Review of Jacob Klapwijk

Dialectic of Enlightenment: Critical Theory and the Messianic Light

This is a revised version of the review that appeared in Thesis Eleven February 2012 108: 133-135.

This English translation of the author's 1976 inaugural lecture as 'lector' in the history of modern philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam was initially published in Dutch in 1977. It introduces the leading thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Some English-speaking readers will have waited for this translation to appear, and it is a testament to the persistence of the author and his Australian translators (C. Yallop and I Yallop-Bergsma) that it is now available.

This is not a large book. It is attractively produced by a small publisher specializing in the writings of independent scholars. The argument is presented in accessible prose, and may serve as a useful, if dated, introduction to the theoretical works it examines. A chief virtue is its encouragement of careful textual analysis.

First, I will outline the structure of this discussion, and then move on to address Klapwijk's method of critical engagement.

The opening chapter ('What Is the ''Dialectic of Enlightenment?''', pp. 1–8), provides the author's plan for discussion.

The second chapter, 'The ''Critical Theory'' of Horkheimer and Adorno', pp. 9–18, artfully traces the major contours of their critique, identifying three central issues from their seminal work: the need to think radically about oneself and the evidence of language; the demand for emancipatory criticism and for reconciliation with nature; the actualization of enlightenment in both theory and practice. This documents Klapwijk's trek through these writings, and the useful sub-headings throughout indicate his diligence in following along on the path provided by the theorists themselves. The second

chapter sub-headings are: The Language of Suffering; Criticism and Reconciliation ('What Horkheimer seems to have in mind is a world in which the unbridled activism of Western technology has been brought to a halt and in which human individuality can expand in alliance with nature'; p.13); Theory and Practice ('Their expectation for the future may well be labeled romantic, but the order of the day is tough criticism of society'; p. 13); Is Reason Reliable? ('Marx's eye was on the realm of freedom beyond nature. By contrast, the concept of the Frankfurt School, or at least of Horkheimer and Adorno, is of all creation groaning, of a nature that also awaits liberation . . . '; '[a] criticism . . . aiming in the first place not at a change in forms of production, but at a change in the direction of reason'; p. 17).

Of course, this is about a shift in critical neo- or post-Marxist thinking away from re-directing the proletariat to re-directing reason. The shift is radicalized by requiring a re-configuration of enlightenment itself, and Klapwijk explores this as-deep-and-as-far-as-you-can-go commitment underlying this further radicalization.

The discussion deals with Marcuse's extension of Freud's analyses. Then it moves to his exposition of One Dimensional Man, the flag-ship of 'new left' thinking. Marcuse exposed the way psychology and technology had become bound together in a repressive threat to all of life.

Klapwijk then considers Adorno's poignant negative dialectic, Auschwitz having emphasized just how far human degradation can go, reaching into the very fibres of conceptualization itself, so that henceforth thinking is inseparable from a bleeding world suffering in 'absolute negativity', with our task being to avoid catastrophe 'in spite of everything', even if that means that critical theory must turn against itself in a negation of the negation. Two chapters are devoted to Adorno's one-time assistant, Habermas: his early expose´ of the technocratic ideology and a new critical search for the emancipatory purposes of comprehensive social theory. Klapwijk's suggestions for

how we might read Horkheimer's reckoning with religious consciousness, through grasping of human finitude and injustice, rounds out his comparison and contrast of this most significant 20th-century 'school' of critical theory.

The Frankfurt School has not just transformed our understanding of 'critical theory' but confronts us in our sense of what a 'movement' or a 'school' may henceforth be or become. Klapwijk's final chapter briefly explains the grounds for his commitment to ongoing conversation with these same critical perspectives.

An initial question may be asked: why should a professor emeritus of 20th-century philosophy, from a professedly Christian university, want his inaugural lecture on the Frankfurt School published in translation 34 years later? Klapwijk's final chapter, which outlines his critical response, can help us discern the character of this long-held intention. He does so respectfully, in a quiet but decisively Christian way, giving priority not to his own response but to the prevailing character of the combined philosophical challenge he faces.

With the publication of this translation, we see that the challenge is still present with him. It is thus his interpretation of this theoretical challenge, and his attempt to articulate a response to it, which Critical Theory and the Messianic Light documents. The author 'keeps going' in this discussion, articulating his perspective and insights for a new generation of philosophers and critical social theorists.

This book publishes his hope as he also examines the way 'hope' has become a theme in the writings he examines. His hope is that he can stay in relevant touch with contemporary developments derived from this critical theoretical 'school'. His examination of a profound wrestling with the dialectic of enlightenment, seeks to pinpoint the thread of unity and disunity within and between the several contributions considered.

We have seen that the word 'dialectics' has many meanings. There

is no reason to reject the notion of dialectic in itself. But we are forced to conclude that within the Hegelian and Marxist tradition the word has grown into a hidden faith regarding the inevitable course of history. History is characterized as developing via oppositions and at this moment necessarily leading to an ominous reversal of reason.

Some readers may perhaps feel that this is the point at which to break off the discussion with these 'dogmatic Marxists'. But, for one thing, there is the question of whether a philosophical discussion ought ever to reach that point. And, apart from that, we should ask whether the desire to cut the discussion off does not equally betray a dogmatic prejudice, a belief in the so-called self-sufficiency of reason and in the closed logical nature of scientific debate (p. 94).

Here Klapwijk makes a stand for scholarly engagement and against any closure which would justify 'breaking off' philosophical conversation with partners in this theoretical discussion. This predictable dogmatic response to his analysis leads him to distance his argument from it. He would rather maintain ongoing critical engagement with critical theory since 'breaking off' presumes that the last word that can be said has been said. For Klapwijk critical philosophical theory can never say the last word. And these thinkers continue to present him with their challenge. Their attempts to deal with the dialectic of enlightenment show that what they have identified was also their dialectic. It was theirs because it was integral to what they believed. And though Klapwijk does not follow this line of belief, he does encourage a full immersion into this intense and self-critical scholarly slipstream. It is to be hoped therefore that further critical work in this vein, examining Habermas and other intellectual descendants from that founding generation, will come to publication, from Klapwijk's pen and from others of his 'school' or scholarly disposition. Could it be that the full compass of the critical insights of the Frankfurt School is still to be realized? A wall may have since been torn down; our author insists that critical engagement with critical theory retains its meaning and purpose.

Klapwijk's style of engagement might be described as a hermeneutical dialectic which philosophically re-argues the case of the thinker or thinkers under examination in order to see clearly the evident weaknesses where he agrees, and the residual strength of argument where he must disagree. Such solidarity in scholarship might have its corollary in political life where citizens who disagree over the foundations of public justice have to find ways of maintaining constructive discussion with each other – is that not what citizens do? Likewise, critical theorists who are intent on developing their understanding will maintain the provocative challenges they throw out, back and forth to each other, in order to keep their scholarly discussions open to fresh horizons. At the outset Klapwijk noted the frank openness of Adorno and Horkheimer about this state of affairs. He accepts that it is integral to their critical theory. 'We have no doubt – and hereon lies our petitio principii – that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking' and 'We are the heirs, for better or worse, of the Enlightenment' (p. 9).

Klapwijk intends his book to be an example of critical theoretical engagement, a decisive vote in favour of maintaining critical solidarity, particularly when someone with a personal faith in the 'messianic' redemption, as Klapwijk views himself, has to give an account of his confrontation with Adorno when, in Minima Moralia, he makes the astonishing claim that the 'messianic light' he so desperately needed for redemption is mythic, 'removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence' (pp. 95–97). And for Klapwijk, it is critically important that solidarity be maintained to keep critical theorizing open to fresh disclosure.

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Revised April 16, 2016