

Social theory, society and everyday life: exploring the sociology of Theodor Adorno

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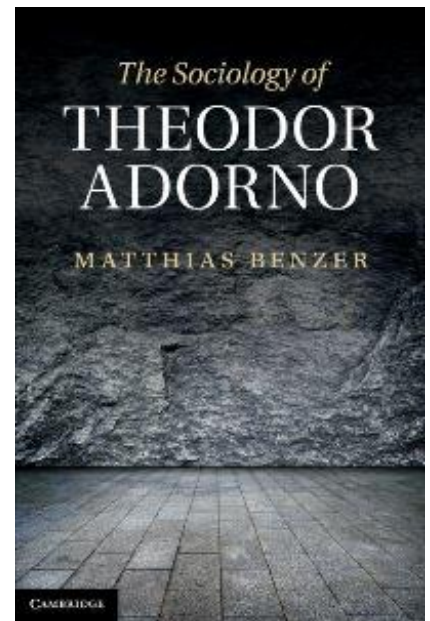
Gerard Delanty finds that Matthias Benzer's recent book provides a detailed account of Theodor Adorno's sociological writings, which are often neglected or misunderstood. This book does an excellent job in clarifying Adorno's sociological approach in all its complexity. It is lucid and as clear as it is possible to be in explaining Adorno's often obscure concepts and observations on the idiosyncrasies of everyday life.



The Sociology of Theodor Adorno. Matthias Benzer. Cambridge University Press. March 2011.

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Theodor Adorno was the most important of the [Frankfurt School](#) of critical theorists. His legacy for the human and social sciences has been enormous, though undoubtedly his major contribution has been to aesthetic theory. In sociology Adorno is probably most widely read as a representative, if not founder, of critical social theory; he is less seen as a sociologist as such. Matthias Benzer's book offers an important corrective to the reception of Adorno as a theorist unconcerned with empirical analysis. His book provides a detailed account of Adorno's sociological writings, which are often neglected or misunderstood or simply seen as a kind of cultural critique or ideology critique unconnected with sociological theory. Benzer's book offers a much needed alternative reading and shows how his sociological writings can be understood only when considered in the context of his broader work. The works that are of most significance are the collections [Critical Models](#), [Prisms](#), [Minima Moralia](#) and two collective sociological research projects, the Authoritarian Personality and Group Experiment.





The concept of society was central to Adorno's sociology, which was primarily addressed to the reality of 'exchange society.' Society is an objective reality that shapes every aspect of the social world, including too nature. Society for Adorno is a relational concept in that it is formed out of social relations between individuals. Capitalism itself is dominated by exchange relations and through the process of social integration, which Benzer argues is a key concept in Adorno's sociology, more and more areas of social life are drawn into exchange society, for social integration allows the exchange principle to dominate.





Adorno attaches importance to the analysis of social phenomena from the standpoint of society as a whole and from the perspective of social actors who can change society. Much of Adorno's sociology is based on his observations of the minute details of everyday life as well as aspects of the culture industry, and was informed from the perspective of a somewhat disconnected foreigner in the United States. The perspective of the outsider and the experience of exile formed the basis of an approach

that was otherwise not methodologically rigorous. Possibly his greatest work, *Mimima Moralia*, is an exploration of everyday life distorted by the capitalist exchange principle. This approach, which can be characterized as a sociological analysis of exchange society, informed his philosophy of social science, which was opposed to positivist analysis in that he saw as the objective the analysis of complications and contradictions of social life. Sociology should try to discover possibilities for social transformation within the present; it is in this sense a critical endeavour and one in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition.

Sociology, as practised by Adorno, must be based on a theory of society but it must also have an empirical dimension. He was opposed to the separation of theory from empirical research and always insisted that sociology was not a purely theoretical discipline, but required empirical field research. It is probably the case that what he had in mind here was the polarization of empirical social research and philosophy. He wanted sociology to occupy a mid-way position. Benzer's book offers a corrective to the conventional view that he was opposed to empirical research. The empirical material that informed his sociological analysis was drawn from his own personal observations of everyday life, many of which are deeply insightful while some are the bizzare thoughts of a bourgeois intellectual whose Marxism confirmed his disdain for everyday life. Adorno's difficulty lay with method-guided empirical research. He believed that such research isolates itself from theoretical analysis and is generally theoretically improvised. Benzer offers a very good account of Adorno's struggle to deal with theory, research methods, and empirical data. Adorno, while not always dismissive of conventional research methodology, was convinced that empirical social research is not entirely exhausted by method guided research and can instead be theoretically guided. Adorno's own engagement with method-guided social research was not a happy one; for example the famous F-Scale that was devised in the Authoritarian Personality studies to discover the extent of fascist personality traits in post-war America was flawed in its basic research design in that the research instruments presupposed the theory they were trying to validate.

Adorno was a product of Germany's unempirical sociological tradition. While he did his best to become familiar with empirical sociological research he was never at home in it and instead relied on his own rather idiosyncratic observations of everyday life, many of which were drawn from travel. It is possible to characterize Adorno's empirical sociology as a 'microsociology' of exchange society informed by a theory of society, which is also based on a range of concepts such as constellation and mimesis, which are discussed by Benzer in later chapters of the book. Benzer suggests that his approach is a hermeneutics of capitalism and that he was informed by Weber's methodology in this regard. It was certainly a deeply personal kind of sociology based on his own observations and much of it written in the style of the essay than a journal article.

In this sense Adorno belonged to a generation of thinkers such as Simmel, Veblen, Kracauer, and Benjamin who did not engage with professional social research. It is difficult not to conclude that Adorno misunderstood not much of social life, but also had a poor understanding of social science. Whether the exchange principle is as dominating as Adorno believed is a matter of some debate. Adorno held that the exchange principle had much the same power of society as Weber's 'iron cage' and had a very limited perspective on society's capacity for social change. Yet, his work was haunted by the possibility that something could lie outside exchange society. His attack on positivism was often misdirected and over generalized, against both Mannheim and Popper for instance. His rejection of method-guided research was undoubtedly a product of his own failure to engage with the real world of social research. Benzer is aware of these problems and does not seek to offer a defence of what were clearly problems in Adorno's sociology. This book does an excellent job in clarifying Adorno's sociological approach in all its complexity. It is lucid and as clear as it is possible to be in explaining Adorno's often obscure concepts.

Gerard Delanty is Professor of Sociology and Social & Political Thought at the [University of Sussex](#), where he is also head of the Department of Sociology. He is an interdisciplinary sociologist with an interest in social theory and the cultural analysis of social and political questions. He has written eleven books, many of which have been translated into several languages, and edited seven. He has published over 100 papers on various issues in social and political theory, European identities, globalization, nationalism and the cultural and historical sociology of modernity. [Read more reviews by Gerard.](#)

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