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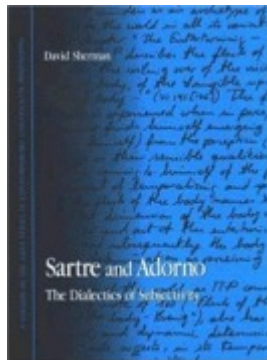
David Sherman. *Sartre and Adorno - The Dialectics of Subjectivity*

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Référence(s) :

David SHERMAN. *Sartre and Adorno - The Dialectics of Subjectivity*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007, xii + 328 pp., €64.59, ISBN 978-0-7914-7115-9.

Texte intégral



Afficher l'image

- David Sherman's nicely published cloth book from 2007, *Sartre and Adorno: The Dialectics of Subjectivity* contains an Introduction and three component parts with eight chapters; the acknowledgments, abbreviations, notes, bibliography and index are all user-friendly and information rich; the index especially has received very careful and professional attention; the topic area of the tome is a genuinely fascinating one insofar as Sartre has been long neglected, particularly so as of late, and Adorno too not particularly well-received in the late modern, late capitalist bourgeois university. So, for the subject area alone the book has to get two thumbs

up. The book appears in the well-respected Suny Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy.

- 2 The time should in truth be ripe for a critical reappraisal of Sartre's legacy given the recent newly published and now released, new editions of Sartre's late-style two-volume masterpiece, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume One* (2004) and *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume Two* (2006), both with forewords by Fredric Jameson and both from Verso books (London/New York). Further, a translation of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology* has been re-published in the Routledge Classic series with a new preface to the work in 2003. Not only this, Sherman's book itself, more precisely, contributes to what Sartre himself asks for of the general subject area in the first volume of his major work *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume One*,

I am far from believing that the isolated effort of an individual can provide a satisfactory answer—even a partial one—to so vast a question, a question which engages with the totality of History. If these initial investigations have done no more than enable me to define the problem, by means of provisional remarks which are there to be challenged and modified, and if they give rise to a discussion and if, as would be best, this discussion is carried on collectively in working groups, then I shall be satisfied.
(translation Alan Sheridan-Smith, foreword Fredric Jameson, London: Verso, 2004, 40-41)

- 3 Also, as for Adorno, the new translation by Robert Hullot-Kentor of the late-style posthumous major work *Aesthetic Theory* (1997 from Minnesota's Theory and History of Literature Series) albeit a decade ago already now, has helped in and of itself to make the time more than ever correct for a reassessment too of Adorno. Adorno, in particular, is thought to be a most difficult writer to translate so these new translational treatments can only help the over-all reception of Adorno's work in thought. It too is worth mentioning a few among the many new Adorno volumes in English such as the 1999 (Polity Press) and subsequent 2000 (Harvard University Press) publication of *Theodor Adorno & Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940* that has as of late aided and abetted the understanding of Adorno's achievement. Also, among a select band of other texts released in the 1990s in English is Henry W. Pickford's translation of *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia University Press, 1999). Routledge has also been issuing new editions of Adorno texts for over a decade with such titles as *The Stars down to Earth and other essays on the irrational in culture* (2002 a most recent edition in the Routledge Classic series) and likewise in the same series would be the 2003 *The Jargon of Authenticity*; in 2005 Continuum published with a new introduction by Graham McCann the jointly authored *Composing for the Films* by Adorno and Hanns Eisler.

- 4 Titles such as *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music* (Verso, 2002, translation Rodney Livingstone) and *In Search of Wagner* (translation Rodney Livingstone, with a foreword by Slavoj Žižek, Verso, 2005) add to our sense in translation of Adorno's wide-ranging and always interesting output. Just to give a sense of other translated titles into English and their genealogy we could cite a representative list that would include *Prisms* (1967, MIT), *Negative Dialectics* (the E.B. Ashton translation from 1973, The Continuum Publishing Company), the perhaps still incomparable in the Adorno corpus for its sheer content, *Mimima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (translated E.F.N. Jephcott, Verso, 1974 that continues to be given new impressions--my edition is the thirteenth such impression from 2002), *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minnesota, 1989), *Notes to Literature: Volume One* (Columbia UP, 1991) and the rich *Hegel: Three Studies* (MIT, 1993) may round out our sense of Adorno's reception in English. Other tiles could be mentioned but we stop here for reasons of limitations of space though one should not let go unmentioned the new translation by Edmund Jephcott of Adorno's best known work *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* coauthored with Max Horkheimer, which came out from Stanford University Press in 2002 (albeit David Sherman, in the current tome

under consideration, uses the 1991 translation from John Cumming that is a product from Continuum).

5 One rather strange omission of Sherman's from his sense of reference is Fredric Jameson's early-style major 1971 tome (Princeton University Press) on *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Sherman though does discuss Jameson's work and includes the latter's 1990 work (Verso) *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*. Last not least in this general Adorno-reception context David Jenemann has just published a nice tome with Minnesota on *Adorno in America* (2007) that convincingly wipes the floor with a lot of misconceptions about Adorno's time spent in and tack on the U.S.A. I would not have expected to see Robert Miklitsch's super fine and highly readable *From Hegel to Madonna: Towards a General Economy of "Commodity Fetishism"* (SUNY Press, 1998) in the bibliography but let the reader be aware of its engrossing and rather lengthy engagement with Adorno.

6 Now, let us home in on, and page through, Sherman's newly printed study of Sartre and Adorno. In discussing Slavoj Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (1999) Sherman, Associate Professor of Philosophy in the University of Montana at Missoula, writes:

As is the case with Heidegger's purportedly individuating insight that we are beings-unto-death, which is at the core of a theory that Kristeva rightly calls a "regressive mythological travesty," Žižek's variation on the poststructuralist preoccupation with death as wholly "other" ends up perpetuating the very sort of social madness that Žižek would have done with. (3)

7 This is a good example of the high philosophical intelligence at work in this book; for whether one agrees or no with such a claim as the foregoing about Žižek, for instance, it remains the case that Sherman's arguments are rich, provocative and almost always most thoughtful and searching. (Incidentally, and it is a minor point but I still think worth mentioning: Sherman's text does not use the accent marks in the last name Žižek; perhaps this is his choice, his oversight or that of the press or even the house style.)

8 In any case, and furthermore, for this reader-critic, one of the more interesting contributions of the present tome to the benefit of understanding relates to what the author has to say here in the introduction to his text, speaks of

part III, which considers Adorno's dialectic of subjectivity from diverse perspectives. In the initial chapter (chapter 7), I look at Adorno's notion of the subject in terms of both its formation and deformation [...] I argue that Adorno's take on the enlightenment subject is not as incriminating as some poststructuralists contend, and that Habermas's contention that Adorno wholly abandons enlightenment rationality is wrong—in fact, Habermas himself falls prey to the very dialectic of enlightenment he rejects. (10)

9 In the actual content of the text the aforesaid reads well as a cogent corrective. Equally compelling is the coda to the piece that is the book; as Sherman puts it in his introduction, "I then wrap up by examining Adorno's model of "negative dialectics," which, I shall argue, presupposes a subject that can have the sorts of qualitative individual experiences that resonate with Sartre's early brand of phenomenology" (11). This is all interesting material. Intriguingly, in a comparative discussion of Kierkegaard and Adorno we read

due to Kierkegaard's refusal to equate the attainment of what he would deem a truly Christian comportment with a state of reconciliation in either a spiritual or secular sense [...] he fundamentally remains, like Adorno, a philosopher of nonidentity and negativity. Like Adorno, Kierkegaard longs for a reconciliation that cannot be spoken and is a keen critic of mass society who seeks to revivify individual subjectivity within it. (26)

10 However, the problem here from a Niklas Luhmannian systems theory point of view is that the concept "subject" is a false invention that we are now beyond. But

that would be another modeling of thought, and so remains beyond the pale of our present considerations. Thoughtfully and relevantly, Sherman argues a mere page later to the foregoing that, “Given Habermas’s rejection of every ‘philosophy of the subject,’ [...] it is ironic that it is exactly Kierkegaard’s defense of individual subjectivity that prompts him to assert that elements of Kierkegaard’s thought are indispensable to his own enterprise [...]. (27) This, however, may be asking for a misguided consistency on Jürgen Habermas’s part; there is no reason why Habermas cannot appropriate Kierkegaard for his own purposes, after all: why not? I certainly follow Sherman’s logic here, but it does seem an over-rigid structure of expectation of his notion of what constitutes correct philosophical methodology. In another pairing of Kierkegaard and of Adorno we read,

both Kierkegaard and Adorno passionately embrace “the negative” and both hold fast to the idea of a “negative utopia,” albeit for one this idea is theological, while, for the other, it is sociohistorical [...] Kierkegaard declares that “dialectically understood, the negative is not an intervention, but only the positive.” (33)

- 11 This is a well put point that helps us to negotiate these two major thinkers and the concept the negative itself. Indeed, in Adorno’s abovementioned *Hegel: Three Studies* we read something that rather corresponds to the above line of argumentation from Sherman on Kierkegaard and on Adorno; Shierry Weber Nicholsen (who is also the translator of *Hegel*) and Jeremy J. Shapiro write as co-introducers that for Adorno, “negative experience is the authentic form of experience for those who live in a contradictory, antagonistic society, an upside-down, perverted-world” (xvi). In another nice distinction, Sherman submits,

Even Adorno’s most “systematic” works, such as *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, appear [...] as a constellation of essays structured around a loose organizing principle, while other central works, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Mimima Moralia*, are comprised (in part and whole, respectively) of aphorisms. Accordingly, in contrast to Hegel’s systematic “dialectical theory [...]” Adorno’s antisystematic style seeks to open up spaces for later capitalism’s overdetermined subject: “If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty to consider the evanescent as essential” (MM, p. 16). (36)

- 12 What is ephemeral is what is real for Adorno’s mentor, Walter Benjamin, so the foregoing can hardly be a surprise. And the increasingly pronounced use of the genre of the fragment, or of the aphorism, or of fragmentary writing in the literary arts since the Jena Romantics, can only accord to Adorno’s practice of essayistic writing embedded within his big late-period tomes.

- 13 As for the charged and fascinating question of Adorno’s complex relation to Heidegger, Sherman argues with not inconsiderable interest (though it is a highly debatable position), “that despite superficial similarities, the differences between these two thinkers are deep and irreconcilable.” (37) In another aside from Sherman we read regarding the foregoing that ignorance of

the Kantian approach in *Negative Dialectics* [...] leads one to overestimate the similarities between Adorno and Heidegger [...] Heidegger, like Adorno, fought against positivism, but Heidegger’s dogmatic approach, which in privileging Being grounds itself on a theologically inspired transcendental entity, ultimately collapses into a reified form of thought that is no less troubling than positivism [...] much as Kant played off the empiricists and rationalists in the First *Critique*, Adorno plays off the positivists and Heidegger. (48)

- 14 This is a challenging and provocative argument put forward by Sherman and should raise the level of the debate about not only a more correct appreciation for the Heidegger-Adorno linkage but also for the Kant-Adorno connection. One equally could argue here though that Sherman repeats his over-systematic structure of expectation for what constitutes a relation that he enacted above

already in his discussion of Habermas and Kierkegaard; for is it not more accurate as the lesson of twentieth-century art teaches us to conceive that the true lies rather in multiplicity and in models of substitutability and creation more than in models of correspondence or of equivalence and that such notions might accord to methodological truths no less. Sherman in this light would be blameworthy of a kind of academicism rather lacking in a more supple imaginary as far as the methodological goes. As for the concept of death, which is so central to Heidegger's philosophy, Sherman rightly points out that Heidegger's

foundational approach towards death is rejected by French thinkers such as Levinas and Blanchot, who do not buy into the possibility of self-presence that it implies. But [...] they do not reject the theoretical centrality of death [...] death becomes for them the non-foundational foundation of their theoretical moves. Sartre will have no truck with this fetishization of death [...]. (106)

15 This is what perhaps makes Heidegger a more Baroque thinker than Sartre; for a preoccupation with death (and fate) obsesses a certain baroque world-picture. (A minor point: but again Sherman's text does not include the correct accent mark in a last name, this time is it *Lévinas*.) It remains a good point too that Sherman as a philosopher is well aware in a sophisticated way of a critic/theorist such as Maurice Blanchot.

16 Now, in a veritable exacerbation of Sherman's negative understanding of Heidegger's now ostensible full-blown positivism over against Adorno we read

because he "breaks off" the dialectic and attacks not only Cartesian subjectivism but subjectivity altogether, Heidegger's philosophy is itself ultimately positivistic. Both fundamental ontology and positivism ahistorically [...] seek an absolute language, and in so doing both fall prey to mythological thinking [... though] at least fundamental ontology acknowledges that "one cannot speak absolutely without speaking archaically" (JOA, p. 43). For Adorno [...] language can never purport to have identified the truth once and for all. (39-40)

17 Heidegger here appears as the bourgeois positivist philosopher that he can well appear to be, full stop, in many a view from the so-called left. Yet there is also some sleight of hand here in the treatment of Heideggerian truth that would be a more process-based thing than Sherman appears prepared to admit. More discussion on these two major figures occurs where we read, "Heidegger's project ultimately fails because [according to Adorno] 'the problem of historical contingency cannot be mastered by the [purely formal] category of historicity.'" (49) From one conceptual framework this would be fair enough, but Heidegger's thought of course is for many (and I think quite rightly) much more oriented toward open up new vistas for thinking than for taking on the mantle of being ascribed either as a successful or as an unsuccessful "project".

18 As for Sartre, Sherman informs us that the concept death for the French philosopher

can not be apprehended as *my* possibility but, on the contrary, as the nihilation of all my possibilities, a nihilation which itself is no longer a part of my possibilities" (B&N, p. 687) [...] The factual possibility of my death simply means "that I am biologically only a relatively closed, relatively isolated system" (B&N, p. 685) [...] Whether or not I have had the time to realize my projects will determine the meaning of my life [...]. (107)

19 I find it noteworthy that Sartre's notion here of the individual as "biologically only a relatively closed, relatively isolated system" very much foreshadows Luhmann's systems theory that will still be to come. Obviously the usage of the concept "project" here would be highly problematic for the thought of Georges Bataille; but that again would be for another cultural investigation. Sherman need not use the "or not" above 'Whether' carries the day. There is more. For Sherman, as concerns Sartre

As a necessary condition of an ethics of deliverance and salvation, which in turn is a necessary condition of individual authenticity, a radical conversion requires a radical reorganization of the social context (which means that Sartre did not evidence a “radical conversion” to Marxism [...] but rather came to see Marxism as a necessary condition for a radical conversion) [...] not unlike Adorno, Sartre came to appreciate as early as *Being and Nothingness* that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (MM, p. 39). (131-2)

- 20 This requisite conditions of possibility, of embracing a certain form of Marxism for any left radicalism to come in one’s imaginary edifice for authentic forms of living or of being would at least ostensibly put Sartre at odds with what Peter Sloterdijk sees as a dominant mode of reality during the late 1970s and early 1980s that he famously terms cynical reason in his 1983 book translated in 1987 (Minnesota) as *The Critique of Cynical Reason*. One could argue that his arguments are more pertinent than ever today. Importantly, as for the Sartrean concept of freedom, Sherman writes

even in the 1975 Schilpp interview, Sartre says that freedom remains his “starting point,” which, he states, is exactly what distinguished his thought from the dominant strains of Marxist thought (which do not necessarily bear a strong relation to Marx’s thought). Sartre thus rejects as a “mistake” his previous claim that “existentialism is only an enclave within Marxism” because of his “idea of freedom.” (152-3)

- 21 This constitutes a nice nuancing of the Sartre-Marx cultural-pair relationship. Just prior to this critical reflection Sherman quotes Sartre himself, which seems of special import for the very topic area of the text:

For the idea which I have never ceased to develop is that in the end one is always responsible for what is made of one. Even if one can do nothing besides assumes this responsibility. For I believe that a man can always make something out of what is made of him. This is the limit I would today accord to freedom [...]. (152)

- 22 This is an extremely valuable assertion that does not get the coverage or recognition that it deserves today in critical theory and thought. Kierkegaard himself said something not entirely dissimilar when he wrote “I feel a loathing for existence—for I who love only one idea, namely that a man can become what he really *wills*” (61); from *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard* (translated from the Danish by Gerda M. Andersen, edited by Peter P. Rohde, New York: Philosophical Library, 1960). This reader would have been pleased to see Jean-Luc Nancy’s pioneering post-Sartrean work on freedom translated by Stanford in 1993 as *The Experience of Freedom*, but of course one cannot do everything; and one cannot expect it of Sherman no less than many another scholar.

- 23 Now, let us return to our target text. Sherman recapitulates in the penultimate chapter of his investigations of “Sartre’s Mediating Subjectivity” (chapter six) with these words

this modest capacity for self-determination, which arises from the phenomenology of freedom that Sartre offers throughout his works, is a sociohistorical product rather than an ontological one, and this is why [...] what we get from Sartre is a “phenomenology of freedom” rather than “ontological freedom.” (170)

- 24 This is sound and convincing as far as it goes. There is more to adduce, for crucially, Sherman insists that, “Much like Sartre, whose synthetic approach also explicitly rejects the hierarchies that are inherent in classical versions of both idealism and materialism—Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, orthodox Marxism’s material dialectic, and Anglo-American positivism—it is Adorno’s intention to revitalize the subject” (173); and also for Adorno, according to Sherman: “The notion of a ‘subjectivity without a subject,’ [...] is, therefore, no more acceptable than the notion of a ‘subject without

a subjectivity.” (175) For Luhmann’s system theory the category subject again would be inadequate, but that is another story for another comparativist study.

- 25 To move on, in an astringent and an interesting upbraiding of Hegel, Sherman notes

in contrast to (even) Hegel, who fails to comprehend the leveling impulse of the market economy [...] it is Marx who clearly perceives that the more nettlesome forms of enlightenment rationality and capitalist phenomena such as abstract labor, exchange value, and money are homologous in that they are part and parcel of the instrumentalizing propensity of modernity itself. (187)

- 26 This may stand on its own although it should not to unstated that, as Adorno reminds us in his study *Hegel: Three Studies*, “Hegel referred to history as a ‘slaughterbench’”. (82) In a difficult clarification from Sherman, we read him very searchingly assert that with Adorno and with Horkheimer

the “dialectic of enlightenment” that they recount is part and parcel of the bourgeois perspective on the world [...] their categorical indictment of reason and the subject can be understood as *only* a historically situated indictment [...] And yet [...] what is [...] a story about bourgeois reason and the bourgeois subject [...] merely one side of the story, tends to become *the* story—and this manifests what is arguably Adorno’s most troubling tendency [...] to make sense of the modern predicament in totalizing terms. (191)

- 27 Fair enough. Adorno in this sense would be culpable for a certain kind of terroristic mode of Hegelianism.

- 28 Further on we read from Sherman’s hand that the crucial lacuna in Adorno remains to this hour

whether his negative dialectics is actually justified [given] that “the attempt to change the world miscarried.” Adorno is quite clear on the fact that “theory cannot prolong the moment its critique depended on” (ND, p. 3), which suggests that with the passing of the moment there is also a passing of the theory [...] Of course, theory lives on—but the issue is whether it lives on as *critical* theory [...]. (238)

- 29 There is a good deal here to unpack. First of all, Sherman is one-hundred percent correct that Adorno should have addressed the historical actualities of actual communism under Stalinism etc. etc. Second, Adorno should have even more searchingly probed the complicity of philosophical culture with social powers than he recognizably did at least with respect to Heidegger. Third, the notion that today the question concerns if theory exists as “*critical* theory” is indeed precisely the point. Julia Kristeva for example argues in her tome translated by Jeanine Herman in 2000 as *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1* (Columbia University Press) that “Perhaps charlatanism is today’s currency, and everything is both spectacle and merchandise, while those we call marginal have definitively become excluded.” (11) This is not beyond the realm of possibility. At least it would seem each year of our new century brings with it ever more conformisms and cynicisms.

- 30 I would be remiss not to mention that in chapter eight on “Subjectivity and Negative Dialectics” Sherman lucidly and compellingly broadcasts that “A mediating subjectivity is not only a notion to which the philosophies of Adorno and Sartre share a commitment but it is also one that incorporates their standpoints, which constitute the two necessary moments of its very being.” (272)

- 31 This constitutes a key kernel point about our two big names in thought. Interestingly, Sherman reminds us that Adorno “depicts negative dialectics as a ‘logic of disintegration’” (ND, p. 144), which nicely maps onto the aesthetics of such major contemporaneous works of Adorno’s important work, *Negative Dialectics*, as Thomas Pynchon’s novel in English, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). What is more, for Sherman’s reading

each individual constantly reworking his self [...] is the essence of a mediating subject [...] what impels the individual to hypostatize the “old particularity” [...] is the fear that by not making himself into a thing [...] he will die under the weight of an indifferent economic system [...] Openness to a world to which the individual can actually afford to be open is therefore the very condition of the liberated subject, *not* his demise [...] the very ideal of the liberated subject, which continues to inspire innumerable acts of resistance, testifies to its existence. (281-2)

- 32 The notion of the individual as a mediatorial agent for social transformation, however micro level, rings true, just as does the acknowledgement of a kind of universal reification of life under advanced capitalism in which even individuals are turned into commodities. All the same, that forms of social “resistance” remain a possibility serves as a source of inspiration for readers and reader-critics alike. A minor point but a valid one is that Sherman in the last sentence to the above extract need not use the phrase “or not”; the word “whether” carries the necessary syntactic and semantic load.
- 33 As far as the prose style goes, the text is well written with a very refreshing unpretentious use of contemporary American English full of verve and wit; however, there is one more minor but unfortunate feature of the text that I have not yet adduced and that is its only very occasional albeit noticeable use of split infinitives; two examples: we read “to reflectively articulate” (162) and “to ideologically piggyback” (204).
- 34 Last not least, a strong suit of this long-needed text is its special capacity to quote signature and memorable passages, such as the following, as

Adorno’s renowned statement in *Negative Dialectics* that “no universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (ND, p. 320)

- 35 Such nuggets of gold themselves help to make this all in all a well written and incisive book a pleasure to read and worth the thoughtful person’s reading time. In short, then, Sherman makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of not only Sartre and Adorno but also to other luminaries such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Habermas, no mean feat for a text that so penetratingly explores such a big topic area as its principal object of critical attention.

Pour citer cet article

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