

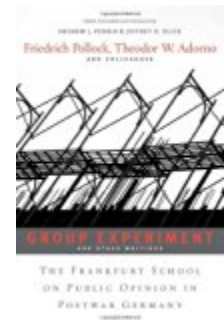


Friedrich Pollock, Theodor W. Adorno. *Group Experiment and Other Writings: The Frankfurt School on Public Opinion in Postwar Germany*. Andrew J. Perrin and Jeffrey K. Olick, eds. and trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 268 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04846-1.

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## What Did They Know? The Frankfurt School on German Public Opinion after 1945

In a lecture in late 1959, Theodor W. Adorno argued that a “hollow space” still lay at the center of public discussions of the Third Reich and the Holocaust in West Germany.[1] As evidence of this evasiveness, he referred to the public opinion research that he and his colleagues undertook at the Institute for Social Research in the early 1950s. This study had fallen into relative neglect soon after its publication; however, thanks to the efforts of Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin, the work is once again in print and translated into English for the first time. As the editors point out, not only is the study an important background to this much discussed Adorno lecture, but it also sheds light on several aspects of the twisted paths of German remembrance. The following discussion will address in part the study, but it will examine primarily the ways in which the editors have sought to situate these volumes in debates emerging at the time that the research was conducted. In particular, Olick and Perrin convincingly argue that the study is a neglected but still important theoretical contribution to social psychological research; that it represents a significantly revealing episode in German discussions of the Nazi past; and that it contributes to what we know (and can know) about German public opinion during and after the Third Reich.

Originally published as the second volume of *Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie*, here the work has been divided into two volumes.[2] Both include substantial and useful introductory essays, as well as further material, in-

cluding the aforementioned Adorno lecture and a translation of a shorter article that he wrote on public opinion research. The first volume takes its title from the Adorno monograph that was part of the original study, *Guilt and Defense*. [3] This was an extensive essay that constituted the qualitative analysis of their research material, and it was meant to accompany and deepen the study’s quantitative sections. The latter book includes a lengthy discussion of theory and method, and is here published in slightly abridged form under the original title *Group Experiment*. The difficulties of publishing the full 550 pages of the original study with accompanying material and introductions probably necessitated the division. However, the editors further argue that in fact the two parts of the study may find different audiences as they contain material relevant to different disciplines. Certainly, this is a reasonable approach, but I suspect that most readers will want to look at both volumes: Adorno’s essay benefits from full exposure to the methods used in the study, while readers who tread their way through the somewhat laborious prose of *Group Experiment* will probably want to see how this methodological apparatus translates into more wide-ranging arguments. This aside, the editors do make a compelling argument that the methodological part of the study deserves attention in its own right, both on account of its critical interventions and its findings. Moreover, even though the study was relatively ignored, it was probably not without influence. For instance, the editors note the implications of the study for one of the

younger researchers involved—Jürgen Habermas. (Other participants included Ralf Dahrendorf, Monika Plessner, and Helmuth Plessner.)

As Olick and Perrin concede, *Group Experiment* is very much a mixed bag. The study was the result of an extensive collaboration that included the work of over two dozen scholars, and it represents one of the institute's most ambitious forays into empirical research. Despite some of its limitations in terms of, for instance, the design of the experiment and the inconsistent method of interpretation, it still offers, according to the editors, an important critique to contemporary practices. The institute researchers were anxious to import methods learned in America during the war into the post-1945 German research environment; but they wanted to do so in a fashion that still reckoned with the theoretical and philosophical priorities that guided their work in general. This meant a substantial effort to reconceptualize the nature of public opinion and the means of investigating it. According to the researchers, contemporary concepts of public opinion were inadequately theorized; public opinion had to be understood, so they argued, not as a property that was possessed by individuals that could then be imparted to researchers but rather as a result of specific sets of social relations. Thus, according to the study, public opinion emerged from a dynamic process in which neither opinion nor the subject who held it could be viewed as discrete and stable. The introduction by the editors also offers a useful discussion of these issues.

Thus the experimenters tried to construct a research scenario that would reckon with these premises, and that would approximate the fluid settings in which opinion takes shape. Their model was the railway car where strangers and acquaintances might meet and have a chance discussion over subjects of common interest. To approximate this scenario, the institute brought together over 120 discussion or "focus" groups consisting of between 15 to 20 people—in total there were about 1,800 participants. These groups, though not representative of the German population as a whole, still encompassed a wide range of individuals: former soldiers, fashion students, the homeless, and expellees from the East—even a former SS officer is reported as a participant. The groups met and a moderator played for them a tape that purported to be a letter from a member of the Allied Occupation forces commenting on what he saw as the general mood of the German population after the war. The letter—the "basic stimulus" of the experiment—was meant to provoke, but not to attack, an aspect of the experiment's design that led to some criticism later. For in-

stance, the letter referred to a lingering hostility among Germans toward both Jews and Displaced Persons, and a persistent sympathy for authoritarian rule (for balance, several sympathetic judgments were also included). The groups were then invited to respond to the letter, and the ensuing discussions were recorded and transcribed. Though, on average, only 4 out of every 10 individuals actually spoke during these sessions, the study still produced over 6,300 pages of transcripts. These were then subjected to an analysis that attempted to categorize the discussants' statements in terms of their negative or positive attitudes toward such subjects as democracy, war guilt, the West, and the Jews. This material, which is to be found in *Group Experiment*, was then to be accompanied by a number of monographs that analyzed the data in a qualitative fashion.[4]

This approach was both innovative and informed by theoretical issues that have important ramifications. Indicative of this, perhaps, is the fact that in the most recent presidential election campaign in the United States, one commentator who questioned the status of what opinion polls actually measure referred back to the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and the debates among researchers in the 1940s and 1950s. It was these debates and practices that first impelled the institute to move away from the views of Lazarsfeld and pursue this alternative path of research.[5]

Did this methodology actually generate different interpretations of German public opinion? Adorno and his colleagues thought so, and the gathered material uncovered a startling amount of resistance to the post-Nazi order. However, they were cautious towards these findings; instead, they stressed that the most important result was the illumination of those defense mechanisms and collective dynamics that influenced opinion formation *in statu nascendi*. Such mechanisms hindered meaningful attempts to reckon with the past. The pervasive reluctance to address past crimes, a desire to draw a line under National Socialism, and just move on, was echoed in the discussions that the group experiment elicited. For instance, the participants often used contorted circumlocutions to refer to Nazi crimes, in particular, those committed against Jews; Adolf Hitler's name was avoided as if it were a taboo. In general, as the editors notes, a uniformity of language prevailed that institute researchers argued was symptomatic of the survival of ideology and a failure of critical reflection. The conclusion that Adorno drew from these phenomena is nuanced—on the one hand, the mechanisms of defensiveness represented a desire to repress knowledge and culpability; on the other,

they also suggested a veiled admission of guilt, however dimly felt, and this was positive, so he argued.[6] Still, behind this flattening of language, there persisted what the study identified as “trans-subjective factors” or the collective thinking of the Third Reich. The transcripts offered abundant evidence of how far the motivations of Nazism and knowledge of its crimes had penetrated into the general population, including a deeply unsettling level of antisemitism (particularly among university graduates and farmers). Despite these findings, Adorno and his colleagues tried to remain within the limits of the study’s provisional nature, stressing repeatedly that this was a pilot project. Firm conclusions on the prevalence and distribution of such views were generally to be avoided. As Adorno wrote: “the often odd perspectives that our participants expressed concerning the most delicate subjects ... would be misjudged in isolation if separated from their psychic dynamics. Exactly here we have to remind ourselves emphatically that the nature of qualitative analysis is to tease out types of attitudes and opinions, not their distribution. We do not ask ... how many people think the question of guilt ‘in a typically German way’ but in which characteristic ways they try to master this complex, what role political ideology plays in the process.”[7]

From this point of view, the study furnished rich materials. Several discussions emerged in the transcripts that demonstrated the fluidity of opinion as it struggled for linguistic expression amid complexes of guilt and ideology, sometimes resulting in the most bizarre equivocations. “Most saw something,” said one student from a philosophy study group, “but no one experienced it consciously.” “Nobody—nobody—probably heard,” asserted a number of agitated Bavarian dignitaries—the absolute judgment of the statement’s first part totally undercut by the qualifying adverb.[8]

For good reason, the editors have included a hostile review of the study, published in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, written by Peter Hofstätter who was actually quoted favorably in the research. Though Hofstätter raised some legitimate issues—the study at times reads as if “the sociological analysts are continuing the discussion with their subjects after their discharge”—his review nonetheless typifies the strategies of evasion that the study claimed to uncover (p. 194). As Adorno pointed out in his rebuttal, Hofstätter reacted mostly to those aspects of the study that the authors had taken considerable steps to circumscribe. They did not make inferences about the German population in its entirety based on their findings, yet this is exactly

where Hofstätter directed much of his anger. Moreover, his claim that the “basic stimulus” provided by the letter had provoked the discussants to engage with stereotypes likewise had been addressed by the researchers, but Hofstätter took little notice of their remarks on this point. According to Adorno, the review by Hofstätter was nothing more than apologetics, and the editors have provided some important context for this debate, describing other writings by Hofstätter that struck a similar note.[9] Moreover, Hofstätter had missed one of the primary points of the study by arguing that the researchers had failed to solicit well-considered opinions and judgments, instead allowing the group discussion to lead to a “seduction of superficiality.” Yet was this not one of the striking conclusions of the study, that group dynamics play an important role in opinion formation against which the reserves of “inwardness” may hold little defense? And did not the electoral success of National Socialism itself suggest that superficial thought could be persuasive? For Adorno, ultimately the dispute represented a persistent tendency in postwar Germany to use a thin veil of irrelevant facts to cover up painful issues. Thus his lecture of 1959 on working through the past was, as the editors argue, an intervention that had many years of debate and research behind it. It also shows the importance of empirical studies in the formation of one of Adorno’s key writings.

There are, to be sure, some questions that remain with regard to the study and the conclusions to be drawn from it. The interpretation of those participants who were silent is probably an insoluble difficulty, but the institute researchers, it should be noted, handled this with more caution than did such critics as Hofstätter. Also, at one point, Adorno made a surprising claim for the primordial nature of individual drives toward collective identification, a factor that they suggest heavily informed the dynamics of opinion formation—“as if one was gaining insight into primitive phases of identification, almost into the prehistory of humanity.”[10] Such statements may lead some readers to feel that the baggage of social psychology sits a bit too heavily on the study; but nonetheless the subject of group identification has remained important in terms of studying the formation of both National Socialist constituencies, and the will to commit mass murder as investigated in the work of Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992).

Yet the generalized thesis of a “persisting anthropological disposition” that impels group opinion makes it more difficult to distinguish between different modes

of identification (p. 139). Though Adorno and the researchers of the institute explicitly conveyed their intention to shed light on the fascism that exists *within* democracy rather than against it, the concept of a general anthropological ground seems to conflict with a theory that would allow one to distinguish between forms of identification that are fascist or otherwise. Moreover, Adorno himself cited some instances where collective identification meant a more reflective attitude toward the burdens of guilt. This tension remains unresolved in the study's conclusions.[11] Perhaps this is not surprising given the provisional nature of their research.

Those studying public opinion in Germany, both during and after National Socialism, should find much of value in these studies and in the informative introductions given by Olick and Perrin. They refer to the work of Robert Moeller (*War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* [2001]), and these volumes may be read with much benefit in light of the issues raised by Moeller, and in other studies of public opinion, such as those of David Bankier (*The Germans and the Final Solution: Public Opinion Under Nazism* [1996]); Ian Kershaw (*Hitler, The Germans, and the Final Solution* [2006], especially his introduction); and Eric Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband (*What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany—An Oral History* [2005]). The defensive stance identified in the group experiment is in accord with what Moeller has revealed about postwar German memory. Yet, aside from the circumlocutions common to many participants, they were also at times quite voluble, and they offer a range of attitudes and points of view that extend into areas beyond the more common narratives of German victimization. The studies, I would argue, do tend to support Kershaw's argument that historical research into public opinion can only allow a partial reconstruction, beyond which it is hard to speculate. The quantitative results of the study, for which Adorno and his colleagues only made the most modest claims, appears to harmonize with the general picture that has emerged: that of mass support for the regime up to and including even lethal violence against the Jews, a small minority who were in opposition but not in open resistance, and the remaining population who were in a silent zone of "moral indifference." On this question, what Adorno wrote in 1955 is still provocative: "The answer is extraordinarily difficult. No doubt, the National Socialists tried to conceal the worst ... or rather, they tried not to let *more* leak out than a vague and pan-

icked feeling of horror. Moreover, the horror itself has produced its own veil—precisely that which surpasses all comprehension could hardly be admitted by anyone, regardless of whether he stuck with the National Socialists or not; it is otherwise difficult to imagine how one could possibly have continued to exist in Germany." Yet, as he points out a couple of paragraphs further, most "would surely have heard something." [12]

#### Notes

[1]. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past," in *Guilt and Defense: On the Legacies of National Socialism in Postwar Germany*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 214. The version translated and reprinted here was published in 1960, but was delivered earlier.

[2]. Friedrich Pollock, ed., *Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie*, vol. 2, *Gruppenexperiment: ein Studienbericht* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955).

[3]. Theodor W. Adorno, "Schuld und Abwehr," in *ibid.*, 278-425.

[4]. Adorno's *Guilt and Defense* was the only such monograph to be published in its entirety. A fragment of a study on language by Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rainier Köhne was included in the original publication and is translated in *Group Experiment* as Appendix A. A further monograph by Kurt Wolff was never published, but a mimeograph of it was produced by Ohio State University under the title "German Attempts at Picturing Germany: Texts."

[5]. Andrew Hacker, "Can Romney Get a Majority?" *New York Review of Books* (September 27, 2012). Also, see the introduction to *Group Experiment* on the dispute with Lazarsfeld (pp. xv-xvi).

[6]. Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*, 52-53.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 49-50.

[8]. *Ibid.*, 58, 60.

[9]. *Ibid.*, 204-205, 29-32.

[10]. *Ibid.*, 181.

[11]. *Ibid.*, 182.

[12]. *Ibid.*, 57.

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