

# REASON Reversed?

## **The Neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School and the Dialectic of Enlightenment**

The Frankfurt Neo-Marxists Horkheimer and Adorno first put forward their theory of the 'dialectic of enlightenment' at a time when fascism was on the rampage in Europe. They said that freedom and enlightenment tended to go into reverse – that freedom and enlightened reason were headed for a dialectical about-turn into blindness, oppression and mass deception.

Marcuse and Habermas elaborated this theme. Even today's post-war society was said to be at the mercy of the dialectic of enlightenment. Our modern world is not free at all, but blinded by ideology. It has come under the spell of a reason that is reversed into its opposite, into a principle of domination and manipulation.

The philosophers of the Frankfurt School want a theoretical programme that will criticise and expose the modern world, as well as a practical programme that will liberate society. But the fundamental question they keep coming back to is how either of these programmes can still be feasible in a system of global repression. And it turns out that the Neo-Marxists are increasingly pessimistic about both theory and practice.

A striking feature of the Neo-Marxist social critique is that it attacks servitude and pseudo-democracy wherever and however they appear. Communism and capitalism are seen as partners in crime. What is more, the Neo-Marxists' diagnosis is that the trouble goes back to the core ideas of enlightenment that were developed in the eighteenth century. But are the Neo-Marxists themselves able to escape from this enlightenment and its dialectical path?

Is reason in the modern world indeed doomed to reversal? Does it inevitably lead to domination and oppression? The Marxist dialectic eventually proves to be a faith, a mythical faith. The author believes that this paralysing faith encourages resignation and despair. It has to be unmasked in favour of a wholesome reason, inspired by a different, messianic faith.

*Reason Reversed?* is an introduction to the theory of Neo-Marxism for students of philosophy, theology and the social sciences. It is also meant to offer guidelines to anyone who shares the author's concern at the way in which modern culture is developing.