

Katia Genel (dir.), La dialectique de la raison. Sous bénéfice d'inventaire, Paris (Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme) 2017, 311 p. (Série Philia), ISBN 978-2-7351-2371-1, EUR 26,00

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Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's »Dialectic of Enlightenment« (1944) is best known for its skepticism regarding Enlightenment conceptions of progress and the potential of rationality to produce human emancipation. Rather than generate social revolution, the contradictions of capitalism, as identified by dialectical materialism, had produced only fascism and totalitarianism. Instead of liberating humanity from superstition and ignorance, science had created a new mythology of hyperrationality and the state, replacing liberal capitalism with centralized planning and mass culture (»the culture industry«). Adorno and Horkheimer further suggest that the Enlightenment, in its penchant for technocracy and sadism, abetted the crimes of the Third Reich, including the Holocaust.

Although understandable in the context of 1944, these pessimistic conclusions regarding the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment rationality proved controversial. Many liberal and conservative thinkers who believed strongly in critical rationalism, including Karl Popper and Hans Albert, rejected the »dialectic« outright. But even some members of the Frankfurt School, such as Jürgen Habermas, though initially supportive, eventually moved beyond the dialectic, finding that its arguments had pushed critical theory into an epistemological and methodological cul-de-sac.

This stimulating if eclectic volume works hard to rescue the dialectic from the condescension of posterity, negotiating a path between historicizing Adorno and Horkheimer's preeminent work into obsolescence and dismissing it as methodologically suspect because it undermines many of the premises of modern critical theory. The contributions to this diverse and invigorating »inventory« argue that we might still »profit« from the dialectic in providing a critical model for analyzing »contemporary capitalist societies« (p. 11).

The volume is divided into three parts. The first part, »An unpublished critical model«, seeks »to restore this complex model of radical critique and to interrogate its relevance in order to indicate the ways in which critique can be resumed and continued in the present« (p. 11). The first contribution, by Amy Allen, counters Habermas's criticism of the dialectic, arguing that Adorno and Horkheimer actually illustrate the paradoxes necessary to employing reason effectively, anticipating postcolonial theory in its attempt to expose the inevitable contradictions between non-western societies employing western reason to critique western colonial practices (and vice versa). Hence the dialectic is less about rejecting Enlightenment rationality *tout court* than remaining cognizant of its paradoxes, including the intrinsic relationship



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between reason (or knowledge) and power that might cause us to wield theory more carefully.

The second chapter, by John Abromeit, focuses on hidden tensions between Horkheimer's more diachronic (historicist) and materialist approach and Adorno's more synchronic, genealogical and anthropological method. Abromeit reminds us that the much of the dialectic's critique could be explained, per Horkheimer, not by the inherent flaws in the Enlightenment's emancipatory claims, but by the transformations in bourgeois capitalist and industrial society during the 19th and early 20th century.

Olivier Voirol's contribution likewise emphasizes the productive role that the dialectic has had in advocating empirical social research. To be sure, Voirol concedes that the authors' reject Enlightenment optimism when it comes to the objective and emancipatory potential of (social) science. But their efforts to encourage interdisciplinary social research over abstraction and to interrogate theory with empirical evidence remains welcome, as, for example, in their innovative sociological examinations of antisemitism and the culture industry. The fourth contribution, by Alex Demirović, also pushes back against Habermas by noting that Adorno and Horkheimer never intended to reject the potential of (critical) theory, only to point out the inherent tensions between the Enlightenment's authentic desire for emancipation and its irrational («magical») tendencies, including its potential for domination. Reason can only be liberated from this mythical context, Demirović contends, by recognizing and interrogating its own contradictions through the process of «autoreflexion».

Manfred Gangl embeds the dialectic in contemporary debates about totalitarianism, noting its debt to Friedrich Pollock's theory that state capitalism produces totalitarianism. In a geopolitical context where fascism, not socialism, had replaced free market liberalism, it was only logical that Adorno and Horkheimer would emphasize the «primacy of politics» over dialectical materialism. The editor Katja Genel further situates the dialectic within contemporary debates around totalitarianism theory. For Adorno and Horkheimer it made little sense to differentiate too rigidly between elements of authoritarianism, which exist in all liberal societies, produced by the Enlightenment, and totalitarianism, which merely represents its endpoint.

The second part of the book, «To Clean the Slate and After? The Critical Model of the Dialectic of Reason in Question», examines the scope and radicality of the dialectic in its broader interdisciplinary context. In formulating their critique, Adorno and Horkheimer famously drew on Marx's early works on philosophical anthropology, Nietzsche's «Genealogy of Morals», Freud's «Totem and Taboo», contemporary literary theory, and ethnological research on magic and rituals. To what extent is their appropriation and utilization of such interdisciplinary theories and methods convincing? Agnès Grivaux examines the authors' recourse to psychoanalysis, wondering whether Freud's work supports the premise that reason is inherently self-destructive.

Gérard Raulet's essay, «Ulysses. Victim or Priest», also questions the viability of Adorno and Horkheimer's psychoanalytic reading of Ulysses and whether it reveals the irrationality inherent in



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bourgeois liberalism. Miguel Abensour locates the roots of Adorno and Horkheimer's »suspicion of the Enlightenment« in that of another Enlightenment thinker, Rousseau, whose critical perspective Habermas ostensibly ignores in his desire to rehabilitate Enlightenment rationality. Christoph Menke finds considerable similarities between Derrida's deconstruction and Adorno's »negative dialectics« insofar as art, as one element of reason, ostensibly provides a medium for dissolving non-aesthetic (Enlightenment) reason. Yet both fail to recognize that art is sovereign and independent of reason and may therefore subvert reason from without. Conversely, Agnès Gayraud highlights the sophistication of Adorno and Horkheimer's dystopian reading of the modern West, at least in comparison to Orwell, as the former do not parody utopian philosophy so much as pick it apart from within.

The final section, »Beyond Critique: Another Rational Discourse«, includes four contributions that seek to provide a defense of rational discourse beyond the dialectic. Pierre-François Noppen examines the role of »mimesis« in the dialectic, namely Adorno's and Horkheimer's emphasis on mimicry in the formation of the self, reminding us of their insight that, in contrast to Hegel, capitalist society does not permit a healthy creation of the self because of its »pathogenic« nature. Returning to the relative absence of political economy in the dialectic, Marcos Nobre argues that the methodological emphasis on »philosophical anthropology« was more productive since it inspired interdisciplinary methods and sociological insights that would not have otherwise emerged.

Anne Boissière again takes up the authors' psychoanalytic reading of Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens, focusing on the role of music in understanding the dialectic. As both slave to and master of the music (in the form of his rowers), Ulysses' experience corresponds to the tensions between rationality and enchantment. For music requires a high degree of technical mastery while nonetheless appealing to emotions and irrationality, which have a tendency to cut one off from empirical reality. The final essay, by Esteban Buch, interprets the Paris bombings of November 2015 in the context of a dialectic of sound, which promises both enjoyment and terror. The cacophony of rock music and alarms, sirens and screaming, might simultaneously emancipate and terrify the audience, combining death and pleasure in revealing the mythology embedded in reason.

Although diverse and sometimes abstruse, taken together the contributions to this volume leave no doubt regarding the continued relevance of the dialectic in shining a light, not only on contemporary critical theory, but on the aporias that define our complex 21st century reality.



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