology. The fact that Adorno was 'simply too theoretical' (Jenemann 2007: 18) by Lazarsfeld's standards seems to have contributed significantly to the well-known frictions between the two émigrés. Adorno had crafted theoretical frames around musico-sociological questions (1991a: 29–60), intending to employ them in the project's investigations of radio and listener reactions (CM 218). Lazarsfeld (1941: 2–8) embraced 'administrative research'. This involved empirical research on which types of audiences – given certain attributes, predispositions, habits, circumstances etc. – consumed different media and their contents. Administrative research also sought to observe how media contents were received: whether broadcasts were liked or disliked, how they were understood and responded to, or how they affected people's thinking and behaviour. Such studies were often conducted at the behest of agencies seeking to use radio, newspapers or other media to influence the public. Though a self-described 'European positivist', Lazarsfeld (1941: 14–16; 1968: 271, 322–6) had sympathy for the concerns of Horkheimer's 'Frankfurt group'. He wished for co-operation between critical and administrative sociology, especially between Adorno's theoretical work and empirical research, hoping that the conceptual frames could help in gathering and elucidating data. Adorno found that the sociology he was to contribute to thus granted theory merely a 'supplementary' role, rendering it obsolete once the data were obtained. He could not assent to this (CM 223, 227–8, see also CoM 477). Adorno's objective was a critical

theoretical examination of factual materials, not conceptual guidance for their collection and clarification.¹⁵

Adorno's 'radio physiognomics' begins to flesh out this vision. Both radio music and listener reactions, Adorno argues, are socially mediated. Radio music is a commodity: the impact of compositional standardisation (1941: 17–24; 1945: 210–12, 216–17), repetitive 'plugging' (1941: 27–32) and radio technology (1938: 23–4, 28; 1945: 209; 1979) on music must be understood in relation to the socially dominant exchange principle. This is consistent with Adorno's conviction that productive forces are fettered by social relations (see also CoM 60–1). Standardised, relentlessly plugged, commodified music, he adds, is met with complete recognition, automatic reactions and 'commodity listening', e.g. the exaggerated fascination with priceless instruments or the focus on a series of gustatory passages instead of intellectually active experiences of integrated artistic wholes (1941: 21–4, 32–7; 1945: 211–15). Sociologists gathering empirical material on listeners must simultaneously ask 'in how far . . . subjective reactions of test-persons are . . . spontaneous and immediate . . ., or in how far there stand behind them . . . the dissemination mechanisms and the apparatus's power of suggestion, . . . the objective implications of the media and the material with which the listeners are confronted – and ultimately widely overarching social structures up to that of the whole of society' (CM 220).

No 'treatment of superficial data' can unveil the 'moving forces' behind them (CoM 110). Only theoretical analyses of the material allow sociologists 'to understand [listeners] better than they understand themselves' (1945: 216, see also 1938: 4) and radio better than the facts present it. 'Nothing . . . is "too far-fetched" . . . [T]he more [our statements] transcend the limited and immediate situation and consistently relate it to basic social conditions, the more valuable they are' (CoM 103). Music consumption, Adorno speculates for instance, furthers social integration: pop music's 'soporific' effect distracts listeners from the workday and the economic threats they constantly face; spare-time relaxation is meant to reproduce their labour capacity for capitalist production; and the illusion of free choice covers up the consumers' misery in social dependence (1941: 37–9; 1945: 212, 216). According to Adorno's 'social phenomenology' of standardised hit songs (CM 226), listeners have been trained to prefer the largely major- and minor-related tonal make-up of the music of their childhood surroundings. The industry imitated these musical patterns. Once a song was commercially successful, its model was incessantly

¹⁵ On Adorno's relationship with Lazarsfeld and the rise of administrative research in the USA, see Jenemann 2007: 1–46; see also Morrison 1978; Rose 1978: 97–9.

repeated and became the frozen standard for all hit compositions. The songs' superficial, schematic 'pseudo-individualisations' keep music within those naturalised boundaries of marketability, while nonetheless offering listeners, who would punish lack of variety with slackening consumption, stimuli they perceive as new (1941: 22–6). Plugging – the glamorous presentation and replaying of songs, 'pseudo-expert' discourses on styles and musicians etc. – further ensures that even standardised music is not forgotten the minute it is heard (1941: 27–32). Most of these perspectives on radio phenomena are established by theoretical examinations of the data's hidden social dimension. '[S]ticking to the facts' would be 'illusory' (CoM 104–5).¹⁶

Analysing fascism In 1943, after parting ways with Lazarsfeld, Adorno was still investigating radio material, but his attention had shifted to content analyses of Martin Luther Thomas's speeches. The study was part of Adorno's reaction to the politics of the day. In mid-1930s California, Thomas had 'attempted to launch a religiously framed, politically oriented fascist organization . . . "the Christian American Crusade"' (Cavalletto 2007: 133). As the following two examples illustrate, the Thomas project, too, was informed by Adorno's efforts to penetrate the untrustworthy factual surface theoretically and scrutinise the rhetorical stimuli in view of typical reactions and underlying social dimensions (see CM 237).¹⁷

The study's first part investigates the appeal of Thomas's self-characterisation, e.g. his self-portrayal as a 'great little man', powerful and grand yet impecunious and petty. Adorno explores the allure of this image in relation to the listeners' psyche in capitalism. Listeners are attracted to the great moneyless man, because in the distressing conditions of dependence and estrangement, where people deem themselves at the mercy of 'huge blind economic forces', hearing that even grand personalities face economic insecurities reduces the shamefulness of their own. The orator's appeal for cash further gratifies individuals, because they imagine that despite their exigencies they can support someone significant. Under the illusion that greatness and littleness cohere, even the poor feel 'elevated' (GS9.1 28–33).

Adorno revisited the 'great little man' image in subsequent years, each time with a slightly different analytical emphasis. A 1949 piece points out that the agitator posing as a friendly neighbour takes advantage of people's

¹⁶ See Jenemann 2007: 47–104, for a detailed discussion of Adorno's radio research.

¹⁷ Apostolidis (2000: 71–89) and Cavalletto (2007: 127–71) provide elaborate discussions. See especially Cavalletto's (2007: 155–67) notion of 'theorizing by elucidation'.

desire for 'genuine relationships' in an industrialised society where 'technification and specialization disrupt' interpersonal relations (VSI 283–4). A more elaborate 1951 study reconfigures the problem in Freudian terms. Since in current conditions the subject cannot fulfil its 'ego demands', narcissistic love is precarious. This triggers a displacement of libido: it is no longer the ego, nor the ego-ideal, but the idealised leader, who receives a large part of the energy formerly nourishing self-love.¹⁸ The 'great little man' attracts this energy: his putative grandeur makes him loveable without frustration; his ostensible similarity with his petty listeners allows them to reconcile their remaining traces of self-love with their love for him (SSI 419–21). Identifications among listeners subsequently establish a group following (SSI 417). The leader's followers identify with each other on the basis of sharing the replacement of their ego ideals with the same leader image (SSI 419; Freud 1955: 107–8, 116).

In another passage of the Thomas study, Adorno's quest for critical analysis pushes beyond sociology's methodological and substantive dimension. Thomas, Adorno (GS9.1 114–15, see also SSI 401) emphasises, almost exclusively presents 'opaque, isolated ... images of facts'. The agitator knows that if he engaged in 'consequent, coherent and consistent thinking', namely 'autonomous logical processes', he would not only offer a basis for challenging him to 'those at whom [he] wants to strike', but also defy the incoherent, 'unrelated ... facts' he presents, and he would threaten to undermine his message. Adorno implies that theoretically scrutinising factual material is not a purely sociologico-methodological issue, but that his readers are to reflect upon whatever they are fed as data in their own everyday lives. Critical scrutiny of empirical immediacy supports people's political resistance to fascist propaganda.¹⁹ Adorno, the persecutee in 1943, does not have the luxury of doubting the necessity of such resistance.

Psychological and sociological concepts also guided Adorno's involvement in the research for *The Authoritarian Personality*. In determining personality trends and corresponding 'give-away items' – the very precondition for conducting the empirical study – researchers considered extant data as well as theoretical work (CM 234). For instance, the notion that items expressing 'superstition' indicated a weak ego which has given up on intervening in overpowering conditions and shifted responsibility to 'outside forces beyond one's control' (AP 236) was informed by psychological and social theory. Yet not even the laboriously established data of

¹⁸ See Freud 1955: 109–13, 129–30; 1957: 93–4, 99–100.

¹⁹ The statement 'thinking per se refuses to become ... a tool' (GS9.1 114) constitutes an early formulation of a point that would be significant to *Negative Dialectics* (ND 30).

The Authoritarian Personality were trusted as representations of reality. Only theoretical interpretations could access the material's hidden psychological and social dimensions. '[I]ntended as an empirical investigation', the study, Adorno (SoI 185) states retrospectively, eventually conflicted with the rules of empirical research due to its strong speculative tendencies. For Adorno, it was precisely its theoretical foray into the hidden dimensions of the psychological facts that rendered the project richer in socio-psychological and sociological insights than efforts limited to empirical procedures and materials.

The Authoritarian Personality's 'interpretations', Jahoda (1954: 12) emphasises, 'are performed in terms of psychoanalytic theory'. Turner (2002: 155–8) argues that Adorno treats historical-material conditions underlying the respondents' attitudinal patterns as mere background, instead of critically analysing them. Bauman (2000: 152–3) makes a similar point. Indeed, the study's authors repeatedly warn that their inquiry into personality has yielded only limited insights into social reality (AP 608, 661, 972–6).²⁰ Yet it is relevant for this sociological discussion that in several passages Adorno does attempt to decipher the data's social dimension. Anti-Semitic prejudice, including the distinction 'good Jew/bad Jew' (AP 622–7), he holds, is unrelated to the characteristics of the Jews (AP 609). Stereotypy is a 'means for pseudo-orientation in an estranged world' (AP 622, see also 608). The opacity of contemporary capitalism, which defies people's critical-analytical scrutiny, fosters their ignorance about, and lack of interest in, political matters (AP 658–63; see also Buck-Morss 1977: 183–4). Individuals tackle their confusion with misleading intellectual compasses, which also include political stereotypes (AP 662–9), blaming bureaucrats for all ills (AP 693–5) or ascribing an unrealistic degree of power to politicians (AP 669–71).²¹ This latter issue of 'personalisation', a subjective device for 're-translat[ing] the abstract and impenetrable character of' social relations and conditions 'into . . . living experience', recurs frequently in Adorno's later sociological work (SSI 188, see also CM 63, OL 426, PETG 59–61). One of *The Authoritarian Personality's* central sociological findings is summarised thus: 'The objectification of social processes, their obedience to intrinsic supra-individual laws, seems to result in an intellectual alienation of the individual from society. This alienation is experienced by the individual as

²⁰ It is another matter to have *The Authoritarian Personality* suggest Adorno's retreat from Marxist social analysis, especially since in 1940s America he probably felt under political pressure to veil his Marxist orientation (Rubin 2002: 173–4).

²¹ Low 'fascism'-scorers – Adorno seems to see his political point reinforced – tend to reject labels and reflect on their personal perceptions of the world (AP 644–52).

disorientation, with the concomitant fear and uncertainty . . . [S]tereotypy and personalization can be understood as devices for overcoming this uncomfortable state of affairs' (AP 618). The 'industrial standardization of innumerable phenomena of modern life', Adorno adds, partly explains why 'stereotypical thinking' is so common today (AP 665). Here society's quasi-autonomous operation, social petrification, estrangement and the homogenising force of commodity exchange are foregrounded as conditions for the respondents' attitudes. This is consistent with Adorno's critical theory of capitalism – outlined in Chapter 1 and revisited in Chapter 4 below – as a coagulated, estranged totality generating confusion and fear, and as an encompassing context of exchange relations adjusting thought to the identity principle. Transforming the potentially fascist personality, the authors conclude, hinges on 'chang[ing] . . . the total organization of society' (AP 975).

Stars under scrutiny During 1952–3, Adorno worked for the Californian Hacker Foundation. The foundation was linked to a clinic interested in psychiatric, psychological and socio-psychological research, which Adorno sought to 'accentuat[e] . . . sociologically' (GS9.2 11). Adorno's main production was the aforementioned qualitative content analysis of astrology, focused on the stars column of the 'right wing' *Los Angeles Times* (SDE 56). Like earlier studies, Adorno's interpretations of the texts employed psychoanalytical and sociological concepts – including his theory of the culture industry (DE 94–136) and occultism (SDE 172–80) – for tackling the data's hidden social dimension.

A selection of passages illustrates this.²² Although, Adorno concedes, the column's astral ideology is ultimately irrational, people's 'susceptibility' to it 'is kept awake by certain social and psychological conditions' (SDE 49). The blindly reproduced, reified, solidified whole of capitalism generates the experience of society as arbitrary, daunting fate. Reading astrology mollifies this experience. The projection of the fateful social system onto the stars lends it 'higher . . . dignity and justification', while 'the idea that the stars, if one only reads them correctly, offer some advice, mitigates the . . . fear of the inexorability of social processes' (SDE 57–8). The narcissist is particularly excited by this. 'To him, astrology, just as other irrational creeds like racism, provides a short cut by bringing the complex to a handy formula and offering . . . the pleasant gratification that he who feels . . . excluded from educational privileges nevertheless belongs to the minority of those . . . "in the know"' (SDE 61).

²² Bernstein (in Adorno 1991a: 12–16) and Witkin (2003: 68–82) discuss further aspects of the study's substance.

The ‘promise of help . . . granted by a superhuman agency’ also ameliorates the misery of the socially ‘*dependent*, who find themselves incessantly in situations which they cannot cope with by their own powers’ (SDE 74). The column’s ‘soothing overtone . . . reassure[s] the reader . . . that “everything will be fine,” overcoming his apprehensions by establishing some magical confidence in the good turn of events’ (SDE 76). Extra gratification ensues from astrology’s message that solving the predicaments of life is exclusively up to the individual and his observation of the stars’ – often practical, ‘down to earth’ (see SDE 72–3) – advice on how to deal with himself in the world (SDE 78–9). Astrology is by no means the harmless aberration it may appear to be at first sight: by giving the status quo ideological legitimacy, the astrology column encourages readers to adapt and to integrate.

Adorno’s theoretical analysis of the hidden social dimension of a range of further items reveals that promoting conformity constitutes astrology’s ‘*over-all rule*’ (SDE 80). The column’s temporal dimension is particularly effective. Exchange society requires individuals to function both as workers and as consumers. Astrology offers its readers a biphasic guide – purportedly attuned to a cosmic rhythm – for reconciling these antinomies. Work tasks, especially putatively necessary but senseless chores, atone for pleasure and are assigned to the a.m.; play and pleasure reward work and are assigned to the p.m. Readers gladly accept this orientation device as a natural reference point. Their performance for exchange is secured: the a.m./p.m. plan neither allows production to spoil consumption nor consumption to distract from production’s meaningless machine-like operations (SDE 89–101).

On closer scrutiny, however, the formulaic astral prescription of various modes of happiness only permits pleasure that ‘serves . . . *some ulterior purpose of . . . self promotion*’ (SDE 101). A jolly appearance conduces to being deemed successful; attending parties, sprees and trips expands one’s network; accepting invitations (whether you like it or not) serves to maintain one’s status; even romances can push one’s career. Just like the functional orgies in Huxley’s novel ensnare individuals in the apparatus of the Brave New World (SDE 102–3), fun, although a p.m. activity, serves a.m.’s labour and unites the subject with society’s productivist imperative.

These passages display Adorno’s doubts that sociological material discloses its social dimension and his efforts to scrutinise data as symptoms of social tendencies with the help of his theory of exchange society’s weightiest aspects: solidification, estrangement, dependence, integration, exchange principle (SDE 153–66). Shedding light on what the material hides, these theoretical analyses persistently unsettle its

cognitive value. In the final section of his study, Adorno states: 'just as adherents of philosophical empiricism seem to be more susceptible for organized secondary superstition than speculative thinkers, extreme empiricism, teaching absolute obedience of the mind to given data, "facts," has no principle such as the idea of reason, by which to distinguish the possible from the impossible'. A 'mentality' develops which is 'often no longer able to resist mythological temptations' (SDE 158). Adorno associates the social researcher's trust in empirical data, conceived as an uncritical belief in factual reconstructions which hide their social dimension, with the superstitious view of the world in terms of astral 'facts', which Adorno has also just presented as glossing over social trends. His sociological work in America thus closes with an intensely provocative appeal to mistrust socially limited sociological data and examine them theoretically.

The *theoretical* dimension of 'Stars Down to Earth' underlines why 'content analysis' is no misnomer for Adorno's sociological engagement with texts. His *empirical* treatment of documents seems more affinitive with the procedures of discourse analysis. Language, discourse analysts emphasise, is no mere epiphenomenon but a form of social action (Gill 2000: 174–5). Even astrological writings, Adorno concurs, fulfil important psychological and social functions. What discourse analysts tend to deny, however, is that texts can be 'a pathway to some other reality' (Gill 2000: 175). They insist on studying 'the text in its own right' (Gill 2000: 177). Content analysts, by contrast, regard texts not only as influencing the social world, but simultaneously as a 'medium of expression' of prevalent 'worldviews, values, attitudes, opinions, prejudices and stereotypes' (Bauer 2000: 133–4). Content analysis means analysing these contexts through texts. Adorno treats astrological literature as an expression of the intellectual and social conditions of commodity capitalism. The sociological analysis of texts involves ascertaining these conditions, which, albeit produced and reproduced by human actions, including speaking and writing, have come to operate as if they were independent. Social conditions shape these human actions in turn.

Results or reciprocity? Vis-à-vis capitalist conditions recalcitrant to decipherment, theoretical assertions, Adorno warns, must be viewed with circumspection. By tackling the material's social dimension, theoretical analysis unsettles the material and provides instructive perspectives on phenomena in social mediation and on exchange society. But these perspectives are rarely exhaustive of the matter and often resist reconciliation. Theory does not amount to a satisfactory explanation or conclusive

decryption of social phenomena. Their investigation must continue. This means conducting further empirical research, engaging with new material, which demands theoretical scrutiny in turn. Theory and observation enter into a reciprocal relation.

It is difficult to identify this trajectory in Adorno's American sociology. His interpretations appear to claim an unwarranted degree of definiteness, glossing over the problems of theoretical sociological analysis presented by his methodological work. Relentlessly critical of sociological material, Adorno's interpretations, it seems, do not then enter into a reciprocal relation with new data. He deciphers new material with his established analytical frameworks or new ideas. But instances where he fundamentally challenges his theoretical assertions before proceeding to re-engage with new data appear to be rare. His theoretical assertions read like statements fancying themselves as representations of the material's final truth in the form of a theory of exchange society. In the Thomas study, psychoanalytic and particularly social theory certainly had 'primacy' over the material (Cavalletto 2007: 164–5). Adorno's radio writings even contain a list of 'axioms' about capitalist commodity society (1945: 210–11). Did Adorno grant theoretical assertions the status of conclusions – perhaps in reaction to an American scientific milieu which he felt (CM 242) overvalued empirical material and downgraded theory to refutable hypotheses?

This question requires a careful critical response. Adorno denies that his analyses have reached conclusions and states the need for continued investigation in relation to all the studies discussed. The radio writings are described as 'models' for further empirical inquiry. New material could 'correct' – whereby he seems to mean 'refine' rather than 'falsify' – 'the theorems' (CM 227). Thus Adorno at least intended to stay true to his announcement to Lazarsfeld (A&H2 427) that the 'dialectical method' would maintain 'a reciprocal relation' – an 'interdependence' (1938: i), 'interw[eaving]' (1938: 6) or 'interplay' (CoM 446) – between theory and empirical research. The Thomas study, reports Adorno's wife, was also never regarded as exhaustive or conclusive. I mentioned the different theoretical perspectives on the 'great little man' Adorno held over the years. He might have denied that they amount to a complete theoretical framework. Adorno, Gretel Adorno continues, understood the study of the Thomas transcripts as a text-based counterpart of *The Authoritarian Personality* (A&H4 758), which continues investigations on the basis of new empirical inquiries into subjects. *The Authoritarian Personality's* theoretical considerations, the authors caution, should not be read as conclusive either – even if they appear plain – but 'as hypotheses for further research' (AP 604). For Bonß (1983: 215), they are not 'results' but

“open” offers of interpretation [Interpretationsangebote]: ‘uncertain and preliminary’, but capable of providing new ‘perspective[s]’. ‘Stars Down to Earth’ might be read as investigations of some of the theoretical ideas informing Adorno’s earlier studies on fascism and stereotypy with reference to new – namely textual – data (see Crook in SDE 13–24).²³ The astrology piece’s ‘results’, too, ‘must by necessity be regarded as tentative’, awaiting more empirical material, especially on readers (SDE 54).²⁴ Given Adorno’s denials that his theoretical assertions are final and plans to conduct further empirical research, it might be wrong to construe that he intended those assertions as conclusions, inconsistent with his methodological warnings of the precariousness of theoretical reflections on, and in, exchange society. Nonetheless, many theoretical statements in Adorno’s American sociology, articulating his perspectives on phenomena in their social mediation and on the social whole, ring as conclusive. This seems to be partly due to the fact that most of his plans to re-examine the theoretical problems persistently with reference to new data remained unrealised. As a result, some criticisms of this part of Adorno’s *oeuvre* are hard to dismiss. Witkin (2003: 117) complains that Adorno’s radio research ultimately mainly ‘illustrated his theory’.²⁵ Kellner (2002: 99–103) argues that Adorno’s failure to consider artefacts of oppositional subcultures from outside the culture industry, which express rebellion over conformity, render his theoretical interpretations of popular music one-sided. For Hyman and Sheatsley (1954: 102), Adorno’s analytical sections in *The Authoritarian Personality* exempt ‘judgements’ from ‘scientific restraint’ and let the theoretical ‘diagnoses’ run ‘rampant’. Crook (SDE 25–8) questions the value of Adorno’s statements on listener and reader reactions because they are based on studies of radio speeches and astrological literature, rather than of listeners and readers,²⁶ and notes Adorno’s neglect of the gender dimensions of those reactions due to his overreliance on Freudian theory.

A sociology in which theory is inconclusive and requires renewed confrontation with data which are always limited and subject to renewed

²³ *Group Experiment* could also be seen as developing ideas from Adorno’s earlier fascism research in relation to new data.

²⁴ Wiggershaus’s (1994: 458) criticism that Adorno ‘did not mention any objective data’ is misleading. Adorno regarded the column’s text as empirical – which is what Wiggershaus appears to mean by ‘objective’ – data. Strictly speaking, for Adorno data are never ‘objective’ but untrustworthy subjective reconstructions (see Bonß 1983: 209).

²⁵ Lazarsfeld’s (A&H2 436) accusation that Adorno ‘disregard[ed] ... evidence’ is problematic: for Adorno, nothing empirical is evidence, neither as verification (e.g. PD 69) nor as falsification of theory. Adorno sometimes (AP 603) mentions empirical data as ‘evidence’, but clearly does not treat them as such.

²⁶ See also Honneth 1991: 81, and Cavalletto 2007: 167.

theoretical critique has difficulties offering positive results. Although some of Adorno's American sociological writings read as if theory did not face these difficulties, occasional emphases on negation are noticeable. His radio research, Adorno cautions, is an 'experiment in theory' (1938: 2). Some media analysts answer the question how radio, music and listeners interact by claiming that radio brings high culture to ever more people (1979: 110–13). Adorno's 'The Radio Symphony' presents no comprehensive alternative result. He makes the specific point that radio transmission – and repetition 'ad nauseam' (1972: 128) – transforms symphonic music and its reception (1979: 113–35). This enables Adorno mainly to challenge the conclusion that radio is an adequate means of fostering conscious experiences of the original works and to question the power of empirical records of listener reactions to underpin that conclusion (1979: 112, 135–9). *A Social Critique of Radio Music* chiefly proposes a rival approach to administrative research. Administrative research answers questions like 'How can radio bring good music to large numbers of people?' with reference to data on listener responses to stimuli. Adorno steers clear of answering this question. Since radio transmission infringes on 'good music'; and since in capitalist conditions, where music is commodified, the masses, socialised into commodity listening, are incapable of genuinely experiencing 'good music' (1945: 208–11), the very possibility to achieve the stated aim is in doubt. His radio writings, Adorno explains, focus on negating the 'untrue image' of music on the radio and exposing the social conditions of this 'untruth' (CM 226). *The Authoritarian Personality's* 'gain' lies not in the 'absolute conclusiveness of its positive insights' either, 'but primarily in the conception of the problem'. It is a 'pilot study', 'explor[ing] ... possibilities' rather than offering 'irrefutable results' (CM 235). Horkheimer's (1985: 263) statement that his friend's 'sociological research ... contravenes empiricism no less than conclusive theory' is perhaps one-sided, but it captures some of the orientation of this research.

Adorno's work in the USA between 1938 and 1953 is commonly read as his most exemplary sociological output. The American studies demonstrate Adorno's engagement with, and simultaneous distrust in, empirical material as well as showing his efforts to theoretically scrutinise the data's social dimension and undermine their cognitive status with the help of his theory of exchange society. However, these writings are not the most striking illustrations of the reciprocity and negativity of sociological analysis he was shown to envision above. For more thoroughgoing illustrations of the theoretical-analytical procedure in social research – including the elements of reciprocity and negativity – outlined in Adorno's

methodological writings, one must turn to works that are less often deemed central to his sociological *oeuvre*.

The rhythm of analysis

Adorno sees his writings as resistant to *résumé* (SSI 574).²⁷ The following discussions do not aim for summaries. Many of Adorno's arguments are so multifaceted and dependent on how he articulates them that synopsis runs the risk of covering up substantive complexity.²⁸ The objective is to consider another selection of Adorno's 1960s *Critical Models* to illustrate a specific aspect of his late sociology. The focus will be on highlighting how these texts manifest – more comprehensively than the American pieces – the elements of theoretical analysis discussed above: its role and *modus operandi*, its reciprocity and negativity, its experiential potential and its problems. Yet illustration is impossible without some engagement with the texts' argumentative contents, which, if it is not to distract from this discussion's thematic focus, must be synoptic. I hope to counterbalance the unavoidable disadvantages of condensing Adorno's argumentation by exposing a less transparent layer of these writings: the unswerving operation – underneath the web of diverse substantive points – of a persistent analytical strategy for sociological examinations of exchange society.

Analytical models In 1965, asked to contribute to a radio programme, Adorno wrote 'On the Question: "What Is German?"' The critic of stereotypy would not have asked this question himself – it was set by the station (CM 312). Instead of trying to resolve it, Adorno replies by mercilessly problematising it. More precisely put, Adorno treats the question as well as the facts putatively justifying and answering it as empirical material demanding investigation. This is consistent with the trend in his late sociology to draw material from personal encounters with social life's details. Of course, personal encounters do not escape the social limitations of observation either. Their materials bear hidden a characteristic twofold social dimension. Adorno seeks to analyse this dimension with the help of his theory of exchange society.

Adorno cannot even begin to reply to the question 'What is German?' without reflecting on the social conditions of reifying consciousness in their impact on the question and on the subject's answer. Both, he argues, adhere to typically capitalist identity thinking: the question by invoking a German essence subsuming the supposed nation's people, any answer by

²⁷ This is partly why Adorno is so hard to criticise (Kellner 2002: 105).

²⁸ See Chapter 5.

stereotyping. Such thought easily progresses towards a dangerous 'collective narcissism', idealising the in-group and denouncing the out-group (CM 205–6). The very possibility of pinpointing specifically German traits is thus suspicious.

Images of German uniqueness, Adorno continues, often highlight the nation's intellectual excellence and its people's reputation to 'do something for its own sake'. Kant, Goethe and Beethoven challenge the theoretical negation of German uniqueness. Their observable distinctness hints at that of German intellectual culture. Yet reflecting on the social dimension of this observation suggests that it is merely guided by commodity thinking, which makes of these figures German 'possessions' and 'brand[s]'. Germany's intellectual achievements require further scrutiny, namely in terms of their social dimension. The delay in capitalist development rendered Germany's cultural production somewhat resistant to commodification. The formula 'for its own sake' is appropriate, because the nation's intellectual life 'understood itself' as a 'being in-itself' not as 'an object of exchange'. Notwithstanding Adorno's initial scepticism, here German culture does seem to stand out, albeit historically, rather than, as it seems on the surface, naturally (CM 206–7). And even this insight is inconclusive. The German intellect was not entirely delivered up to commodity exchange, but it was still 'for-something-else', the state. As the idealist 'pathos of the absolute' indicates, it conspired with the political desire to subjugate the world. From this angle, the German intellect is as socialised as the intellect elsewhere (CM 208–9).

Yet surely the undeniable empirical fact of National Socialism alleviates all theoretical doubts about German uniqueness. Given that Germany was thinking in those absolutist, authoritarian terms, Adorno concedes, it is no accident that Hitler came to power there. Yet from another angle, Adorno also scrutinises and unsettles this fact, underlining that fascism is a 'socio-econom[ic]', not a national problem and therefore not uniquely German. 'Such complexity', he insists, 'discourages any unambiguous answer to the question', 'What is German?' (CM 209). This is not a shortcoming of the analysis: social reality itself defies the sociologist's theoretical decryption.

Seeking to avoid skating over the difficulty of the matter for the sake of definite results, Adorno starts over. He resorts to his personal observations of Germanness with a 'more modes[t]' question: 'Why did I return?' The fact that the refugee returned to a country that had slaughtered millions and would have slain him too suggests that there must be something uniquely attractive about it. Adorno immediately qualifies this. Renewed reflections on the social conditions influencing his decision imply he may have just 'identifi[ed] with the familiar'. Also, his opposition

to the dominant powers before leaving made it equally difficult to integrate abroad, and the catastrophe made it imperative to return and struggle against its recurrence. This makes Adorno wary of subscribing to the idea of German specificity suggested by his observations. Back on the empirical level, however, Adorno concedes that Germany's resistance to the American attitude to 'keep smiling' distinguishes German culture. Simultaneously, he invites readers to reflect critically on the social dimension of this point: the American 'view of life' conceals the threatening contradictions of capitalist society – but so does the belief in a pure intellectual culture. The distinction between a German intellectual *Kultur* and an American 'culture' of 'refrigerators' may well be unfair (CM 209–10).

Counter to this theoretical assertion, recourse to the empirical domain of personal observations yields another suggestion of German cultural distinction. As mentioned, Adorno considers it a significant observation that in the USA, in contrast to Germany, his texts were edited to the point of being unrecognisable. Scrutinising this observation in a wider socio-historical context does not lead Adorno to dispute it. He surmises that Germany's 'economic backwardness', compared with the Anglo-Saxon world, left an exceptional 'refuge' for the intellect where it can, for now, hide from integration and commodification (CM 210–11).²⁹

Theoretical sociological analysis manifests itself similarly in Adorno's 1969 essay 'Free Time'. Collected in *Catchwords*, this piece continues his work on the culture industry. Adorno sets out from a personal observation of a quotidian detail. He finds the question 'What is your hobby?' difficult: 'I have no hobby. Not that I'm a workaholic ...', but reading and music are 'integral' to 'my existence' and defy the label 'hobby'. '[C]onversely, my work, philosophical and sociological production and university teaching, ... has been so blissful to me that I am unable to express it within ... opposition to free time'. Judged purely by his perception of the question, Adorno sees no difference between work and leisure. However, he concedes that such perceptions are untrustworthy and calls for reflection on the conditions shaping them. The distinction between work and spare time collapses only for someone granted such rare relative professional autonomy. The majority who depend on taking any job regardless of its content will have an alternative view (CM 168–9).

²⁹ Elsewhere, Adorno (1991a: 121) undermines his point that this was specific to Germany, arguing that Austrian and French radical art was only possible because in the early 1900s the 'administered world and social modernity' had not yet seized these countries completely.

Adorno subsequently proceeds to the empirical differences between work and free time. Similarly to the question 'Have you not been on holiday?', posed by co-workers astonished at one's pale skin in the summer, 'What is your hobby?' sounds like a directive that one must have one. Moreover, just as it is commonly accepted that production ought not to be distracted by play, people agree that leisure must not require any effort reminiscent of work. Theoretical decoding of these observations initially supports the implied distinction, albeit differently from how the co-workers perceive it. In capitalism's 'functional system', the separation between work and leisure testifies to the widespread yearning to escape quotidian boredom and conventions (CM 168–70). Where individuals spend their days working in conditions beyond their control, 'free time' intends a period free from that (CM 167).

Upon further reflection, the distinction between leisure and work collapses again. Yet the theoretical perspective Adorno offers here retains nothing of the blissful perception of their unity he set out from. Leisure products are commodities, dominated by the same exchange and profit principle that dominates work (CM 169–71). Indeed, capitalism is typified not only by the reification of labour and its products as commodities (CM 169), but also by humans treating themselves like things after work: in sunbathing 'merely for the sake of the tan ... the fetish character of commodities seizes people ...; they become fetishes to themselves' (CM 170). Many spare-time activities, albeit superfluous and uncreative, play on the pretence of real spontaneity, mollifying people's recognition that their productive capacities are fettered and their ability to transform the 'petrified relations' limited (CM 172–3). In reality, leisure as relaxation and sports reproduces labour power through rest and through enhancing fitness and team skills: leisure is fused with the workday (CM 169–70, 173–4).³⁰

Further empirical observation also implies the sameness of work and free time. Some leisure activities, Adorno points out, bore their participants as much as work does. The analysis of its social dimension suggests that boredom after work reflects the ever-same world of commercially determined leisure, while boredom at work reflects the standardised tasks of a meticulously divided production process. Boredom is further fuelled by people's notion that they cannot transform their lives in the overpowering social conditions and that they must even surrender their imagination in order to adjust to those conditions for survival (CM 171–2). The complexities created by the changing perspectives on free time in

³⁰ See Morgan 1988 on Adorno's views on sports.

exchange society are evident. A puzzled Adorno admits: 'In the age of truly unparalleled social integration, it is difficult to make out at all, what in humans would be other than functionally determined' (CM 167).

Full accounts of the arguments in Adorno's theoretical analyses would require longer discussions of the two texts. I aimed to distil passages that illustrate his efforts to scrutinise empirical data with a view to their social dimension and with a view to what they express of exchange society. Adorno persistently examines to what extent factual reconstructions are merely the upshot of the social conditions of observation and how phenomena themselves are socially characterised. This operation repeatedly 'strikes' the material in which these dimensions hide like lightning and vaporises the factual material's claim to represent reality faithfully.

Reciprocity and negativity Upon reading Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Kracauer wrote to his friend:

Really, Teddie, . . . when I found an interpretation one-sided or it seemed dissatisfactory to me for some other reason, a passage followed shortly thereafter which revised or added to your first position . . . It was . . . as though you had been looking over my shoulder, or even into me, smiled about my scruples, and held out to me the next member of the thought, a thought which already anticipated, and mostly superseded still, what I wanted to say to you. (A&K 456)

Kracauer expresses a sociologico-methodological problem which is more serious than his formulations suggest. This problem is visible in Adorno's *Critical Models*. His reflections on the material's social dimension offer several distinct perspectives on the respective phenomena in their social mediation and glimpses of exchange society: Adorno's debate on 'Germanness' tackles intellectual socialisation, for instance; 'Free Time' broaches reification and commodification. Yet the theoretical considerations offer no answers. In response to the question 'What is German?', this is a political point. By arguing that even the putative 'fact' that there exists a German character awaiting description is dubious, Adorno turns his reply against precisely the classificatory identity thinking that raised the question. Adorno's constantly revised statements convey the dilemma that in opaque social conditions, society, and therefore single socialised phenomena too, resist complete decipherment and determination. His essays, Adorno warns, are discontinuous because reality is ruptured. Their 'insights' not only 'confirm' and 'multiply', but also relativise and 'qualify [einschränken: restrain, limit] themselves' (NLI 16). Neither facts nor theory are conclusive. The investigations must continue. This requires renewed engagement with empirical observation, whose socially limited material inevitably faces theoretical scrutiny in turn. The two poles

enter into a reciprocal relationship. Whereas Adorno's American sociology chiefly intended such reciprocity, the texts here realise it.

This can be made explicit. Gillespie (1995: 56) hears in Adorno's writing 'strong rhythmic elements', 'regular rhythmic units', parts of sentences with different 'rhythmic values'. Listening closely to the 'rhythm' of Adorno's *Critical Models* is telling in this context. Yet although 'rhythm' is a fitting term, I mean something different by it. The rhythmic elements decisive here are not parts of sentences, but two kinds of passages: those representing the empirical and those representing the theoretical dimension of Adorno's investigations. Charting the rhythm of Adorno's models suggests that he constantly shifts back and forth between those two dimensions, concluding in neither, and thus sustaining their reciprocal relation – all the while pursuing the same issue.

'What Is German?', to exemplify this, begins by unsettling the empirical suggestion that German intellectual culture is unique with reference to the hidden social conditions suffusing the observing subject. Adorno's return to the empirical dimension of his compatriots' intellectual achievements challenges that reflection. His examination of these achievements in light of their underlying social dimension is inconclusive, confirming German cultural uniqueness in one respect, denying it in two others. The investigation continues on the empirical level, where the obvious fact of German fascism undermines the theoretical denial of German uniqueness. Yet Adorno's reflections are once more inconclusive, suggesting German uniqueness from one angle, questioning it from another. With a narrower question in mind, the investigation continues, and Adorno returns to the empirical level. There he seems to observe German uniqueness, but disclosing the observation's social content unsettles it. Another empirical observation challenges the theoretical denial of German uniqueness yet again, whereas renewed reflection negates that observation. Perplexingly, and against the latter negation, renewed confrontations with the empirical reality of German intellectual life suggest its peculiarity, as do Adorno's subsequent interpretations.

Notwithstanding assurances that his essays have renounced the 'ideal' of 'indubitable certainty' (NLI 13), in Adorno's later sociological texts, theory still regularly seems to have the last word over empiry. 'What Is German?' and 'Free Time' constantly shift between the two rhythmic elements, but the empirical passages are usually short and rapid, the analytical passages long and elaborate. Significantly, though, and in contrast with Adorno's American texts, the longer reflections regularly come to an abrupt halt. Adorno leaves no doubt that the phenomena in their social mediation are not fully decoded. His theoretical perspectives on the material's social dimension often even conflict with one another, such as

in the simultaneous confirmation and denial of a socially determined German cultural uniqueness. The theoretical statements may sound conclusive in isolation. It is just that this is true of several scarcely reconcilable statements, so that the reflections end up highlighting each other's inconclusiveness. Accordingly, the investigation always continues, pursuing the same question on the empirical level. For instance, where Adorno overtly concedes the 'ambiguity' of his reflections halfway through 'What Is German?', he immediately returns to the empirical problem of 'Germanness' with his more 'modest question'. Also, in both texts the observations occasionally challenge theoretical statements, notwithstanding that the observations are, in turn, always met with theoretical scrutiny – usually with the scrutiny of analyses which are unsatisfactory and forced to re-engage with empiry. If their textual rhythm is amplified, Adorno's models illustrate the tendency in his sociological examinations of exchange society to relate the empirical and theoretical levels reciprocally.

Correspondingly, these texts display the tendency towards negation. The different theoretical perspectives challenge each other without resolution, as well as relentlessly negating every empirical observation's claim to truth. Theoretical conclusions and trustworthy facts being unavailable, the studies do not offer much by way of positive results. In the first piece, theory is as effective in negating the view that German culture is unique as it is equally in negating the view that it is not. Through the ambiguities in his writing, Adorno highlights social reality's withdrawal from identification. Similarly, theory calls into doubt both the distinction between free time and work, as well as their sameness. Adorno can only presume that if there still is a dimension of life exempted from production, it will be as good as indiscernible.

It would be myopic to pillory Adorno for failing to master these shortcomings without noting that they are consistent with his methodological arguments about the socially conditioned limitations of sociological analysis.³¹ Adorno's perpetual demonstration of his failure to grasp social reality empirically and theoretically certainly raises questions about the viability of sociology *qua* examination of exchange society. Yet, partly for this reason, sociological analysis remains consequential. Not only do the investigations offer various – however problematic – perspectives on exchange society and its single phenomena, but negations also persistently expose non-identity: the incongruence between the socialised subject's factual and theoretical conceptions of social reality on the one hand and social reality itself on the other. In the rhythm of reflection of his critical

³¹ For Adorno, a presentation of the failed world *in* the failed world will ultimately fail (see Geulen 2001: 49–50).

models one can hear the reverberations of Adorno's sociological non-identity thinking. According to Adorno, the ensuing recognition of the resistance of social reality – which mediates sociology's empirical facts, research phenomena and theoretical procedures – to sociological inquiry constitutes a methodological as well as substantive sociological insight.

Dense experience *Minima Moralia* contains an apposite description of the process of thinking that operates in the analyses explored here. Thought is not 'a discursive progression from stage to stage', but neither do 'insights fall from Heaven'. 'Rather, one cognises in a network of prejudices, intuitions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions, and exaggerations': they form the subject's 'dense ... experience' (MM 80). A passage in Adorno's *Sociological Writings*, referring to the reciprocity between empiry and theory in the sociological thought process, specifies: 'Solely a combination, difficult to anticipate theoretically, of fantasy and flair for the facts reaches up to the ideal of experience' (SSI 185–6).

Though none of them are satisfactory, theoretical engagements with empirical sociological data enhance the experience of exchange society by offering various perspectives on it. What is intriguing, if less obvious, is that negation generates a further dimension of the experience of society. In the studies cited, reflection relentlessly unsettles empirical material, highlighting that factual reconstructions do not trustworthily represent the reality they claim to be representing. Reflection does so by repeatedly suggesting that the material bears a social dimension which is not immediately accessible. The theoretical considerations come to no conclusions either. Society and the phenomena mediated by it are not fully accessible even to theory. This shows in the text, which constantly undergoes abrupt stops, sudden ruptures and unexpected changes in direction, rather than settling with solutions to the puzzles at issue. Adorno conveys the experience of a social whole which, albeit determining all thought and single phenomena, confronts people as an impenetrable instance. Negation generates – and, in writing, expresses³² – the experience of estrangement, of a society that is so fossilised that it befalls individuals as intransigent essence. What Adorno once said of Benjamin in a different context applies to his own reflections here: he 'look[s] at all objects so closely, until they bec[o]me strange and as strange ones g[i]ve away their secret' (VSI 169). 'Through complete estrangement, the social relation reveals itself to be blind second nature, which is what' – here Adorno in turn adopts a Benjaminian image – 'the mythical

³² See Chapter 5.

landscape used to be, into whose allegorical image the unattainable and unapproachable congeals' (NLI 179).

Positivist sociology, Adorno alleges, pins the fact down as 'that which is the case', without theoretically situating it in the social dynamic which conditioned it and within which it operates. The fact is severed from its 'historical implications' and 'presented as something timeless' and 'unalterable' (IS 148–9). Veblen provides a sociological counterpoint. He deciphers a range of inconspicuous cultural phenomena as manifestations of dominant social institutions, especially of the demonstration of 'power' through 'conspicuous consumption' (IS 146). Veblen allows contemporary cultural phenomena to speak of their 'prehistory', notably of the perpetuation of institutions that already characterised the barbarian age. This orientation of Veblen's work is certainly evident when *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994b) is read alongside *The Instinct of Workmanship* (1994a).³³ It is also evident that in order to remain consistent with his criticism of positivism and remark on Veblen, Adorno cannot settle with his theoretical perspectives on capitalism's 'mythical landscape'. Indeed, Adorno's theoretical investigations never articulate surrender before their tasks. He exhibits, but does not accept as final, the discrepancies in his examinations, making ever renewed efforts to grasp the matter more adequately in social terms. Adorno's efforts display his struggle to negate the socially conditioned, sociologically instructive, but simultaneously unsatisfactory, estranged perspective of an opaque society *qua* impenetrable instance. Theoretical analysis echoes the double character of Adorno's sociology. Negation registers the petrification of society, but the notion that society is inherently inscrutable, natural, essential is also negated. Interpretation must persevere so as to unearth the congealed oppositions emerging from theoretical analysis as well as to dissolve what has coagulated: to decipher, in close touch with the facts, the social whole and its single phenomena as what they are, the historically changeable affair of human beings.

The texts examined in this section are only partly successful at fulfilling this analytical aim. In 'Free Time' (CM 174–5, see also IS 152–3), Adorno presents interpretations of data established by an Institute survey of people's reactions to media representations of an aristocratic wedding. Against the expectation that the culture industry 'utterly dominates' consciousness and encourages 'personalization', it was found that – in their thinking – individuals had escaped control to some extent and digressed from conventional uncritical thought patterns. This suggests the

³³ In other writings, Adorno is more critical of Veblen (P 75–94, PD 108).

possibility that humans might bring about wider social transformations.³⁴ But otherwise, the models in focus here, not unlike the texts cited in Chapter 1, tend to portray the individuals who maintain society as though they were compelled to do so by objective forces. Recall Adorno's discussion of sport, which trains its unsuspecting participants for the production process. In 'What Is German?', Adorno makes references to the historical genesis of the social conditions against which the question is read. Overall, however, society's historical transformability is indicated allusively, abstractly or through negating society's appearance as an invariant object. Society, Adorno reiterates in *Negative Dialectics*, has developed 'the semblance that what is is inescapable and thereby legitimated'. He insists that it is possible to 'see through' this 'total society' and show how 'threadbare' its 'apologia' actually is. But his advice on how theory might tackle this task is characteristically brief: it would require 'the physiognomics of the total condition and of the extended individual data' and 'the analysis of economic structural transformations' (ND 265). The difficulties with fulfilling one of their own objectives – with deciphering social reality more explicitly and concretely as a historical, alterable context generated and maintained by humans – are beginning to take shape as a persistent problem of Adorno's sociological analyses of exchange society.

Recalcitrant relevance

Outhwaite questions the dismissal of the concept of society as obsolete proposed by postmodern and globalisation theories. He defends a 'modest conception of society' (2006: 108). 'Society is the product of sociation, the actions of individuals in structured contexts' (2006: 95); it is 'a condition and a continuously reproduced outcome of action' involving material as well as cognitive practices. This constitutes 'a real definition of society' (2006: 91). It allows for conceptions of 'social structures and mechanisms' if 'they explain satisfactorily ... the observable phenomena of social life' (2006: 87). One of Outhwaite's (2006: 86) sources is Adorno's concept of society. According to Outhwaite (2006: 82–3), Adorno evokes an 'imperceptible yet ... real structure determining ... concrete human actions' without 'depreciat[ing] ... the individual' and emphasises 'the interpenetration of thought and reality'. By relating Adorno's concept of society to idealist and realist models, Outhwaite

³⁴ Cook (1996: 65–73) cites this and other passages to underline Adorno's awareness of ruptures in the culture industry's control of consciousness.

offers an original angle on Adorno's concept and its potential significance for contemporary sociology.

It might be interjected that arguments for the continuing relevance of Adorno's sociology which involve no criticisms of its most problematic components end up suggesting that his sociological work – tied, of course, to the project of investigating capitalist exchange society – would prove irrelevant if it were exposed in detail. Adorno's conception of capitalist society as a petrified structure which constrains individuals while being reproduced by them alone is scarcely modest, but mediates two extremes. Outhwaite (2006: 85) rightly states that Adorno's 'dialectical theory of society' seeks to do 'justice to . . . contradictory moments'. A conception which involves contradictions, in turn, constitutes a troublesome resource for attempts to define social reality. As I highlighted above and in Chapter 1, while Adorno theoretically investigates the social structures and mechanisms underpinning empirical phenomena, the concurrent endeavour to explain phenomena exhaustively or conclusively encounters tremendous obstacles. One of the key contributions – or challenges – of Adorno's sociology of an omnipresent yet persistently elusive capitalist whole seems to be his demonstration of the difficulties sociologists face in their struggles to define contemporary society and explain particular phenomena.

Scholars aware of the dilemmas Adorno's sociology encounters may see them as occasions for denying its contemporary significance. Critical theory, Honneth (1991: 61–2) emphasises, cannot be 'empirically controlled'. Empirical social science is treated as an 'auxiliary discipline'. Simultaneously, though, theory takes a 'negativistic turn': it is 'den[ie]d . . . any claim to positive knowledge' and receives the 'function of a self-criticism of conceptual thought'. Honneth alleges that Adorno adheres to historico-philosophical theses developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. These theses lead him to associate all empirical and theoretical sciences with civilisation's instrumental-rational control and violent domination of inner and outer nature, and hence to oppose empirical as well as positive theoretical knowledge. One might proceed to conclude that the methodological impasses of Adorno's sociology, conditioned purely by a dogmatic insistence on disputable theorems written in the first half of the last century, prove the inability of his sociological work to speak to present debates in the discipline.

Before responding to Honneth's argument, it is worth underlining that for Adorno sociological 'theorizing' is indeed 'relatively autonomous' (Outhwaite 2006: 85) from empirical research, at least during certain analytical steps. This is doubtless part of his work's attraction for present-day opponents of empirical realism like Outhwaite (2006: 87). It is also a

potential point of disagreement between Adorno and contemporary sociologists who demand that sociologico-theoretical frameworks be empirically plausible. Urry (2000b: 21–2, 27) is careful in raising this demand for his influential ‘metaphorical’ framework of mobilities, networks, scapes, nodes and flows, which he proposes for a twenty-first-century ‘sociology beyond societies’. Adorno assigns to theory the task of analysing sociologically decisive aspects of social reality which elude empirical observation. The criterion that sociology’s theoretical frameworks be empirically plausible throughout would constrain them in tackling this task. For the more a framework claims to represent of the unobservable, the more prone it is to the charge of being empirically uncorroborated. *Vis-à-vis* the standard of complete empirical plausibility, theoretical analyses recede from capturing the unobservable. Accordingly Adorno’s theory of exchange society, employed to interpret empirical facts with regards to what they do not represent, need not answer to facts in all its facets. ‘There are sociological theorems’, he replies to Popper, ‘which, as insights into the mechanisms of society which operate behind the façade . . . contradict appearances to such an extent that they cannot be adequately criticized through the latter’. The theory of social integration, an analytical framework for a social tendency beyond immediate empirical grasp, ‘recoil[s] from tests’. ‘Nevertheless, the dependence of that which can be socially observed upon the total structure is, in reality, more valid than any findings which can be irrefutably verified in the particular and this dependence is anything but a mere figment of the imagination’ (PD 112–13). In fact, the more a theoretical configuration deciphers of the material’s hidden content, the more it unsettles the material’s claim to represent reality. From this perspective, the demand to ‘stick to the facts’ would unjustifiably bind a theoretical conception to observations which are untrustworthy precisely because they cannot reveal the social context beyond observation. The more theoretical statements ‘transcend the limited and immediate situation and . . . relate it to basic social conditions’, to repeat Adorno’s formulation, ‘the more valuable they are’ (CoM 103). Sociology requires empirical material as substance for reflection, but the frameworks employed to decipher it are enabled to go ‘beyond the factual’ (SSI 543), to penetrate the material’s hidden dimensions, and to acquire perspectives on capitalist society which are unavailable to observation. Of course, nothing shields the resulting statements from further theoretical scrutiny and hence from renewed confrontations with empirical data.

Honneth’s portrayal of the methodological impasses in Adorno’s sociology, notably the notion that they are conditioned by Adorno’s adherence to theses about science’s instrumental rationality, is unduly narrow. To restate these impasses in terms of this chapter: from Adorno’s

sociological viewpoint, observations and data are untrustworthy and prone to theoretical decipherment, while theoretical analysis remains incomplete, inconclusive, often even contradictory, and is thus subject to further scrutiny. As I have sought to argue, Adorno refers facts to theoretical scrutiny and theoretical assertions to further examination primarily on the basis of inquiries into obstacles which the current social conditions create for empirical and theoretical sociological research. This has implications for judging the ongoing relevance of Adorno's sociology. If one follows Honneth, contradicting Adorno's supposedly stubborn subsumption of all scientific thinking under the concept of a violent instrumental reason suffices to unsettle Adorno's critique of empirical and theoretical research and exempts contemporary social science from any further concern with it. If one follows the reading I propose, defusing Adorno's warnings issued to sociologists conducting empirical and theoretical research today would require sociologists to show that the socially generated socio-scientific problems he highlights do not exist – or to solve them.