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*Projektleitung:*

*Harald Rau (Professur für Kommunikationsmanagement, Campus Salzgitter)  
h.rau@ostfalia.de*

# Mind the gap! What we can learn from Adorno's hesitance to cross the divide between Critical Theory and Practice

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## **Abstract**

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## **Correspondent Author:**

Christian Raupach (Research Associate, Ostfalia University of Applied Sciences, Salzgitter, Germany),  
ch.raupach@ostfalia.de

# Mind the gap! What we can learn from Adorno's hesitance to cross the divide between Critical Theory and Practice

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## *Abstract*

### **Introduction**

Edward Snowden violated laws concerning national security in order to make visible how the actions of states and their secret services sometimes undermine core principles of democracy. As far as I know, Snowden did not violate those laws because he thought they were generally wrong, but rather because special circumstances seemed to justify his action. The more so because Snowden did not claim that people in general should violate Laws concerning national security. What he did, seems to be a case of determinate negation of rules rather than general, abstract negation of those rules. This contribution is about determinate negation, and asks whether determinate negation is a way of transferring critical theory to practice.

The reason is simple: Though constructing their critical theory for a practical purpose – that is, making visible how ideology helps and masks social dominance (Steinert, 2007, S. 37) – Adorno and Horkheimer were very hesitant to identify with any social movement of their time that actually tried to abolish social dominance. “Die Werke Adornos”, Horkheimer said in his speech at the funeral of Adorno, “[...] zeugen für die Kritische Theorie [...], wie intensiv auch immer er um Reformen sich bemühte, er hat abgelehnt, den Kollektiven, die auf seine Theorie sich beriefen, anstatt sie reflektierend auf die eigenen Aktionen anzuwenden, unbedingt sich anzuschließen.” (1985, S. 289f.) (Author's translation: Adorno's works testify for Critical Theory [...], however intense he worked for reforms; he denied unconditional association with groups who invoke his theory instead of applying it critically to their own actions.)

*This contribution argues that Adorno's interpretation of Kant's freedom paradox through the lens of negative dialectics results in a critical distance towards social change trying to promote individual freedom. While individual freedom, may be the main aim of critical theory, it is only possible through determinate negation of both: rules and the absence of rules at the same time. Thus, critical practice is less about finding and implementing the right social rules and more about educating in determinate negation. Furthermore, this contribution poses the question whether determinate negation may have any practical purpose at all.*

### **The non-identity of idea and object**

Applying critical theory to action first and foremost means to apply negative dialectics, the core epistemological principle of critical theory. In essence, negative dialectics denies the identity principle, the identity between ideas and objects, and instead tries to identify the differences between the two. (Adorno T. W., 2007, S. 15f.)

This fundamentally challenges any social movement concerned with general reforms, as general reforms seem to work on either one of the following principles: the rules they want to set are either

- right in an ontological sense, or

- that the rules they want to abolish are wrong in an ontological sense or, in a weaker form,
- that the proposed rules are better – for whomever – than the existing rules.

Even if one just considers the weaker third principle, the problem becomes obvious: The ideas manifested in the proposed rules are non-identical towards the reality they try to change. Thus, it is not decidable whether the proposed changes are actually good for anybody – notwithstanding the question whether they can be realized at all. The same can be said for the existing rules – negative dialectics challenges us to not depict them as an ontology of the wrong state (Ontologie des falschen Zustands, see Prokop, 2007, S. 41f.) – that is, to identify the rules with the inferior reality they seem to be putting forth. After all, it is not “good or bad rules” critical theory is concerned with, but “good or bad reality”.

Even if one tries to find modest rules that are as close as possible to the objects they try to rule, thus reflecting on the non-identity of idea and object, the problem remains. As soon as dialectical evaluation of non-identity results in a set rule, dialectics turn positive, non-critical towards the epistemological deficits of the evaluation of non-identity. Critical theory seems to doubt the idea that it is possible to find any set of rules worth pushing forth.

### The freedom paradox

If there are no rules worth pushing forth, one may ask whether the whole concept of rules is worthwhile. Adorno asks that question in his debate of Kant.

When Adorno argued – both with and against Kant – that freedom is not an abstract choice between abiding by a self-set rule and ignoring the rule (see Khurana, 2013, S. 63f.), opting for determinate negations of both stances, he dialectically challenged the idea of rules in general. If it is neither right to impose rules upon oneself nor to live without any rules, one may argue that rules can neither be right nor wrong, because if one or the other were the case, it would either be generally right to abide by the rules, or it would be generally right to break the rules. If Adorno regards freedom in the Kantian sense as the central aim of human existence, humankind cannot get out of this dialectical mess. One may still find reason to support one rule or another, but only for instrumental reasons, never for objective reasons.

Thus, it would not be the rule itself that is useful from a dialectical perspective, but rather what the self-set (social) rule *does* in regards to individual freedom. On the one hand, rules promote individual freedom by unchaining the human being from its natural behavior and from societal anomy. On the other hand, rules challenge individual freedom by superimposing control onto human existence, thus evoking resistance against rules.

In Marxist theory, the principle of exchange is a primary example: It promotes individual freedom by making complex modes of production possible, while at the same time threatening individual freedom by being a social institution so “greedy”, as Lewis Coser would put it (Greedy Institutions, 1974), that it demands the undivided attention of any socialized individual and accumulating ever more of this attention. Obviously, the usefulness of the principle of exchange from a critical point of view gets lost when one of the two sides gets lost – it is, again, not the rule itself that is useful, its usefulness rather depends on individuals being able to determinately negate its presence as an obstacle to freedom, and its absence as a promoter of freedom.

In essence, rules are worthwhile, as long as they are determinately negated, acknowledging the non-identity of the rule and reality.

### **Freedom, identity and non-identity**

These arguments and the example illustrate three things in a dialectical way:

1. Adorno's theory promotes neither social change nor social stagnation. Any rule that hinders freedom must be disapproved, and rules do that by definition. The divide between theory and practice cannot be crossed.
2. Ultimately, promoting freedom is not about promoting "the right rules", but about promoting a mindset towards rules that is inspired by negative dialectics, using determinate negation of existing rules and of the absence of rules at the same time. Horkheimer's explanation of Adorno's hesitance to identify with social movements points into this direction. In this sense, there never was a divide between theory and practice, as (critical) theory always has been, and always will be, practice, namely the practice of determinate negation resulting out of negative dialectics. From Adorno's theoretical point of view, being critical of these social movements may be the best way to actually support them. Though social change may very well benefit people in some ways, it is just as dangerous if people associate proposed change with false hopes of ontic freedom or its derivatives. After all, if one agrees with Adorno's interpretation, these would be false ideologies that promote social dominance in their very own way. The most one can do to actually promote freedom is to debunk both the myth of ontic freedom and the myth of the impossibility of freedom; and divert freedom-related efforts to enabling people to negate in a determinate way. Anything else inevitably promotes not freedom, but ideological limbo.
3. While the mere existence of rules promotes, and thus helps, the *struggle* for freedom, there is still value in finding more adequate rules, rules that both respect the nonidentity of rules and objects while at the same time trying to make the ideas rules consist of more similar to the objects they are imposed upon, more respectful to the uniqueness of the object. These kinds of rules may allow for more meaningful determinate negation, because they present a bigger challenge when it comes to finding their non-identity towards the object. Compare a rule that would allow you to kill anyone who disagrees with you to a rule that asks you to solve any problems you have with other persons by argument. The first rule obviously is much more nonidentical towards individual freedom, thus, the second rule is preferable. However, even the second rule is nonidentical towards individual freedom, inasmuch it makes the power of arguments, and thus rationality, absolute.

### **The practical meaning of determinate negation**

A prerequisite for determinate negation is the ability to see the differences between idea and object/reality. If idea and reality require different actions, determinate negation is the ability to reject the idea/rule, because it is not fit for reality in that particular instance. Contrary to abstract negation, this does not imply the rejection of the idea/rule in general; more so, good rules may generally seem fit, yet determinate negation will still reject them in particular instances for particular reasons. In a sense, determinate negation is not interested in pointing out which ideas/rules are wrong, but rather under which circumstances they are not fit, and that, under these circumstances, breaking the rules is the right thing to do.

Adorno's concept of determinate negation thus stands in direct opposition towards deontic practical philosophy, like Kant's. While Kant claims that the premise of one's action should be fit to be a general rule, determinate negation rather values the uniqueness of any decision situation, pointing out the blindness of generalized rules.

Edward Snowden may be a good example for the difference: His decision gave preference to the uniqueness of the object/the situation rather than the rationale of the rule.

That does not mean, though, that he was right. The question is: How can we evaluate whether a unique situation justifies breaking rules?

Here, negative dialectics stumble into a difficult situation. Any rule that would tell us under which circumstances we should break rules would have to be scrutinized for following the identity principle. If, on the other hand, this rule was negated determinately, under which circumstances should we break this rule? This results in an infinite regress. Theory does not seem to be able to help here! (And I am looking forward to your input on that proposition.)

## Summary

While the best way to help social change from a critical theory point of view seems to be to apply negative dialectics towards their agenda through determinate negation of their proposed rules, negative dialectics do not seem to be able to actually formulate any rules on how to effectively use determinate negation. In summary, Adorno's stance of keeping a critical distance towards social movements thus can not only be interpreted as the best way to help them, but also as the realization that critical theory is not fit to promote any rules or reforms after all. Maybe determinate negation, as a purely practical approach, is helpful, but theory does not allow inferring so.

However, the promotion of determinate negation as a purely practical approach may be in vain, insofar ideology, "the form of thought whose ontological status is not that of thought" (Žižek, 1994, S. 17), is an "objective process [...] independent from the consciousness of the individuals and their wills" (Adorno, quoted in: Lotz, 2013, S. 117). Determinate negation relies on strong agency; if ideology does not allow for strong agency, even a purely practical approach ignoring the theoretical problems does not seem to be fruitful. So, in conclusion, we cannot know

- whether determinate negation is possible,
- how to negate determinately,
- whether determinate negation is actually helpful for the purpose of individual freedom.

Negative dialectics seem to leave us in a radical dilemma. There is no way to tell if it is helpful, but without it we fall prey to ideology.

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