
MARC NICOLAS SOMMER, *DAS KONZEPT EINER NEGATIVEN DIALEKTIK*,
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In the last decades of 20th century *Negative Dialectics* has been widely recognized as Theodor W. Adorno's most significant philosophical work. With *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) and *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944, 1947, written with Max Horkheimer) it is one of the core texts for understanding Adorno's philosophical thought. *Negative Dialectics* was published in 1966 and accompanied with several previous lecture courses on the subject. These lectures were recently published in edition of Adorno's *Nachgelassene Schriften*. Adorno called *Negative Dialectics* "a methodology" of all his material works. This statement seemingly contradicts his notorious polemics against abstract "method" of philosophers-logicians, separated from things and particular objects of knowledge. However, there is something peculiar about this work, which makes it universally valid for Adorno's philosophical thought. Therefore, the concept of negative dialectics shouldn't be conceived only as a subject matter of philosophical explanation or a method in the strict sense, but perhaps as the only legitimate way of contemporary philosophizing and genuine form of contemporary intellectual experience. It is emphatically a philosophy itself.

The book of Marc Nicolas Sommer *Das Konzept einer negativen Dialektik* is a comprehensive scholarly study and valuable addition to subsequent commentary

of Adorno's work. It is a philosophical contribution as well. As the author says at the very beginning, the book is a slightly reworked version of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Basel. It throws light on perplexing structure of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, but also on the underlying logic of modern dialectical thought. This work is somehow peculiar in secondary sources: it is a rare extensive, systematic and thorough examination of the philosophical foundations of negative dialectics. The very title indicates this intention. The author is interested in reconstruction of the entire concept of negative dialectics, its various features, conceptual aspects and implications. His aim is not just to provide a useful commentary of *Negative Dialectics*, but intends explication of the very idea of dialectics. Such attempt must be discerned from the question and search for "origin", which is provided by S. Buck-Morss in her well-known study on Adorno's early philosophy *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. To explore the origin means to determine socio-historical, cultural, intellectual or other factors which influenced genesis and shaping of some intellectual product or theory.

Still, the project of philosophical reconstruction is not possible without reference to philosophical tradition, namely Hegel and his idealism as a modern paradigm of dialectical philosophy. Sommer is plainly

aware of this. Hegelian philosophy, especially *Phenomenology of Spirit*, contains the modern core of dialectical thought as a mixture of metaphysics and history. Therefore, taking into account Hegel and Adorno's criticism of his famous idealistic predecessor is indispensable and discerning strategy of this work.

The study is divided in the introduction, three main chapters, concluding consideration, and bibliography with primary and secondary sources. It is structured as follows (it should be noted that thematically it corresponds to the structure of *Negative Dialectics*):

The introduction is divided in three sections. The author begins with general philosophical issues, in terms of reception of negative dialectics after Adorno, primarily in Habermas's criticism and theory of communicative rationality, and later with reception in 1983 and 2003 conferences on Adorno's philosophy (Bubner, Schnädelbach, Geuss, Wellmer, Honneth, Habermas, Kern etc.) Further, in the second section, he advocates a liberation from interpretative preconceptions, mainly that of negative dialectics as a philosophical foundation of social theory. Here, the author explains why it is important to address Hegel as one of Adorno's key orientation figures in philosophical tradition (next to Kant, Marx and Nietzsche). The author claims that criticism of Hegel hits not only the structural problems of logic of negative dialectics, but the whole philosophy. Formulation of the concept of dialectics is to be found at the beginning of Adorno's *Three Studies on Hegel*, where author states that "the intention of the whole is preparation of a changed concept of dialectics." The core of understanding of negative dialectics lies in a difference and its relation to speculative dialectics: it must be conceived as *a necessary self-criticism of idealistic dialectics*. In the last section of Introduction, the author explains his methodology of reconstruction of a mature project of negative dialectics.

The first chapter deals with formal reconstruction of negative dialectics: its categories, structure, metaphysical and

philosophical background. However, this chapter is perhaps the most important. General strategy consists in exposition and discussion of four structural moments of dialectical thought and dialectical concepts as well: mediation, totality, negativity, and non-identity (as opposed to immediacy, particularity, positivity, identity). Chapter is divided in four sections, each discussing one of the topics mentioned above. In this examination emerges a structural difference between two types of dialectics, speculative and negative, which consists in meta-dialectical change from identity to non-identity of subject and object. The author points out that Adorno treats negative dialectics as an authentic (not deficient or unsuitable) form of dialectics. Hegel has only adjusted it to the principles of speculative idealism. However, these principles were external to structure of the dialectics itself. The main task of the chapter is examination of separation of idealism and dialectics. The implications of this process are manifested in many changes regarding four structural concepts.

Of particular importance is a dialectical concept of *negativity* and its four dimensions (difference between normative and ontological negativity, between positive and negative negativity, different meaning of absolute negativity, different centering of negativity) presented and discussed in detail by Sommer. So far, besides Theunissen's report of negativity on *Adorno-Conference 1983*, there was a very few sources in secondary literature dedicated to this enigmatic, but nevertheless central term. In this respect, this study is a valuable contribution for understanding of Adorno's radicalized and full-fledged concept of negativity.

Another major frustration for Adorno's reader is often caused by the gap between conceptual dialectics (methodology) and real dialectics (ontology), i. e. dialectics in conceptual structures and dialectics as a law of things and objective reality (society). These two domains seem to stand separately without any chance of connection, but Adorno is using the term interchangeably providing no justification in that regard.

However, Sommer defends Adorno's position clarifying that the assumed dualism was premature, that the task of negative dialectics is only to mediate sphere of the concepts with sphere of reality, to attempt to apprehend reality with concepts, but not necessary to succeed. Nonidentity of things with concepts reproduces in contradictory character of the concept, but also in the thing itself. Negative dialectics expresses these contradictions in the sphere of thought, which makes it so difficult to comprehend. This topic is further clarified in discussion of nonidentity.

It should also be mentioned an alternative idea of philosophical method, one with different logical structure than usual deduction, namely *logic of constellation*, initially taken from Benjamin. Adorno introduced this method at the very beginning of his academic career in 1931 inaugural lecture "The Actuality of Philosophy", but never provided any fully developed theory of constellational knowledge. Sommer rightly understands constellation as "a redemption of cognitive goal of negative dialectics, to transfer the non-conceptual into the sphere of concepts", but without reduction to a concept. Inability of determinant concept to grasp the thing gets (constellational) logic close to aesthetic experience and Kantian theory of aesthetic judgment (R. Bubner makes this point in his essay "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik"). In this respect, the role of *exact phantasy* should be considered in constitution of intellectual experience and philosophy. This notion was also introduced in Adorno's early philosophy, but not worked out in this book, perhaps because of its aesthetic origin. In recent years (or, as the author says, since the anniversary year of 2003), when an increasing interest in Adorno's *epistemological* views was raised, this subject may become even more relevant.

The second chapter ("Theory of Intellectual Experience") is divided in three sections. Main topic of the first is reconstruction of Adorno's theory of intellectual experience, criticism of theory of knowledge, and the transition from knowledge

to intellectual experience, which is motivated within the theory of knowledge itself; second section presents Adorno's account of Hegelian science of the experience of consciousness, and insight that subject not only constitutes the object but experiences it through self-reflection of its own actions; the third section connects theory of intellectual experience with materialistic theory of spirit, considering already introduced Adornian premise of 'primacy of the object.'

Main topic of the third chapter is philosophy of history and historicity in Adorno's thought. Author argues that Adornian way of thinking is thoroughly historical, even in metaphysical domain. This makes a clear general reference to *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The chapter is divided in three sections (World Spirit, Natural History, Metaphysics), each of them in three subsections. First section presents Adorno's criticism of Hegelian philosophy of history, at the same time revealing his commitment to a concept of world spirit and universal history; in the second, the concept of natural history is introduced as well as Adornian modification of Hegel's concept of universal history; in addition, the concept of utopia is introduced, which enables proper understanding of "transmutation" of metaphysics in history in Adorno's philosophy; finally, in the third, author is in more details interested in the problem of metaphysics, and at the same time one of the most important subjects in this work – self-reflection of the dialectics.

In the concluding remarks the author summarizes his previous arguments stating that "negative dialectics is a genuine and in itself coherent form of dialectical thought." Its main productive element Sommer sees in a possibility of connecting experience with the most abstract concepts, insight into nivellating tendencies of culture industry, capability of preserving autonomy of thinking in universal negativity consciousness and a possibility to take part in the project of mature mankind. Quoting Adorno's work *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, where author states that: "It is time not for first

philosophy but last philosophy”, Sommer concludes that negative dialectics may be considered as a “last philosophy” (*philosophia ultima*). It is not ‘last’ in terms that there was no philosophy after Adorno; it is last in terms of dialectical philosophy

from Plato to Hegel and beyond; of the only remaining non-regressive form of thinking or one which can still be followed on a path of negativity, self-reflection and self-criticism. Such philosophy can only be conceived as a negative dialectics.