Heaven, Eternity, and Beauty: An interview with Max Horkheimer at the time of Theodor W. Adorno’s death

*Der Spiegel* Editorial Note (August 19, 1969): Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, who died at the age of 65 last week, was a friend of Max Horkheimer’s for decades. They first met as students at Frankfurt University. In 1930 Horkheimer employed his friend at the Institute for Social Research headed by him. In 1933 their paths diverged for a short time. Horkheimer went to Columbia University, Adorno to Oxford. In 1938 Adorno again became a colleague of Horkheimer’s. Together, they returned to Frankfurt in 1949, led the revived Institute for Social research, and founded the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School. They were, as they put it themselves, fascinated with each other. Horkheimer by the “genius” of his friend, and Adorno by Horkheimer’s “vision of a just general constitution of humanity,” tied together “with respect for the happiness of each individual.”

*Spiegel* Herr Professor Horkheimer, your friend Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno is dead. Was there in the last years of his life anything like resignation?

Horkheimer There can be no talk of resignation; Herr Adorno was convinced that taking decisive positions towards the current social, political and cultural situation, as he had described in his writings, would be infinitely more helpful to intellectuals in bringing about progress than if such responses were enacted from various and contradictory sides. In this way he already negated resignation because he felt that the thoughts he expressed were themselves particular measures which, in the midst of pure automatization and mechanization and...forgetting of positive visions of human relations, would stand as the opposite of this tendency.

*Spiegel* Students, even those who had been his pupils and whom he loved, reproached him for shying away from praxis and for being insufficiently partisan. They thus accused him of teaching a philosophy of change and then ultimately betraying it. Were the accusations false?
Horkheimer    Yes, I think they were false. He was convinced that present developments were leading to such a point that society would be exclusively directed by purely technical and instrumental concepts and goals rather than by autonomous thought. On this view there was a need to protect, if not expand and develop, what he had hitherto called “human” amidst the unavoidable technological improvement of society. He demanded a society which was not only more just but also better, where developed human strengths would continue to be fostered. The manner in which he spoke, wrote, and lived exemplified this conviction.

Spiegel    Do you believe that the student provocations that he was subjected to since 1967 damaged him and left scars in his thinking?

Horkheimer    I believe one must be careful here. The students opposed him at various points and also protested against him. On the other hand, there were amongst the students more than a few who knew what he meant and who, despite all their protest actions, also preserved a love for him. Naturally he was deeply hurt by the protest actions of the students. On the other hand when he spoke with individual students (of those who protested) they often said things to him which pleased him very much.

Spiegel    Did you talk with him about it?

Horkheimer    Naturally I spoke to him about it constantly, and he always said to me that he in no way supported these protests when they aimed at progressive teachers. On the other hand, he was never ready to let these protests simply force him to the other side.

Spiegel    You and Adorno invented the concept of the “culture industry.” You both carried out the most radical critique of Western culture, in that you uncovered its social fundaments. But in our last discussion with Adorno, earlier this year, he foreshadowed an aesthetic. You certainly had an inside view of his work. Was this work to be a reconciliation or a continuation of critique?

Horkheimer    Critique, moreover his critique, does not exclude an understanding and description of the doubtful conditions of cultural movements in the present. Nevertheless, Adorno understood that in a time when the social basis of culture becomes so doubtful, like today, the great aesthetic phenomena could still arise. His anxiety, which I shared, was the consequence of the evermore instrumental constitution of society; a society which ultimately concentrates all forces of individuals upon an ever more technicized labour. Insofar as this society ultimately narrows all thinking, this forces thinking into an ever more marginal position. I however believe that it would be too simplistic to think that this whole development should be judged only negatively.

Spiegel    Professor Horkheimer, what was the essential question in the thinking of your friend?

Horkheimer    The question of the orientation of Adorno’s thinking does not allow for an answer simply through sentences and statements whose formulations are not as differentiated as those found in his writings. The thought that one could now simply answer this question without the endlessly subtle expressions which he not only used in his writings, but also in the lectures he gave, would have seemed very questionable to
him. For that reason I hesitate to respond with any word that does not have the responsibility and differentiality of his formulations.

**Spiegel** You want to say that respect for the small, for the individual, for the extraordinary, forced or produced such a differentiality in him.

**Horkheimer** Yes.

**Spiegel** And that it would go contrary to the ethos of his thinking to utter general formulations. And thus naturally the other, the interpreter, may also not do this.

**Horkheimer** Yes, that is quite right.

**Spiegel** That means that the differentiality that you speak of was necessary and unavoidable for him because the stress on the small and extraordinary — i.e. reality [Wirklichkeit] — was so central to his thinking.

**Horkheimer** That is true. Consider, perhaps the theological. Consider simply that one asks something like: does God exist and what can be said of him? Then he would have answered, and this answer would express the great thought of history: I cannot simply answer by saying God exists and God is just and God is good, because the words “just” and “good,” like the word God, are ultimate ends. This is as he explained in *Negative Dialectics* and as it is thought in critical theory. It cannot be given in positive formulations at all, but only expressed through that which God is not. Nevertheless, the affirmation of an “other” which one can only describe through this word “other” is hiding in this negativity.

**Spiegel** “Other”?

**Horkheimer** Yes, he always talked of the longing for the “other” without using the words heaven or eternity or beauty or anything like that. And I believe that is in fact the greatness of his questioning; that when he inquired into the world he ultimately meant the “other,” but he was convinced that the “other” could not be grasped by description, but rather by conceiving the world as it is under the aspect that it is not the only one towards which our thoughts are directed.

**Spiegel** That is a negative theology, is it not?

**Horkheimer** Quite right, a negative theology, but not a negative theology in the sense that there is not God, but rather in the sense that he cannot be represented.
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