Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany
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I deny that there has ever been such a German-Jewish dialogue in any genuine sense whatsoever, i.e., as a historical phenomenon. It takes two to have a dialogue, who listen to each other, who are prepared to perceive the other as what he is and represents, and to respond to him. Nothing can be more misleading than to apply such a concept to the discussions between Germans and Jews during the last 200 years.

—Gershom Scholem, Against the Myth of the German-Jewish Dialogue

This book would not be complete without a consideration of Theodor W. Adorno’s role in the formation of a public discourse on the Holocaust in postwar Germany. There are multiple reasons for this. Adorno’s presence loomed large in the new republic’s sociopolitical and intellectual landscape. During the 1950s and 1960s he gave over three hundred public speeches and delivered about as many radio lectures, prompting some to speak of a veritable Adorno-inflation. Adorno could be heard—and was indeed listened to—on an almost weekly basis.

2. Schwarz, “‘Er redet leicht, schreibt schwer.’”
Evidently this aural and performative aspect of his public engagement was important to Adorno, who did not want to be reduced to the role of a writer. As Jaimey Fisher has demonstrated, Adorno not only took his role as an academic teacher quite seriously but effectively viewed himself as a public (re)educator. Another key reason is that Adorno made a significant and, compared to the other public speakers under discussion here, more consistent and systematic contribution to the postwar debate on the denazification process and the aftermath of the Holocaust. And it was in this capacity that he was in demand as a public speaker, not as a formidable thinker of the Frankfurt school or one of the most iconic figures of critical theory. As a former exile who was extremely critical of the repressive climate of postwar Germany but had nevertheless returned as early as 1949 and stayed, Adorno seemed like an obvious choice to lecture on the subject, even if his questions and explications were by no means always comfortable. Stunned by the Germans’ ostensible unawareness of their past misdeeds and their unwillingness to accept and act on them, Adorno repeatedly decried his fellow citizens’ morally irresponsible and psychologically and intellectually inadequate flight from reality. Like Arendt, he was appalled by the extensive disavowal of guilt he witnessed in Germany, as well as the pervasive habit of brokering one’s own wartime suffering against the suffering one had “unwittingly” inflicted on Jewish victims.

This diagnosis was also the starting point of Adorno’s famous lecture *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (The Meaning of Working through the Past), which he delivered in 1959 in response to a new wave of anti-Semitic attacks against synagogues and Jewish community institutions in West Germany. The opening paragraph of the lecture is worth citing in full, as it eloquently articulates Adorno’s powerful message:

> The question “What does working through the past mean?” requires explication. It follows from a formulation, a modish slogan that has become highly suspect during the last years. In this usage “working through the past” does not mean seriously working upon the past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory. The attitude that everything should be forgotten

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and forgiven, which would be proper for those who suffered injustice, is practiced by those party supporters who committed the injustice. I wrote once in a scholarly dispute: in the house of the hangman one should not speak of the noose, otherwise one might seem to harbor resentment. However, the tendency toward the unconscious and not so unconscious defensiveness against guilt is so absurdly associated with the thought of working through the past that there is sufficient reason to reflect upon a domain from which even now there emanates such a horror that one hesitates to call it by name. (WP, 89)

Adorno rejects the notion of “working through the past” (Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit) as one that is tendentious and dangerously misleading. It is certainly less contentious than the term “mastering the past” (Vergangenheitsbewältigung), which in the public parlance of the 1950s connoted—and concealed—just another, different form of violence (Gewalt) toward Jewish victims. After all, the term captured the idea of a political and administrative imperative to make amends in the form of legislative and diplomatic measures that were ultimately dictated by the German state. The term “working through,” however, was problematic in its own right. Adorno regarded the phrase as nothing more than a slogan or catchphrase that suggested one thing but meant another. Although Adorno does not explain as much, the word Arbeit (work) implies that the Germans made a sustained and labored effort to reevaluate the past, if in reality this task was more likely considered an unpleasant chore to be checked off a list. It certainly did not receive the kind of sincere and conscious attention that Adorno would have deemed essential. Uncannily echoing the slogan Arbeit macht frei (Labor makes [you] free), which was placed at the entrance of a number of concentration camps, the term Aufarbeitung suggests that the Germans would be quick to accomplish their task and hence be freed from any obligation toward their victims.

Equally problematic was the fact that the term Aufarbeitung resonated with the Freudian notion of “working through” (durcharbeiten), thereby holding a promise it could not keep. When Freud coined the term durcharbeiten in an article titled “Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten” (Remembering, Repeating and Working Through, 1914), he stressed the extraordinary effort required of both patient and analyst in their struggle against repression and defense mechanisms.6 In other words, Freud truly conceived of “working through” as a form of “work” that had to cut “through” deep layers of resistance in order to allow the patient to get in touch with and submit to his deepest and perhaps most hurtful feelings. As Freud’s language suggests, there is nothing trivial or easy about it: “One must allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which

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he has now become acquainted, to work through it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work according to the fundamental rule of analysis." As a superficial and reluctant practice marked by denial and omissions, the post-war German practice of *Aufarbeitung* was diametrically opposed to *durcharbeiten*, defined by Freud (and by extension, Adorno) as “working upon” and coming to terms with the past through guided analysis and (in the case of Adorno) critical reflection.

A similarly suspicious and inadmissible assertion was that the Germans suffered from a so-called *Schuldkomplex* (guilt complex; *WP*, 90). Like *Aufarbeitung*, *Schuldkomplex* is a pseudopsychological notion; it is borrowed and adapted from the vocabulary of Jungian psychoanalysis, where the term “complex” refers to sometimes a conscious or semiconscious, but usually an unconscious pattern of feelings, memories, thoughts, and desires organized around a common theme. It is crucial to note that Jung found complexes perfectly normal. As an intrinsic part of psychic life, they were the building blocks of the psyche, derived from emotional experience. The use of the term in the context of the postwar debate concerning the German nation’s psychic state (which ultimately represents a “collective unconscious” in the Jungian sense), however, suggests that this particular complex was considered a pathological and thus ultimately perilous element. As Jung writes, “While the contents of the personal unconscious are felt as belonging to one’s own psyche, the contents of the collective unconscious seem alien, as if they came from outside. The reintegration of a personal complex has the effect of release and often of healing, whereas the invasion of a complex from the collective unconscious is a very disagreeable and even dangerous phenomenon.”

Adorno, who at an earlier point in his career had denounced Jungian theory for justifying Fascist tendencies, disparages the claim that Germans suffered from a guilt complex, because it aligned this very concrete and real form of historical guilt toward the Jews with the symptoms of neurosis and mental disturbance. It thereby not only invoked another version of the argument that Germans were suffering as well, but also insinuated that the cause of this complex was not real but pathological, an ultimately treacherous illusion. In other words, it suggested that the very notion of a German “guilt” was simply not tenable.

A third point Adorno makes with respect to the language of *Aufarbeitung* concerns the “mitigating expressions and euphemistic circumlocutions” postwar Germany had inherited from the Nazi period, a language that was also the subject

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7. Ibid., 155.
of the previous chapter on Weiss (WP, 90). As Adorno notes in The Meaning of Working through the Past, group experiments conducted by the Institute for Social Research had shown that Germans frequently used rhetorical strategies that would allow them to shield themselves from the reality and soften the truth of their involvement in German crimes against the Jews. Adorno in his lecture deliberately works against such forms of rhetorical denial. Like Buber, who already in 1953 had confronted his German audience with the primal facts about Auschwitz, Adorno takes care to call things as they are. The issue was not whether it had been five or six million people who had been gassed, but that millions of innocent people had become victims of the most ghastly form of (administrative) mass murder: "Vergasung" (gassing). Here as in other places in his lecture, Adorno can barely contain his contempt for the “idiocy,” “blindness,” and “lax consciousness” of those Germans who still had the audacity to trivialize or deny this fact (WP, 91). Clearly Adorno employs this kind of language not solely for informational and heuristic purposes but also as an emotional outlet for his ongoing frustration with the German people.

Adorno’s other key argument, already hinted at in the first paragraph of the lecture, concerns the question of whether or not the Germans’ pervasive “mechanisms used to defend against painful and unpleasant memories” were the result of unconscious psychological processes or merely a self-serving strategy aimed at simply moving on (WP, 91). Although he often took recourse to psychoanalytical concepts, Adorno here leans to the side of the less charitable proposition, according to which these defense mechanisms are “the achievement of an all too alert consciousness” and serve “highly realistic ends” (WP, 91, 92). Refusing to consider psychology as an exculpating or mitigating factor, Adorno rigorously insists that the cause of forgetting points beyond the individual and hence must be explained objectively: “The forgetting of National Socialism surely should be understood far more in terms of the general situation of society than in terms of psychopathology” (WP, 91). Too conducive for forgetting were the objective social conditions that had caused the emergence of Fascism in the first place. Revealing the nightmare horizon of Enlightenment ideology, these conditions epitomized three core research problems informing the political project of critical theory: capitalism, the culture industry, and Cold War politics. It was part of Adorno’s intellectual endeavor to seek out and define the concrete practical measures that would ensure the Germans’ gradual development toward emancipation. The Meaning of Working through the Past was only one in a series of such educational efforts.

People Who Do Such Things

The concerns of Adorno’s Erziehung nach Auschwitz (Education after Auschwitz), which was initially delivered as a radio lecture in 1966, are consonant with those of The Meaning of Working through the Past, not the least because both speeches
are polemical and prescriptive in intent. It was no small accusation to argue (as Adorno did in *Education after Auschwitz*) that the conditions that had led to the Nazi genocide had remained largely unchanged in postwar Germany. And it was a doomful prediction to suggest that the barbarism of Auschwitz could easily be repeated in the future if Germany failed to grapple with the relationship between education and morality. On the other hand, Adorno does propose a series of practical educational measures by which German society might prevent Auschwitz from repeating itself. Implicit in this proposal is the conviction that such a recurrence could be prevented. Adorno’s speech thus holds an emancipatory promise, suggesting that education as a critical practice could foster a climate wherein “the motives that led to the horror would become relatively conscious” (*EA*, 194).

What then are these educational measures? Crucially targeting the youth but extending to adulthood, they entail instruction in- and outside the traditional classroom setting. Adorno speaks quite literally of “mobile educational groups and convoys of volunteers”—traveling cadres, presumably consisting of the same class of individuals whom he defined in *The Meaning of Working through the Past* as those Germans who are “hardly susceptible to fascism” (*EA*, 196; *WP*, 100). Adorno believes in the value of guided, structured discussion groups and open debates that are informed by scientific analysis and an intellectual understanding of Germany’s humanistic tradition as well as its long-held cultural practices. At once opposed to and dependent on the mainstream media, Adorno’s educational measures also involve high-quality television broadcasts that would work against the narrow, consciousness-distorting framing mechanisms of the mass media, controlled as they were by Christian conservative policy-making and capitalist market forces. Finally, Adorno recommends that these educational measures should be concentrated primarily on the *platten Land* (literally, “flat land,” a pun that associates dullness with the open country), where barbarism more widely prevails, thereby undermining the sentimental view of the countryside as an idyllic alternative to the iniquitous city (*EA*, 196).

Where Adorno agrees with other speakers considered in this study is in his call for a turn to the perpetrating subject, for a consideration of the sociological and, even more importantly, psychological processes that led to the systematically administrated genocide. As for Arendt and Weiss, sustained reflection on the Nazis’ symptoms reinforced Adorno’s conviction that “the roots must be sought in the persecutors, not in the victims” (*EA*, 193). As Adorno elaborates, “One must...
come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must
reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness
of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again” (EA, 193). How
was it possible that so many German citizens had participated in the destruction of
European Jewry? In answering this question, Adorno emphasizes a point similar
to that made by Arendt in her much-contested *Eichmann in Jerusalem:* it is these
individuals’ inability to think and reflect for themselves that produces the condi-
tions for a mindless (and ultimately stupid) submission to the facile “truths” pro-
mulgated by the culture industry. Then and now, public education was failing the
German people.

Hence Adorno’s lecture takes on a performative impetus that is proportionate to
his cause but different from previously discussed attempts at acting on it. Contrary
to other public speakers who adopted extremely self-conscious modes of rhetori-
cal and aesthetic presentation that made the gap between truth and demonstrabil-
ity painfully clear, Adorno seizes on the opportunity of reaching a mass audience
by opting for the (arguably reductive) simplicity and clarity of style that he was
otherwise deeply suspicious of. Attesting to Marie Luise Kaschnitz’s observation
that Adorno “speaks with ease but writes heavily,” the lecture (and other similarly
educational pieces by Adorno) stands in contrast to the pointedly oblique and dense
nature of his philosophical writings.11 But because Adorno presents his ideas in an
accessible and transparent form, he is able to illustrate his points in a way that the
general public would be sure to understand—an essential attribute of the lecture,
given that his point was to educate them toward personal and political maturity.
This is not to say that *Education after Auschwitz* complies with the quasi-literary
form of the radio essay as it was cultivated, first by Alfred Andersch, and subse-
quently by other members of the Gruppe 47 during the 1950s and 1960s. Quite the
opposite is true. Adorno’s radio lectures, most of which he recorded himself, are
marked by the precise and methodical language of philosophy spoken in absolute
sincerity and without vocal inflections or other aural effects. Clearly, as Michael
Schwarz notes, Adorno wanted foremost to be understood.12

Adorno spoke publicly, often in a semi-improvised manner, to develop new
ideas and at the same time test their effect before publishing them. This explains
the discrepancies between the recorded and the published versions of his *Educa-
tion after Auschwitz* lecture. For instance, the published essay opens with a power-
ful adaptation of Adorno’s new categorical imperative, previously published in his
*Negative Dialectics,* where Adorno had decreed with utmost authoritative finality
“that Auschwitz will not repeat itself.”13 As a command that is unconditionally and

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11. Quoted in Schwarz, “‘Er redet leicht, schreibt sich schwer,’” 4; my translation.
12. Schwarz, “‘Er redet leicht, schreibt sich schwer,’” 3. This is not to deny that Adorno was often
criticized for the recondite and oblique style of his lecturing.
universally binding, Adorno’s categorical imperative obliges without any other condition than the rightful authority of (moral) philosophy, even if Adorno of course writes from a postmetaphysical stance, raising awareness, as Gerhard Richter puts it, “of the difficult impulse in post–Hitlerian thinking of seeking a universalizable morality of action even when we have no secure metaphysical or universal ground on which to stand.”¹⁴ Like Buber, who in his Peace Prize speech had drawn attention to a moral abyss that was absolute and categorical in its terms, Adorno postulates a truth that is beyond doubt because (or even though) it is rooted (negatively) in the fundamental condition of human ethicality turned inside out. It is the smallest common denominator of even the most divergent statements about post-Nazi Germany. Why then does Adorno mitigate this crucial point in his radio lecture?

There are two changes, both of which exemplify how scrupulously Adorno met the difficult challenge of educating his postwar German audience about their Nazi past. The first change occurs in the rephrasing of the Negative Dialectic’s categorical imperative for the purpose of a public lecture. The original phrase is worded in strong, menacing language that is dominated by words such as Frevel (outrage) and leibhaft (bodily) that are drawn from a biblical—indeed satanic—register: “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection.”¹⁵ How much more cautious is the wording of Adorno’s radio lecture: “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again. Its priority before any other requirements is such that I need not and should not justify it. I cannot understand why it has been given so little concern until now” (EA, 191). While this reiteration effectively evokes the universality and normative prescription of a categorical imperative, it avoids both the use of philosophical terms (“categorical imperative”) and the invocation of Hitler as the paradoxical root of the imperative’s prescriptive morality. The second major change is from presentation script to script presentation. When Adorno recorded the radio lecture, he further weakened the categorical imperative of his Negative Dialectics by qualifying it twice with the ostensibly spontaneously uttered phrase scheint mir (it seems), while also relativizing his supposed incomprehension at his contemporaries’ lack of interest in it by employing the adverb recht (quite).

¹⁵. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 365.
Moreover, Adorno adds the flavoring particle *doch* to a factual, assertive statement as if to preemptively respond to disagreement on the part of his listeners. Here is a transcript of the radio lecture’s opening paragraph: “*To me it seems* that the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again. Its priority before any other requirements *seems to me* such that I need not and should not justify it. I cannot *quite* understand why it has been given so little concern until now, which is *indeed* the case” (EA, 191; emphasis added).

Through these rhetorical devices, Adorno significantly softens his stance and admits to his own ambiguity and struggle with the issue at hand. At the same time, he opens his statement up for debate, thereby undermining the very notion of a categorical imperative. In that way, Adorno’s opening paragraph sets the stage for a radio lecture that is at the same time incontrovertible and heuristic, prescriptive and participatory. Its fairly spontaneous character is carried through the entire lecture, which is permeated by a range of qualifiers and flavoring particles that mark content as opinion rather than passing it off as fact, while also indicating how the speaker thinks that it relates to his listener’s knowledge. Thus Adorno through his speech performs what it means to think critically within and despite the constraints of radio, a mass medium that had for all too long been (and was still) gravely misused by political and commercial forces. It shows that although he was at least initially more skeptical of the radio than his prewar collaborator Benjamin, who had actively employed radio plays as an instrument of enlightenment and social change during the 1930s, Adorno eventually came to concur with the conviction that mass media could help cultivate a more critical and progressive society.

The Radio Voice

It is essential to read *Education after Auschwitz* through the lens of Adorno’s early writings on the radio, and in particular his essay “The Radio Voice” to fully appreciate what the speaker set out to accomplish.16 Finished in 1939 and hence under the influence of the Nazis’ rise to power, and conceived, more specifically, in response to Hitler’s uncannily “successful” deployment of both rhetoric and radio as his propaganda media, Adorno issues a critique of the radio “voice”—embodied and monopolized at this historical moment by the “frightening” sound of Hitler’s “barking” and “howling” speech.17 Of course Adorno’s critique extends beyond the particulars of a dictator’s sound and tonality in its most extreme historical incarnation. It is based on a phenomenological description of the act of listening to

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17. These are the words with which Virginia Woolf responded to the live transmission of Hitler’s Nuremberg rally speech, which she listened to on the radio; quoted in Anne Karpf, *The Human Voice: The Story of a Remarkable Talent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 223.
music and speech, and in particular live music and speech on the radio. As Adorno points out, during a live broadcast the act of listening is simultaneous with the performance, thereby creating an illusion of immediacy and presence that to his mind concealed its reified nature. One fundamental problem of radio as a mechanized form of communication was that it encouraged people to listen alone. While the performance of a symphony was socially integrating in that it brought people together inside a music hall, this “power to build a community” was positively lost in the radio transmission of the same symphony, as it failed to join people in space (even if it did join them in time). Falsely promoting “the idea of allowing huge masses to 'participate' in the original events from which they are actually excluded,” radio broadcasts thus created a false sense of community binding the listener to the particular moment of the event and, more importantly, tying him to the act of listening. “The listener remains the slave of radio’s immediacy, of the simultaneity of the performance.” In that sense, radio was analogous to the service of public utilities over which the consumer had no control. Having little power to regulate the flow of power, water (or for that matter, ideas), in his private space, the consumer can only turn it off, and only with dire consequences: “The individual is at the mercy of society even within the sphere of his extreme privacy; and that subjectively this dependence causes a perpetual state of fear within him.”

So much is at stake for Adorno in the radio voice. It is structurally related to dictatorship because it likewise reflects a unidirectional, centrally controlled, and hierarchical authority: “The individual has no chance to raise his voice against the super-voice addressing him.” Like Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, who would later caution that in television “the wealth objectified in social production appears so omnipotent that relationships between individuals fade into insignificance,” Adorno thinks that radio broadcasting bears witness to the reification of society: “Just as these authorities alienate themselves from men, regarding men as a mere material for the realization of their will, so does the radio voice. It is its alienation, its reification in virtue of which it appears to speak itself.” And yet Adorno was to become attuned to the radio as a pedagogical tool in the postwar period. Another way of counteracting the “shouting of the commentator” on the radio and with it the indelible memory of Hitler’s fanatic voice and his demagogic speeches, which were still considered by some Germans as the standard for an effective and

20. Ibid., 379.
23. Kluge and Negt, Public Sphere and Experience, 100.
enthraling rhetoric, was to answer them with a similarly sweeping and forceful negative. This is not to claim that Adorno’s radio lectures were anything close in impact or magnitude to what Hitler’s speeches had been. But they do constitute Adorno’s earnest effort at multiplying his audience and reaching thousands of listeners with the purpose of educating—rather than manipulating—them in the intellectual and moral virtues of critical thinking. Adorno’s radio voice was even, not loud, and his delivery of *Education after Auschwitz* in particular was sober and instructive, offering insight in a self-effacing, nonpatronizing way that shows just how careful he was not to exhibit any similarity to the voice of a dictatorial commentator or a dictator tout court. As Klaus Reichert writes, “Instead of pontificating he simply articulated.”

In *Education after Auschwitz* Adorno performs a tricky balancing act. He speaks calmly so as not to shout, but vehemently enough not to be swallowed up by (or simply ignored within) the culture industry’s economy of kitsch production. And while he has to be attuned to his listeners as well as to his particular individuality, he must also maintain a philosophical grasp of the objective conditions of his subject matter. Otherwise he would inevitably fail to bridge the gap between the “hard” materiality of scientific and theoretical knowledge and the “soft” practice of public education. As Kluge and Negt put it in their homage to Adorno, “A production process such as one that is stringently theoretical tears the researcher apart to a certain extent. Or, to use a different image: this mode of production can only be realized along a narrow range of possibilities. . . . Only in a social form, with an alternatively configured collective practice of theory, can the extreme labor process of theory and scholarship be adequately linked to the productive labor that defines the whole of society.” Foreshadowing Kluge and Negt’s notion of a counter-public sphere, Adorno’s radio lecture simulates a discussion that would be based on “a face-to-face relation” and consequently “subject to discursive conflict and negotiation.” Instead of resisting the reach of mass media, Adorno hopes to invigorate a community of “belonging” from within. It is entirely without irony or subversiveness that Adorno, the ardent critic of mass-mediated technologies, uses the latter as tools in the formation of a contingent, alternative public.

On July 7, 1967, Adorno delivered a lecture on Goethe’s *Iphigenie in Tauris* at the Free University in Berlin. Given by invitation of Peter Szondi, the talk is a passionate reinterpretation of Goethe’s play, which Adorno reads as a prophecy of the

25. Ibid., 377.
28. Hansen, foreword, xxxvi.
Enlightenment’s reversal into myth. Initially entitled “Against Barbarism,” the *Iphigenie* lecture offers a prime example of Adorno’s critical method: “In its fragmentary quality, Goethe’s classicism proves its worth as correct consciousness, as a figure of something that cannot be arbitrated but which its idea consists of arbitrating. Goethe’s classicism is not the resolute countermovement of a chastened man to his early work but rather the dialectical consequence of that early work.” Yet despite the lecture’s critical import, which was directed against one of the foremost classical works of the German canon and with it, as Ulrich Plass observes, “the very institution the students were invested in changing,” a group of left-wing students attempted to sabotage it. It was only after Szondi asked those students who did not wish to listen to leave the hall that Adorno was able to deliver his lecture. Adorno was exasperated by the event, which is believed to have greatly contributed to his exhaustion in face of the increasingly irrational, indeed nonacademic and anti-intellectual attitude propagated by the *Studentenbewegung* (student movement).

Why then did the students disrupt a lecture by one of the few professors who never distanced himself from the movement as a whole and who officially condemned their fight for university reforms while seeking out dialogue with them about the contemporary political situation? A professor and uncompromising thinker, too, whose teachings had provided them with the theoretical tools for their critical theory–inflected, antiauthoritarian opposition? There is little doubt that the students in question had been bitterly disappointed in Adorno, who had, as Richard Langston observes, “withheld his validation and defense of their victimology,” because he was opposed to the students’ arguably regressive brand of direct action through provocation and civil disobedience. After repeated unanswered calls for a declaration of Adorno’s allegiance to Fritz Teufel, a member of the left-wing splinter group Kommune 1 (Commune 1), who had been arrested during the demonstrations of June 2, a few students marched up to the lectern and unfurled banners, one of which declared, “Berlin’s left-wing Fascists welcome Teddy the classicist.” Describing the obvious sarcasm of this message, Langston rightly suggests that

30. Ibid., 2:159.
“the communards were as sympathetic to the humanitarian aspirations of Goethe’s Iphigenia—in whom Adorno saw a premonition of modernity’s collapse into myth—as they were earnest about identifying themselves as Fascists.”35 If these agitators called themselves Fascists, it was to put precisely their anti-Fascism on display, which would in turn serve to refute Habermas who had recently imputed a form of “leftist Fascism” to their leader Rudi Dutschke.36 Whatever their motivation, the effect of this ironic self-attack is perplexing: it implicitly accuses one of the leading anti-Fascist thinkers whose analysis of the “authoritarian character” was a foundational concept in the theory of anti-Fascism of the same heresy to which they had so candidly and falsely confessed. (In a letter to Samuel Beckett, Adorno would later note his surprise at “the feeling of suddenly being attacked as a reactionary.”37) Already we have in this strategy—in the convoluted attempt at assigning Fascistic tendencies to a declared enemy—the inflationary use of a term that quickly led to a spiraling of its diffusion and simplification. If Adorno is a Fascist, then aren’t we all? This is not only an outrageously unjust accusation but also an empty rhetorical gesture that strips the term of any descriptive value.

Even more problematic was the fact that by fashioning themselves as the victims of a new Fascist order, these young gentiles implicitly equated anti-Fascism with Jewish suffering. Appropriating the roles of the victim (“long-haired Ersatz Jews” was a common descriptor in the ensuing years), the students began to consider themselves targets of anti-Communist repression—and hence the equivalent of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Of course Adorno and Szondi, who were both Holocaust survivors, regarded this as a dangerous and unacceptable move. In a similar vein, the slogan Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands (We are all German Jews), adopted by French students to express their solidarity with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a Jewish-born leader of the movement who had been denied reentry into the republic, equates the French government with the Nazi regime and thereby downplays the uniqueness of the Holocaust and diminishes the suffering of its victims.

If figures like Adorno, Arendt, Buber, Szondi, and Weiss had put their identity as members of the persecuted minority of the Jews on the line to defend and possibly even resurrect a German-Jewish dialogue, if it ever existed, while Bachmann and Johnson had expressed their support for and solidarity with this group while

calling for a process of critically confronting the Nazi past from within the German people themselves, the students now turned their backs on these pioneering efforts. Hence if there was any momentum gained from the critical interventions described in this book, it was lost by the time the new generation of rebellious and increasingly militant students began to articulate their ambitious political agenda. For while the new Left surely reckoned with the sins of their fathers, they were only marginally concerned with understanding the specificity of the disaster that had unfolded through the hands of the “Auschwitz generation.” Focused on the structural, political, and moral continuities between Nazism and West German democracy at the expense of the radical break in history constituted by Auschwitz, the 1968ers’ attitude to the Nazi past was marked by ambivalence and contradiction. In the words of Hans Kundnani, it “both intensified the engagement with the Nazi past and drew a line under it.”

What happened to the spirit of rapprochement between Jewish and non-Jewish students who had protested jointly against the German government’s (and societies’) failure to openly address and acknowledge the horrendous crimes committed during the Nazi period? The initial consensus about shared political purposes was not only heavily compromised by what Langston terms the “phantasms of the Holocaust” that were woven into the new Left’s politics, but effectively put to an end by the massive criticism aimed at Israel’s handling of the Six-Day War against Egypt. One aim of this book has been to show the emergence of a counter-public sphere that formed around the speeches of a set of exiled or formerly exiled intellectuals who insisted on the reality of Auschwitz, even if it did not easily lend itself to articulation. The student movement’s reaction to Adorno’s *Iphigenie* lecture shows the risks and questions that attend this emergence of a counterpublic devoted to the memory of the Jewish victims of Nazism. While it is true that the students expanded and consolidated this oppositional discursive space through their own critical interventions, their activism took a decidedly different turn in the period of radicalization after 1968, when the ubiquity of public speech, now recognized as a distinct form of social and political action, replaced the tacit search for sometimes as little as a single deviant word—“Auschwitz,” “death,” or even just “I” and “Thou.” Having found their cause, the students no longer needed to search for a common ground or a possible “ground” tout court—be that religious or ethical, sociopolitical or epistemological—to articulate what had seemed virtually “unspeakable” to their intellectual mentors. Obviously, this shift in process also implies a shift in substance and ideas. As a new generation of German intellectuals began to contextualize the political and economic legacy of the nation’s totalitarian past within a current and

global horizon, the subjective experience of individual Jewish survivors and other victims and witnesses began to seem an inadequate basis for the collective experience of marginalization, oppression, and persecution.⁴⁰

But while the development of a counterpublic that would oppose the official interpretation of the Nazi past was temporarily stalled by the student revolts at the end of the postwar era, the public speeches that are the focus of this book nevertheless laid the seeds for what would in the following decades become Germany’s “culture of memory,” whereby Germans have, in the words of one commentator, “adopted an acute historical sensitivity, making expressions of genuine sorrow and shame longstanding fixtures of German identity.”⁴¹ It is important to remember that the broad and sweeping expressions of guilt and responsibility taking place in today’s Germany would not have been possible without the individual subjective interventions by a number of (often Jewish and not always German) intellectuals whom the hegemonic discourse had rendered as outsiders.

⁴⁰ As Bettina Warburg writes, “In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the reconsideration of the Holocaust by the younger generation allowed for the generalization of the Nazi past to move away from a specific debt to the Jews and move the focus on moral debt owed to the Jewish community.” Bettina Warburg, “Germany’s National Identity, Collective Memory, and Role Abroad,” in Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations, ed. Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 51–70, here 55.
