

A Reading of *the Dialectic of Enlightenment*

— The Fate of Reason in the Contemporary World —

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I. Introduction

Dialectic of Enlightenment(1947) embarks on a *critical negation* of science, technology and, most of all, self-destructive instrumental reason; it combines a critique of Western civilization and rationality in general with a powerful critique of the contemporary society. Making the 'domination of nature' by human reason under the spell of self-preservation the axis of their analysis, Horkheimer and Adorno interpret the developmental trends of modern societies under the rubric of the 'dialectic of enlightenment', and radicalized the critique of science and enlightenment rationality which have been penetrating into every aspect of contemporary social life. In particular, they pursue a narrative theorization of the origins of the bourgeois spirit, its entanglement with myth, and the dialectical process of enlightenment reason's self-renunciation, which leads at last to fascism and administered neo-capitalism.

As widely known, the *Dialectic* is an odd book. Employing a new style of writing and modes of presentation by juxtaposing heterogeneous subject matters, the book seeks to explode the boundaries of the established academic disciplines to illuminate new problematics and new modes of thought. It relies on material from philosophy, history, cultural studies and contemporary experience in a unique mixture of disciplines and topics.

Not only for this reason but rather for its ambiguous relation to the Enlightenment tradition, the legacy of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has been one of the most controversial issues in the contemporary intellectual discourse.¹⁾ More importantly, the book has in divergent ways provided points of departure to many contemporary thinkers, notably both Habermasian reconstructionists and postmodern deconstructionists or aestheticists. On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno's book evokes a deep feeling of crisis and despair in the face of ever increasing hegemonic dominance of Western rationality. On the other, it lends an impetus to theoretical efforts to confront the dismal diagnosis on the Western culture that the Enlightenment tradition turns into another mythology. In a significant way, the *Dialectic* symbolizes a watershed in the history of modern intellectual development, incorporating the insights from Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Weber into a whole picture of Western civilization. And the influence of the *Dialectic* can be in one way or another detected in almost all corners of the contemporary philosophical discourse.

This paper attempts to illuminate both explicit and implicit themes of the *Dialectic* which, despite the book's fragmentary character, are interrelated in view of the fate of human reason in the contemporary world; and to probe into its ambiguity in light of the prospect of critical theory. Reexamination of the *Dialectic* is of due importance at least in two respects: First, we can find a thread in the *Dialectic* to reach the core of the contemporary intellectual discourse; despite a wide variety of concerns and problematics, in the contemporary philosophical and public discussions we can identify a considerable amount of thrust to deal with the pessimism of the *Dialectic*. Second, with the *Dialectic* we have a test to evaluate the achievement and limitation of the contemporary intellectual endeavors. Which forms of critical theory of society are viable in the contemporary situation? What implications does it have either to radicalize the pessimism of the *Dialectic* or to

1) For useful readings of the *Dialectic*, see Habermas(1982); Jay(1973), pp.253-280; Kellner(1989), pp.83-101; Bronner(1994), pp.80-88; Ingram(1990), pp.48-69; Held(1980), pp.148-174, 401-407.

reconstruct the legacy of the Enlightenment? With these questions in mind, I will first elaborate various but intertwined themes of the *Dialectic*.

II. Themes of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

The major target of the *Dialectic* is the entire Enlightenment tradition, i.e., the process of allegedly liberating demystification that Max Weber had called *die Entzauberung der Welt*. Here Horkheimer and Adorno follow Lukács's lead in *History and Class Consciousness*, where Weber's notion of rationalization is given a greater critical edge by being connected to the concept of reification. In this spirit the *Dialectic* seeks to discover "why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism" (DoE, p.xi). Admitting the difficulties of interpretation caused by too much trust in the modern consciousness, it nonetheless urges one "to discard even the last vestiges of innocence in regard to the habits and tendencies of the spirit of the age." Horkheimer and Adorno find a crucial symptom of "the indefatigable self-destructiveness of enlightenment" in the fact that science and scientific thought had become increasingly formalist, conformist, instrumental and thus in thrall to the interests of the existing systems of domination: "There is no longer any available form of linguistic expression which has not tended toward accommodation to dominant currents of thought; and what a devalued language does not do automatically is proficiently executed by societal mechanisms" (DoE, p.xii). Indeed, "the self-destruction of the Enlightenment" is not only one of the major themes of their work, but also the dilemma they are forced to face throughout the work.

The notion of the Enlightenment underwent a basic change in the forties: It has been linked to that of domination. While they do not define the concept of domination, Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic* trace the history of domination back to the turning points of Western civilization — from the first chapters of Genesis and Olympian religion, to the culture industry and the totally administered

society. In *Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer says that “this mentality of man as the master [which was the essence of the Enlightenment] can be traced back to the first chapters of Genesis”(Horkheimer 1947, p.104). The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, does not present a systematic reconstruction of history. Systematic philosophies of history tend to impose themselves upon history, and even to legitimize acts of severe brutality.²⁾

Horkheimer and Adorno propose two theses in the first essay “The Concept of Enlightenment”: “myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology”(DoE, p.xvi). In the analysis and interpretation of the relationship between human beings and nature, 'enlightenment' implies a mode of thought which emancipates human beings from the despotism of myth and helps them to control and dominate nature, and the 'dialectic of enlightenment' refers to the ways in which enlightened, rational thought contains traces of myth and irrationality, which in turn contain a rational core. Odysseus and the Marquis de Sade's Juliette become key figures in a process of enlightenment at the self-destructive end of which enlightenment degenerates into mass deception.

The first excursus traces the dialectic of myth and enlightenment in the *Odyssey*, as one of the earliest representative testimonies of Western bourgeois civilization. At the center are the notions of 'sacrifice' and 'renunciation', through which both the difference and the unity of mythic nature and enlightened mastery of nature are explained. The second excursus is concerned with Kant, Sade, and Nietzsche, who mercilessly elicited the implications of the Enlightenment. By examining those thinkers, Horkheimer and Adorno try to show how the submission of everything natural to the autocratic subject finally culminates in the mastery of the blindly objective and natural, which evens out all the antinomies of bourgeois thought, even that of moral rigor and absolute amorality.

Their reading of the *Odyssey*, described as “the basic text of European civilization”(DoE, p.46), is intended to show the interconnections between myth and enlightenment and the emergence of the modern self from the mythic past.

2) Refer to “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History,” DoE, pp.222-5.

Homer's text is read as an allegorical journey in which Odysseus overcomes primitive natural forces and asserts his domination over the mythic/natural world. Odysseus here is presented as a prefiguration of bourgeois individual who reveals the links between self-preservation, the domination of nature, and the entanglement of myth and enlightenment. Odysseus's story also illustrates the price paid for domination over nature and for the emergence of the sovereignty of the self over the totality of being: As Odysseus overcomes the challenges, he is increasingly separated from nature, other humans, and even capacity for pleasure.

Homer's epic had anticipated the major themes of the Enlightenment. One example is the realization that self-denial and renunciation are the price of subjective rationality. In the *Dialectic* asceticism in all of its forms is one of the major targets of criticism:

In class history, the enmity of the self to sacrifice implied a sacrifice of the self, inasmuch as it was paid for by a denial of nature in man for the sake of domination over non-human nature and over other men. This very denial, the nucleus of all civilizing rationality, is the germ cell of a proliferating mythic irrationality: with the denial of nature in man not merely the *telos* of the outward control of nature but the *telos* of man's own life is distorted and befogged... The history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice. In other words: the history of renunciation(DoE, pp.54-55).

The *Odyssey* abounds in clear examples of the inherent relationship between self-renunciation and self-preservation in Western thought: Odysseus's refusal to eat Lotus or the cattle of Hyperion, his sleeping with Circe only after extracting an oath from her not to transform him into a pig, his tying himself to the mast of his ship to avoid seduction by the song of the Sirens. In struggling against the mythic domination of fate, he was forced to deny his oneness with nature and to develop a particularist, subjective rationality to insure his self-preservation. Like Robinson Crusoe, he was an atomized, isolated individual living by his wits in the face of a hostile environment, whose rationality was thus based on trickery and

instrumentality. In this respect, Odysseus was the prototype of modern “economic man.”

Domination of an objectified external nature and a repressed inner nature are the hallmarks of enlightenment. The thesis that reason itself destroys the humanity which it had made possible in the first place is substantiated in the first excursus; the episodes of Odysseus tell of an internalization of sacrifice and the self-imposed renunciation through which the ego gains its own identity and at the same time relinquishes the archaic unity with both inner and outer nature. The process of enlightenment is from the beginning dependent on an impulse of self-preservation, which in turn mutilates reason because it can only make use of it in the form of purposive-rational domination of nature and instinct, i.e., in the form of instrumental reason.

Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize that “the power of control over non-human nature and over other man” was repeatedly paid for by the “denial of nature in man.” With the denial of nature in man, not only the goal of the external conquest of nature, but the goal of man's own individual life is distorted and rendered unintelligible. Man's mastery over himself, which is the basis of his self, means the destruction of the individual as subject, thus negating the very purpose of that mastery. Horkheimer and Adorno say:

As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive — social progress, the intensification of all his material and spiritual powers, even consciousness itself — are nullified, and the enthronement of the means as an end, which under late capitalism is tantamount to open insanity, is already perceptible in the prehistory of subjectivity. . . . Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood, is almost always the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken; for the substance which is dominated, suppressed, and dissolved by virtue of self-preservation is none other than that very life as functions of which the achievements of self-preservation find their sole definition and determination: it is, in fact, what is to be preserved (DoE, pp.54-55).

What is especially disastrous is the effect of the Enlightenment domination of nature on the interactions of men. Totalitarianism is less the repudiation of liberalism and the values of the Enlightenment than the working out of their inherent dynamic. The instrumental manipulation of nature by man lead inevitably to the concomitant relationship among men. The objectification of the world has produced a similar effect in human relations.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, both myth and enlightenment are motivated by attempts to dominate nature.³⁾ In myth, individuals try to gain power over nature and the spirit world through naming, ritual and magic. In science, domination of nature is made possible through discovery of scientific laws in nature. In both cases identity-thinking, mimesis and calculation are methods of control and domination, and both modes of thought are governed by the drive for self-preservation.

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that modern logic has its origins in social practices of substitution, calculation and equivalence. Just as Nietzsche claims that morality is rooted in pain, sacrifice and punishment, so Horkheimer and Adorno propose that substitution, equivalence and interchangeability are rooted in sacrifice(DoE, pp.10ff.). Tribal sacrifices are an attempt to gain power over nature and the efforts to dominate nature manifest an "introversion of sacrifice," a renouncing of one's own instinctual demands for pleasure. Through these processes,

3) Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the first manifestations of enlightenment in Bacon already reveal the project of the domination of nature: "The concordance between the mind of man and the nature of things that he had in mind is patriarchal: the human mind, which overcomes superstition, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature... What men want to know from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive. In face of the present triumph of the factual mentality, even Bacon's nominalist credo would be suspected of a metaphysical bias and come under the same verdict of vanity that he pronounced on scholastic philosophy. Power and knowledge are synonymous(DoE, p.4)." About the nature of Bacon's project, also refer to Leiss(1972), pp.45-71.

“myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them(DoE, p.9).”

While Horkheimer and Adorno withdraw attention from production and labor, they show the ways in which the imperatives and organization of capitalism permeate social life and lead to social domination. They argue that all principles and modes of thought connected with enlightenment reason can be conceptualized as forms of bourgeois ideology: “The system the Enlightenment has in mind is the form of knowledge which copes most proficiently with the facts and supports the individual most effectively in the mastery of nature. Its principles are the principles of self-preservation. Immaturity is the the inability to survive. The burgher, in the successive forms of slaveowner, free entrepreneur, and administrator, is the logical subject of the Enlightenment(DoE, p.83).” In the same vein, Horkheimer and Adorno contend that

For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect... Enlightenment is totalitarian... its ideal is the system from which all and everything follows. Its rationalist and empiricist versions do not part company on that point... Formal logic was the major school of unified science. It provided the Enlightenment thinkers with the schema of the calculability of the world. The mythologizing equation of Ideas with numbers in Plato's last writings expresses the longing of all demythologization: number became the canon of the Enlightenment. The same equations dominate bourgeois justice and commodity exchange(DoE, pp.6-7).

In the second excursus titled “Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality,” Horkheimer and Adorno illustrate the ways in which enlightenment rationality leads logically to fascism. They examine return of repressed nature, the revenge of brutalized nature that culminated in the barbarism of the twentieth century. Here

Horkheimer and Adorno stress the continuity between bourgeois liberalism symbolized by Kant, and totalitarianism prefigured by Sade and, to some extent, Nietzsche. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Kant intensified the critique of religion, morality and metaphysics with his conception of philosophy as a closed rational system, while banishing everything outside system to the irrational, noumenal realm(DoE, pp.81ff.). Kantian reason projects an ideal of a subject who transcends nature and history. The Enlightenment's treatment of nature and man as objects is fundamentally in accord with the extreme formalism of the categorical imperative, despite Kant's injunction to consider man as ends rather than means.

Carried to its logical extreme, instrumental and formal rationality leads to the horrors of twentieth-century barbarism. Marquis de Sade is one of the way-stations along the route. His *Histoire de Juliette* is the model of functional rationality: "Juliette believes in science. She wholly despises any form of worship whose rationality cannot be demonstrated... She is attracted by the *reactions* proscribed by the legends of civilization. She operates with semantics and logical syntax like the most up-to-date positivism, but does not anticipate this servant of our own administration in directing her linguistic criticism primarily against thought and philosophy; instead, as a child of aggressive Enlightenment, she fixes upon religion(DoE, p.96)."

Sade's other works are the cynical, reverse image of Kant's architectonic system, and the Homeric epic with the last vestiges of mythology removed. In separating the spiritual and the corporeal, Sade is working out the implications of Cartesian dualism. Moreover, the characteristic Enlightenment mastery of nature is implicit in his subjugation of women who, reduced to their biological function alone, are robbed of subjectivity.⁴⁾ Sade's blatant brutality is merely the most obvious example of what is a far more pervasive phenomenon. Nietzsche's will-to-power, no less than Kant's categorical imperative, foreshadows the development by positing man's independence from external forces. His anthropocentric hubris is also at the root of

4) And this point is further developed in the aphorism on "Man and Animal," DoE, pp.245-55.

Kant's notion of "maturity." It is the overemphasis on man's autonomy that paradoxically leads to man's submission, as the fate of nature becomes man's own. "Enlightenment which is in possession of itself and coming to power can break the bounds of enlightenment(DoE, p.208)." Fascism, in fact, used the rebellion of suppressed nature against human domination for the sinister purposes of that very domination.

In the remainder of the *Dialectic*, Horkheimer and Adorno consider the working out of the Enlightenment ethos in the culture industry and in modern anti-Semitism. The essay on the "culture industry," even more fragmentary than the others, demonstrates the regression of enlightenment to ideology which finds its typical expression in cinema and radio. Here enlightenment consists in the calculation of effectiveness and of the techniques of production and distribution. The final essay "Elements of Anti-Semitism" is concerned with the actual reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism. The argument here is that not merely the ideal but the practical tendency to self-destruction has always been characteristic of rationalism. Offering the main lines of a philosophical prehistory of anti-Semitism, the authors argue that its "irrationalism" is deduced from the nature of the dominant *ratio* itself, and the world which corresponds to its image.

At the end of the book they include a number of aphorisms and notes on mutually disparate subjects. Throughout, the tone is pessimistic and the prognosis bleak. Complete reification means the negation not only of the dominating aspects of the ego, but also its non-dominating ones as well. This is a reality that concerns Horkheimer and Adorno in their treatment of the reification of the body in an aphorism of "The Importance of the Body"(DoE, pp.231-36). The alienation of man from nature so central to the current crisis of Western civilization seems an almost irreversible trend. In an aphorism on the philosophy of history, Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly reject the optimistic premises of Christianity, Hegelian idealism, and historical materialism. Hope for better circumstances, if not entirely illusory, rests less in the guarantee of their attainment than in the 'determinate negation' of the existing. There is, however, no distinct *praxis* suggested by reason that might

help in the struggle: As they say, "thought is in fact a negative element(DoE, p.225)." In an aphorism on "Propaganda," Horkheimer and Adorno denounce the instrumental use of philosophy and language to bring about social change: "Propaganda makes language an instrument, a lever, a machine... Deceit and propaganda are inseparable... Truth itself becomes merely a means of enlisting support and is falsified in the very utterance. This is why genuine resistance knows no propaganda(DoE, p.255)."⁵⁾

III. Formal Reason and the Problem of Critique

With this dark picture of the fate (or formalization) of reason, Horkheimer and Adorno want to demonstrate that modern science, morality, and art fall a prey to the dictates of instrumental rationality. As Habermas notes, "already the separation of the cultural spheres and the decay of the substantive reason still embodied in religion and metaphysics so extensively debilitates the isolated moments of reason, robbing them of their coherence, that they regress into a purposive rationality at the service of a self-preservation gone wild. In cultural modernity, reason is stripped of its validity claims and is assimilated to sheer power(Habermas 1982, p.38)."

Horkheimer's "End of Reason"(1941) sums up the crucial argument on the simultaneous birth and de-substantialization of individuality with the destruction of relations of personal bondage. The new individuality, being defined by self-preservation, is victimized by a development that integrated individuals into more complex and reified networks of relations. The essay, prefiguring the themes

5) In "Traditional and Critical Theory," Horkheimer again emphasizes this point: While "it is the task of the critical theoretician to reduce the tension between his own insight and oppressed humanity ... critical theory is neither 'deeply rooted' like totalitarian propaganda nor 'detached' like the liberalist intelligentsia"(Horkheimer 1989, pp.223-24). And in *Eclipse of Reason* he makes a similar point: "The age needs no added stimulus to action. Philosophy must not be turned into propaganda, even for the best possible purpose"(Horkheimer 1947, p.184).

in the *Dialectic*, is concerned with such key concepts of critical theory as the domination of nature, the decline of the individual and the technological veil. These themes are repeated in the *Dialectic*: "The individual is wholly devalued in relation to the economic powers, which at the same time press the control of society over nature to hitherto unsuspected heights. Even though the individual disappears before the apparatus which he serves, that apparatus provides for him as never before. In an unjust state of life, the impotence and pliability of the masses grow with the quantitative increase in commodities allowed them (DoE, p.xiv-xv)."

Horkheimer in the early 1940's maintained that the fundamental concepts of civilization had been in a process of rapid decay, and that the decisive concept among them is that of reason. From the ancient world to the Enlightenment reason is conceived as "the masterful principle of creation" and "the source of every society, institution, and order." Referring to Voltaire and Kant, Horkheimer emphasized that the ideas of freedom, justice and truth derived their justification from this ideal of reason. In following out its own principles, however, reason turns against itself and takes the form of skepticism: "The concept of reason from the very beginning included the concept of critique (Horkheimer 1941, p.27)." Critique, in Kantian sense, is an analysis of the conditions of possibility and the limits of rational faculties undertaken by reason itself: Assuming a self-reflective posture, reason analyzes and criticizes itself in the process of its world-constituting 'legislating activity'. Reason, however, in destroying conceptual fetishes, ultimately destroys itself. On the one hand, skepticism purged the idea of reason of so much of its content that "reason itself appears as a ghost that has emerged from linguistic usage." Still being adapted to an animistic pattern of thought and thereby hypostatizing states and actions as nominatives, the grammar of everyday language makes reason "a meaningless symbol, an allegorical figure without a function." On the other, while it has not been cancelled altogether, reason has been reduced to its pragmatic significance much more radically than ever before. The functions of reason conceived by Locke, i.e., discovering truths, regularly and methodically ordering them, perceiving their connections, and drawing the right conclusion, are

“as indispensable in the modern technique of war as it has always been in the conduct of business(Horkheimer 1941, p.28).” Reason in this sense is a pragmatic instrument oriented to expediency, i.e., the optimum adaptation of means to ends.

While Locke's definition of reason contradicts the definition of reason in terms of individual self-preservation, it does not liberate reason from the atomic self-interest of the individual. The increasingly formalistic universality of reason expresses the skeptical separation of thought from its object. And reflective thought loses its meaning in the struggle for self-preservation. “The idea of reason, even in its nominalistic and purified form, has always justified sacrifice(Horkheimer 1941, p.33)”: The self-preservation calls for the death of the individual which is to be preserved. The collapse of reason and the collapse of individuality are one and the same. All of these changes are reflected in the most basic of cultural creations, language. The greatest failing of the Enlightenment mentality is its systematic elimination of negation from language. Instead of revealing meanings, speech has become nothing more than a tool of the dominant forces in society or the imperatives of self-preservation.

Horkheimer and his colleagues are highly critical of what has passed for reason in the modern world. Instrumental, subjective, manipulative reason is the handmaiden of technological domination, by which all interaction is eventually reduced to power relationships. In so arguing, of course, they are by no means alone. A wide variety of thinkers also have launched heated attacks against instrumental rationality and its effects. What distance the Frankfurt School from them are its members' insistence on the varieties of reason, one of which might avoid the reification in the modern world, and their refusal to accept the possibility that this type of substantive reason might be immediately realized in social terms. Nonantagonistic reason is always a hope, but one whose existence, being secured by the negation of the status quo, prevents the uncritical apotheosis of nature. Despite their distrust of absolute identity theories, Horkheimer and his colleagues stress the importance of “objective reason” as an antidote to the one-sided ascendancy of instrumentalized “subjective reason.” With the instrumentalization of reason, the

rationalization of the modern world incurs the replacement of what Weber calls "substantive" reason by its formal counterpart. "What remains of reason in its contemporary decline, however, is not just the perseverance of self-preservation and the persistence of that horror in which it culminates. The age-old definition of reason in terms of self-preservation already implied the curtailment of reason itself. Reason has borne a true relation not only to one's own existence but to living as such; this function of transcending self-preservation is concomitant with self-preservation, with obeying and adapting to objective ends. Reason could recognize and denounce the forms of injustice and thus emancipate itself from them(Horkheimer 1941, p.47)."

Given the formalization of reason, how is it made possible to set out in critical analysis of hidden paradoxes of Western civilization? According to Adorno, immanent critique presumes that existing reality contains reference to normative ideals which can serve as a meaningful basis to assess reality's rationality. Its task is to confront existing reality with those ideals. But the problem is that neither immanent criticism and critique of ideology are viable in existing societies. What characterizes the "rationality" of existing reality is precisely its complete and total irrationality. Contemporary social arrangements are the consummate expression of an instrumental rationality implicit in the structure of Western reason. Proper to instrumental rationality is its subordination of all spheres of life to the domination of a "logic of identity" that suppresses differences and prevents both individual autonomy and meaningful solidarity. In the "totally administered societies" this irrational rationality so ubiquitously grips existing reality that the norms of society are infused with the very irrationality that the social critic would question. Under these conditions, society can no longer be meaningfully criticized using the tools of immanent critique. "The limit of immanent critique is that the law of the immanent context is ultimately one with the delusion that has to be overcome(Adorno 1973, p.182)." In Nazism the attempt to eliminate all that is "non-identical" crystallized the totalitarian tendencies implicit in the concept of Western reason.

Then what options are left in this situation? We can identify three options, which have been taken by influential thinkers of our age: first, there exists a strong attraction of transcendent critique, which finds its embodiment in Adorno's negative dialectics; second, there is a possibility of avoiding the dilemma in the Marxist immanent critique by way of pursuing a theoretical project for grounding a paramount form of reason and rationality on the inescapable dimension of social life, i.e., communication. This path is intended to secure a domain of critical and emancipatory reason in a post-metaphysical way, which, while embedded in social interactions, cannot be reduced to facticity. And finally, there remains an option of 'no more talks' on reason and rationality and searching for new vocabularies and new sense of responsibility.

Adorno, in the spirit of the *Dialectic*, takes the first option. If social reality cannot be criticized by confronting it with its own implicit norms, appeal must be made to transcendent or "extraterritorial" standards of rationality which fully surpass the domain of societal immanence.

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light(Adorno 1974, p.247).

In a world defined by its wholesale irrationality, a rational society is attainable only in the wholesale negation of the real. Then how can we warrant the possibility of negative dialectics which bars a complete subordination of the real to the exigencies of instrumental rationality? This question leads us to the issue of ambiguity in reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

IV. Ambiguity

Horkheimer and Adorno undertake a critique of the 'totalitarian' nature of enlightenment reason which serves the interests of domination. It is not clear, however, whether they intend to carry out an immanent critique of enlightenment thought or break with enlightenment rationality altogether. In general, Critical Theorists like Marcuse, Habermas and sometimes Horkheimer attempt to base critiques of instrumental and formal rationality on a concept of critical reason. Adorno, however, consistently refuses to posit a positive concept of reason, and Horkheimer in *Eclipse of Reason* is ambiguous. Accordingly, we can with good reasons read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* either as an attempt to defend the progressive tradition of the Enlightenment against its repressive heritage, or as a more radical critique of enlightenment rationality which breaks with enlightenment thought, discourse and reason altogether.

Both Adorno and Horkheimer waver between more radical breaks with Enlightenment rationality and attempts to defend a form of critical reason against current forms of irrationalism. The very notion of critique, particularly for Adorno, involves that double move of negation and affirmation: "Today as in Kant's time, philosophy demands a rational critique of reason, not its banishment or abolition(Adorno 1973, p.85)." And: "The self-reflection of enlightenment is not its revocation; it is corrupted into revocation only for the sake of today's status quo(Adorno 1973, p.158)."

In this regard, it is possible to interpret *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a critique of enlightenment undertaken from the standpoint of enlightenment itself. Horkheimer and Adorno believe that, in jettisoning the speculative and reflexive component of reason, instrumental rationality actually wound up insulating itself from criticism and becoming a new dogma akin to myth. It only makes sense then that their joint effort wished to preserve the reflexive moment of reason. In this line of interpretation, the *Dialectic* is a "critical negation" of the rationalist, idealist, progressive view of history, and "this critique was made *for the sake of the*

Enlightenment and the rationality which it promised... As an attack on progress, the book should be interpreted less as proof of the authors' growing pessimism (a subjective-psychological explanation) than as documentation of the shift in *objective* conditions(Buck-Morss 1977, p.61).” In opposition to Nietzsche, Horkheimer and Adorno never collapse cognition into power and consistently reject a relativism which they see as connected with historical positivism. They believe that enlightenment rationality violated the reflexive component of reason and thus ineluctably aided in the creation of a totalitarian society(Bronner 1994).

We can here raise a question of whether their image of the Enlightenment is valid. In a significant way, the dark picture of the Enlightenment is arbitrary and one-sided. Horkheimer and Adorno keep silent on how the enlightenment concern with universality has been tied to republicanism and the rule of law which were designed to protect the individual against arbitrary use of power; and how the commitment to scientific knowledge fostered tolerance and openness to social change. We can even claim with fair support from historical analyses that “enlightenment” has nothing to do with fascism.⁶⁾

Habermas and the second generation of Critical Theorists tend to reject the more radical critiques of Enlightenment and to defend versions of critical reason or communicative rationality. Habermas is critical of the *Dialectic* for failing to provide a fair evaluation of the rational content of cultural modernity. He argues:

The dignity specific to cultural modernity consists in what Max Weber has called the stubborn differentiation of value-spheres. In fact, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not do justice to the elements of reason in cultural modernity ... I mean the internal theoretical dynamic which constantly

6) In this regard, Bronner argues that “neither from the standpoint of intellectual nor political history, let alone class analysis, does the interpretation offered by Horkheimer and Adorno make sense ... It was not instrumental reason which brought about fascism and destroyed the ability of the individual to make normative judgments, but rather real movements with one set of values intent on eliminating those committed to *qualitatively* different ones(Bronner 1994, pp.84-85).”

propels the sciences — and the self-reflexion of the sciences as well — beyond the creation of merely technologically exploitable knowledge; furthermore, I mean the universalist foundations of law and morality which have also been embodied (in no matter how distorted and imperfect a form) in the institutions of constitutional states, in the forms of democratic decision-making, and in individualistic patterns of identity formation; finally, I mean the productivity and the liberating force of an aesthetic experience with a subjectivity set free from the imperatives of purposive activity and from the conventions of everyday perceptions (Habermas 1982, p.39).

For these reasons, Habermas asserts, the presentation is at least incomplete and one-sided, and thus the global pessimism of the *Dialectic* ignores significant aspects of cultural modernity.

In a way, the critique of ideology wants to demonstrate that the validity of a theory under investigation has not freed itself sufficiently from the context of its genesis. It wants to demonstrate that hidden behind the back of this theory is an inadmissible *fusion of power and validity*. The critique of ideology challenges the truth of a suspicious theory by exposing its untruthfulness, its lack of veracity. The critique of ideology furthers the process of Enlightenment by unearthing a category mistake which stems from the fusion of declared validity claims with hidden power claims. With this type of critique Enlightenment becomes reflexive for the first time (Habermas 1982, pp.40-1). But when the critique of ideology itself is suspected of no longer producing truths, the Enlightenment becomes reflexive for a second time. During the 1930s Horkheimer and his colleagues had retained some trust in the potential for reason which would be realized in a self-reflexive critique of ideology. In the 1940s, however, they felt that the Marxist critique of ideology had exhausted itself, and they no longer believed that they could fulfill the promises of a critical social theory with the methods of the social sciences. Instead they attempted a radicalization and totalization of their critique of ideology in order to enlighten the Enlightenment about itself (DoE, p.xi). With this move Horkheimer and Adorno consider the basis of the critique of ideology destroyed. Critique now

becomes *total*, turning against reason and rationality as such and extending critique to the very foundations of an immanent critique of ideology.

This critique of ideology depicts the self-destruction of the critical faculty in a paradoxical manner, because “in performing the analysis it must make use of the same critique which it has declared false(Habermas 1982, p.42)” — a performative contradiction. Now reason itself has fallen prey to the ill-fated confusion of power and validity claims. Instrumental reason and purposive-rationality, which had become total, eliminates the difference between validity claims and imperatives of self-preservation, and thus breaks down the modern decentered understanding of the world. Reason, once instrumentalized, has become assimilated to power and has thereby given up its critical power — this is the final unmasking of a critique of ideology applied to itself. Adorno, in his *Negative Dialectics*, even suggests that we should no longer attempt to resolve this unavoidable performative contradiction.

This leads us again to the question of the motives and reasons which could have prompted Horkheimer and Adorno to make their critique so *far-reaching* that the very project of Enlightenment itself was threatened. As we have seen, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers hardly any prospect of escape from the constraints of instrumental rationality. Why then did Horkheimer and Adorno abandon a type of immanent critique of ideology in favor of 'a totalizing critique'?

As Habermas(1982) notes, Nietzsche is the significant model for a totalizing self-transcendence of the critique of ideology, and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* was the great model for the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno themselves acknowledge that “Nietzsche was one of the few after Hegel who recognized the dialectic of enlightenment(DoE, p.44).” Also, Horkheimer's debt to Nietzsche's pathbreaking thought seems evident especially in light of his argument that the domination of nature or the expansion of human power in the world is a universal characteristic of human reason rather than a distinctive mark of the modern period(Leiss 1972). If we look closely into Nietzsche's treatment of the ascetic ideal, we can find the striking similarities between Nietzsche and the authors of the *Dialectic*: not only in respect to the strategy of a totalizing critique, but also

to such themes as sacrifice and self-renunciation, the dialectic between self-preservation and self-destruction, the meaning of truthfulness in unmasking and self-overcoming, and so on.

The fate of the ascetic ideal resembles that of enlightenment reason. Here we can identify the same predicament in which both Nietzsche and the authors of the *Dialectic* find themselves: an ultimate unmasking leads them to a point from whence they started, that is, to the phase of value creation. But this time reason is of no use; with a totalized self-critique, reason is stripped of both substantive and critical potential. In this situation, Nietzsche seeks refuge in the doctrines of will to power and eternal recurrence, while Horkheimer and Adorno intensify the performative contradiction of a totalizing critique and leave it unresolved, opposing the fusion of reason and power with a gesture of “*ad hoc* determinate negation(Habermas 1982, p.47).”

V. Concluding Remarks

As noted, a major theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the radical critique of science, technology and instrumental rationality, which continues to be of value in the contemporary world in which the tendencies described by Horkheimer and Adorno are increasing in both scope and intensity. In a significant way, however, the *Dialectic* undermines the ground and possibility of critical social theory. Once radicalized, the pessimism of the *Dialectic* does not allow any room for systemic theorizing and rational grounding with conceptual distinctions. If Horkheimer and Adorno are right about the commodity form absorbing all opposition and levelling all distinctions, we can neither introduce any forms of critical moment in the dialectic of history nor ground any hope for a better future. Hence comes a problem of performative contradiction on the part of critical theory.

Given this, Horkheimer's and Adorno's tracing of the phenomenology of modern bourgeois spirit can be read as an attempt at a psycho-analytic therapeutic whereby

the psyche can become reintegrated and healed by working through past sufferings. In a sense, Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* can also be regarded as a medical book(Danto 1988): etiological, diagnostic, therapeutic, prognostic; especially therapeutic, for the book is not so much for other practitioners of the caring art as for those who suffer from the *diseases* it addresses. Horkheimer and Adorno show the scars, wounds and suffering endured in history. Though "their odyssey might produce emancipatory enlightenment for a few individuals or for themselves," however, it still is not clear what therapeutic effects their philosophy of history will produce in public(Kellner 1989, p.93).

The dilemma of the *Dialectic* engenders fertile soil for the spread of postmodern gestures of deconstruction and aesthetic appeal; every category lumps into boundless "texts" and every experience turns into radically subjective aestheticism. Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault attempt to find a critical moment in art and aesthetic experience, but at last Derrida pushes the negative dialectic to the limit until he gives up even the preoccupation with the "world" of the work of art. On the other side of the scene, there remains another alternative to respond to the pessimistic prognosis of the *Dialectic*, i.e., reconstructive critical theory. The Habermasian camp has attempted to reconceptualize reason and rationality with the hope of overcoming postmodern intellectual defeatism by developing a communicative paradigm in which historical analyses of society, philosophical arguments, and ethical hopes can reinforce one another to keep critical moments alive in history.

Horkheimer and Adorno conceive the Enlightenment as the unsuccessful attempt to escape from the powers of fate. "The issue is not that of culture as a value . . . The point is rather that the Enlightenment must consider itself, if men are not to be wholly betrayed." What is relevant is not "that the hygienic shop-floor and everything that goes with it, the Volkswagen or the sportsdrome, leads to an insensitive liquidation of metaphysics," but "that in the social whole they themselves become a metaphysics, an ideological curtain behind which the real evil is concentrated(DoE, p.xv)." Although they no longer placed hope on its liberating power, Horkheimer and Adorno nonetheless refused to abandon the now paradoxical

labor of analysis. This attests the fact that negation can never be truly negated. In a situation in which progress can turn into regression any minute, it will be the fate of reason to conduct a permanent critique of the limitations and shortcomings of our thought and practices — this may be a lesson we can learn from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Horkheimer ends his discussion on “The End of Reason” by saying that “the progress of reason that leads to its self-destruction has come to an end; there is nothing left but barbarism or freedom(Horkheimer 1941, p.48).” What this phrase means is that the choice between barbarism and freedom is not up to reason imprisoned in the realm of philosophy. From philosophy's standpoint, the self-destructive process of reason has come to an end, left in a totally reified world where reason, being totally integrated into social practices and institutions, has lost its autonomy and status as a philosophically meaningful concept. Therefore, the choice between 'barbarism and freedom' depends upon 'moments of decision' in the realm of politics. As Horkheimer and Adorno are afraid of, reason can easily degenerate into instrumentality in the arena of political *praxis*. This is, however, as much true as the fact that the political world itself is characteristically *contingent* and thus open to our struggle for change. With this very truth, *practical* reason can assert its claims on the matters of public concern through public forums and social movements. In other words, reason *in its public use* can regain its power to make *substantive* claims to irreducible ideals in human life and 'practical criteria' in political processes, overcoming its dismal fate and dilemma in theory.

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