



## 'Learning from the power of things: labour, civilization and emancipation in Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialectic of Enlightenment'

Stoetzler, Marcel

### Marxism 21

DOI:  
[10.26587/marx.16.2.201905.008](https://doi.org/10.26587/marx.16.2.201905.008)

Published: 18/06/2019

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*  
Stoetzler, M. (2019). 'Learning from the power of things: labour, civilization and emancipation in Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialectic of Enlightenment'. *Marxism 21*, 16(2), 210-235.  
<https://doi.org/10.26587/marx.16.2.201905.008>

#### Hawliau Cyffredinol / General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

#### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

마르크스주의 연구

서평

# Learning from the Power of Things

## Labour, Civilization and Emancipation in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Marcel Stoetzler\*

This article proposes a novel reading of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's emblematic book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*(1947). Horkheimer and Adorno took as their starting point the observation that modern liberal, human and social progress has tipped over into a new form of barbarism but explicitly *refused* to develop it into a rejection of the enlightenment and its values *as such*. Instead, the dialectical view seeks even in the darkest moment of the failure of civilization, which is here epitomized in the Holocaust, reasons to defend a self-reflective, more enlightened form of human civilization. The dialectical theory does not reject but *rearticulates* the idea of progress that remains central to most forms of liberal and socialist theory. One of the central questions is, under what conditions do the instruments of enlightenment and civilization, including scientific and technological rationality, social organisation and general productivity, serve either emancipation or barbarism. Warding off the positivistic attack on any form of metaphysics and utopian thinking, Horkheimer and Adorno emphasised the need for enlightenment to be based on non-empiricist, reality-transcending, critical thinking in order to be in the service of emancipation rather than domination. The human mind atrophies when deprived of its freedom of movement. The more abstract, philosophical argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is developed through several more historically specific materials, one of which is the interpretation of modern antisemitism. Horkheimer and Adorno combine in this context a Marxist analysis of aspects of continuity between liberal and fascist governance, based on the concepts of the commodity-form and the wage-form of modern social relations, with an

---

\* Bangor University, [m.stoetzler@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:m.stoetzler@bangor.ac.uk)

anthropological interpretation of pogroms and genocide as ‘rituals of civilization’. Civilization aims at the liberation of human life from labour but does so by way of organizing and intensifying labour, discipline and identity, generating resentment as well as streamlining and destroying thought. Civilization thus produces furious anger both at those deemed to represent more ‘primitive’ levels of civilization and at those perceived as driving it. Nevertheless, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that enlightenment itself produces the means to overcome its own entrapment. The ‘forces and things’ it produces serve domination but also encourage humans to overcome domination: the reification of the means of domination – knowledge, in particular – mediates, moderates and potentially democratizes power.

Key words: Adorno, alienation, antisemitism, capitalism, civilization, Comte, emancipation, enlightenment, fascism, Horkheimer, Keats, labour, liberalism, magic, Maurras, metaphysics, mimesis, positivism, rationality, reification, socialism, technology

Underneath a surface of granite pessimism, Horkheimer and Adorno’s emblematic book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1987 [1947]) hides elements of a strangely sanguine theory that still wait to be discovered.<sup>1)</sup> In the preface,

---

1) *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* was written between 1941 and 1944 in Los Angeles by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in close cooperation, also involving Gretel Karplus-Adorno, who typed both men’s dictations, and Leo Löwenthal, who contributed to the first three sections of chapter five, ‘Elements of Antisemitism’. Five-hundred mimeographed copies of a first version were informally distributed in 1944 under the title *Philosophical Fragments*. The Amsterdam publisher Querido Verlag, a leading publisher of German-language exile literature, published the book under its final title, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, in 1947. The word ‘enlightenment’ means both the specific eighteenth-century movement of that name and a general notion of incrementally, albeit not linearly, progressing self-consciousness observable throughout human history. The body of the work consists of five chapters and a final section of twen-

Horkheimer and Adorno state that the aim of the book is ‘to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’ (1987: 16). This addresses the dialectic flagged up in the title of the book. The important bit here is the ‘instead of’: the reality of barbarism was undeniable and clearly visible, but the originality of the formulation lies in its implication that humanity could have been expected to enter ‘a truly human state’ sometime earlier in the twentieth century, leaving behind its not-so-human state. The promise of progress towards humanity, held by (most) socialists and (some) liberals, blew up in their faces with a vengeance. It would have been easy and straightforward then to write a book arguing against the holding of such hope, but this would not have been a dialectical book. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* undertakes to rescue this hope by examining why and how progress tipped over into its opposite. Its title references the book’s principal proposition: ‘enlightenment’ contains *both* the seeds of its own destruction *and* the potential of an escape route from that destruction. Horkheimer and Adorno state this unequivocally in the preface: the critique of the enlightenment ‘is intended to prepare a positive concept of

---

ty-four short pieces (‘Notes and Sketches’) that pick up various aspects of the argument. The first chapter of the book is ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’. It is followed by two chapters that are designated as ‘excursus’, or digressions, related to different aspects of the first chapter. The fourth chapter, ‘Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, was also initially intended to be an excursus. The fifth chapter is ‘Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment’. The writing generally refuses the linear logic expected of regular academic philosophy. Instead, each section starts with a fragmentary perspective, explores its contradictions, suddenly comes to a halt and moves on to another fragment to the effect that similar arguments are made from only slightly differing angles using different fragments of empirical or historical material. This unusually open style is related to Horkheimer’s understanding of ‘dialectic’ as the refusal to treat any phenomena in a reductionist manner. Horkheimer developed the dialectical conception of thinking about history and society as a dynamic and contradictory totality in a series of essays in the 1930s.

enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987: 21). Different from most extant interpretations, this article aims at a reading of the book that takes this stated intention at its word and looks for traces of the concept of 'liberated' enlightenment that Horkheimer and Adorno wished to 'prepare', and that is today as urgently needed as at any previous time.

Horkheimer and Adorno looked for a position from which to confront fascism and found that 'in reflecting on its own guilt', thought finds that it lacks a language (1987: 18). This is the book's painful starting point as described in the preface. In the name of what exactly is it possible to challenge fascism effectively? In the languages of sociology, psychology, history, philosophy? The discourses of truth, freedom, human rights? Here is the rub: in the period in which fascism took power these sounded hollow as they had been stripped of their authority. If this sounds familiar, it is because we are, almost a century later, in a not so different situation. Horkheimer and Adorno state that fascist demagogues and liberal intellectuals feed off the same (positivist) zeitgeist, marked by the 'self-destruction of the enlightenment'. Science and scholarship are not potent weapons against fascism anymore, and this even affects tendencies that are opposed to 'official', positivistic science. The basic point here is that scientific, materialist, technological rationality is a force for good only when it is linked to the idealistic notion of general human emancipation, the goal of full rich lives for all without suffering, exploitation and oppression. (Using a word they had good reasons to avoid at the time, this is what Marx would have called 'communism'). Only this link gives empirical and rationalist science its truth and significance: enlightenment needs to be 'transcendental', i.e. something that points beyond the actually existing reality, not unlike metaphysics in traditional philosophy. It needs to be critical, that is, in opposition to reality as it is. The principal thesis of the book is that enlightenment purged itself of this connection to society-transcending,

non-empirical, critical truth, and as early as on the second page of the preface Horkheimer and Adorno name the thinker who exemplifies for them this fatal development: Auguste Comte, the founder of positivist philosophy (1987, 17). They assert that in the hostile and brutal conditions of the eighteenth century - the period often described as that of ‘the Enlightenment’ - philosophy had dared to challenge the ‘infamy’ (as Voltaire called it) of the church and the society it helped maintain, while in the aftermath of the French Revolution philosophy switched sides and put itself at the service of the state. This was of course, by now, the modernising state, but — dialectically speaking — as much a different state as still the same state. They write that the Comtean school of positivism — ‘apologists’ of the modern, capitalist society that emerged in the nineteenth century — ‘usurped’ the succession to the genuine Enlighteners, and reconciled philosophy with the forces it previously had opposed, such as the Catholic church. Horkheimer and Adorno mention in this context the ultra-nationalist organisation *Action Française*, whose chief ideologist Charles Maurras had been an ardent admirer of Comte. This hint helps understand what kind of historical developments they had on their minds: while Comte surely saw himself in good faith as a protagonist of social reform meant to overcome-but-preserve the achievements of the Revolution, and his translation of enlightenment empiricism into the system of ‘positivist philosophy’ as a contribution to the process of modernization, his followers in many ways and to varying degrees contributed to the development of the modern authoritarian state and, as in the case of Maurras, proto-fascism. The elements of these subsequent developments can be found in Comte’s own writings, which makes his ambiguities a suitable illustration of the dialectic of enlightenment.<sup>2)</sup>

---

2) On this see Stoetzler (2014). The *Action Française* is mentioned only in the informally circulated version of the text that was published in 1944, not in the definitive publication of 1947. The 1987 edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Schmid

As elsewhere in Horkheimer and Adorno's writings, there is a lot of polemic against 'positivism' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Mostly the target of their critique is the 'logical positivism' of their own time, but they seem to see the latter as a logical extension or modification of the older Comtean positivism that was a much more ambitious and comprehensive proposition. There is no detailed engagement with Comte but the principal point of attack seems to be Comte's rejection of metaphysics: when the eighteenth-century enlightenment combined empiricism with rationalism, Comte aimed to boil it down to strictly positivist empiricism that observes the 'positively' givens (nowadays better known under their Latin name: *data*) and derives 'laws' from them that can be used to predict and adapt to, perchance slightly tweak, whatever reality has in store for us. The metaphysical ideas that had been useful in bringing down feudalism and the old regime — the likes of freedom, individualism, emancipation — need to be abandoned as they are the playthings of troublemakers, irritants that could endanger the consolidation of the post-revolutionary new order. Positivism in Comte's sense is essentially the scientific basis of governance by experts, while twentieth-century 'logical positivism' is its epistemological complement. When Horkheimer and Adorno attack the latter, they see it as continuous with the former. The attack on metaphysics was a central theme of German philosophy in the 1920s, and helped weaken the defences against fascism across the political spectrum. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the positivistic cult of facts and probabilities has flushed out conceptual thinking, and as humans generally have a need to explain to themselves conceptually why they should actually do something, or resist doing something that society expects them to do, the denunciation and elimination of concepts as 'metaphysical' promotes a fatalistic going-with-the-flow: the 'blocking of the theoretical imagination

---

Noerr provides the variants in the footnotes.

has paved the way for political delusion’, which in the context meant fascism (1987: 18).

At the same time, though, many contemporaries argued for the reconstruction of some kind of metaphysical system, be it theological, neo-Platonic or neo-Aristotelian. In the context of WWII such philosophical or theological systems would have been attractive as something to hold on to: they can help one to weather the brute modernizing nihilism of the fascist barbarians, and after their defeat provide a handy identity narrative. The easy option of a return to traditional metaphysics was not open, though, to the Frankfurt School theorists who saw themselves *within* the tradition of the radical strand of the Enlightenment. Their main thrust was to attack the latter’s domesticated version, the ‘positivism’ that puts itself and its expertise at the service of domination. Far from writing *against* the Enlightenment, they wanted to restore it to its complex form that contained traces of the transcendental that Comte — quite correctly — saw as trouble. They wanted to be the troublemakers whom the positivists thought they had exorcised from the Enlightenment.

As Horkheimer and Adorno state, the ‘self-destruction of enlightenment’ frustrated the writing of the book they initially had in mind — a monograph on the role of dialectical logic in a variety of academic disciplines — but came to provide the principal subject matter of the book they wrote instead. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* asserts that ‘thinking that aims at enlightenment’ is inseparably linked to freedom in society, but admits that enlightenment also ‘already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today’ (18). Theirs is the project of an enlightenment mindful of its contradictions, as opposed to a smug and arrogant one that happily and expertly lectures the unwashed and the unenlightened.

Its precariousness and fragility are expressed strikingly on the very last pages of the book, in the last of the twenty-four ‘Notes and Sketches’, titled



‘On the genesis of stupidity’ (288-290). This short text begins with an arresting image: ‘The emblem of intelligence is the antenna of the snail’ (288). Horkheimer and Adorno do not provide any reference in support of this claim, but one could think for example of a famous letter by Keats that mentions the ‘trembling and delicate snail-horn perception of beauty’.<sup>3)</sup> The antenna, or horn, of the snail represents the good kind of enlightenment we should aspire to: trembling and delicate, as in Keats. Horkheimer and Adorno use the image, though, to make an anthropological argument about the emergence of intelligence: Meeting an obstacle, the antenna is immediately withdrawn into the protection of the body, it becomes one with the whole until it ventures forth again only timidly as an independent organ. If the danger is still present, it disappears once more, and the intervals between the attempts grow longer (288).

They argue here that the development of human mental life is precariously physical and depends on the freedom to exercise the organs of perception. Evolution only takes place when ‘antennae were once stretched out in new directions and not repulsed’. Stupidity, by contrast, ‘is a scar’: ‘Every partial stupidity in a human being marks a spot where the awakening play of muscles has been inhibited instead of fostered’ (289). Switching to a psychoanalytical argument, Horkheimer and Adorno write that the inhibition leads

---

3) Horkheimer and Adorno quote from Goethe’s *Faust* (Part 1, line 4068), where Mephistopheles talks about the ‘fumbling face’ of a snail. Closer in meaning to how they use the image is, though, a formulation by John Keats who wrote about “that trembling and delicate snail-horn perception of beauty” in a letter from 1818 (letter to Haydon, April 8, 1818 [<http://keats-poems.com/to-benjamin-robert-haydon-teignmouth-april-8-1818/>]). In another letter, Keats quotes a passage from Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* that conveys exactly what Horkheimer and Adorno say here: “As the snail, whose tender horns being hit,/ Shrinks back into his shelly cave with pain/ And there all smothered up in shade doth sit,/ Long after fearing to put forth again...” (*Venus and Adonis*, verse 175 [<https://englishhistory.net/keats/letters/j-h-reynolds-22-november-1817/>; <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/Poetry/VenusAndAdonis.html>]).

to automatized repetitions of the aborted attempt, such as in neurotic repetitions of a ‘defence reaction which has already proved futile’, and ultimately produces a numb spot where the scar is, a deformation. All the deformations we accumulate during individual and species evolution translate into well-adapted, functioning ‘characters’, stupidity, impotence or spiteful fanaticism, or any combination. They are so many monuments to arrested hope. This is how the book ends: it is implied that the answer to stupidity, including those of fascism and antisemitism, but also their contemporary second cousins such as ‘post-truth’, resentment-driven politics from Hindutva to Brexit, those myriads of irrational particularisms that gang up on particulars and individuals, ultimately can be defeated only by more freedom of movement for our antennas and other muscles, and the production of fewer scars on our various tissues.

## Antisemitism and civilization

‘The genesis of stupidity’ could also be understood as an alternative take on the general theme of the book. The one ‘stupidity’ that receives the most detailed treatment in the book is antisemitism. The fifth chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ‘Elements of antisemitism. Limits of Enlightenment’, is the most complex text ever written on this particular subject. Like the book as a whole, it intermeshes the critique of the present — capitalist modernity — with the much grander theme of the critique of human civilization. Horkheimer and Adorno do not in fact say a lot about antisemitism in the perspective of the capitalist *present*: most points on this are made on the first few pages of the chapter. Unsuspecting liberal readers must have experienced these like a slap in the face, though: the argument emphasizes the continuity between liberal and fascist governance and the responsibility of the

bourgeoisie. First of all, liberals and the representatives of the ‘democratic-popular movements’ had always been lukewarm at best about the equality of Jews who seemed less than totally assimilated. Fascism is then described as the modern bourgeoisie’s move towards ‘regression to naked domination’, whereby the liberal notion of the ‘harmony of society’ (the harmonious give-and-take of a market-based society) morphed into a *Volksgemeinschaft*, i.e. the nation that declares itself to be ‘race’ (198-199). Fascism openly reveals and celebrates what had been the essence of society anyway: violence that distorts human beings. Those who had embraced the more idealistic aspects of liberalism only made themselves more helpless when they had to face up to its unvarnished reality: these were nice ideals to have, but potentially self-defeating in practice. This analysis was seriously out of step with the emergent intellectual life of a post-fascist Germany that hoped simply to return to its previous liberal and democratic better self, as if the latter’s total collapse had just been an unfortunate accident.

Although probably the best-known part of the argument, the critique of liberalism and the bourgeoisie is only a minor point here, though: for Marxists it was hardly shocking news that liberalism can morph into fascism, usually fails to put up much of a defence against it, and that the ruling class will encourage the subalterns to embrace any kind of vicious and violent ideology if they deem it useful to maintain their grip on power. These were part of the necessary but not sufficient *preconditions* for the emergence of the exterminatory antisemitism of the Nazis. These points on their own were not sufficient to explain a pogrom, and certainly not the Holocaust. This is the point at which Horkheimer and Adorno shift their argument from ‘modern bourgeois society’ to ‘human civilization’ as the framework of explanation: the antisemitic pogrom is described as ‘a luxury’ (given that the material gain for the immediate perpetrators usually was slim) and ‘a ritual of civilization’ (200). With ‘ritual’ and ‘civilization’ the argument enters the

territory of anthropology. The point here is that the dynamic of contemporary capitalist society mobilizes forces that can be described and understood only with the help of categories of more historical depth than those of capitalist society itself. This does not, though, mean a turn away from the language of Marxism: ‘civilization’ and ‘society’ are not alternative objects of study – the point is that either dimension can be understood only through the other. Human civilization exists in the present only *in the form of* capitalist society; capitalist society is nothing other than human civilization in its current form.<sup>4)</sup>

The core of the argument relating to modern society is derived directly from Marx’s critique of political economy: capitalist society maintains the ‘socially necessary illusion’ that the wage-relationship is (in principle, or potentially) ‘fair’, i.e. an exchange of equivalent values: *this much* labour-power for *this much* money. Nevertheless, social inequality is an only too obvious reality. To the untrained eye, inequality seems to be brought about in the sphere of circulation (as opposed to the sphere of production), say, at the supermarket till where it becomes manifest how much produce one’s wages will buy. Marx argues that the apparent fairness of the wage relationship itself presupposes exploitation that is expressed as the difference between the ‘exchange value’ of labour power (represented by the wage) and its ‘use-value’ (represented by the product that it produced): the product produced by X amount of labour power must be higher than the wage paid for it because this is where the profit for the capitalist comes from. Admittedly this

---

4) The relationship between these two concepts can be conceived in a way similar to that between capitalism and patriarchy: they are not different ‘things’ but the former is the contemporary form of appearance of the latter, while the latter is undergirding the former. Here, too, the strategic hope of progressives is that capitalist modernity impacts and transforms its substratum, patriarchal civilization, so thoroughly that it allows for the emergence of the post-capitalist non-patriarchy we would like to see.

explanation — one of the centrepieces of Marxist theory — flies in the face of ‘common sense’ everyday consciousness where the notion of ‘a fair wage’ reigns supreme — not least because we tend to invoke the ideology of ‘fairness’ when we engage in a wage struggle. (When in an industrial dispute we ask for more than what is deemed ‘fair’ we are called ‘greedy’, which implies immorality, and forfeit the sympathy of ‘the public’.) Capitalist common sense, including the ideology of ‘fairness’, produces thus the need for another explanation for inequality and exploitation, and helpfully the capitalist exploiters, ‘masquerading as producers’, shout ‘thief!’ and point at ‘the merchants’ and other representatives of the sphere of circulation. This line of argument, up to this point, has of course nothing in itself to do with anti-semitism: in developed capitalism, the exploitative character of the mode of production tends to be deflected onto (real or imagined) agents of circulation, and many forms of (supposed) ‘anti-capitalism’ reflect this. As Horkheimer and Adorno put it, ‘the merchant is the bailiff of the whole system and takes the hatred for the other [exploiters] upon himself’.<sup>5)</sup> Which category of people is cast as this particular type of scapegoat is entirely dependent on historical context; in Christian Europe, this mechanism of capitalist-anticapitalist ideology found in ‘the Jews’ an ideal object and thus revived and reinvented, as modern antisemitism, pre-existing traditions of Jew-hatred.<sup>6)</sup>

---

5) This aspect of antisemitism can be understood as a particular version of what later came to be known more generically as ‘middleman minority’ hostility. Bonacich notes that ‘the Jews in Europe’ are ‘perhaps the epitome of the form’ and mentions as other examples ‘the Chinese in Southeast Asia, Asians in East Africa, Armenians in Turkey, Syrians in West Africa, Parsis in India, Japanese and Greeks in the United States’ and others (Bonacich, 1973: 583).

6) Modern antisemitism was exported all over the world in the hand luggage of imperialism and on arrival, somewhat ironically, sometimes became an element of what could be called the ‘anti-imperialism of fools’.

This, the Marxist theory of antisemitism, is contained in very condensed form on some of the first pages of ‘Elements of antisemitism’. Taken on its own, this theory only explains antisemitism as a set of ideas, a particular misguided way of thinking about capitalism. Insofar as these ideas are quite fixed, they form an attitude or a mental pattern. Ideas and attitudes alone do not make anyone *act*, though, and the monstrous antisemitic acts of the Holocaust need several more layers of explanation. Nazi antisemitism mobilized a deep-seated force that turned antisemitism into an irrational obsession, even though often executed with rational deliberation, that far surpassed the misguided social protest as which it may have started in most individuals: the delusion of a moral duty to save the world by identifying, chasing and killing Jews wherever they are, at whatever price. One of the ideas with which Horkheimer and Adorno respond to this theoretical need is that of the pogrom as a ‘ritual of civilization’ (200). Antisemitism as described above gave form and direction to the murderous obsession — it pointed to who the victims should be and why they deserved what they got — but it did not in fact *cause* it. Ideas can trigger, guide and justify, but do not cause actions. The dynamism of the action itself needs a deeper-level explanation that sits at the level of civilizational or anthropological theory — the dialectical theory of rationality that is the central theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This distinction is important because it has crucial practical implications: even the smartest rational explanations do not usually help much with antisemites ‘because rationality as entangled with domination is itself at the root of the malady’. If antisemitism and other maladies are in fact phobias against rationality, rationality will not suffice as a weapon against them. Only reflection on the entanglement itself would help: is there perhaps good reason to be suspicious of reason? With this question, ‘Elements of antisemitism’ feeds back into the general theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

In the philosophical tradition that Horkheimer and Adorno come from and that includes Hegel and Marx, 'reason' is not a value-neutral concept. What is reasonable is not simply 'whatever works' (efficiently, instrumentally) but whatever serves human emancipation and autonomy. Rationality understood in this way has an element of transcendence — some kind of going-beyond the bad reality as it exists — that is not entirely different from that found in religion. Indeed Horkheimer and Adorno write that before it was reduced to being a cultural artefact — an aspect of a society's way of life, something that society's administrators consider useful for holding society together — religion contained both, truth and deception (206). The truth of religion had been the longing for redemption, and this truth lived on in philosophical idealism. Positivism, in turn, exorcized the longing from philosophy and reduced truth one-dimensionally to the depiction of the world as it actually — presumably — is. Spirit, enlightenment, civilization became dispirited. Enlightenment minus the spirit of longing — utopia, the ability to imagine something better — becomes a self-hating and self-destructing enlightenment.

## Labour and civilization, mimesis and magic

Whereas civilization and enlightenment are defined as the continuous effort of humanity to *escape* the dull circularity of reproduction and self-preservation, in reality its efforts increasingly went into *perfecting* humanity's means of reproduction and self-preservation (in other words: labour; the economy). In order to free ourselves from having to work a lot, humanity had to work a lot so as to develop the means of production (knowledge, experience, science, technology, social organisation) which are indeed an important part of what we commonly call 'civilization'. Horkheimer and

Adorno's basic point is quite simple: far from rejecting civilization, we have to rebalance it as it has become an end in itself. Humanity has developed civilization, productivity, technology, society in order to spend more time lazing about on the beach, and after all we went through, humanity is more than entitled now to cash in the chips. The reality of the *dialectic* of enlightenment is, though, that the closer we actually come to leading the life of Riley the further it seems out of reach, and chances are that by the time we sort this out beaches may be no more.

In 'Elements of antisemitism', Horkheimer and Adorno focus on one particular aspect of this dialectic: the idea that modern civilization develops a destructive fury against the 'anachronistic' remnants of its own initial stages, including mimesis and magic. Mimesis is the effort of a living creature to mimic its natural environment as a survival strategy and is discussed by anthropologists as one of the oldest aspects of human civilization: humans try to pacify a dangerous animal by 'being' that animal in a ritual dance, for example. Horkheimer and Adorno discuss this as the beginning of the process of enlightenment: we mimic nature to escape its domination (210-216). Similarly, sacrificing an animal in order to make the gods grant rainfall or success in warfare is a form of barter, i.e. an early form of rationality, especially as the clever humans hope the deal will have them receive something much more valuable than what they sacrifice. It is not difficult to recognize some of our own supposedly 'modern' behaviour in those supposedly 'primitive' practices. One of the key arguments in 'Elements of antisemitism' is that every time civilization progresses from one stage to the next, it comes to hate everything that recalls the previous stage: in a very general sense, the 'civilized' hate (and exterminate) the 'savages' because the latter remind the former that they are but one step ahead, and that it would not take much to regress into the more 'primitive' state (witness Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*). Perhaps we even have a secret desire to



go back to being ‘savages’: after all, the life of a hunter-gatherer might well be preferable to the average office job. Because the civilized paid a high price to get this far, they fortify themselves against the threat of regression. Many aspects of racism can be related to this. Antisemites like to shudder in fear of supposed Jewish superiority and secret world domination, but at the same time antisemitism shares with other forms of racism the projection of aspects of ‘savagery’ onto ‘the Jews’. The most obvious case is their accusation of ritual murder, but there are other things that antisemites assert they find unpleasant or disgusting about ‘the Jews’, and many of these are, in a sense, ‘primitive’: energetic gesticulating, which is often seen as somehow ‘typically Jewish’, is a form of mimetic behaviour as the physical movement paints a picture of an emotional state (213). The big noses ‘the Jews’ supposedly have point to a more primitive stage of development where the sense of smell was still more important than the other senses (whereas in modernity smell, as well as being smelly, is tabooed; against all scientific evidence, in bourgeois society smelling of garlic is not the signature of a healthy diet but of cultural backwardness). Horkheimer and Adorno point to a bitter irony here: not only was the religion of Judaism in fact very much driven by the overcoming of magic and mimesis (such as in the ban on images), it is the antisemites who indulge in echoes of magic and mimesis in their love of rituals, sacrifices, formulas and uniforms. The prosecution and destruction of those accused of mimetic, primitive behaviour provides the supposedly civilized with a splendid opportunity to indulge in lots of mimetic and primitive behaviour (214).

The principal argument, though, is that the latest stage of the process of civilization is marked by the destruction of the capability of thinking itself: highly advanced stupidity. In prehistory, people’s encounters with animals not noted for carefully pondering the pros and cons of eating humans required equally unhesitating decisions: shoot the poisoned arrow or run fast.

No time for dialectics here (53). Civilization decimated troublesome animals and other immediate threats and was thus free to create institutions of mediation that slowed things down and made space for the new activities of judging and reasoning. Late-industrial society, though, has brought about ‘a regression to judgment without judging’: legal process is made short work of in kangaroo courts, cognition is emptied of active reflection and likes to jump to conclusions, and thinking as a specialized profession becomes a luxury that ‘must not be tempted ... to draw any awkward conclusions’ (233).

## Learning from the power of things

Nevertheless, the very last sentence of ‘Elements of antisemitism’ — and therewith the last sentence of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, apart from the ‘Notes and Sketches’ — is guardedly optimistic: ‘Enlightenment itself, having come into its own and thereby turning into a force, could break through the limits of enlightenment’ (1987: 238). The grounds for this surprisingly hopeful turn are laid out in the concluding pages of the first chapter, ‘The concept of enlightenment’, which contains the book’s core argument. Here, in particular in the concluding three paragraphs of the chapter (1987: 60-66), Horkheimer and Adorno assert in the purest, most idealistic spirit of the Enlightenment that thinking is, after all, ‘the servant whom the master cannot control at will’ (60). Even though enlightenment serves domination, it is bound to turn *against* domination sooner or later. The bringer of hope is here, rather unexpectedly, the very thing that tends to figure as evil incarnate in most forms of ‘critique of civilization’ on the left as on the right: *reification*.

The argument centres here on the observation that domination has

‘reified’ itself (which means, made itself into a series of things) by taking on the forms of law and organisation, and in the process limited itself. These instruments ‘mediate’ domination, that is, they organize and actualize but also moderate exploitation which through mediation loses its immediacy: ‘The moment of rationality in domination also asserts itself as something different from [domination]’ (60). The object-like quality of the means of domination — language, weapons, machines, thought — makes these means universally available for everyone, including those resisting or fighting domination. Also this is, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument, part of the dialectic of enlightenment: although in the capitalist present, thought may become mechanical, and today’s machines mutilate their operators, ‘in the form of machines ... alienated reason moves toward a society which reconciles thought ... with the liberated living beings’ (60). *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appears here, on closer reading, to have anticipated some of the emphatic optimism that decades later accompanied the discussions of the internet as somehow intrinsically communistic, as in the enthusiastic discussions around shareware for example, and more recent suggestions that the latest round of technological innovation will abolish most capitalist labour and force humanity to advance to a truly human society — unless, though, it first regresses to the barbarism of a neo-feudal or neo-caste system.

Horkheimer and Adorno assert that although industrial capitalism means the disempowerment of the workers, this is not, as it were, set in stone (1987: 60). The element that would empower the workers to end domination is, in sturdy idealist fashion, their ability to think. The human capacity to think is not *necessarily* subservient to power, quite to the contrary: the master’s tools are in fact needed to undo the master’s house. Horkheimer and Adorno celebrate here the positive upshots of reification and alienation: they argue not only that the instruments (guns, etc.) *can* be turned around but that their object-like, thing-like character *asks* for it. It is in this sense that prog-

ress, *by way of* being the progress of domination, is also the progress of the negation of domination — which is, of course, just what the phrase ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ means. It is here a surprisingly optimistic concept. In the capitalist present, thought may have lost its self-reflexivity and today’s machines may mutilate their operators, but ‘in the form of machines… alienated reason moves towards a society which reconciles thought [in its reified forms, namely material and intellectual apparatuses]… with the liberated living beings’ (1987: 60-61). It is important to note that emancipatory hope lies not in the actuality of thought in bourgeois society (and likewise, the actuality of machines and other things) but the ability to have thoughts (and to translate science into machines) *as such*. The overall argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* makes abundantly clear that the actuality of thought in bourgeois society — the double monarchy of positivism and the wrong, namely authoritarian, kind of metaphysics — in fact thwarts the possibilities of thought. Nevertheless, in spite of it all, enlightenment has not lost its innate emancipatory potential which is grounded objectively in the nature of thought.

Unsurprisingly, Horkheimer and Adorno instantly pour cold water on the hints of optimism in this account of reification by pointing out how ‘the rulers’ react to the objective openness of the historical situation: smelling the rat, ‘the rulers’ denounce reason itself as ideology, which brings the discussion back to one of the book’s leitmotifs, the attack on (Comtean as well as ‘logical’) positivism. The ruling ‘cliques’ (fascist, proto-fascist, quasi-fascist, and now post-fascist) have abandoned rationalist justifications of their ‘misdeeds’ and use instead the rhetoric of intuitions, mission and destiny, posturing ‘as the engineers of world history’ (1987: 61). Horkheimer and Adorno conclude this paragraph with a reflection on productivity, power and class in contemporary capitalism:

Now that the livelihood of those still needed to operate the machines can be produced with a minimal part of the labour time which the masters of society have at their disposal, the superfluous...mass of the population...are drilled as additional guards of the system, so that they can be used today and tomorrow as material for its grand designs...Misery as the antithesis of power and impotence is growing immeasurably, in tandem with the capacity permanently to abolish any misery (1987: 61-62).

Thinking about thinking is central to critical theory that constitutes an exercise in self-reflection: enlightenment's enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno state sarcastically that 'the reason of the reasonable society' is not in fact reasonable (it is so only in the sense in which the father orders his children 'to be reasonable, or else'). The good news is that this system's inevitability is only an illusion; the bad news is that thinking that is societally constituted 'as an instrument of domination' cannot dissolve this illusion (1987: 62). There is no such thing as a type of *in itself* emancipatory thinking. Horkheimer and Adorno's argument is rather that the nature of thinking *as such* points beyond its own social-historical constitution and the limitations that it brings. Thinking cannot escape the entanglement that keeps it 'ensnared in prehistory' (the struggle for self-preservation), but at least it can understand that we escaped nature only by means of being very much like nature. We have not yet transcended nature, and in this sense we are not human — humane — yet, and we know it somehow, due to the relentlessness of thinking itself: unstoppably consistent thinking, thinking about itself, relentless in this respect like nature, cannot stop short of recognizing, and then challenging, its own nature-like character. Thinking produces a kind of overflow that enables it to reflect on itself. Its steady trickle is the basis of humanity's hope for emancipation. Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of dialectics precludes any attempt to separate the good bits of enlighten-

ment from the bad bits, though: enlightenment is emancipatory and liberating only *through* its instrumental and dominating aspects, that is, its reification.

Hope lies in the fact that thought may be a product of society but is still not entirely reduced to its social function: ‘...true praxis capable of overturning the state of things depends on theory’s intransigence against the comatose state in which society allows thought to ossify’ (65). It seems that those scattered bits of thought that escaped reification — such as critical theory, perhaps, or else literature and art that refuse to be pleasant and amusing — can, by being intransigent, inform ‘true praxis’ that will shake society out of the coma that makes thought ossify. Here Horkheimer and Adorno add an attack on the (then as now) influential conservative ‘critique of civilization’: ‘Fulfilment is not jeopardized by the material preconditions of fulfilment, unfettered technology as such’. The question of technology is not the ‘supreme’ question but the wrong one as ‘the fault lies with a social context that induces delusional blindness [gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang]’. The ‘mythic-scientific respect that people all over the world pay to what the given facts are’ has become ‘a fortress before which even the revolutionary imagination despises itself as utopianism and degenerates to the compliant trust in the objective tendency of history’. Horkheimer and Adorno encourage here ‘the revolutionary imagination’ not to capitulate before the positivistic fetishization of facts: ‘The spirit of a theory that is intransigently formulated in this perspective might be able to turn around that of merciless progress when it has run its course’ (1987: 65).

In the last paragraph of ‘The concept of Enlightenment’ Horkheimer and Adorno are explicit about the source of their optimism: they state that ‘the bourgeois economy’ has multiplied *Gewalt* (a German word that means violence, power, force and/or domination) ‘through the mediation of the market’, but in the same process has also ‘multiplied its things and forces

[Kräfte] to such an extent that their administration no longer requires kings, nor even the bourgeois themselves: it only needs all. They learn from the power [Macht] of things finally to forgo domination [Macht]' (1987: 66). This sentence, written in the midst of WWII and the Holocaust, is nothing less than astonishing: in spite of seemingly overwhelming darkness, we can learn from the reified forms of enlightenment — the stuff of civilization: knowledge, science, technology, social-organisational forms — that we can abolish the domination to which the enlightenment has been wedded for several tens of thousands of years. Nevertheless, 'it only needs all' must be the understatement of the century.

On close reading, and considering the historical context, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is much more 'Mountain Hut Halfway House' than 'Grand Hotel Abyss', where Georg Lukács famously lodged the Frankfurt School in the 1962 preface to his *Theory of the Novel* (Lukács, 1971: 22). Francis Bacon's early-enlightenment utopia that 'we should command nature in action' (quoted in Horkheimer and Adorno 1987, 26) has revealed itself as the nightmarish domination of nature, human and non-human, within society as much as without. In the process, though, human knowledge has increased so much that it can finally begin to dissolve domination for good.

Unsurprisingly, the optimism of this account of what humanity can achieve is dampened in the last sentence of 'The concept of enlightenment' that points forward to the discussion of 'culture industry' in the fourth chapter: 'But in face of this possibility enlightenment, in the service of the present, is turning itself into total deception of the masses' (1987: 66). Horkheimer and Adorno assert that 'the increase in economic productivity... creates the conditions for a more just world', which is an orthodox Marxian perspective as much as that of liberal modernization theory. What the liberals tend to emphasize much less is that progress in productivity at the same time tremendously increases the social power of those who control production.

Individuals are better provided for than ever before, but they ‘vanish before the apparatus they serve’ (20). This state of things is completed by ‘the flashy and noisy propagation of spirit [der gleißnerischen Verbreitung des Geistes]’: while spirit’s true concern is the ‘negation of reification’ (20), the spread of reified spirit — i.e. culture in the form of things and commodities: *Kulturgut* — kills off spirit and with it the hope for the better state of things. ‘The flood of precise information and brand-new amusements makes people smarter and more stupid at once’ (20), which is of course a statement nowadays agreed upon by any number of commentators on mobile phone-based information technology. Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize, though, that their concern is not the same as that of the conservative *Kulturkritiker*, the ‘critics of civilization’ who promote ‘culture as a value’: the ‘selling out of culture’ would not *in itself* be particularly deplorable. The point is that it helps ‘converting the economic achievements into their opposite’ (21). The critique of the reification and self-destruction of spirit is meant to help humanity reap ‘the economic achievements’ of human civilization and its latest incarnation, the capitalist economy: by transcending the latter we can make civilization attractive to all and thus defeat fascism and other delusions. The difficulty hereby is that only the reified forms of spirit can overcome spirit’s reification.

(Received 2019-03-11, Revised 2019-04-17, Accepted 2019-05-07)



## □ References

- Bonacich, Edna. 1973. "A theory of middleman minorities." *American Sociological Review*, 38, pp.583-594.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. 1953[1808-1832]. *Faust. Der Tragödie erster und zweiter Teil*. Stuttgart: Kröner.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. 1987. *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*. In: Horkheimer, Max, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 5: Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940-1950*. Herausgegeben von Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, pp.11~290.
- Keats, John. 1818. Brief an Haydon, 8. April 1818 [<http://keats-poems.com/to-benjamin-robert-haydon-teignmouth-april-8-1818/>]. (viewed 15.1. 2019)
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1818. Brief an John Hamilton Reynolds, 22. November 1817 [<https://englishhistory.net/keats/letters/j-h-reynolds-22-november-1817/>] (viewed 15.1. 2019).
- Lukács, Georg. 1971. *The Theory of the Novel*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 1593. *Venus and Adonis*. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/Poetry/VenusAndAdonis.html> (viewed 15.1. 2019).
- Stoetzler, Marcel(ed.). 2014. *Antisemitism and the Constitution of Sociology*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2014. 'Sociology's Case for a Well-tempered Modernity. Individualism, Capitalism, and the Antisemitic Challenge', in Marcel Stoetzler(ed.), *Antisemitism and the Constitution of Sociology*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, pp.66-89.

## □ 국문초록

### 사물의 권력에서 배우기: 호르크하이머와 아도르노의 『계몽의 변증법』에서의 노동, 문명 그리고 해방

마르셀 스토엣즐러

이 글은 막스 호르크하이머와 테오도어 아도르노의 대표적인 저서 『계몽의 변증법』(1947)에 대한 새로운 독해를 제안한다. 호르크하이머와 아도르노는 근대의 자유주의적, 인간적, 사회적 진보가 새로운 형태의 야만주의로 넘어갔다는 관찰을 출발점으로 삼았지만, 이를 계몽주의와 그 가치에 대한, 보통 말하는 그런 거부로 발전시키는 것은 명백히 거부했다. 그 대신에 변증법적 관점은 문명이 실패하는 가장 어두운 순간, 홀로코스트에서 전형적으로 보이는 순간에서조차도 인류문명의 자기반성적이고 더욱 계몽된 형태를 방어해야 할 이유를 찾으려 시도한다. 변증법적 이론은 자유주의 및 사회주의 이론의 대부분에서 중심적인 것으로 남아 있는 진보라는 아이디어를 거부하지 않고 재정립한다. 중심적인 질문 중 하나는 어떠한 조건하에서 과학적·기술적 이성과 사회적 조직 및 일반적 생산성을 포함하는 계몽주의와 문명의 도구들이 해방 또는 야만주의 어느 하나에 복무하는가이다. 어떠한 형태의 형이상학과 유토피아적 사고에 대한 실증주의적 공격을 피하면서, 호르크하이머와 아도르노는 지배보다는 해방을 위해 비경험적인, 현실을 초월하는, 비판적인 사고에 기초한 계몽주의의 필요성을 강조했다. 인간의 정신은 운동(movement)의 자유가 박탈되었을 때 위축된다. 『계몽의 변증법』의 더 추상적이고 철학적인 논증은 몇몇 더 역사적으로 구체적인 소재를 통해 발전하는데, 그중 하나는 근대의 반유대주의에 관한 해석이다. 호르크하이머와 아도르노는 이러한 맥락에서, 근대 사회관계의 상품 형태와 임금 형태 개념에 기초해 자유주의와 파시스트적 거버넌스 사이의 연속성 측면을 다룬 마르크스주의적 분석과 포그롬(pogrom) 및 제노사이드(genocide)를 ‘문명의 의례(rituals)’로 보는 인류학적 해석을 결합시킨다. 문명은 노동으로부터 인간 삶의 해방을 목표로 하지만, 이는 노동, 규율, 정체성을 조직하고 강화시키는 방법, 사고를 간소화시키고 파괴시키는 방법뿐만 아니라 분노를 일으키는 방법을 통해서 이루어진다. 따라서 문명은 더 ‘원시적인’ 문명 단계를 대표하는 것으로 여겨지는 사람들과 문명을 추진하는 것으로 여겨지는

사람들 모두에게서 맹렬한 분노를 생산한다. 그럼에도 호르크하이마와 아도르노는 계몽주의 그 자체가 스스로의 함정을 극복할 수단을 생산한다고 주장한다. 계몽주의가 생산하는 ‘힘과 사물’은 지배관계를 제공할 뿐만 아니라 인간이 지배관계를 극복할 수 있도록 고무한다. 지배수단(특히 지식)의 물화는 권력을 조정하고, 완화시키며, 잠재적으로는 민주화시킨다.

주요 용어: 아도르노, 소외, 반유대주의, 자본주의, 문명, 오귀스트 콩트, 해방, 계몽주의, 파시즘, 호르크하이머, 존 키츠, 노동, 자유주의, 마술, 샤를 모라스, 형이상학, 미메시스, 실증주의, 이성, 물화, 사회주의, 기술