

Horkheimer and Adorno 2

Culture industry

ADORNO

Theodor W. Adorno was one of the most important philosophers and social critics in Germany after World War II.

Adorno left Germany in the spring of 1934. During the Nazi era he resided in Oxford, New York City, and southern California. There he wrote several books for which he later became famous, including *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer), *Philosophy of New Music*, *The Authoritarian Personality* (a collaborative project), and *Minima Moralia*. From these years come his provocative critiques of mass culture and the culture industry.

Long before “postmodernism” became fashionable, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote one of the most searching critiques of modernity to have emerged among progressive European intellectuals. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a product of their wartime exile. It first appeared as a mimeograph titled *Philosophical Fragments* in 1944.

Their book opens with a grim assessment of the modern West: “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth radiates under the sign of disaster triumphant”

How can the progress of modern science and medicine and industry promise to liberate people from ignorance, disease, and brutal, mind-numbing work, yet help create a world where people willingly swallow fascist ideology, knowingly practice deliberate genocide, and energetically develop lethal weapons of mass destruction? Reason, they answer, has become irrational.

Although they cite Francis Bacon as a leading spokesman for an instrumentalized reason that becomes irrational, Horkheimer and Adorno do not think that modern science and scientism are the sole culprits. The tendency of rational progress to become irrational regress arises much earlier. Indeed, they cite both the Hebrew scriptures and Greek philosophers as contributing to regressive tendencies. If Horkheimer and Adorno are right, then a critique of modernity must also be a critique of premodernity, and a turn toward the postmodern cannot simply be a return to the premodern. Otherwise the failures of modernity will continue in a new guise under contemporary conditions. Society as a whole needs to be transformed.

Horkheimer and Adorno believe that society and culture form a historical totality, such that the pursuit of freedom in society is inseparable from the pursuit of enlightenment in culture.

There is a flip side to this: a lack or loss of freedom in society—in the political, economic, and legal structures within which we live—signals a concomitant failure in cultural enlightenment—in philosophy, the arts, religion, and the like. The Nazi death camps are not an aberration, nor are mindless studio movies innocent entertainment. Both indicate that something fundamental has gone wrong in the modern West.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the source of today's disaster is a pattern of blind domination, domination in a triple sense: the domination of nature by human beings, the domination of nature within human beings, and, in both of these forms of domination, the domination of some human beings by others. What motivates such triple domination is an irrational fear of the unknown: "Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized"

Contrary to some interpretations, Horkheimer and Adorno do not reject the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Nor do they provide a negative "metanarrative" of universal historical decline. Rather, through a highly unusual combination of philosophical argument, sociological reflection, and literary and cultural commentary, they construct a "double perspective" on the modern West as a historical formation

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Adorno's Critique

- Part of Critical Models: Interventions and catchwords.
- Some of the Major points
 - Critique is essential to all democracy. Not only does Democracy require the freedom to criticise and need critical impulses, Democracy is nothing less than defined by Critique.
 - Democracy is a system of checks and balances. Separation of power is the major idea behind it.
 - Politically mature is the person who speaks for himself, because he has thought for himself and is not merely repeating someone else; he stands free of any guardian. This is demonstrated in the power to resist established opinions and one and the same, also to resist existing institutions, to resist everything that is merely posited, that justifies itself with its existence.
 - Such resistance, as the ability to distinguish between what is known and what is accepted merely by convention or under the constraint of authority, is one with critique, whose concept indeed comes from the Greek *krino*, "to decide."
 - Whoever relies on the limited activity of one's own understanding Hegel calls, using a political epithet, *Raisonneur* (a person who offers reason; in literature a person who elucidates an author's point of view) [carper, arguer] and accuses of vanity because he does not reflect on his own finitude, is Incapable of subordinating himself to something higher, the totality. However, for Hegel this higher thing is the present conditions.
 - Looks into Germany's political condition and highlights the lack of any bourgeois movement/ reformation/ movement - "Full-fledged bourgeois emancipation was not successful in Germany, or only in a historical period in which its pre-requisite, the liberalism of diffused free enterprise, was already undermined. Likewise the unification into a nation-state—which in many other countries was attained parallel to the strengthening of the bourgeoisie—limped behind history and became a short intermezzo."

This might be one of the reasons of Germany not attaining a strong "democratic will formation."

- This according to Adorno has led to various problems and along with the economic and straightforward societal problems, the refrain towards critique has also been formed. To quote Adorno -

"One such vestigial pattern of behavior is the mistrust of critique and the inclination to throttle it under some pretense or other. "

- The fact that Goebbels could degrade the concept of critic into that of criticaster, could maliciously associate it with the concept of the grumbler, and wanted to prohibit the criticism of all art was not only meant to take independent intellectual impulses in hand. The propagandist was calculating in terms of social psychology.

- So, Adorno also talks about the point of view that only people who own some kind of responsibility or accountability should be allowed to Critique. Responding to this, he says that by saying this "Critique is being departmentalized, as it were. It is being transformed from the human right and human duty of every citizen into a privilege of those who are qualified by virtue of the recognized and protected positions they occupy. Whoever practices critique without having the power to carry through his opinion, and without integrating himself into the official hierarchy, should keep silent— that is the form in which the variation of the cliché about servants' limited powers of understanding returns in the Germany that formally has equal rights."

- The unspoken abrogation of the right to critique for those who have no position makes the privilege of education, especially the career insulated by official examinations, into the authority defining who may criticize, whereas the truth content of critique alone should be that authority. All this is unspoken and not institutionally anchored but so deeply present in the preconscious of innumerable people that it exercises a kind of social control.

- The right to free critique is unilaterally invoked for the good of those who oppose the critical spirit of a democratic society. However, the vigilance that rebels against such misuse requires the strength of public opinion that is still lacking in Germany and that can hardly be produced by mere appeal.

- Essentially German, although once again not so completely as one who has not had the opportunity to observe similar phenomena in other countries might easily suppose, is an anti-critical schema from philosophy—precisely the philosophy that besmirched the Raisonneur—that has sunk into blather: the appeal to the positive. One continually finds the word critique, if it is tolerated at all, accompanied by the word constructive. The insinuation is that only someone can practice critique who can propose something better than what is being criticised;

- Those talking about the positive are in agreement with destructive power. The collective compulsion for a positivity that allows its immediate translation into practice has in the meantime gripped precisely those people who believe they stand in the starkest opposition to society. This is not the least way in which their actionism fits so smoothly into society's prevailing trend.

- he quotes Spinoza to offer a solution - "the false once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better."

Source

Critical Models: Interventions and catchwords