



Stefan Müller-Doohm

Adorno

A Biography

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I dedicate this biography to my daughter Anna-Maximiliane because I would like my account of Adorno's life and work to help keep alive for future generations something of the thinking that was so influential for my own intellectual orientation.

Adorno
A Biography

Stefan Müller-Doohm

translated by
Rodney Livingstone

polity

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To write history is to give the dates a face.
Walter Benjamin

Preface

Curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought.¹

A biography of Adorno lays itself open to the objection that he had no liking for this genre of writing and in fact had grave reservations about the wisdom of exploring writers' lives in order to discover the key to their artistic or philosophical works. He expressed the hope that in his own case too readers would give preference to his writings rather than to the accidental facts about his life. Of course, he read and made use of biographies; the life of Richard Wagner is a case in point. But he never wearied of warning his readers not to scour musical compositions or literary texts for traces of the author's experience, subjective intentions or impulses. However, there is a constant temptation to do just that when thinking about Adorno himself. His texts contain many autobiographical allusions to happy childhood memories or sly references to local place names in Frankfurt or the surrounding area. What Adorno thought important was not such reminiscences, but the interplay between the objective content of his work and its historical context, i.e., what he called the force field consisting of the historical situation of the authorial subject, his life and his oeuvre.

This maxim has been the guiding principle of my life of Adorno, which has been completed forty years after his death and at a point in time when he would have been a hundred years old. During the six years and more that I have been working on this book I had a quotation from Adorno standing above my desk in a frame and visible at all times: 'Even the biographical individual is a social category. It can only be defined in a living context together with others; it is this context that shapes its social character and

only in this context does an individual life acquire meaning within given social conditions.’²

The present biography attempts to reconstruct the context of Adorno’s life with other people. It is based on the corpus of documents consisting of Adorno’s publications, his published and unpublished letters, a variety of notes and the transcripts of his lectures and talks, as well as interviews with key contemporaries. A large number of other sources and texts belonging to Adorno’s intellectual contemporaries have been consulted. Despite the sheer quantity of the material referred to, it should be borne in mind that there remain documents that have not been made available in the archives or where legal restrictions have prevented access. This applies especially to his correspondence; some letters have been blocked, in particular the highly significant correspondence with Siegfried Kracauer which is preserved in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach.

Biographies are sometimes distinguished by an emotional distance from their subject. This would be inappropriate in my case. Both as a schoolboy and a student, I had the good fortune to experience directly something of the fascinating intellectual power of this protagonist of critical theory. ‘The only relation of consciousness to happiness is gratitude: in which lies its incomparable dignity.’³

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the financial support of two projects by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, it was possible to establish the Adorno Research Centre at the Carl von Ossietzky University in summer 1998. Under my direction my colleagues have helped to create the framework which has made it possible to write the present biography. I wish to thank the DFG for its financial support and also for the financing of a replacement professor for the whole of the winter semester 2002/3. It was only this support that it made it possible to complete work on this manuscript.

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A part of the research consisted of interviews that I conducted with contemporaries of Adorno who were more or less closely associated with him. These interviews were recorded on tape and then transcribed. The two extended interviews with Ute and Jürgen Habermas in their house on the Starnberger See were not only highly instructive but also warmly sympathetic to my project of writing a life of Adorno. I am indebted to both of them for their patience with my questions and for their many suggestions.

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In order to refine my own picture of Frankfurt University in the 1960s, I took the opportunity to speak with Uta and Hans-Dieter Loeber, Christa and Walter Siebel and also Eberhard Schmidt. I would like to thank them as well as my friends, whose curiosity over the years has helped me to keep on going.

I was also able to obtain good advice from other people during my work on the biography. In particular, I wish to thank Tom Huhn, Martin Jay, Robert Hullot-Kentor, Alexander Kluge, Wolf Lepenies, Thomas Levin, Ahlrich Meyer, Klaus Neumann-Braun, Jürgen Ritsert, Hartmut Scheible, Rolf Wiggershaus, Gisela von Wysocki and Harro Zimmermann, as well as the universities of Princeton, Berkeley and Columbia (New York) for their hospitality.

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In addition, I was assisted in my work by the following archives, to whom I also owe a debt of gratitude: the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Archive of the Academic Assistance Council, London; the Leo Baeck Institute, New York; Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach; Institut für Stadtgeschichte, Frankfurt am Main; Thomas Mann-Archiv, Zurich; Archiv der Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main; Stadtarchiv Dettelbach; and Institut für Sozialforschung, Frankfurt am Main.

Since I have the old-fashioned habit of writing my first drafts by hand, Elke Glos had the difficult task of transferring the text to the computer, which she did with endless patience and great understanding. Barbara Vahland

made use of her great expertise in pre-editing important sections of the text.

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Thanks to their professionalism, the editorial department of Suhrkamp Verlag headed by Bernd Stiegler have helped to ensure that the manuscript could be completed and available in the bookshops in time for the centenary of Adorno's birth. I am especially indebted to the cooperation and exchange of ideas with Bernd Stiegler, who has meticulously edited the entire book chapter by chapter.

My increasingly close cooperation with Reinhard Pabst (our almost daily briefings provided emotional support as well as practical help) turned out to be a particular stroke of good fortune. I am indebted to him for a large number of valuable ideas as well as enthusiastic assistance in collecting the photographic materials, a task he finally took over completely.

My wife Heidi encouraged me to make the formulation of many of my ideas more comprehensible at the manuscript stage, and she generously overlooked the months during which I had retreated to my desk.

Oldenburg, April 2003

Illustration Acknowledgements

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Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, Frankfurt am Main: [Plates 11, 12, 14, 16, 20](#); [figure 5](#)

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Part I

Origins: Family, Childhood and Youth: School and University in Frankfurt am Main

Family Inheritance: A Picture of Contrasts

Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is coloured through and through by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us.

Walter Benjamin¹

Every human being has his own way of dealing with the chance nature of historical events. But equally, individual lives are determined by the gifts bestowed on them by the fairies, both good and wicked, operating through the culture of their time.

Thomas Ludwig Wiesengrund-Adorno, who was born on Friday 11 September 1903 in Frankfurt am Main, was no exception. At his cradle there was a profusion of gifts of the most varied kind. Symptomatic of this abundance was the fact that his mother, whose maiden name was Calvelli-Adorno, toyed with the idea that her son should bear the name Adorno in addition to his father's name Wiesengrund. Thus right from the start the baby, who was baptized a

Catholic, was the meeting point of two opposed cultural traditions. On the one hand, there were the Jewish origins of his grandfather and his assimilated father. Oscar Alexander Wiesengrund owned a successful wine-exporting business and identified with the open-minded, liberal values of the Frankfurt middle class. On the other hand, for Adorno, who was an only child, his mother's view of the world was of the very first importance. Maria Calvelli-Adorno della Piana was a devout Catholic who believed fervently in an ideal of artistic self-realization. Before her marriage to Oscar Wiesengrund she had made a name for herself as a singer who could boast of having performed in Vienna at the Imperial Court Opera. Her younger sister Agathe, to whom she remained close throughout her entire life, had made a name as a singer and pianist. She also had highly developed literary interests. Maria was the offspring of a Franco-German marriage that was itself highly unconventional for the time between the well-bred daughter of an established master-tailor in Frankfurt, who was herself musically gifted, and a roving Corsican officer and fencing master who had settled there. It is likely that Maria had something of a bohemian streak and that she was susceptible to a variety of cultural influences. For what could be more remote from the adventurous wanderings of a patriotic Corsican than the educated bourgeois outlook of a Jewish businessman who had been quietly minding his own business like his father before him in the commercial and trading metropolis on the River Main?

1

Adorno's Corsican Grandfather: Jean François, alias Giovanni Francesco

In the nineteenth century, Corsica, the island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, was still strongly marked by its native traditions. Nor did much change under the French constitutional monarchy, when Louis Philippe, the 'bourgeois king', built roads on the island and launched a programme to enlarge the harbour. The same might be said of Napoleon III, the nephew of the great Napoleon, who had come to power through a *coup d'état* in 1851. He followed a pro-Corsican policy in the hope of gaining the allegiance of the island with its rebellious population.

Corsica, the stubborn mentality of its inhabitants and their internal feuding were looked on with fascination in the imperialistic France of the Second Empire. This emerges clearly from the writings of Prosper Mérimée, one of the most popular authors of the decade of the July Monarchy. In 1840 he published his story *Colomba*, which opens with the return to Corsica of Lieutenant Orso della Rebbia, 'poor in hope, poor in money'. Back at home, he meets his sister Colomba. Her exotic appearance represents for him the true nature of the island. Although he is an upright citizen who identifies with law and order, she inveigles him into helping her to avenge the death of their father many years previously, for which they blame the Barricini brothers, a family from the same neighbourhood.

The French public of the day was fascinated by this exotic story with its vivid contrast between civilization and savagery, even though the dominant ethos of its own bourgeois industrial aristocracy was one of material gain.¹ When *Colomba* appeared, Jean François was scarcely more than twenty years of age and was well on the way to a career like that of Lieutenant Orso della Rebbia in Mérimée's story. There was even a certain physical resemblance between the two men. 'His face was bronzed by the sun, he had sharp, black eyes and a frank, intelligent expression.'² That is a description of the literary character Orso della Rebbia. But what do we know about that other Corsican, Jean François Calvelli, who, like his literary doppelgänger, tried his luck in the French army and must surely have read and valued Mérimée's picaresque story?

I have referred to the exotic figure of Jean François not because of the evident similarity between fact and fiction, but because he is one of the grandfathers of Theodor W. Adorno.

Jean François Calvelli was born on 14 April 1820 in Afa, Corsica.³ Afa was part of the municipality of Bocognano, situated 650 metres up in the mountains. Today, it is a village surrounded by chestnut forests at the foot of Monte d'Oro, around 25 miles from Ajaccio. The inhabitants' lives were determined by the seasons and the consequent changes in the pastures for the herds of sheep and goats. Afa was scarcely more than a *paese*, a collection of houses, that came together with others of the same sort to form a church parish, a *pieve*. By the late eighteenth century, the Calvelli clan had settled in Afa and built a *torre*, the visible sign of a modest material security. This little stone house was the birthplace of Jean François, the only son of the *pastore*, Antoine Joseph Calvelli (1787–1822), and Barbara Maria, *née* Franceschini (1790–1846). The birth certificate in

the town hall in Afa records the name in its Italian form: Giovanni Francesco Calvelli. His parents had married thirteen years before the birth of their son. They already had a daughter, Agatha, who was two years older than her brother. Their mother, Barbara, was eighteen when she married Antoine Joseph. He came from a family of some importance regionally. Her mother-in-law, Angela Orzola Calvelli, was already a widow. Her pride in her family, which was called Boldrini, was taken for granted. She was particularly proud of what were claimed to be close connections with the family of Napoleon Bonaparte, who in 1806 had promoted her brother to the rank of captain in the French army. She was of course present at the wedding, as were other near relatives. In all probability it was a close-knit family, as was customary in Corsica, and Jean François was more dependent on it than most. For when he was only two he lost his own father, likewise a fervent Bonapartist. The death certificate does not make clear whether the 35-year-old had died of natural causes, whether he was the victim of a stabbing, or even whether he had been condemned for political reasons. At any rate, Barbara had the sole responsibility for the upbringing of the two children. Their education, however, lay in the hands of the local priest whom the French prefect had entrusted with the task of teaching the children of the community, among them the bright young Jean François.

At the age of twenty, Jean François applied, evidently with success, to join the French army in Ajaccio. He began his career as a 'chasseur' second class in the Second Infantry regiment. After a brief interlude as an ordinary recruit in St Omer, he was sent to Africa, in December 1845. Following the French conquest of Algeria in the 1830s, there had been a number of uprisings under Abd el Kader against the colonization of the country. Troops were sent out to the colony to suppress the rebels, among them the young

Corsican Jean François Calvelli. In the years to come he was in the habit of telling anyone who would listen about his exploits at this time; his grandson, too, would hear about them in due course.

After two years' military service in Algeria, which seems also to have resulted in a dose of malaria, Jean François was finally released from the army in Ajaccio, and in accordance with the rules prevailing at the time he was retired as an officer on half pay, just like his literary doppelgänger, Orso della Rebbia. We are also reminded of Mérimée's dashing lieutenant in the personal description of Calvelli that was produced at the end of his seven years' period of service. For his outward demeanour he was given the mark '*de bonne conduite*', and the testimonial continued: 'Height 1.66 m, oval face, broad brow, brown eyes, average nose and mouth, rounded chin, hair and eyebrows, very dark.'⁴

Calvelli returned home to the island to discover that his mother and sister had died shortly before. What was left to keep him in Corsica? In the following years he kept moving from one place to the next; he spent time in Italy, France and even Spain, as far as it is possible to trace his movements. He left France following the political events in Paris during the February Revolution in which Louis Philippe was forced to abdicate by the mass demonstrations and battles at the barricades in Paris. His departure was interpreted there as a sign that the Corsican Bonapartist had little liking for the revolutionary events in Paris in 1848. He doubtless felt greater sympathy for the rise to power of the despotic Louis Bonaparte. Karl Marx, one of the most perceptive witnesses of these events, published a brilliant analysis of the elimination of the parliamentary republic brought about by this change of government. Once the revolutionary proletariat had left the historic scene, an account of the social and political causes of the plebiscitary

dictatorship could be followed in Marx's series of articles entitled *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

What had happened? In December 1848, Napoleon's nephew was elected president of the French Republic. As early as 1851, he organized a *coup d'état*, dissolved parliament and had himself crowned emperor. At the point in time when Calvelli turned his back on France his path might in theory have crossed that of the author of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. For, when Marx was expelled from Brussels in 1848, he spent some of the February in Paris before going on to Cologne. If we imagine Calvelli laying hands on *The Communist Manifesto*, we can be certain that the restless Corsican would have found it quite alien. He might easily have found more to interest him in Heinrich Heine's *De l'Allemagne*, a book that Heine, who had been living in Paris ever since the July Revolution of 1830, had written specifically with French readers in mind. Not the least of Heine's intentions was to provide a corrective to the idealized picture of Germany that had been offered by Madame de Staël. He wished to make the complex situation of German intellectuals comprehensible, but also to warn about the dangers that might result from the intellectual capture of the romantic movement by the politically conservative restoration after 1815:

If we were to compare the history of the French Revolution with the history of German philosophy, we might easily come to the conclusion that the French had requested us Germans to sleep and dream on their behalf, and that our German philosophy was nothing more than the dream of the French Revolution.⁵

While Heine, the champion of the Enlightenment, remained in Paris and gradually saw his hopes fade, and while the stateless Karl Marx finally saw himself forced to emigrate to Britain, the thirty-year-old Calvelli took the burdens of constant travel and change of locality upon

himself in order to earn his living as a fencing master. Since he was anxious to work only for reputable and affluent families, he must have been very eager to preserve his own good name. His visiting card had to be impressive enough to open the doors of the best houses of the nobility. Just as Lieutenant Orso, a member of the *nobile*, had enhanced his name by calling himself 'della Rebbia', Jean François embellished his own surname by adding 'della Piana'. This addition refers to a *paese* in Corsica that Calvelli either regarded or claimed as his original birthplace.⁶ But how are we to explain the further addition of 'Adorno'? From the little information that we have, it is likely that he came across the name in Genoa or perhaps even Turin. He was fortunate enough to spend a longer period of time in one or other of these towns, where he perhaps lived in a Villa Adorno or else with an Upper Italian family of that name to whom he gave fencing lessons. However that may be, when around 1859 or 1860 he made his way to Frankfurt on the recommendation of the Russian consul, Nicholas Wertheim, whom he had met in Stuttgart, he travelled under the impressive name of Calvelli-Adorno della Piana. At that time, in the post-Napoleonic period, Frankfurt had regained its old status as a free imperial city and was therefore an autonomous political entity. This meant that, since its territory was small, it imposed correspondingly restrictive conditions of entry. This explains why Calvelli took up residence in Bockenheim, a suburb to the west of the city that was actually part of Hesse-Nassau. For most of the nineteenth century Bockenheim was an independent town that was increasingly industrial in character. Not until 1895 did it become an integral part of Frankfurt itself.

Fencing master Calvelli-Adorno in the Frankfurt suburb of Bockenheim

Calvelli's connection with the respected Wertheim family helped him to obtain a lodging in the house of a worthy master-tailor, Nicolaus Henning (1801-71), and his wife, Maria Barbara (1801-72). Here he met their musically talented daughter Elisabeth, who was able also to speak French. Their relationship developed with a certain romantic inevitability. They fell head over heels in love. They married as early as February 1862, despite the opposition of the tailor, who was concerned for his family's good name and who had placed all his hopes for the future on making a more advantageous match for his daughter. The official papers that Calvelli had sent for to Bocagnano proved insufficient for a wedding in Frankfurt. For this reason it was decided to celebrate the wedding in London. The marriage was registered in the district of St Pancras in the county of Middlesex. The profession of Calvelli-Adorno was given as 'fencing master'. The witnesses were Victor Alexander and Henriette von Erlanger, who came from a reputable Frankfurt family belonging to the Jewish commercial and financial middle class. In February 1865, the registry office wedding in London was supplemented by a religious ceremony in Frankfurt Cathedral. At that time, Elisabeth had already given birth to two children, both of whom, however, had died in the year of the religious wedding. When the ceremony took place in Frankfurt, the bride was pregnant once again. In September of the same year she gave birth to her daughter Maria. The following year Louis was born. When he was baptized his parents added the name 'Prosper' to his French Christian name - proof that the writings of the

Parisian author held a special place in the young couple's affections.

In the years after Louis' birth the couple continued to live in Frankfurt, which had once again become part of Prussia. They lived in what were evidently straitened circumstances and during this period Elisabeth Calvelli-Adorno gave birth to another four children. Of the four the only one to survive was Agathe, who had been given the same name as Jean François' sister. Agathe was born in 1868 and, as if the fact of her name had a symbolical significance, a deep relationship developed with her sister Maria which lasted the whole of her life, even after the marriage of the older sister in July 1898. Providing for the daily needs of his wife and three children was no easy task for the fencing master. He only ever spoke French and Italian. In all his years in Frankfurt Calvelli was never able to earn the 5000 guilders annually that were needed to qualify for the rights of a free citizen of the city. But he worked as hard as he could to secure an income for his family befitting their standing. When the viceroy of Egypt came to take a cure in Bad Homburg, Calvelli-Adorno offered his services as a fencing master. He also submitted a petition to Louis Napoleon in 1867.⁷ In his letter to the emperor's *chef de cabinet*, Calvelli-Adorno referred to the good relations that once obtained between his own family and the emperor's. After describing his own unfortunate financial situation, he went on to ask for assistance. He was very willing, he wrote, to appear in person in Paris to give an account of his conduct as a French patriot. He gave the name of His Majesty's ambassador in Italy, Monsieur Nigra, who would testify to his probity. In his letter to the emperor, who as the nephew of Napoleon I had established the Second Empire in December 1852, Calvelli-Adorno gave a detailed description of the friendly relations between the Bonaparte family and his own. He pointed out that, when the Bonapartes had