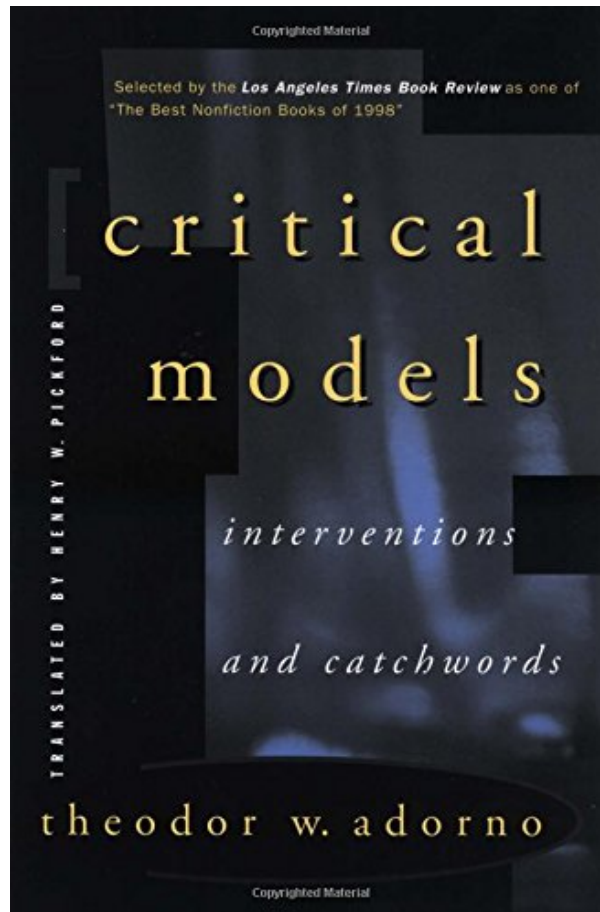
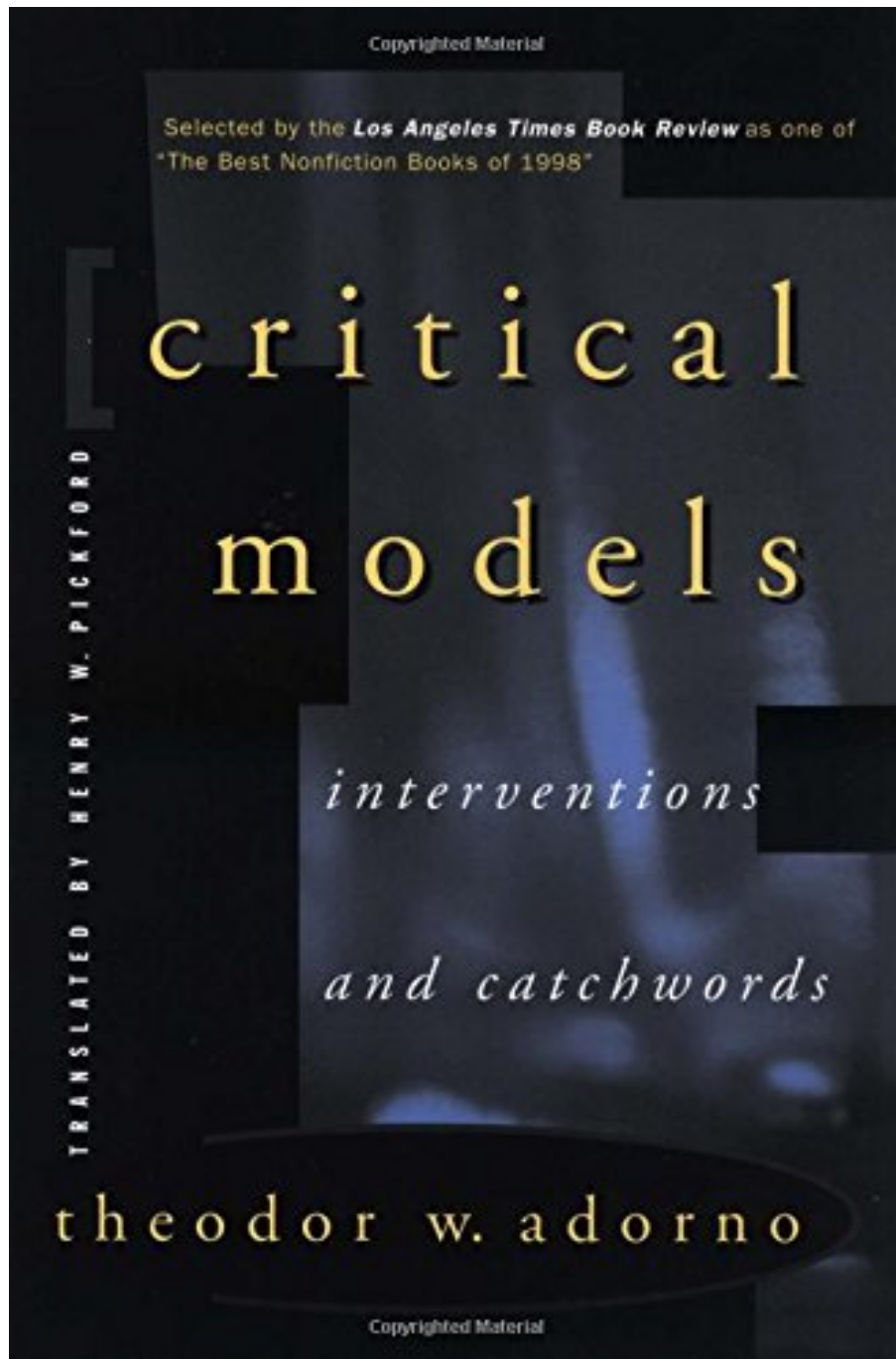


CRITICAL MODELS BY THEODOR W. ADORNO



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The two collections combined in this volume -- *Interventions: Nine Critical Models* (1963) and *Catchwords: Critical Models II* (1969) -- are passionate examples of Adorno's postwar commitment to unmasking the culture that engendered Nazism and its antihumanist nightmare. Included here are Adorno's practical recommendations for reform in primary and higher education, his explanation for the enduring therapeutic value of psychoanalysis, and his appeal to raise public awareness of "propaganda tricks" that exploit prejudice and chauvinism.

- Sales Rank: #2694450 in Books
- Published on: 1999-10-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: .93" h x 6.11" w x 9.07" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 400 pages

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Rolling in his grave as he's reviewed

By Edward G. Nilges

It is important to point out that Teddie Adorno is spinning in his grave, for the very venue on which I am reviewing Critical Models is itself an example of the fetishized, reified and administered world that Adorno named, and critiqued. However, Adorno's philosophical tradition also includes the catchphrase what is, is right, and would probably view the Internet as more or less a necessary consequence of vast economic forces which it would be simple minded to simply ignore, or negate. And, his "dialectical" logic not only permits us to log on and praise him where praise is due: it requires us to do so.

This collection is of essays written after Adorno returned to the Federal Republic of Germany in the early 1950s. Because culturally Adorno was "very German" and indeed he resented the *Volkische* definition of Germanness imposed by Hitler, Adorno delayed his escape, as the son of a Jewish father and Catholic mother, from Hitlerdom to a dangerous point. He resided briefly in England and somewhat longer in America. Strangely, he did not like England and (given the choice) preferred America, and specifically California, the latter because of its climate.

This collection makes it clear that although Adorno was critical of many tendencies in America he was by no means knee-jerk in his criticism. Adorno enjoyed the very real democracy of American life and the very real empiricism of science as practised here...insofar as democracy and empiricism did not become, as a very different sort of emigre might call it, a shtick, or a number: or, as Adorno would call it, fetishized or reified.

But it is clear from these essays that Adorno would be very critical of changes in America that have occurred since my generation, that of the immediate post-war Baby Boom, has taken over the shop. Adorno's work on Fascist tendencies in California, for example, located Fascism in our hearts and at our dinner tables. These tendencies are denied in ceremonies (such as the commemoration, last week, of the bombing in Oklahoma City) which are structured by press and lawyers in a way that fully denies anything like a spontaneous response.

One naturally wonders why it is that people at these commemorations, which memorialize real pain that should never be repeated, have to act in such structured fashions, and it was the structuring of Timothy McVeigh's life by similar tendencies that caused him, in all probability, to bomb the Murrah building.

It was irresponsible to decry social research that located Fascist and authoritarian tendencies so close to home and to expect no incidents such as the bombing of the Oklahoma City building. Adorno's work is a reminder to examine our own environment for barbarism, and Americans who have worked on issues of domestic abuse are in his tradition, even if they would actually find the guy irritating, arrogant and conceited...all of which he was.

Some of the book does require, because of Adorno's arrogance, a knowledge of German philosophy, which is not a laugh a minute by any means. The essay "On Subject and Object", for example, may be completely opaque, even to, and especially to, the "educated" reader if her education is in the typical American university. That's because what we mean by the subject may be divergent from what Ted meant, a difference expressed by our own "catchphrase", "that's subjective."

"That's subjective" means in ordinary usage that "that" can be dismissed, and despite the (laudable) place that mere listening plays in our life, "that's subjective" forecloses listening. Adorno writes from a tradition in

which subjectivity is not a sink and instead is a source of value.

The surprising end of "on subject and object" is one in which the mere subject acquires value precisely by being removed from a place of origin: we realize, in the general murk of Adorno's style, that the very reason why we exhibit a false humility about our own subjectivity is that we are delivered a false story about our origins as "the first man", which exalts the subjectivity of a mythical Adam, and makes our own second-hand. Adorno makes the common sense point that given our initial resources (which are inferior, because less specialized, than those of other large mammals) "the first man" was probably the group, in which the "subjectivity" of each member had to be (paradoxically enough) treasured because it was a group resource.

The experience of reading the more difficult essays is one of struggle, and reward, in which one realizes that one's mere failure to comprehend is only in part a product of ignorance: it is one of dawn. This is in contrast to reading the typical American scholarly essay in which the very lack of participation and struggle...and the airy dismissal of important questions as marginalia, drives questions to the zone of the subconscious.

That is, Adorno is outside of the tradition which recast and rephrased problems into such a shape that they could be solved...that their solution was implied by their clear phrasing. Mathematics is an example of this. At its best (and Adorno conceded this in many ways) this tradition is a source of both power and democracy. At its worst, however, and especially as applied to Adorno's own field of social research, this tradition makes people into objects precisely because it has to ignore the philosopher's tendency to delay, by questioning everything. The most obscene consequence of this is the political poll and its unstated influence on our elections.

Like Adorno's longer works but more accessibly, *Critical Models* rewards reading, and rereading: the very density of his style provides, in terms that would make the guy shudder, good value for the dollar...precisely because, as

17 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

A good jumping-off point for neophyte Adorno readers

By A Customer

If you want to understand something about the nature of Adorno's overall project, read the guy below, sadly cut off as he is in mid-sentence. If your only contact with Adorno is the bitter "Minima Moralia" or the (to me) rebarbative "Negative Dialectics", this is an essential complement. If you aren't interested in radical cultural criticism...er, why are you reading this?

Critical Models is a collection of essays, articles and radio talks, mostly from quite late in Adorno's career. I am neither a philosopher nor an academic, and would be the first person to admit that I'm not quite up to Adorno's more Hegelian moments. I'm just casting about for help in an increasingly bland, homogenised, uncritical cultural environment, and the best thing about *Critical Models* is that it's Adorno being unusually helpful.

This is Adorno throwing himself into the task of trying to build a post-war democracy in Germany, not Adorno the cantankerous emigre complaining that doors shut more violently than they used to. He urges the value of promoting the status of teachers, of rooting out and criticising Nazi attitudes (who'd have thought that they'd still be flourishing fifty years on). Adorno is seldom a very approachable writer, but here he's making the effort to communicate to a mass audience, and to a relatively uneducated schmuck like me it's critical dynamite. The spine of my copy of *Negative Dialectics* may remain forever uncreased, but this one will be carried around.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Enlightening

By sandra

The essays in this text were a breath of fresh air after having to read *The Arcades Project* by Walter Benjamin. I get the feeling that the world of academia is super-excited right now about Benjamin, but I find Adorno to suit my taste much more. In this book you sense that he is not just writing for himself or for others on the same intellectual wavelength - who are familiar with all the philosophical jargon. He is trying to reach

out to a broader audience and I really benefited from this effort of his.

His work on television in this text is extremely relevant. He basically examines how our relationship with television is not necessarily a case of art imitating life, but life imitating art. (Is television art though?) The culture industry therefore has a lot of power in teaching us how to live and what values to hold dear - but, whose values are they? We spend most of our time at work then we come home switch on the TV, tune in and tune out. But, do we ever really tune out? Does TV reinforce social bonds or does it act as a sad replacement for a sense of community and social engagement that we are denied (paraphrasing Adorno here)? Does TV keep the working man pacified and distracted from thinking about how he is being screwed over on the daily by the system? Is there an observable ideology behind TV program scripts? Why do we enjoy watching TV? Adorno engages very thoughtfully with these questions and more. You get the sense that he really cares about the future of the world and wants people to raise their awareness about the society they are living in by equipping them with the critical tools necessary to address the medias of the culture industry. He shows you how life can be read like literature.

There's a lot in this compilation. I would say that his *Taboos on the Teaching Vocation* was very fun to read. He seems really pissed off throughout the book at the way teachers and intellectuals are represented in the culture industry and the way they are perceived in communal thought. On TV for example, the intellectual or the artist is emasculated, often shown as being gay, narcissistic, or whiney.

Anyway, I would check this book out. I'm glad I did and I look forward to reading more by Adorno.

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