

The Origins of Empirical Versus Critical Epistemology in American Communication

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Keywords: Epistemology, Adorno, Lazarsfeld, Princeton Radio Research Project

To better understand communication research, it is necessary to understand the debate between the empirical and critical approaches to research. The debate is often contentious, and while it may be that a combination of approaches best suits the study of communication, it is important to identify the roots of the debate, and the integral role the question has played in the development of the discipline of communication. This paper offers insight into one of the more fabled instances of that debate, the relationship between Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodor Adorno and their work on the Princeton Radio Research Project.

Introduction

The debate in communication research between the empirical and critical approaches is not a new concept, but has been a constant struggle for proponents of both for many years. As the communication discipline continues to evolve in the face of technological advances, an understanding of each of the approaches is necessary to better prepare ourselves to better understand how technology is impacting the field. To best understand the relationship between critical and empirical research, it is important to understand the beginnings of the debate, particularly its roots in mass communication. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine one of the more notable cases in the debate, that of the Princeton Radio Research Project, and in particular, the relationship between Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodor Adorno.

Understanding the differences between empirical and critical research is integral in understanding the conflict between Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodor Adorno and their ill-fated collaboration on the Princeton Radio Research Project. Empirical research, or “positivistic sociology” (Lazarsfeld, 1982, p.58) uses various methods of observation in order to understand the prevailing reality. Critical theory, on the other hand, derives from Kant and Marx (among others) and is “an analysis of the conditions of possibility *and* the limits of rational faculties undertaken by reason itself” (Piccone, 2002, p. vii). In other words, empirical research attempts to understand the world in a descriptive sense, where critical theory attempts to explain how the world *could* be in a normative ideal.

Both types of research are important to not only communication, but to sociology, psychology and political science. However, there has been a long-standing debate between those who adhere to each epistemologic approach to knowledge, a debate which was fully manifested between 1938 and 1941 between two of the most well-known sociologists of the 20th century, Theodor Adorno and Paul Lazarsfeld. For the most part, empirical research, which includes methodologies such as surveys, interviews and attitude analysis, has become the more popular way of gathering knowledge, at least in the United States. Critical theory, espoused by the Frankfurt School, has recently begun to work its way back into the writings of contemporary social philosophers, but has for the most part been avoided by researchers in communication.

Lemert (1989) states that

“If God had told Noah to match up each school of...criticism [epistemology] with one another before leading them in pairs on the Ark, they’d probably all have drowned first. Several schools of ...criticism don’t seem to be on speaking terms with on another. Worse, they may not even be on *listening* terms” (p.26)

This lack of listening is not due entirely to the failure of the experiment

Lazarsfeld attempted in 1938, that is, bringing Adorno onto the empirically-based radio research project, but the absolute resolve of each man left a bitter taste in the mouths of empiricists and critical theorists for each other, a lingering taste that has

lessened over time, but still leads each side to view the other with a measure of skepticism.

The Princeton Radio Research Project (PRRP)

Funded by a grant from the Rockefeller foundation, the Princeton Radio Research Project started at the University of Newark in 1937, led by Paul Lazarsfeld, though it later moved to Union Square in New York City. According to Rogers (1997), it was called the Princeton Radio Research Project because the Rockefeller foundation did not feel the University of Newark was prestigious enough a name, and the project maintained its name even after the move to New York.

The PRRP over the course of about seven years, produced research on the effect of media, specifically radio, on society. Originally the project called for laboratory experiments, but with the addition of Lazarsfeld, the project took on a wider range (Rogers, 1997). He utilized research methods such as content analysis, surveys along with secondary data such as ratings (Rogers, 1997). Lazarsfeld later recalled how the growth of methodology grew out of necessity:

“While the budget for the project seemed very large at the time, it soon turned out that it did not permit the collection of much primary materials. The original plan, as formulated by Cantril and Stanton, assumed that much time would be given to laboratory experiments, but perhaps because of my training, experiments played a small role once I became director” (Lazarsfeld, 1982, pp. 46-47).

Out of the radio research project came improvements on polling data, survey analysis, focus group interviewing, and the Lazarsfeld-Stanton analyzer –all of which Adorno would later criticize. The PRRP would continue until 1944, when funding from the Rockefeller foundation would slowly dissipate, and Lazarsfeld would move to Columbia to start the Bureau of Applied Social Research, which would take on similar issues as the PRRP.

Paul Lazarsfeld

It may be that Paul Lazarsfeld was born into empirical research. The son of an intellectual Jewish family born in Vienna in 1901, he was influenced early by his father, a lawyer, and mother, a psychologist. He attended the University of Vienna to study mathematics, and when he graduated would go on to teach mathematics, with a special knowledge of statistics.

His first monograph was published in 1931, which examined the behavior of proletarian versus middle class consumers (Jerabek, 2001). He would later form a research center, the *Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle*, or the Research Center for Business Psychology. This small group of mostly recently completed graduate students and some of Lazarsfeld’s close friends (including his first wife), would begin doing work of a completely new kind – market research (Jerabek, 2001). This research, conducted on consumer goods of all kinds, would lead Lazarsfeld to write one of the first texts on mathematical statistics aimed at social scientists.

His most famous early work, though not famous in sociological circles until the 1960's (Jerabek, 2001), was his study on Marienthal, a study on the consequences of mass unemployment. This type of effects research would be the cornerstone of his career, and this study in particular earned him a traveling fellowship to the United States in 1932. He spent two years in the states before permanently emigrating in 1935, when he founded the Newark University Research Center in New Jersey, the birthplace of the Princeton Radio Research Project.

The project's goal was to discover the role that radio played in the everyday life of Americans, why people listened to what they did, what types of programming was popular, and how groups of listeners could best be targeted (Doohm, 2005). In fact, the completed title of the project was "The essential value of radio to all types of listeners" (Doohm, 2005). The idea of the project was initially proposed by Hadley Cantril and Frank Stanton, though neither would have the opportunity to direct the project (due to other work at the time the project received funding), though both would serve as associate directors. However, Cantril expressed concern over Lazarsfeld's appointment, and it was not until Robert Lynd suggested that Lazarsfeld was up to the task was Lazarsfeld offered the position (Lazarsfeld, 1982). However, it would take some time for the details of Lazarsfeld's directorship to be worked out. Lazarsfeld recalls how he wanted to have the project be a part of his Newark Research Center, a proposal that Cantril found "rather absurd" (Lazarsfeld, 1982, p. 43).

Lazarsfeld (1982) would later indicate that the purpose of the project was "intentionally vague, so that it would be possible to carry out varied research under its charter" (p. 42). Lazarsfeld would later reminisce about the Machiavellian way in which he would get Cantril and Stanton to agree to the project being carried out at the Newark Research Center, though he thought that neither really cared, so long as Cantril had "reassured himself that the interests of the project and Princeton would be properly taken care of" (Lazarsfeld, 1982, p.44).

Lazarsfeld, now excited by the prospect of the project being conducted at a research center he had established, wrote to his friend Lynd that:

In addition to my presence at in Newark, he [Cantril] agreed that any amount of project money that would be allocated for research in an urban area could be spent from Newark, which means that I could appoint a number of people here for special studies" (Lazarsfeld, 1982, p. 44).

One of those people would be Theodor Adorno, a German sociologist with a strong knowledge of music, and a tendency towards critical theory. Though Adorno came recommended by Max Horkheimer, to whom Lazarsfeld owed a favor, for Lazarsfeld it meant taking a calculated risk; the attempt to merge a critical theorist with the empirical research he had in mind.

Origins of the Dispute

When Max Horkheimer suggested to Paul Lazarsfeld that he bring in Theodor Adorno to help work on the Princeton Radio Research Project as a means of bringing his fellow critical theorist to the United States, he couldn't have known what result would be soon to ensue. Lazarsfeld, for his part, was optimistic about Adorno joining the project. He would later write:

“I had known about the work of T.W. Adorno on the sociology of music. I was aware of these controversial features of Adorno's work [Adorno's critical approach], but was intrigued by his writings on the 'contradictory' role of music in our society. I considered it a challenge to see whether I could induce Adorno to try to link his ideas with empirical research. In addition, I felt gratitude to ... Max Horkheimer...I therefore invited him to become part-time director of the music division of our project” (Lazarsfeld, 1982, p.58).

Adorno, however, was not as excited about the prospect of coming to America to join Lazarsfeld on the radio project. Adorno would later write:

“I did not even know what a radio project was: the American use of the word 'project which is nowadays translated into German by the word 'forschungsorben' [research project], was unfamiliar to me.” (Jager, 2004, p.102)

Theodor Adorno: An unwilling immigrant

Adorno, born Thomas Ludwig Wiesengrund-Adorno, was born in Frankfurt in 1903. His father, a protestant German with Jewish ancestry, ran a successful wine-export business, and his mother, a Catholic and former singer and pianist, gave Adorno a childhood in the haute bourgeoisie tradition. He was exposed to fine society, art, music and the social lifestyles that accompany it.

At the University of Frankfurt, Adorno studied philosophy, musicology, psychology and sociology. He began to write musical compositions and papers on the philosophy of music, but would be later dissuaded (mostly due to rejection of the concept) and would move toward social philosophy as a main area of interest (Doohm, 2005). It was in this area that Adorno would gain prominence, and would go on to work with or mentor some of the well-known names of the Frankfurt school, including Horkheimer, Marcuse and later, Jurgen Habermas (Witkin, 2003).

Adorno had little desire to leave Germany, in fact, he had no desire to leave at all. He had hoped he would be able to wait out Hitler's regime, but by 1934 it was clear that the Socialist Party would remain in power. Trained in the critical approach, and more importantly a *thinker*, Adorno may have been a threat to Hitler and so he left Germany bound for England in 1934 (Jager, 2004). He would spend four years in England at Oxford and London before receiving being convinced by Horkheimer to come to the

United States to work with Lazarsfeld. In his last letter to Adorno before he came to America, Horkheimer implored Adorno to try to make the best of the situation, and offered the following advice:

“I would ask that you speak extremely scientifically and not say a word that could be interpreted politically. Even expressions such as materialistic are to be avoided at all costs. Your lecture must on no account give the impression that the brickbats that the Institute has received on account of its materialism are in any way justified. Also, try to speak as simply as possible. Complexity is already suspect” (Jager, 2004, p.101).

Apparently, Horkheimer was aware that Adorno tended to be a little elitist, particularly with regard to social structure. Adorno’s insistence on maintaining his devotion to critical research, as well as his inherent desire to “interpret phenomena, not to ascertain, organize, and classify facts” (Adorno, 1998, p. 216) would become problematic, and the basis for the conflict that would arise on the radio project. Adorno later recalled his move to America:

“When I moved from London to New York in February of 1938, I worked half-time for the Institute for Social Research and half-time for the Princeton Radio Project... I myself was supposed to direct the so-called music study of the project. Because I belonged to the Institute for Social Research I was not as exposed to the immediate competitive struggle and the pressure of externally imposed demands as was otherwise customary; I had the opportunity to pursue my own goals” (Adorno, 1998, pp. 217, 218).

The empirical-critical debate at the Radio Project

Witkin (2003) writes, “On paper, at least, Adorno was the most unlikely of collaborators for such a researcher (Lazarsfeld)” (p.116). This may be true, but on paper or not, the effort may have been doomed to fail from the start. Lazarsfeld, an empirical sociologist with a positivist perspective, and Adorno, a critical theorist who, by the time he arrived in New York, had already made up his mind about the nature of empirical survey methodology.

In an attempt to help Adorno become more accustomed to empirical research, Lazarsfeld assigned Gerhard Wiebe, a musician with a doctorate in psychology to work with Adorno. Lazarsfeld hoped that this would develop a convergence between empirical and critical research. He was disappointed when “the actual course of events was quite different from these expectations...cooperation between the two men became difficult” (Lazarsfeld, 1982, p. 58). Adorno’s own opinions about Wiebe are less tactful than Lazarsfeld’s:

“...once I had an assistant of distant German, Mennonite descent, who was supposed to support me particularly in my investigations of light music. He was a jazz musician, and I learned a great deal from him about the technique of jazz as well as about the phenomenon of *song hits* in America. But instead of helping me to translate my formulations of the problem into research strategies, however limited they might be, he wrote a kind of protest memorandum in which he contrasted...his scientific perspective

with my arid speculations, as he viewed them. He had not really understood what I was after.

But his assistant may have been the simplest of Adorno's problems, he also a fundamental disagreement with the way in which Lazarsfeld was conducting research on culture. He thought he would quickly acquire a certain knowledge of American life, but that his methods had not been in American concepts of sociology (Adorno, 1998). Adorno admits he had a difficult time understanding the purpose of the empirical research. He recalls Lazarsfeld asking him to go around and talk to people in the office, and though he had learned English at his time in Oxford, he had difficulty in understanding what the other researchers at the project were saying,

“But I understood enough to realize that it concerned the collecting of data to benefit planning departments in the field of mass media, whether directly in industry or cultural advisory boards and similar bodies” (Adorno, 1998, p. 219).

Adorno's basic problem with Lazarsfeld's methodology was his belief that Lazarsfeld was trying to measure culture, to which Adorno later reflected that “culture is precisely the condition that excludes a mentality that would wish to measure it” (Adorno, 1998, p. 223). This first experience with an American assistant produced exactly the opposite effect Lazarsfeld had hoped for, Adorno was almost immediately turned off by his work on the Radio Project.

In an attempt to smooth things over, Lazarsfeld recalls asking Adorno to write a memorandum that summarized his ideas, so that Lazarsfeld could secure broad-based support for Adorno, but

“in June 1938 he delivered a memorandum of 160 single-spaced pages, entitled ‘Music in Radio.’ But it seemed to me that the distribution of this text would only have made the situation more difficult, for in English his writing had the same tantalizing attraction and elusiveness that it had in German” (Lazarsfeld, 1982, p. 59).

However, the meeting that ensued from a shortened version of the memorandum did not produce favorable results for Adorno. Lazarsfeld recalls that even a shortened version of the memo did not provide significant enough change or a typology that could be translated into empirical research (Lazarsfeld, 1982). Lazarsfeld, in his memoir, remembers that

“the meeting took place sometime during the winter of 1938/1939, but it was not profitable. John Marshall [the man who had originally been the advocate for the initial grant for the radio project to the Rockefeller Foundation] was present and probably felt that my efforts to bring Adorno's type of critical research into the communications field were a failure. The renewal of the Rockefeller grant in the fall of 1939 provided no budget for continuation of the music project” (Lazarsfeld, 1982, p. 60).

However, sufficient funding to keep Adorno around was found, and Adorno was given a new research assistant, Dr. George Simpson, an American with knowledge of both American empirical research and also with the European tradition. It is with Simpson that Adorno began to produce research, if not entirely empirical, at least enough so that it could be applied to empirical methodology. Adorno recalls his happiness with Simpson with what amounted to an attack on Lazarsfeld's, and others, perceived basic rejection of critical theory.

“Again and again I could observe how native Americans proved to be more open-minded, above all more willing to help than emigrant Europeans who under the pressure of prejudice and rivalry often showed the proclivity to become more American than the Americans, and also quickly considered every newly arrived fellow European as a kind of disturbance to their own adjustment” (Adorno, 1998, pp. 225-226).

Adorno states that during his time of working with Simpson, he was able to produce four papers, and serve as the inspiration for two others (Adorno, 1998). However, Lazarsfeld recalls only one piece of usable, or at least publishable, research, a paper on the radio symphony (Lazarsfeld, 1982). The other papers that Adorno claims to have completed for the radio project were not published until after he had left. Years later, Adorno would refer to these studies as a sort of “salvaging action” particularly “measured against what the music project was intended to accomplish” (Adorno, 1998, p. 227).

But it was not only the empirical methodology that Adorno despised, the landscape of New York, and to the small pieces of the United States to which he had been exposed that he hated as well. Adorno said that:

“The shortcoming of the American landscape is not so much, as romantic illusion would have it, the absence of historical memories, as that it bears no trace of the human hand. This applies not only to the lack of arable land, the uncultivated woods often no higher than scrub, but above all to the roads. These are always inserted directly into the landscape, and the more impressively smooth and broad they are, the more unrelated and violent their gleaming track appears against its wild, overgrown surroundings. They are expressionless” (Jager, 2004, p. 105).

Adorno's stay at the Radio Project ended abruptly in 1941. However, the general disagreement between him and Lazarsfeld would continue many years in the form of essays and other published papers. Ultimately, Lazarsfeld did not dismiss Adorno, rather a lack of funding and a mutual agreement that the collaboration was a failed one led to Adorno leaving to rejoin others from the Frankfurt School in California. In the end, “everyone was so confused by what Adorno said” (Morrison, 1978, p. 340). Possibly the only agreement the two well-known sociologists ever had was that the best decision was to have Adorno leave.

Adorno had come on to the project with the idea that radio was simply a tool of propaganda that “pandered to the regressive tendencies of mass audiences, serving up an unremitting diet of undemanding baby food” (Witkin, 2003, p. 116). By the time he left the project in 1941, his research on radio had supported what he thought going in, and the essays he produced were no substitute for the social theory of radio he had aspired to (Doohm, 2005). Adorno had particular disdain for what he referred to as “methodological circle: in order to get a grasp on the phenomenon...one would have to use methods that are themselves reified, as they stood so menacingly before my eyes in the form of that program analyzer” (Adorno, 1998, p. 223).

But for as much disdain that Adorno had for Lazarsfeld’s style of research, Lazarsfeld also realized that critical research did not exactly fit in to the goals of the radio research project. While he may have been hopeful at the beginning, stating that:

“If it were possible in terms of critical research to formulate an actual research operation that could be integrated with empirical work, the people involved, the problems treated, and in the end, the actual utility of the work would greatly profit” (Rogers, 1997, p. 283)

For Lazarsfeld, though, the *if* factor is quite large. He refers to critical theory as “speculative” and as contributing little to “fact-finding on constructive suggestions” (Rogers, 1997, p. 284). He attributed critical research with serving a contributory role to empirical research, and that the ideas that come from critical research might have some influence on what empirical research should study. Lazarsfeld, for all intents and purposes, viewed critical theory and research as normative, non-definitional, and without basis for application (Jager, 2004; Witkin, 2003).

The Fallout from the Radio Project

Both Adorno and Lazarsfeld would write about their “collaboration” years later. Given sufficient time to reflect, it is entirely plausible that what we read today is a much scaled-down version of the original conflict. However, as it is what we have to go by, we can only assume that the conclusions these two men draw about their experiences are as close as we may get to understanding radio research in Newark in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s.

Lazarsfeld, for his part, states that he

“never regretted having invited Adorno to join the project, [that] soon after he left, the Horkeheimer group devoted an entire issue of their journal to the problem of modern mass communication, and to this I contributed an essay in which I tried to explain the ‘critical approach’ sympathetically to an American audience...I ended the paper with the following sentences:

[The] Office of Radio Research has cooperated in this issue because it felt that only a vary catholic conception of the task of research can lead to valuable results...if it [critical research] were included in the general stream of communications research, could

contribute much in terms of challenging problems and new concepts useful in the interpretation of known, and in the search for new, data.

However, not all recollections were so genial, in fact, later works by both Adorno and Lazarsfeld seem to keep the debate of empirical versus critical research alive. Adorno, the less tactful of the two, would openly attack empirical research in his essay *Cultural Criticism and Society*. In his critique of empirical research, he states

“Topological thinking, which knows the place of every phenomenon and the essence of none, is secretly related to the paranoid system of delusions which is cut off from experience of the object. With the aid of mechanically functioning categories, the world is divided into black and white and thus made ready for the very domination against which concepts were once conceived” (Adorno, 1981, p. 33).

Lazarsfeld, too, would continue arguing for empirical methodology. His contention that explication of knowledge and terms is necessary for sociologists, and that empirical methodology accomplished this where critical theorists were unable to. His opening statement in his essay *The relevance of methodology* states

“The sociologist is supposed to convert the vast and ever shifting web of social relations into an understandable system of knowledge...their activities centre around the notion of *explication*” (Lazarsfeld, 1993, p. 236).

And as a means of indicating that his problem was not necessarily with Adorno’s traditions, he goes on to quote German C. Hempel, who wrote on the benefits of empirical research.

So the debate between Adorno and Lazarsfeld, and on a bigger scale, between empirical and critical method, was never reconciled, at least for the two great scholars. Adorno would move to California soon after leaving the Radio Project, while Lazarsfeld would move to Columbia to head the Bureau of Applied Social Research. Adorno would be remembered as one of the great minds of the Frankfurt School, and Lazarsfeld would be known best as the founder of research methodology in the field of communication. Both would be most infamously remembered for their inability to work together and meld methodological perspectives, to the detriment of communication study to this day.

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