

# Politics of Emotions and Preventive Pedagogy against Authoritarianism: Theodor W. Adorno's Educational Theory and his Utopianism

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## Abstract

The current affective turn in social sciences, the spread of emotional politics in social media, and the crisis of democracy and liberalism facilitate the reexamination of some traditional educational ideas regarding to children's emotion, their nature, and democratic education.

This paper focuses on Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno's critical theory due to the conceptual ambiguity of "enlightenment" in his works. His pessimism is known with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but his works on education stressed the importance of "enlightenment" as the social critique for developing democracy and autonomous personality in West Germany. Adorno demanded of education that the social critique would work as the antidote, vaccination, and critical self-reflection against authoritarianism. However, he did not systematize democratic education. Here, I focus on his negative utopianism. Adorno believed utopia would be togetherness of diversity and the state in which the rational dominant principle is unnecessary. Therefore, from education he expected the contribution to vigilance, resistance, and elimination of the cause of suffering, taking the sensitive suffering of reality as a starting point. Such education that avoids the perspective of *natura naturata*, such as the control of emotions, and aligns with suffering, hoping for what can be achieved in/by vigilance, resistance, and elimination of suffering, would be a form of *natura naturans*. I call Adorno's educational theory "preventive pedagogy."

Adorno's "preventive pedagogy" would provide a critical perspective on today's "dialectic of democracy" in which popular political fervor endangers the democracy that is its requirement. Furthermore, this perspective would be suggestive to consider education with post-foundationalism, agonistic democracy, deliberative democracy, emotional architectures, the Beutelsbach Consensus in Germany, education against propaganda tricks, solidarity, and pity.

**Key words:** Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, democracy, authoritarianism, utopianism, enlightenment, Auschwitz, politics of emotions

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## Introduction

The spread of social media and the disturbance of democracy and liberalism by the “politics of anger and hatred” [Yoshida 2020] are currently recognized. Traditional ideas that have dichotomized reason and emotion are criticized in the current “affective turn” in social sciences, and Japanese pedagogy is no exception [Okabe/ Ono eds. 2021]. The ideal relationship between emotion, democracy, and education, “by rational nurturing rational democratic society members while respecting the spontaneity and authenticity of children’s emotions,” also requires reexamination.

This paper focuses on the conceptual constellation of emotion, democracy, and education in Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno’s critical theory. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-written with Max Horkheimer, Adorno analyzed the complicity of the rational and the irrational from the perspective of the improvement of civilization by the domination of nature. However, he criticized anti-Semitism and the culture industry, which appealed to the emotions of the masses, and expected the masses’ enlightenment and education to resist the status quo and contribute to democracy. However, his theory of education primarily focused on resistance to antidemocratic realities. This paper contrasts the uniqueness of his thought with current discussions in philosophy of education concerning emotion and democracy.

### 1. Authoritarianism Disturbing Democracy

Adorno questioned the dominance of authoritarianism over democracy. This dichotomy between authoritarianism and democracy is common in political science, but Adorno, using Freudian psychoanalytic theory, focused on social psychology and the media.

Adorno criticized the personality type susceptible to authority (“Autoritätsgebundenheit” [GS9 – 2:367]), which includes both authoritarian and manipulative characters. This type is characterized by sado-masochism, stereotypical thinking, cruelty, narcissism, cynicism, obsession with control and manipulation, evasion of responsibility, identification with the inner group, and unconscious desire for destruction and its transfer to the outer group. Such personality is “particularly susceptible to antidemocratic propaganda” [GS9–1:149], and it is considered as an expression of ego weakness.

Adorno's analysis of the political "tricks" that rationally divert irrational impulses is noteworthy here. These tricks include the politician's "personalized" appeals (when politicians spend large time in speaking either about themselves or their audiences), the compatibility of the elimination of enemies with the compulsion to identify with allies, the "salami method" (the removing a piece from a complex), the repetition of fragmental and illogical statements, and the appeal to crisis and reform while affirming the current system of power. These tricks supply collective narcissism, sadism, and masochism to the weak ego that seeks an outlet for its impulses with the anxiety of isolation: "Propaganda, Hitler reasoned, has to adjust itself to the most stupid ones among those to whom it is addressed; it should not be rational but emotional." [GS20-1:271]. Both sender and receiver are aware of irrational feelings but dare to surrender to the trick.

## 2. Education for Democracy, against Authoritarianism

Based on Adorno's critique of authoritarianism, what kind of education would be required? Strength and development of the ego in a family and the education of a rational and intellect might be demanded. However, Adorno perceived the decline of the modern family as the basis for ego formation, and the primacy of instrumental reason as a problem of the modern age. Therefore, he hoped for the removal of the blind, opaque authority from schooling [EzM:131], and a social critique as the "enlightenment."

According to Adorno, schools and teachers wield opaque authority and power, and consequently, children form cliques, in which there is a hierarchy of physical strength, violence, and cunning [EzM:84-85, GS20-1:375]. Therefore, Adorno urged schools and teachers to eliminate this structural authoritarianism and then recommended respect for children's self-expression, inspiring friendship rather than collectivity, and tolerance for the emotions of self and others. However, he emphasized the need to develop a sense of disgust/shame to counter the problem of physical violence [EzM:131]. His recommendations for schools were generally intellectual and moderate, however, he affirmed the necessity for emotional and intellectual work to resist the violence.

Regarding "enlightenment", the following three specific methods were recommended for individuals approximately older than 10 years of age, which would contribute to democracy. (1) "antidote" (Gegenmittel) [EzM:27], which accuses individual interests of the disadvantages of authoritarians, (2) "vaccination" (Schutzimpfung) [EzM:27, NSV1:466], which spreads a list of propaganda tricks and

culture industry stereotypes, and (3) sociological political education that analyzes real, concrete social problems [NS V1:381–386]. He expected them to make people aware of their susceptibility to influence from propaganda [GS20–1:273] and to promote “critical self-reflection” [EzM:27, NSV1:465] in addition to social consciousness. Furthermore, this “enlightenment” causes shock and resistance to authoritarianism. This does not alter people’s unconsciousness fundamentally, nevertheless, it can be expected as a counterinstance at the pre-conscious (*das Vorbewusstsein*) [EzM:103].

### 3. Adorno’s Utopian Perspective and his Preventive Pedagogy

Why did Adorno affirm the ego-established individual, democracy, and “enlightenment”? Why did he not systematize democratic education, and why did he not call for his education to be thorough? The main reason would be Adorno’s utopian perspective. According to his *Negative Dialectics*, “Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be togetherness of diversity” [GS 6: 153]. It cannot be grasped by reason, nor can it be promised to be realized by rational means. Utopia would be a state in which the rational dominant principle is unnecessary [NS IV10:215–216]. The rationally depicted and formed individual and democracy were not utopias for Adorno. If we set it as a goal and enforce it identically, we will fall into a “dialectic” and turn into the opposite, as in the former Enlightenment [GS4:86, GS4:223]. Adorno found the penetrating state of identity in “Auschwitz” [GS6:355]. Modern society is not the worst because in this non-identity remains even under the overwhelming compulsion of identification. However, its contradictions and distortions are negative suffering (*Leiden*). However, according to Adorno, this distress facilitates a contemporary “metaphysical experience” that is proof that the “togetherness of diversity” is not just an illusion.

Consequently, Adorno had great expectations for the practice of education. Of contemporary education, he expected not the rational realization of rational goals, but the contribution to vigilance, resistance, and elimination of what causes suffering, taking the sensitive suffering of reality as a starting point. The vigilance, resistance, and elimination of authoritarianism and heteronomy in modern society are considered as the realistic contemporary signs that the established individual, democracy, and utopia would not be impossible, and the embodiment of its emergent potential. Such a perspective of education could be described as a “preventive pedagogy for avoidance of evil” [Shirokane 2019]. Here we can also read here Adorno’s concern with *Mimesis* as *natura naturans* (productive nature) [Früchtl 1986]. Education that avoids the perspective of

*natura naturata* (nature as product), such as the control of emotions, and aligns with suffering, hoping for what can be achieved in/by vigilance, resistance, and elimination of suffering, would be a form of *natura naturans*, or “togetherness of diversity,” in addition to contemporary philosophy and art [GS6:26, GS7:35].

#### **4. To Criticize of Emotion, Democracy, and Education Today, in Perspective of Adorno’s Thought**

Currently, social divisions due to social media and populism, contemporary capitalism in which globalism and nationalism coexist, and the similarities between Nazi Germany and modern society are discussed. What is evident in this situation is the “dialectic of democracy,” in which “the people’s political enthusiasm puts democracy, which is its requirement, in danger.” Against this “dialectic,” Adorno’s “preventive pedagogy” suggests a critical perspective. Although his theory of education recommended concrete and moderate practices and recognized the significance of traditional culture, it may seem conservative and unsatisfactory because it did demand a fundamental change in education and its thoroughness. Furthermore, this perspective on *nouvelle naturae*, which entrusted the spontaneity and authenticity of “diverse things” to suffering in the current situation and to its elimination and what is produced with resistance, is insufficient as a bulwark against the domination of nature [Imai 2017]. However, for Adorno, democracy and education may have been a stage on which he could stake his unforeseen hopes in the midst of an evil reality.

Finally, we will contrast discussions of the philosophy of education with Adorno’s perspective. His view of politics would be more similar the recent post-foundationalism [Tabata/ Tamate/ Yamamoto eds. 2019], which is interested in the avoidance of evils, or agonistic democracy than deliberative democracy that promises legitimacy and rationality of all constituents. These ideas suggest the possibility of citizenship education that does not force all people towards the goal of a “good citizenship.”

Given the current development of social media and other “emotional architectures” [Wahl-Jorgensen 2019] with anonymity, his media-theoretical “enlightenment” is probably more effective than Adorno’s critique of gerrymandering personality types. The Beutelsbach Consensus in Germany [Endo 2004], which encouraged students’ analysis of political realities in view of their own personal interests, and the publishing a new edition of *Prophets of Deceit* [Löwenthal/Guterman 2021], that is a list of propaganda tricks to whose original research Adorno contributed. The contemporary

significance of education as an “antidote” or “inoculation” is evident. However, it is important to understand the difficulties of the “elimination of authoritarianism” in the complex dynamics within schools [Yamana 2015] and the tradition of Japanese postwar education which has produced “fun classes” [Matsushita 2003]. The spontaneity and authenticity of children’s emotions should not be naively considered self-evident, and the actuality of the idea of *natura naturans* requires careful examination.

According to Shannon L. Mariotti, Adorno and Paulo Freire are similar regarding the social issues they analyze and their expectations of democratic education; however, Adorno’s insight into solidarity is insufficient than Freire [Mariotti 2016:105–121]. Adorno maintained that negation of suffering can only be realized through solidarity [GS6:203–204]; however, he never systematized it. From his perspective, what would be expected of theories for the negation of suffering would be the “solidarity” of various theories rather than the rational thoroughness of a particular rational system. For example, Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition [Honneth 2005], Jean-Luc Nancy’s understanding of the human being as “singular plural” [Nobira 2019:119], and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s insight into absolute human “weakness” as the principle of equality and pity [Morita 2015:71], may be theories that contribute to such solidarity. However, caution is required against theories of solidarity and pity not to be enforced by education.

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