

HORKHEIMER AND ADORNO: *DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT*

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1. Enlightenment bursts into history raising the flag of disenchantment and demythologization. All could and must be submitted in the court of reason, all could and must be arranged according to reason: politics and ethics, aesthetics and science. But something seems to have gone wrong with the initial plan. The proof? The re-enchantment of the world. The myths and the gods, that enlightened reason let for dead and buried, are rising from their graves and coming back. They are coming back because man needs them subjectively to set the ends and values that reason cannot objectively define. Enlightened reason has specialized in wining battles, but it does not know anything about the war. The development of Enlightenment has failed with reason's universal vocation: there is no common reason as a practical horizon for the diversity of human activities. The extraordinary developing and differentiation of the cultural spheres (science and technology, economics and politics, etc.) has exhausted and collapsed a substantive reason.

Today we speak of the return of myths without any sorrow. Max Weber warned us with sorrow and fear that the ancient, disenchanted gods could stand up from their graves, but now we celebrate them. But it is not that the new philosophers are fools. They surely would be if they were to have thrown overboard mankind's achievements of freedom. Because they don't want to do it, they distinguish between good and bad myths. The bad myths are the *monomyths*: Reason, Man, Reality, Social Class, Humanity, Race, Free Market. There is no Enlightenment in a singular mode. The enlightenment achievement *par excellence*, freedom, is only guaranteed with the plurality of myths. Freedom is plurality.

Everything is plural, many gods, diverse reasons, numerous opinions, but certainly that pluralism is not a guarantee of freedom. Each *daimon*, each particular logic, strives to take over the entire scene. In 'liberal' societies, the economy tends to suffocate politics; in 'authoritarian' societies, politics interferes with social action. And over all, science has achieved its specific logic as the main analogy of rationality. What is left, then, for philosophy?

The sensitivity that depicts the consciousness of the crisis of reason has a name: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (DE). [1] What other thing does 'dialectic' express, but the consciousness of a failure—the insufficiency of enlightenment—as well as the hope in the liberating force of enlightenment?

The 'dialectic of Enlightenment' expresses the consciousness of the complexity of the processes that produced Modernity, and now these processes are at the point of overcoming it or maybe they already overcame it. This means that the processes, and the situation into which them have forced us, are marked by a basic *ambiguity*: these processes can realize the Enlightenment, but it also can destroy it. The latter happens when we ignore or forget the dialectic—that is Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's central claim.

The aim of this work is to review critically at Horkheimer and Adorno's conceptualization of the process of Enlightenment, to offer an analysis of the concept of *enlightened reason* that is in the core of the issue. The concept of reason (rationality) is closely linked to values of great interest to mankind: freedom, justice and solidarity. For Horkheimer and Adorno, these values are definitely at stake, and that is their main interest to write the DE: 'Save the Enlightenment.' [2]

We have already started to take position in the clash of ideas regarding the DE. If this first reading of DE were clear and distinct, the DE would not imply any other thing but the renewed self-critique of Enlightenment, but the present situation is much more complicated. Since the late seventies this work has contributed to the make up of opposite trends in the contemporary philosophical world: on one side, a neoconservative counterenlightened position, and on the other, a postmodern—non dialectical—trend. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the critique of Enlightenment by any means implies its *negation*, but with a more full and comprehensive realization of it. There is no other way to save the Enlightenment and the values it assumes, except by being aware of its *dialectic*, that is, *to enlighten Enlightenment about itself*. But the dilemma that Horkheimer and Adorno faced is 'the self-destruction of the Enlightenment.' (DE, xiii) The Enlightenment cannot forget its own dialectic, for 'if enlightenment does not accommodate reflection on this recidivist element, then it seals its own fate.' (*Loc. cit.*)

We could depict the character of the crisis of reason by taking a glance at the dawn of twenty-first century. We find taking place the combination of four convictions: a) the claim that the analogy of reason is science, b) the identification of the enlightened reason with the universal reason, c) the close relation between knowledge and ethics, and d) the effectiveness of ideas. [3] Here the pertinent question is: What does enlightened rationality involve?

2. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno's starting point is a dramatic experience: mankind has not advanced toward freedom, but it moves backward and it 'is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.' (DE, xi) They set themselves to understand the causes of this drama, of this dark 'reversal,' that means 'the indefatigable self-destructiveness of enlightenment.' (DE, xi) Their analysis results in a paradox: 'Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology,' (DE, xvi) and this claim turns out to be the DE's main thesis. In Jurgen Habermas's words, they put forward the claim of 'a secret complicity to challenge this opposition' [4] between Enlightenment and myth.

We can find a key to understand this first thesis in Horkheimer's claim: 'Reason's disease lies in its own origin, in the effort of man to have dominion over nature.' [5] Enlightenment rises under the sign of domination. Since the beginning, it 'has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty,' (DE, 3) and its program was 'the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths.' (*Loc. cit.*) In other words, Enlightenment has been understood as an opposition and counterforce to myth: Enlightenment contradicts myth. Therefore, Enlightenment entrenches the knowledge of science that does not work anymore 'by the fortunate insight,' but for the exploitation and dominion over a disenchanted nature. In the process of Enlightenment knowledge turns into power, and nature becomes reduced to 'a substratum of domination.' (DE, 9) The Enlightenment functions according to the principle of identity: it

cannot stand the different and the unknown: 'What was different is equalized.' (DE, 12) 'When there is no longer anything unknown. That determines the course of demythologization, of enlightenment' which reduces all to 'pure immanence.' (DE, 16) 'Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men,' (DE, 9) and it knows them in so far as it can manipulate them. In this process, 'mimesis' [6] is displaced by power, which now turns into the 'principle of all relations.' (DE, 9)

But this *reason's disease*—Enlightenment's inclination for power—which has determined the development of Western civilization, it is already present in the myth itself. In the myth, there is a moment of Enlightenment; moreover, the myth is the first stage of Enlightenment: 'Yet the myths which fell victim to the Enlightenment were its own products.' (DE, 8) The myths, in fact, wanted to 'report, naming, the narration of the Beginning,' but they also wanted to offer an 'explanation,' that is, they wanted to control and dominate, as it is explicit in the step from myth to mythology, from narration to theory, from contemplation to rationalization. In the myth there is a desire of power. At the end, 'myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity.' (DE, 9) As Habermas points out: 'The permanent sign of enlightenment is domination over an objectified external nature and a repressed internal nature.' [7]

The Enlightenment, then, is a process of demythologization, which develops as a progressive rationalization, abstraction, and reduction of the whole reality by the subject— under the signal of *dominion*. This process, that hoped to be a liberating process, has historically developed as a process of alienation: 'Enlightenment is more than enlightenment—the distinct representation of nature in its alienation.' (DE, 39) The latter thesis seems to contradict the former, but it is just the other face of the same coin. The process of Enlightenment reveals a Janus-face: the domination of external nature is done at the cost of repressing man's internal nature.

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 a functions of which the achievements of self-preservation find their sole definition and determination: it is, in fact, what is to be preserved. (DE, 54-55)

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the enlightenment process of self-destruction is the result of a *self-preservation* drive, which mutilates reason; reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible. This process of self-destruction follows, as the Enlightenment itself, an inexorable logic which ends turning against the subject, reducing its own internal nature as a mere substratum of domination. That is, the process of emancipation from external nature reveals itself, at the same time, as a process of subjection of man's own internal nature: 'The fallen nature of modern man' ends up as a process of regression to the old bondage under nature:

The decline, the forfeiture, of nature consists in the subjugation of nature without which spirit does not exist. Through the decision in which spirit acknowledges itself to be domination and retreats into nature, it abandons the claim to domination which makes it a vassal of nature. (DE, 39-40)

The domination of man over nature paradoxically carries with it the domination of nature over man. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the representation of this paradox is Odysseus's fate. Here the conflict is radical and original, and it takes place between man and nature, between the 'domination of nature' and the 'domination of man.'

The Enlightenment started by the sign of dominion and the *reductio ad hominen* of the world historical processes to its principles, it has not just eliminated the myth, but also the 'meaning' that transcends the bare facts:

On the road to modern science, men renounce any claim to meaning. (DE, 5) What is abandoned is the whole claim and approach of knowledge: to comprehend the given as such; not merely to determine the abstract spatiotemporal relations of the facts which allow them just to be grasped, but on the contrary to conceive them as the superficies, as mediated conceptual moments which come to fulfillment only in the development of their social, historical, and human significance. (DE, 26-27)

This means that the Enlightenment itself has fallen victim of its own reductionist logic and returned to mythology, that is, to the necessity that this logic hoped to liberate man. In Horkheimer and Adorno's words:

Mythology itself set off the unending process of enlightenment in which ever and again, with the inevitability of necessity, every specific theoretic view succumbs to the destructive criticism that it is only a belie —until even the very notions of spirit, of truth and, indeed, enlightenment itself, have become animistic magic [...] Just as the myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology. (DE, 11-12)

In Habermas's words, 'the modern fully rationalized world is only seemingly disenchanting.' [8] In other words, the demythologization seems to dispel the enchantment of religious-metaphysical thinking, but it really appears to us as confusion between nature and culture. 'The process of enlightenment leads to the desocialization of nature and the denaturalization of the human world.' [9]

Enlightenment's relapse into mythology means the fall of the spirit—which arose with it—under the blind dominion of nature. The latter thus takes revenge against man exploitation, to whom it has been externally subjected, and the repression that has internally taken place in the subject itself—all this formed according to the principle of self-conservation and dominion. Nature rebels this way because the spirit in the process of Enlightenment has forgotten it. In fact, at the beginning of this process, there took place a 'loss of memory,' which precisely made this process possible; Horkheimer and Adorno basically conclude that 'all objectification is a forgetting,' (DE, 230) all objectification is a 'loss of meaning.'

What is the scope of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Enlightenment? Can we still talk about the *dialectic* of Enlightenment or we must consider the *paradox* of Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno's critical interpretation of the world-historical process of Enlightenment agrees with Max Weber's diagnosis: the Enlightenment is a progressive and irreversible process of rationalization of all the spheres of social life; a process that at the same time is the progressive functionalization and instrumentalization of reason, with the consequent loss of

meaning and freedom. However, the process of Enlightenment was leading to a final *catastrophe*. Here Horkheimer and Adorno enter in the field of the *radical* critique of enlightened reason.

What does this radicalization of the critique of Enlightenment mean? The authors of the DE extended and radicalized Luckacs' concept of reification and, with it, Weber's concept of rationalization, beyond the mode of capitalist production, to the whole history of Western civilization. The radicalization that the critique of Enlightenment experiences here is paradoxical: the criticism turns so radical that it undermines its own basis, its own condition of possibility. In fact, if the history of Western rationality is at the same time a process of collapse and returning to myth, then the ideology critique loses its utopian dimension: 'the rational potential of bourgeois culture,' [10] with which it faced up to reality and criticized it, demands and makes possible its realization. This radical critique, then, excluded the possibility to enlighten the Enlightenment about itself, that is, the possibility to realize it as such.

Obviously, this *paradox* is present in the mind of Horkheimer and Adorno. It was the enlightened-emancipator impetus at stake which motivated their thought: 'We are wholly convinced—and therein lies our *petitio principii*—that social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought.' (DE, xiii) Their position was not to avoid the *paradox*, but to abide in it without fleeing toward irrational solutions.

In fact, the process of demythologization, which is suspended between myth and Enlightenment, leads man a confusion between nature and culture, where the external world is differentiated into the objective world of entities and the social world of norms, and they both stand in contrast to the subject's internal world of experience. This is the place where the procedure of ideology critique can be examined. When contexts of meaning and reality, that is, when internal and external relationships have been unmixed and differentiated only then can the suspicion of ideology arises. The process of Enlightenment shows that the autonomy of validity claimed by a theory, when it follows its specific logic and is cleansed of all mythological dross, is an illusion because secret interests and power are hidden.

Horkheimer and Adorno's critique, which is inspired by such suspicion, becomes ideology critique when it attempts to show that the validity of a theory has not been adequately dissociated from the context in which it emerged (reality) and the context of justification (meaning). Precisely, the ideology critique wants to show that these internal and external relationships are confused and that they are confused because validity claims are determined by relationships of power.

Enlightenment, through this critique, becomes *reflective* and it is performed to its own products. But when ideology critique 'itself' comes under suspicion, then, the doubt reaches out to include reason. Habermas claims that the DE takes precisely this step: 'So what enlightenment has perpetrated on myth, they apply to the process of enlightenment as a whole. Inasmuch as it turns against reason as the foundation of its own validity, critique becomes total.' [11] Thus, the radicalization of ideology critique does not have anything in reserve to which it might appeal. Did the paradox with which Horkheimer and Adorno confronted themselves leave no way out?

The DE suggests, nevertheless, that in the Enlightenment's process of self-destruction, because reason is not itself a completely dominant reason, there is within a hidden *moment of truth* which arises in certain historical events. This 'secret utopia in the concept of reason' (DE, 84) is the last resort that holds the DE's liberating hope, which transcends the contradiction and makes possible the aim 'to prepare the way for a positive notion of enlightenment.' (DE, xvi) However, this moment of truth in the concept of reason is only invoked in the DE. What does it involve? The DE does not explicitly have an answer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* holds scarcely any prospect for an escape from the myth.

We can draw lines, though, that the critique of Enlightenment does not involve the 'subjugation' of nature, but its perversion into an instrumental—homogenizing and reifying—reason. Here the perversion is located in the *origin* itself of the Enlightenment process, and it arises from an *original forgetfulness* at the dawn of Western rationality. Because reason forgot its original unity with nature *and* myth, it was formed then according to the principle of power, and with it the seeds of its own destruction. That criticism does not mean a withdrawal of reason in favor of nature nor a nostalgic return to nature, but the overcoming of the Enlightenment's perversion through Enlightenment itself. The overcoming of the process of alienation of reason/nature is not in the margins of reason itself. [12]

3. From Horkheimer and Adorno's approach we must confront a dilemma: either we welcome the turning back of the myths and the gods or we do not resign ourselves to the failure of Enlightenment. Something was wrong in the initial plan, something happened between the project and what has really taken place. What went wrong? It seems that our time lost the path of its horizon of meaning. Western rationality is dying of success, but it is already finding itself in *rigor mortis*. Western rationality is construing the cage for a new servitude. What resumes modern rationality is its 'reification' which is the virus incubated in its first moments.

It seems that the design of modern rationality was hanging by a thread: the equilibrium between the substantive reason and the particular logics was ready to break. This thread is now broken. We are witnessing the extraordinary developing of the specific rationalities, and at the same time, the vanishing of the substantive reason. Here substantive reason means a common horizon of meaning for the diversity of human activities. That function of reason is the one that transcends the claims of universality of modern reason—that it is plural. In Weber's terms, the 'rationality of choice' [13] was separated in particular rationalities (politics, economics, culture, etc.), each one with its own legitimate logic (logic of power, logic of money, logic of knowledge, etc.). Certainly, these specific logics are the result of the disenchantment of the modern world, separated from the common horizon of the substantive reason.

The consequences of this split are of two types: [14] a) When each particular rationality separates from the common horizon which pretends to give a total meaning to action, the outcome is a *deficit of rationality*. Despite the extraordinary developing of science, it advances without direction. Science investigates by investigating, it does not know why it investigates, and it is indifferent to the meaning of its own research. Finally, nothing prevents science that even man would be the object of its research, that is, to subject the whole man to a process of objectification. b) Concomitantly, the outcome is also an *excess of rationality*. Without a common horizon that regulates the limits of each specific logic, each particular rationality would

have a tendency to colonize the rest. Science—the analogy of the rationality of choice—binds all the spheres of knowledge to conform to its particular methodology.

In sum, the enlightened reason had disenchanting the world by throwing off the myths and the gods, but now they are rising from their graves and coming back. They are coming back because man subjectively needs them to set the ends and values that instrumental reason cannot objectively define. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the 're-enchantment of the world' can be overcome by enlightened reason itself.

Footnotes

1. Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1998). Horkheimer and Adorno's book was first published in Amsterdam (1947) and is the starting point of the discussion on Modernity.
2. Horkheimer and Adorno, cited in Juan José Sánchez, 'Introducción,' *Dialéctica de la Ilustración*, trans. Juan José Sánchez (Madrid: Trotta, 1998) 10. (My translation).
3. See Reyes Mate, *Memoria de Occidente* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1997) 32ff. (My translation).
4. Habermas, Jürgen, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,' in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT, 1996) 107.
5. Horkheimer, cited in J. J. Sánchez, *op. cit.*, 12. (My translation).
6. For the authors, *mimesis* is a primordial reason that recalls the model of exchange between the subject and nature that is free of violence, and whose position has been usurped by power.
7. Habermas (1996), *op. cit.*, 110.
8. *Loc. cit.*
9. *Ibidem*, 115.
10. Habermas (1996), *op. cit.*, 118.
11. *Ibidem*, 118-119.
12. 'The only way —Horkheimer writes— to help nature consists in liberating its seeming opposite: autonomous thinking,' quoted in J. J. Sánchez, *op. cit.*, 31. (My translation).
13. For Weber, the *rationality of choice* precisely expresses the modern rationality, which he defines as follows: 'Action is purposive-rational when it is oriented to ends, means and secondary results. This involves rationally weighing the relations of means to ends, the relations of ends to

secondary consequences, and finally the relative importance of different possible ends. Determination of action either in affectual or traditional terms is thus incompatible with this type.' Quoted in Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 168.

14. See Reyes Mate, *op. cit.*, 52-53.

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