**Reason after its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory**

**By Martin Jay**

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After a major earthquake in Bihar, India in January 1934, which caused the deaths of thousands of people and the destruction of many homes, Mohandas Gandhi described the earthquake as “a divine chastisement for the great sin we have committed and are still committing against those whom we describe as untouchables ….”, prompting a rebuke from Rabindranath Tagore who wrote: “I am compelled to utter a truism in asserting that physical catastrophes have their inevitable and exclusive origin in certain combinations of physical facts”.

Gandhi’s explanation – “the gods are angry” – is easier to summarise than Tagore’s, which would require some basic knowledge of seismology. Moreover, Gandhi ascribes intentionality to the event, providing an answer to the question, ‘why did this happen to us?’ Tagore, by contrast, can say only, ‘it happened’. The enduring preference for supernatural explanations of natural phenomenon is hard to dispute. Nonetheless, like Tagore, some of us find them deeply unsatisfactory.

Martin Jay’s *Reason after its Eclipse* can be read as a philosophical reflection on the persistence of mythic (i.e. supernatural) explanations in intellectual life. It is not that we lack appropriate scientific (i.e. rational) explanations for natural and social phenomena, which are superior to myth in terms of their gathering and sorting of evidence, the consistency and comprehensiveness of their explanatory framework, and their predictive power. What we lack, rather, is a scientific explanation for science itself: human reason can explain many things but struggles to justify its own success.

Jay begins with two celebrated moments in Western intellectual history – Greek metaphysics and the European Enlightenment – both of which can be viewed as decisive steps away from mythic explanations and towards a rational view of the world. Philosophers mostly believed that the natural world was structured by divine reason: human reason did not impose order on the world but revealed the order intrinsic to the universe. However, as Jay notes, from the mid-eighteenth century the idea that human reason was embedded in a stable and benign cosmic order faced a series of challenges, not least after another famous earthquake, in Lisbon in November 1755. Increasingly, science and reason had to be justified in other than natural terms.

The need to provide a non-natural grounding for human reason became a central pre-occupation of German philosophy. Kant suggested that the answer lay in the intrinsic qualities of human reasoning, disclosed through a process of critical self-reflection; Hegel, rejecting Kant’s solution as self-referential and ahistorical, presented reason as the gradual realisation of an abstract intellectual force, manifested in human intellectual history; in turn, Marx denounced Hegel as an apologist for an unjust and irrational *status quo*, and argued instead that fully dispositional reason could emerge in the world only when the universal class of human workers took control of human society.

Despairing at the failure of the revolution of reason to materialise, the leaders of the first generation of critical theorists, known as the Frankfurt School abandoned the quest to provide a grounding for reason, and retreated into aestheticism or the counter-culture. The title of Horkheimer’s short essay, *The Eclipse of Reason* (1946), from which Jay takes the title of his book, and Adorno’s famous aphorism, “the whole is the false”, taken from *Minima Moralia* (1951), were suggestive not just of a loss of confidence in reason, but also a lack of will to recover that confidence.

The task of re-inventing critical theory, thereby saving German philosophy from the cultural despair of existentialism and the methodological dogma of positivism, was embraced by Jürgen Habermas, who is the focus of the final third of Jay’s book. Central to his work is his claim that reason is grounded in communication: language, Habermas argued, contains a latent imperative for speakers to supply reasons for utterances and these reasons are constantly evaluated and re-evaluated by the wider community of language users.

Habermas understands rational explanation as the achievement of agreement through a process of argumentation, from which no voices are forcibly excluded, and in which the quality of deliberation is decisive rather than the status of those who deliberate. There is, however, no end-point, no ultimate consensus, no Hegelian or Marxian finale in which reason becomes complete and comprehensive; nor does Habermas offer any guarantee of progress from lesser to greater reason in society. The achievement of reason is procedural not revelatory, plural not solitary, pragmatic not dogmatic, provisional not final; and it is possible but not inevitable.

As Jay notes, the grounding of reason in communication represents a radical departure from traditional philosophical attempts to explain the superiority of reason over myth. Unsurprisingly, Habermas’s attempt to provide a compelling solution to one of the most intractable of philosophical problems has not gone unchallenged. Consistent with his theory, he has engaged in a series of debates with his critics, to seek clarification as to where his arguments are weak and how they might be strengthened.

Habermas is an advocate and exemplar of discursive participation, who is cautiously optimistic about progress in philosophy, describing the human species as possessing “an automatic inability not to learn”. He does not, however, take progress for granted: while he has moved beyond the despair of the first generation of Frankfurt Scholars, he has not forgotten its causes. Relapses into irrationality and myth-making remain an ever-present danger.

Martin Jay tells this story in a short but densely argued book: one hundred and sixty pages of text, supplemented by seventy pages of supporting notes. He is necessarily highly selective in his choice of protagonists and texts, but he maintains a sharp focus on his central question and brings the full range of technical philosophical language to bear on the argument. Many German philosophers tend to prolixity, whereas this ambitious survey of the sources and strengths of German critical theory takes the alternate course, seeking to condense thousands of pages of fiercely argued philosophy into a handful of expository paragraphs.

One strength of this approach is Jay’s demonstration of the continuing relevance of the arguments of the distant past to the problems of the present. Faced with the temptation of thinking that we are the first generation to worry about the ineffectiveness of reason when confronted by populist explanations for our social ills, we should remind ourselves that this has never not been the case: there have always been reasons to prefer science to myth, and there have always been those ready to champion myth against reason. The modern predicament is not just a modern predicament; although this does not make it any less of a predicament.

What would Habermas have to say about the earthquake in Bihar? Probably that we should listen to the seismologists, because they are best placed to explain its causes. More importantly, he would say that we did not need an earthquake to draw attention to the immorality of the caste system. Instead, we should engage with those called “untouchable” and welcome them into a discursive conversation about how to improve their position in society.

I recently visited Berkeley, California - by coincidence, where Martin Jay teaches history - and shortly after I left there was a small earthquake, whose epicentre was located close to the hotel where I had stayed. Damage was minor and there were no deaths, but this is no reason not to speak about social injustice, in America or elsewhere.

Mark Hannam

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