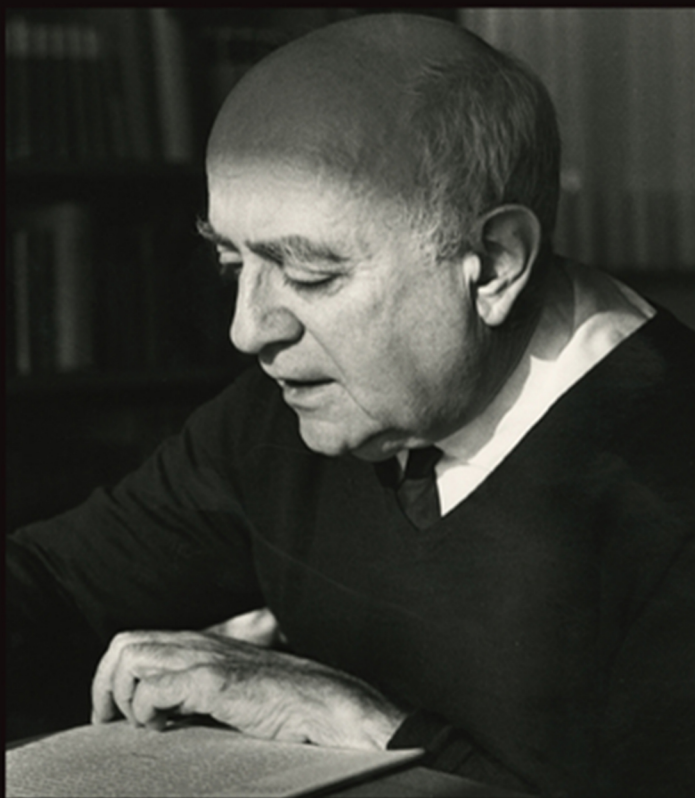


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# A COMPANION TO ADORNO



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# A Companion to Adorno

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# A Companion to Adorno

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Peter E. Gordon

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## Editors' Introduction

A full half-century has passed since Adorno's death in 1969. In the intervening years the landscape of his critical reception has transformed and diversified in manifold ways. In the early years Adorno was most often seen alongside his colleague Max Horkheimer as a partisan of Critical Theory in the philosophical tradition of the Institute for Social Research, also known as the "Frankfurt School." Among his students, he was admired as a returned émigré and public intellectual who embodied the spirit of the Weimar era and used his moral authority to challenge the stifling atmosphere of conservatism and political repression in postwar Germany. In publications such as *Minima Moralia* and in radio addresses on political as well as cultural themes, he fastened his attention on the question of how to reimagine philosophy and art after Auschwitz. Jürgen Habermas, who commenced his studies in Frankfurt in 1956, later wrote of Adorno that he was "the only genius I have met in my life." But this reputation was highly ambivalent. By the later 1960s, Adorno found himself at odds with more militant members of the New Left who came to see him as an ally of the political establishment. His rarefied philosophical style and his mandarin aesthetic sensibility left him vulnerable to charges of cultural elitism and political quietism. His confrontation with student activists in the final months before his death cast a shadow over his legacy that would take years to dispel. By the 1980s and 1990s, a new generation of scholars looked to his philosophical legacy with fresh concerns. The ascendant wave of interest in the cultural and literary criticism of his colleague and friend Walter Benjamin led to a deepened appreciation for Adorno's own legacy as a cultural critic, while literary and theoretical fashions associated with French poststructuralism led to surprising if unlikely exercises in comparison. By the turn of the millennium, Adorno had reemerged in scholarship in a rather new guise, as a thinker whose works were best understood in their full independence as contributions to defining questions of the philosophical canon. Fifty years on, the time has arrived for a summation and critical reappraisal of his formidable legacy.

No doubt, the very idea of a comprehensive summary would have aroused Adorno's ire. From the beginning of his career Adorno looked with skepticism on philosophical efforts to embrace all of human reality, both social and intellectual, within the logic of a single, totalizing framework. In "The Actuality of Philosophy," his 1931 inaugural lecture as professor at the University of Frankfurt, he argued that "Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises begin with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real" (Adorno 1931, 24). In his habilitation on Kierkegaard, Adorno presented himself as a materialist who would read philosophical texts against the grain and resist the allure of the grand

philosophical system. The concept that seeks to subsume the plenitude of reality became for Adorno a sign of the subject's will to mastery and a philosophical correlate for social domination. In a conscious rejoinder to Hegel's famous dictum from the *Phenomenology* that "the true is the whole," Adorno wrote in *Minima Moralia* that "the whole is the false" (Adorno MM). This principled resistance to the totalizing ambitions of the mind helps to explain Adorno's conviction that dialectics could no longer strive for seamless reconciliation; only a "negative dialectic" could remain attentive to the insufficiency of the concept and pay homage to what he called the "preponderance of the object." This emphasis on the unreconciled condition of social reality, with its materialist appeal to the persistence of objective suffering, became the leitmotif throughout Adorno's work not only in philosophy but in his cultural and aesthetic criticism as well. In the "late-style" of Beethoven's music and in the ruined and unredeemed landscapes as portrayed by Samuel Beckett, Adorno discerned the "cracks and fissures" of the only aesthetic style suitable to the catastrophic world of late-capitalist modernity.

But Adorno was never only a philosopher in the conventional sense. His mind was always restless, untethered from all disciplinary orthodoxies and the bonds of established method. Trained in musical composition and gifted with an unusual sensitivity to both music and literature, Adorno authored important studies on figures the European musical canon, including monographs on Berg, Mahler, Wagner, and the (unfinished) study of Beethoven, along with literary analyses of Kafka, Hölderlin, and Beckett. Especially during his years in exile in the United States, he came to appreciate the possibilities of empirical sociological research; during his initial years in New York he collaborated with Paul Lazarsfeld at Princeton University on a study of radio listening; and, during the later 1940s in California, he joined the research team at Berkeley in the landmark study in social psychology, *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in 1950. Upon his return to Germany he continued his sociological research in the 1950s with inquiries into the postwar persistence of Nazi sympathies in German public opinion, most notably in *Group Experiment and Guilt and Defense*. Adorno also applied his critical and sociological skills to the analysis of mass-cultural or commodified art, the products of what he and Horkheimer called the "culture industry." Most notoriously, Adorno wrote a handful of essays on jazz, which he condemned as an especially pernicious form of commodified art and pseudo-individuality. In all such inquiry Adorno sustained the uncompromising posture of an intellectual who feared that the emancipatory promise of the modern age was falling into eclipse and that it was the critic's preeminent task to fasten one's attention on the persistence of negativity in the midst of an increasingly "affirmative" culture that denied the possibility of genuine transformation. In his final and most formidable work of philosophy, *Negative Dialectics* (1966) he set forth the core principles that would inform this task. In the posthumously published and never-finished *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) he entertained the question of what sort of critical potentials might be said to survive in modern art in the midst of an increasingly uncritical world.

In this volume, we have convened an extraordinary group of scholars from a variety of disciplines, to address what we believe to be the most promising and enduring facets of Adorno's intellectual legacy. The chapters that follow concentrate primarily on the philosophical concerns that remained of central importance for Adorno himself. But the chapters also speak to the centrality of aesthetic, musical, moral, political, and sociological themes in Adorno's oeuvre. As editors we have undertaken this volume with some humility and in the recognition that no compendium of critical scholarship could possibly

do justice to the richness of Adorno's thought. But we hope that this collection will serve as a helpful resource for those who wish further to explore the still-undiminished power of his legacy.

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# Part I

## Intellectual Foundations





# Adorno: A Biographical Sketch

PETER E. GORDON

Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund-Adorno was born in Frankfurt am Main on Friday September 11, 1903, the only son of Oscar Wiesengrund, a German-Jewish wine merchant, and Maria Calvelli-Adorno della Piana, a talented singer of Corsican-Catholic descent. The young Theodor, known as “Teddie,” was baptized as a Catholic after the faith of his mother, but grew up without a strong sense of religious identity. His household was notably rich in music thanks to the influence of his mother and his maternal aunt Agatha, a singer and pianist whom Teddie called his “second mother.” When he was not occupied with his academic studies and his music lessons the young Teddie would play with friends in the “spookily pleasurable” corners of the cellar beneath the house where his father stored his wines (Müller-Doohm 2005, 20). The young Adorno was a “pampered child,” a “slightly built” and “shy boy” who was taunted on the playground as a “unique person who outshone even the best boys in the class” (quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 34; quoting reminiscence of Erich Pfeiffer-Belli).

Adorno received his education in Frankfurt, attending the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gymnasium from 1913 to 1921. In the early 1920s, Adorno forged an intimate friendship with Siegfried Kracauer, and the two met together on regular occasions for an intensive study of Kant’s first *Critique*. Adorno pursued a further education in music at the Hoch conservatory in Frankfurt, where he studied piano and composition; he published music and opera reviews throughout the early 1920s. Around 1923, Adorno met Gretel Karplus, the highly educated and culturally sophisticated daughter of a leather manufacturer in Frankfurt. Gretel received a doctorate in chemistry at age 23 and was known to spend her time in the company of prominent intellectuals such as Brecht, Bloch, and Walter Benjamin, with whom she formed a strong friendship. Teddie and Gretel would be married only in 1937; they had no children, and it is perhaps revealing that in a letter to her friend Benjamin she refers to Adorno her husband as their “problem child” (*Sorgenkind*).

At the age of 17, Adorno entered the new University of Frankfurt, where he studied various fields: sociology, art history, musicology, and psychology, but mostly philosophy. His chief instructor in philosophy, Hans Cornelius, was unusually broad-minded; a specialist in neo-Kantianism but also a pianist, sculptor, and painter. Under his guidance, Adorno completed his dissertation in 1924 on “The Transcendence of the Thingly and the

Noematic in Husserl's Phenomenology." A critical study of Husserl's phenomenology, the dissertation examined the tension in Husserl's work between the immanent objects of consciousness and the consciousness-transcendent objects in the world. Along with an unsuccessful 1927 habilitation on the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious, the Husserl-dissertation is typically seen as an exercise in purely academic themes, but Adorno's effort to identify contradictions clearly anticipates the philosopher's later practice of immanent critique (Bloch 2017).

Throughout the later 1920s, Adorno found himself poised between two possible careers. While he continued to pursue his philosophical interests, he also dedicated himself with greater energy to musical composition. It was in 1924 that Adorno first made the acquaintance of Alban Berg, the composer who had apprenticed with Arnold Schoenberg and was considered, together with Anton Webern, a member of the so-called "Second Viennese School" of musical modernism. The Schoenbergian breakthrough to atonality, often characterized as "the emancipation of dissonance," had an enormous impact on Adorno, whose early compositional efforts, such as the *String Quartet* (1921) bear obvious affinities to Schoenberg's style; by 1925 Adorno had commenced studies in musical composition with Berg in Vienna. Adorno's talents in musical analysis and composition were considerable (Paddison 1993). Throughout the later 1920s he continued under Berg's tutelage, publishing music reviews while devoting himself in earnest to composition; in December 1926, his *Pieces for String Quartet* was performed by the Kolisch Quartet. Berg, however, recognized that Adorno found himself at a crossroads: "it is your calling," he wrote, "to achieve the *utmost* [and] ... you shall ... fulfill this in the form of great philosophical works. Whether your musical work (I mean your composing), which I have such grand hopes for, will not lose out through it, is a worry that afflicts me whenever I think of you. For it is clear: one day you will, as you are someone who does nothing by halves [...] have to choose either Kant or Beethoven" (Adorno and Berg 2005, 44).

By the later 1920s, Adorno seemed to be moving toward a decision. Although he continued musical composition and would remain seriously committed to musicological criticism, he also selected a topic for a habilitation in philosophy, which he began writing in 1929. Accepted by the theologian Paul Tillich in 1931 and published two years later as *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic*, the book bears the strong imprint of the author's deepening friendship with Walter Benjamin, whom he had first met in 1923 and whose cultural and literary criticism would remain, despite their considerable differences, a primary source of inspiration throughout Adorno's life. In works such as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) and in early drafts for a study of the Paris arcades, Benjamin had begun to develop an idiosyncratic style of critical reading that fastened upon particular elements of cultural life in a materialist mode, by plunging into their detail and drawing out allegorical lessons for broader problems of history. Adorno's study of Kierkegaard bears a strong resemblance to his friend's allegorical manner of materialist interpretation: rather than reading Kierkegaard as a theologian or proto-existentialist, Adorno seeks to expose the social-historical underpinnings of the Dane's ideology as a child of the rising bourgeoisie. The typical living space or *intérieur* of the bourgeois apartment is shown to be the materialist correlate to Kierkegaard's subjectivist philosophy. Submitted to the university in February 1931, the habilitation received enthusiastic comments from both Tillich and Horkheimer, and Adorno had every reason to hope that he could now embark on a successful career as a professor of philosophy.

Meanwhile, Adorno's affiliation with the Institute for Social Research had grown in importance and he had developed a lasting friendship with the philosopher Max Horkheimer, who, like Adorno, had been a student of Cornelius and in 1931 was appointed

as the Institute's new director (Jay 1996). That same year Adorno, equipped with a license to teach, gave his inaugural address at Frankfurt, "The Actuality of Philosophy" (Adorno 2000). In the lecture Adorno speaks to the widespread sense of a "crisis" in the various schools of philosophical idealism. He criticizes neo-Kantianism, philosophical anthropology, and Heideggerian ontology, all of which, despite their differences, remain captive to the fantasy that they can grasp all of reality even while they are trapped in "the realm of subjectivity." Against these subjective and idealist tendencies Adorno insists that philosophy must embrace what he calls "the thinking of materialism" (Adorno TP, 32). Whereas traditional philosophy searches for "meta-historical, symbolically meaningful ideas," the way forward will require a strategy of *interpretation*. The task of philosophy will be "to interpret unintentional reality," and this can be done only if philosophy looks away from ideal forms to those that are "non-symbolic" and constituted "inner-historically" (Adorno TP, 32–33). The new emphasis on historical interpretation must look away from truths that are ideal and toward "unintentional truth" (Adorno TP, 33). The materialist approach to interpretation is possible only "dialectically," and this means that much of the effort must involve immanent criticism or even the "liquidation" of reigning philosophical systems that make claims to knowledge of totality (Adorno TP, 34). Philosophy must not seek the security of idealistic systems and it should not protect itself from "the break-in of what is irreducible." Against the illusions of a systematic form, philosophy must embrace the form of the essay with its focus on appearance rather than essence, the particular rather than the general. This critical method could be accused of "unfruitful negativity," but Adorno is ready to accept this charge. "For the mind (*Geist*) is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality" (Adorno TP, 38).

The inaugural lecture is striking in its anticipation of themes that would preoccupy Adorno throughout his philosophical career. The appeal to that which is particular and irreducible to thought already points toward the emphasis on the "non-identical" and the turn to the object as points of critical leverage for what Adorno would later call "negative dialectics." Other lectures and seminars from this period also bear witness to Adorno's enormous debts to Walter Benjamin. Despite the fact that his friend had failed to secure a habilitation with the study of German tragic drama, Adorno continued to feel that Benjamin's work deserved serious philosophical attention: he devoted two seminars on aesthetics to the study of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, and in 1932 also presented a lecture, "The Idea of Natural History," to the Kant Society in Frankfurt in which he lavished praise on Benjamin's method of allegorical interpretation as a route beyond the false antithesis between history and nature. Benjamin responded with gratitude even as he took note of the way in which Adorno had made extensive use of his ideas both in the lecture and especially in the Kierkegaard book. "[I]t is true," Benjamin wrote, "that there is something like a shared work after all" (quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 129).

With the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 Adorno's chances for a career in Germany came to an end. By the terms of the April "Law for the Restoration of the German Civil Service," Adorno was classified as a "half-Jew" and was no longer permitted to hold a professorship in Germany. Adorno was by no means ashamed of his father's Jewish identity, but the legal designation imposed on him by the state bore little connection to his own self-conception. Baptized in his mother's faith as a Catholic, Adorno had spent his formative years in a strongly Jewish milieu and often found himself characterized as a Jew in spite of his indifference to his father's religious heritage and his general resistance to all categories of ethno-national or religious belonging. His childhood friend Erich Pfeiffer-Belli would later

recall that “We all knew that he was Jewish” but also added that any persecution that the young Adorno had experienced on the playground was “not anti-Semitic” but was simply due to the usual hostility that the “stupid” boys directed at the one who outshone all the others in the classroom (quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 34). By the mid-1930s, however, Adorno’s relative indifference to questions of personal identity was to matter far less than the official ruling by the new authoritarian state that defined citizenship in explicitly racist terms. In September 1933, he received a letter that informed him that his license to teach had been revoked, and after some months of hesitation he made the decision to leave Germany and set about seeking employment elsewhere. Uncertain plans for transferring his professorial license to either Istanbul or Vienna fell through, and Adorno then applied himself to the task of securing a position in England, where connections through his paternal uncle seemed to promise greater success. In 1934, he was admitted as an advanced student in philosophy at Oxford.

Adorno’s period of study in England did not prove terribly fruitful, despite some contact with a few philosophers (most notably Gilbert Ryle) who shared his interests in phenomenology and other trends that were in vogue back in Germany but less appreciated in Oxford. A.J. Ayer would later recall Adorno as “a comic figure” whose “dandified manner” could not mask his “anxiety” to be taken seriously (Müller-Doohm 2005, 190). Adorno spent much of his time at Oxford immersed in studies of Husserlian philosophy that would only appear in book-length form after the war as *Metacritique of Epistemology* (1956). His aging parents remained for some time in Germany and he made frequent trips back to Frankfurt to see them and also to visit Gretel, who continued to manage the co-owned factory in Berlin. Oscar Wiesengrund, like many German Jews of his generation, had served in the army during the First World War and had even received a Cross of Honor that he believed would protect him from state persecution. As the political situation deteriorated and the Nazis consolidated their rule over all spheres of government and society, Adorno gradually awakened to the fact that it was no longer safe for his family to remain in Germany.

In these precarious circumstances Adorno could take some comfort in deepening his personal and professional bond with Horkheimer. In fact, he had already begun publishing in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the Institute’s journal, beginning with the inaugural issue in 1932. His early essays for the journal demonstrate his continued interest in working at the boundary-line between musicology and socially inflected philosophy. In his first essay for the *Zeitschrift*, “On the Social Situation of Music,” (1932) Adorno argues that if music succeeds in resisting its reduction to the commodity form it will be able to portray the antinomies of society within its own formal language. “It is not for music to stare in helpless horror at society,” Adorno writes. Music “fulfills its social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws.” Musical autonomy is not a retreat into social irrelevance but a precondition for music’s social meaning; music will “call for change through the coded language of suffering” (Adorno 2002, 393). The alternative was for music to abandon its claims to autonomy and sink to the level of the commodity form where all critical possibilities would be defeated. Adorno developed this point with especially polemical vigor in his essay “On Jazz,” that was written during his stay in Oxford and appeared in the *Zeitschrift* under the pseudonym of Hektor Rottweiler. Jazz, Adorno argued, was a thoroughly commercialized musical form that promised only the illusion of freedom. “The improvisatory immediacy which constitutes its partial success counts strictly among those attempts to break out of a fetishized commodity world which want to escape that world without ever changing it, thus moving ever deeper into its snare” (Adorno 2002, 478). It should be noted that

Adorno's knowledge of jazz was severely limited: he knew virtually nothing about the African-American idiom and aimed his criticism primarily at "dance-band commercial jazz" such as the standardized music played by Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra (Paddison 2004, 113.) He therefore had little patience for romantic claims that jazz could serve as a vehicle for authentic self-expression. "With jazz, a disenfranchized subjectivity plunges from the commodity world into the commodity world; the system does not allow for a way out. Whatever primordial instinct is recovered in this is not a longed-for freedom, but rather a regression through suppression" (Adorno 2002, 478).

The controversy over jazz should be understood within the context of Adorno's general critique of reification in capitalist culture. During the mid-1930s, this critique grew especially pronounced in Adorno's debate with Walter Benjamin, who took a rather more favorable view of the possibilities of mass-produced art. In late February 1936, Benjamin sent to Adorno a draft of his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," in which he argued that the dissolution of the aura thanks to modern technical conditions of reproduction and circulation could open up new possibilities for the mass-reception of modern art as a medium for collective politicization. In a long letter sent from London on March 18, 1936, Adorno sharply dissented from his friend's claims. He was especially troubled by what he considered the "anarchistic romanticism" that had distorted Benjamin's views of the proletariat. Under the influence of his friendship with the more militant and communist-inclined Bertholt Brecht, Benjamin was too sanguine concerning the prospect for the masses to awaken to political agency by absorbing mass-reproduced artworks in a state of distraction. Nor was Adorno convinced by Benjamin's critique of the traditional ideal of aesthetic autonomy. "Dialectical though your essay is", Adorno wrote, "it is less than this in the case of the autonomous work of art itself," "for it neglects a fundamental experience which daily becomes increasingly evident to me in my musical work, that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art actually transforms this art itself, and, instead of turning it into a fetish or taboo, brings it that much closer to a state of freedom" (Adorno and Benjamin 2001, 129). Adorno did not mince words; he clearly felt that his intellectual friendship with Benjamin was in jeopardy. "[M]y own task," he wrote, "is to hold your art steady until the Brechtian sun has finally sunk beneath its exotic waters" (Adorno and Benjamin 2001, 132). The debate with Benjamin was to continue even after the latter's death; traces of their dispute can be detected nearly everywhere in Adorno's later work and even in the pages of *Aesthetic Theory*.

Meanwhile, the situation in Europe was growing more ominous. By the autumn of 1937, Adorno had recognized that his chances for a new academic career in England were slim, and as the Nazis expanded their anti-Jewish policies his father's business in Frankfurt was under threat, which meant that he could no longer rely on financial support from his family. On September 8, he and Gretel were at last married, a fact that only enhanced his sense of bourgeois responsibility. Despite his growing attachment to the Institute and especially to Horkheimer, the Institute's own financial difficulties meant that it had only been able to provide him with a half-time position with a diminished salary. It was therefore a great relief when Horkheimer sent him a telegram with the good news of an invitation to move to the United States as a research associate on the Princeton Radio Project with the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. Adorno did not hesitate in accepting the offer and, in February 1938, Teddie and Gretel boarded a steamer for New York. Adorno's parents, however, were now in serious danger: Maria was briefly arrested, and his father suffered injuries when his offices were broken into. Oscar caught pneumonia, which delayed their plans for escape.

Eventually they were able to leave Germany: they arrived in Cuba in May 1939, and then made their way to the United States by early February 1940 (Müller-Doohm 2005, 261; Adorno 2006, 36).

As an émigré in the New World Adorno was eager to prove his worth as soon as possible. His earliest essay, written during a summer sojourn in Bar Harbor, Maine, was “On the Fetish-Character in Music and Regression in Hearing,” published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1938. The essay can be read as a rejoinder to Benjamin’s reflections on the artwork and its mechanical reproducibility (Buck-Morss 1977). Music, Adorno writes, has been converted in capitalist culture into a commodity to such a degree that the exchange value of a musical work now colonizes its very content. Mass music has become standardized to the extent that musical works become interchangeable and are structured only for easy consumption. This fetish-character in turn afflicts the consciousness of the mass of listeners, who consume the stereotyped products of mass society in a state of “deconcentration” that bespeaks not freedom but instead regression and a “catastrophic phase” in modern culture (Adorno 2002, 313).

The essay also served as an entry ticket for Adorno’s new position as a researcher with Lazarsfeld in New Jersey. The Princeton Radio Project was meant to be an empirically based study that would examine the role played in daily experience by this relatively new medium of communication. The Vienna-born sociologist Lazarsfeld was the director of the project under the title “The Essential Value of Radio to All Types of Listeners,” for which he recruited Adorno, whose work he had known and admired since the early 1930s. Almost from the start, however, the collaboration was plagued by misunderstanding and dissent. Adorno’s negative attitude toward radio listening comes through with unmistakable force in texts such as “A Social Critique of Radio Music,” which he presented to his fellow researchers in October 1939. “Commodity listening” on the radio allowed the listener to “dispense as far as possible with any effort,” even if such effort were required for genuine understanding. The intellectual element in listening was displaced by merely gustatory experience: “It is the ideal of *Aunt Jemima’s* ready-mix for pancakes extended to the field of music. The listener suspends all intellectual activity when dealing with music and is content with consuming and evaluating its gustatory qualities – just as if the music which tasted best were also the best music possible” (Adorno 2009, 137). Later in life when he reflected on his experiences as a European intellectual in America, Adorno would still recall with disdain what he considered the mindless emphasis on data collection that had characterized the Princeton Radio Project. The machine that allowed research subjects to signal their “like” or “dislike” during the radio performance of a given musical selection seemed to Adorno highly inadequate as a means of comprehending the place of music in mass society, not least because it appeared to isolate the individual stimulus from the total context of society. When he was confronted with the demand to “measure culture,” Adorno responded that “culture might be precisely that condition that excludes a mentality capable of measuring it” (Adorno 1969, 347). Needless to say, such opinions did not sit well with Lazarsfeld’s team. When it came time to renew funding for the project Adorno was not invited to continue.

Fortunately, Horkheimer was able to secure for Adorno a dependable and permanent position as a member of the Institute, which had moved by then into its offices in New York’s Morningside Heights in the vicinity of Columbia University. For reasons of space, Adorno himself did not have an office in the building, but he nonetheless enjoyed a special role as Horkheimer’s closest intellectual companion. By the end of the 1930s, the two men were at the beginning stages of planning a work that they described as a “dialectical logic.” Adorno would never feel entirely at home in the United States, and the experience of