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Adorno in France

The first critical Reception of the Critical Theory in the 50's

A commonplace about the presence of Adorno's Critical Theory in France, during the years 50's and 60's, consists on the idea of a difficult, indeed impossible, reception of his thought. According to Miguel Abensour, the philosopher would have suffered from a relative indifference by the French intellectual area and the transfer of his philosophy would have only been effective after his dead, in the 70's and in the 80's¹. We suggest to question and to criticize this commonplace by the study of different documents which attest and requalify the reception of some Adornian works in the second half of the 50's. To realize this investigation, we will focus on intellectual journals which translate and comment Adorno, such as *Diogène*, *Arguments*, *Archives européennes de sociologie* and *Communications*, on conferences he pronounces in Paris and on his correspondence with French intellectuals. Also we have to specify that Adorno himself cared about his own French reception, as this letter to Alex Lindenberg from 9th November 1959 shows: „Selbstverständlich bin ich an der Frage der französischen Übersetzung der 'Minima Moralia' aufs lebhafteste interessiert und würde mich sehr freuen [...]“². Moreover, the philosopher will correct the translations that Lindenberg sent to him, making terminological comments and stylistic suggestions in French and requesting the help of two specialists who will judge Lindenberg's translation to far from the text („nicht nahe genug am Text“) and not meticulous enough („nicht sorgfältig genug“³).

From these first observations, we will make the hypothesis that the difficulties of Adorno's reception are the result, not of an indifference by both parties, but of Adorno's stringency and prudence. For example, he had not given his consent for the publication of the “Fragments” in the issue 14th of *Arguments* (1959) and he discouraged Lindenberg and Hildenbrand to publish their translation of *Minima Moralia*. What also induces a difficult reception of the Marxist perspective of Adorno lies in the relation that the French thought maintained with Heidegger, which was discussed a lot in French intellectual journals in the 40's, especially in *Les Temps Modernes*, *Critique* and *La Table Ronde*. The reception of Heidegger's phenomenology in the 30's and in the 40's gives rise to an anthropological and a subjectivist rhetoric, especially in Sartrean works that refer to Henry Corbin's translation of *Dasein* by “réalité-humaine” (in *Bifur* in 1931 and in the translation of *Was ist Metaphysik?* in 1938), which is a (volunteer) misunderstood of “objectal” and “ecstatic” dimensions of the concept. We will have to understand Adorno's reception and its obstructions in

¹ Miguel Abensour, « Malheureux comme Adorno en France ? », dans *Variations*, n°6, p. 17-30.

² « Lettre d'Adorno à Lindenberg du 9 novembre 1959 ».

³ « Lettre d'Adorno à Lindenberg du 27 juillet 1960 ».

strict relation with Heidegger's reception⁴, who is "a crucial interlocutor"⁵ for Adorno, particularly about notions of alienation and reification in connection with experience (*Erfahrung*).

Correspondences with Robert Minder, Karl Loewith, Georges Friedmann, Lucien Goldmann, René Leibowitz or Raymond Aron attest, if no effective reception, at least intensive attention to Adorno's work and requalify Abensour's thought of a minimal presence of the Frankfurter Critical Theory in France during the 50's. A letter from Georges Friedmann disproves this pessimism:

Elle [votre lettre du 12 décembre 1958] me donne l'occasion de vous dire encore le profond écho que votre visite à Paris a suscité et le souvenir durable qu'elle a laissé parmi tous ceux qui vous ont entendu. En particulier, soyez assuré que le Séminaire que vous avez bien voulu donner à la Sorbonne a été hautement apprécié par les chercheurs qui y ont assisté. C'est un public difficile et j'avais pu rarement observer chez eux des réactions aussi chaleureuses⁶.

Moreover, even if explicit references to Adorno in philosophical, linguistic or semiological works in France are not plentiful, we must study his critical actualisation and translation in different thoughts (for example Lucien Goldmann's, Roland Barthes', Raymond Aron's or Edgar Morin's who publish in journals that give a voice to Adorno). We will analyse the particularities of these intellectual productions and we will try to understand the importance of intellectual journals, considered as collective, dynamic and critical discourses that influence individual productions.

More than an empirical study of data that would attest a reception, a transfer, an influence or an absence of Adornian's thought in France, this research aims at measuring sociodiscursive and conceptual singularities that certify the critical reception of this thought and its potential obstructions. By focusing on the "critical reception of the Critical Theory", we will realise a discursive analysis of French intellectual thought about the critique of mass society and culture, in the continuity of Johannes Angermüller's⁷ and Frédéric Cossutta's⁸ researches. Our methodological postulate, actually an Adornian one⁹, supposes an indivisibility between concept and its formal regime. In the project of a rhetorical analysis of tropes, ethical postures (the *ethos*), argumentative structures and strategies (*topoi koinoi*, rhetorical presuppositions, ironical "îlots textuels" and explicit references), lexical and syntactic choices in French intellectual productions, this paper's aim is to study the influence, *in discourse*, of the Critical Theory. As an example, we mention Barthesian mythologies and structural semiology that have to be read, in their rhetorical dimension, in strict relation with Adorno's critique of bourgeois culture and mass society, as it is said in the following article "Inactualités des *Mythologies*":

Ce que Barthes construit lentement dans le projet des *Mythologies*, Theodor Adorno le théorise au même moment dans une approche à mon avis indépassée de « L'essai comme forme » (paru en 1958), dans des termes spectaculairement comparables. On y retrouve la même phraséologie d'attaque de la pensée bourgeoise, qui témoigne de l'âge de ces textes, et le même espoir mis dans l'essai pour « liquider l'opinion » (p.23), qui les projette bien au-delà de leur époque. Surtout, par-delà leurs priorités différentes,

⁴ Cf. Danilo Scholz, « Tout seul dans le pays de l'heideggérianisme. Adorno conférencier au Collège de France », dans Giuseppe Bianco et Frédéric Fruteau de Laclós éd., *L'angle mort des années 1950. Philosophie et sciences humaines en France*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, coll. « La philosophie à l'œuvre », 2016, p. 123-144, and Samir Gandesha, "Leaving Home. On Adorno and Heidegger", in Thomas Huhn éd., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 101-128.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶ « Lettre de Friedmann à Adorno du 23 décembre 1958 ».

⁷ Johannes Angermüller, *Analyse du discours poststructuraliste : les voix du sujet dans le langage chez Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Sollers*, Limoges, Lambert Lucas, 2013.

⁸ Frédéric Cossutta dir., *Langages*, n° 119, *L'Analyse du discours philosophique*, septembre 1995.

⁹ Cf. Gandesha, *op. cit.*

le sémiologue français et le philosophe allemand perçoivent de la même manière le danger d'une naturalisation des phénomènes culturels, et proposent la même pratique essayistique pour la contrer¹⁰.

Another example is the constant use of the “critique” notion which structures articles’ titles in reviews and generates formulas profoundly determined by the Frankfurter philosophy’s reception, especially in *Communications*: “cultureanalyse” or “culture-action” are indeed formed on the model of “*Kulturindustrie*” (cf. “De la culturanalyse à la politique culturelle” by Morin and “La culture-action” by Willener et Beaud). In connection with these too concise comments, we will study the rhetorical evolutions of the intellectual discourse and the formal structures that determine the emergence of a French Critical Theory. In the same time, we will measure the *praxis* power¹¹ of journals, as intellectual groups, to put in dialogue, to receive and to appropriate a foreign thought.

In the continuity of this investigation, we would like to question how the literary area in France allowed the passage from Heidegger’s to Adorno’s reception, especially via the Nouveau Roman and the literary works of Alain Robbe-Grillet¹², Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon and Samuel Beckett, who is particularly commented in *Noten zur Literatur* (cf. *Notes sur Beckett*) and who corresponded with Adorno. As the latter conceived it, the formal creation of art is a necessary condition of philosophical innovations. The Nouveau Roman, by deconstructing the evident relation between subject and object, develops an ecstatic rhetoric, appropriates the *Dasein* concept in reaction to the “réalité-humaine” translation, and develops a critique of traditional, conventional and bourgeois literatures (moreover of the existentialist anthropomorphic aesthetic) by questioning the two notions of “alienation” and “reification”. By refusing, against Sartre and Beauvoir, the conception of the object as a mirror of spirit, the Nouveau Roman denies the subjectivist phenomenology of existentialists, who had appropriated Heideggerian phenomenology in an anthropological way, in favour of a new form of experience (*Erfahrung*) where the subject is “forced to open itself to what is not its own¹³”. As the New Music, the Nouveau Roman would show, by an artistic experience and by a form of negative dialectic, the true “crisis of the identity of subject and object¹⁴” and would materialise the rhetorical condition of a transition between Heidegger’s phenomenology and Adorno’s Critical Theory in the French intellectual area.

¹⁰ Irène Langlet, « Inactualité des *Mythologies* ? », sur *Fabula*.

¹¹ Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique. Théorie des ensembles pratiques*, Tomes I et II, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque de philosophie », 1985 [1960].

¹² Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Its Repressed; or, Robbe-Grillet as Anti-Colonialist”, in *The Ideologies of Theory*, London, Verso, 2008.

¹³ Ganesha, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.