Chapter 1

What is the 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'?

Probably no theme has become as characteristic of the Neo-Marxists of the so-called Frankfurt School as the theme that is indicated by the words ‘dialectic of enlightenment’. A book with just that title – *Dialektik der Aufklärung* – was published by Querido in Amsterdam in 1947. At that time, however, the book was hardly noticed. Later on, it was principally students who realised its significance, and in the sixties a few pirated editions began to circulate. The book was eventually republished in 1969 at a time when violent disturbances at the Berkeley campus in California and student revolutionary movements in Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin had brought Neo-Marxism to the forefront of public attention.

The authors of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, took the opportunity to say in the foreword to the new edition that although their critique of culture and science had been developed in the grim days of Nazi terror, it had lost none of its relevance in the meantime. Fascism, they claimed, could not be viewed as something over and done with, as if it were a chance interlude in world history or a brief moment of madness. Rather it was like a gong that announced to the world that developments beyond man’s imagination were yet to come. Fascism was a symptom, just as today the chains that bind the Third World and the renewed rise of left and right-wing dictatorships must be seen as symptoms.

All these phenomena were, and still are, symptoms of the harsh modern world which has embarked on a journey towards a global society of power and automated control. Gigantic economic and political power-blocs are moving towards this total technological integration, driven by internal and objective necessity, and they collide
with each other, leaving behind them a hideous inhuman trail of oppression, dictatorship and inhuman suffering.¹

Oppression and suffering appear not only in the Western world but also – as these Neo-Marxists, to their horror, had to recognise – in countries under communist rule (KV 8, CR ix). Fascism was not an interlude. No, it is the freedom regained after the Second World War that has to be seen as an interlude, a period of temporary relief. Since then the march towards a totally controlled world has resumed, even if it is delayed or perhaps just camouflaged by a margin of individual freedom in the West. However that may be, the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ is working itself out, whether we like it or not (DA ix, DE ix-x).

1.1 The Enchanted World

What exactly does ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ mean? As we shall see, the meaning of the words varies within the Frankfurt School. At the basis, however, is the idea of Horkheimer and Adorno, who relate the word Aufklärung or ‘enlightenment’ to the primeval fear of primitive man. Man must originally have trembled to the very roots of his being at the sinister powers of the cosmos which played with this puny earthly mortal. Enlightenment means that the lamp of reason is lit and that man exerts his thinking to the utmost and frees himself from the clutches of this enchanted and bewitching world. We may think here, for example, of the once notorious book De Betoverde Weereld (The Enchanted World) written by the Amsterdam clergyman Balthasar Bekker in 1692, or, more generally, of the way in which the enlightened men of the 18th century self-confidently strove to achieve maturity. Since then, the Aufklärung programme has been, in Max Weber’s famous phrase, the ‘disenchantment of the world’ (DA 9, DE 3).

Man has always had to cope with fear of the world around him. In the past this fear was, according to the Frankfurt School, absorbed by ‘mimesis’, i.e. by following and imitating macrocosmic processes in one’s own life. Mimesis was as it were the

umbilical cord that linked man to mother nature.² Man sought to escape nature’s threat by uniting himself to nature in mimicry. He tried to repeat the cycle of life and the rhythm of nature in the dull beat of drums and dance, in magic ritual, and mythological participation. Man abandoned himself to nature he threw himself at nature, and under nature’s control he was nameless, impersonal and collective.

But there are two possibilities for man in confrontation with nature. Nature can master man or man can master nature – control or be controlled (DA 38, DE 32). The Aufklärung, according to Horkheimer and his followers, represented a choice for the second alternative: the desacralisation of nature, the break-up of myth, the coming-of-age of man, a stand for individual rights and dignity, autonomous use of reason, distance between the subject and the object, control and calculations, experimental science, mathematics and logic, mechanisation of labour, industrial production and world-wide traffic in goods and raw materials (DA 19, DE 13). From the dim beginnings of civilisation, this movement of enlightenment has been quietly under way. From the 18th century – not for nothing called the age of enlightenment – it has revealed its emancipatory and expansionist aspirations in insolent self-assurance. Primitive terror in the face of nature has swung right around into a strategy of rational thinking about nature and rational control of nature (DA 21, 46, 189, DE 15, 39, 180).

1.2 Dialectics

Here we turn to what is called the ‘dialectic’ of the Aufklärung. Over the centuries the Enlightenment has failed to deliver what it promised. It has changed into its opposite. Enlightened reason is in the process of eliminating its ideals of reasonableness, freedom, justice and dignity. It is in danger of losing its grip on nature. It is on the point of destroying itself (DA 3, DE xiii).

How has all of this come about? The craving for knowledge and control in Western science and technology has proved to be totalitarian. The craving for power did not stop short at man and human nature. Domination of nature involves domination

of man, says Horkheimer. Man and society becomerationally dominated, and within these power-structures man can no longer be human. He loses his individual significance, his unique value. The meaning of being human is now reduced to the function which man fulfils within industrialised society.

Who is to be held responsible for this development? Not a single dictator, not some particular class of oppressors. Man has trapped himself in the spiral of guilt and tragedy. Man is both oppressed and oppressor, not only a victim but also an instrument of oppression, taking his share of guilt and paying his share of tribute in the social system. Man is deformed by the social structures but mutilates himself as well. For the greater glory of technical ingenuity all other functions of the human self are discredited (KV 153, ER 162). Man has degraded himself into an instrument or the object. Worker and industrialist alike have degenerated into extensions of the established order.

In this light it is fair to speak of a dialectic, a reversal in world history. Having emerged from a harsh and pitiless nature, man sinks back into harsh and inhuman forms of existence. Western man’s expansive urge to grasp and regulate the entirety of physical and human nature has become the independent principle of blind domination (DA 48, DE 42), later succinctly termed the Prinzip Herrschaft by Adorno. It is as if blind nature, now working under the fancy name of social order, is once more playing with men.

The consequences are serious, especially for man himself. The Aufklärung has made an about-turn into mythology and mimesis. Mythical faith in the cycle of seasons returns as mythical veneration for the laws of nature discovered by science. To control nature, man must and does adapt himself to nature and nature’s laws. Free thought destroys itself as an ‘organ of adaptation’ (DA 18, 48, DE 12, 42). With all of

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3 KV 94, ER 93. Horkheimer originally had a more positive view of traditional science and technology, as can be seen from his 1937 paper ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, a foundational article in the Frankfurt School’s theory of science. Following Marx, he maintained that, whatever our criticism of society, the intellectual technique of control over nature ought to be developed as far as possible (M. Horkheimer, Critical Theory, p.216). Nevertheless, the theme of the dialectic of enlightenment is already to be found here in principle. The critical social theory can in fact be summarised, he says, in the existential judgment ‘that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.’

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this comes a new mythicisation of reality: the language of facts has become sacrosanct (DA x, DE x).

Thus the mimetic impulse, primitive adaptation to lifeless nature, – despite the taboo on it – is far from conquered in the modern world. It has seized our economic existence; it has been rationalised in the automated instruction of mental processes. The dull thudding of the factory, the drill of disciplined labour and the restless routine of hard work and clocking on and off are the heartbeat of modern life: a ritual, conditioned identification of countless, nameless, interchangeable workers with the production system.

We could speak here of a fundamental alienation. Man is alienated from himself. He is also alienated from the world around him, a world which is equally misused. Man no longer knows where he fits in. He let himself be handled as a tool without a will of its own. Sooner or later he can therefore become a mere instrument in the hands of unscrupulous dictators who have managed to get to the control panels of the social system. In retrospect, the Aufklärung turns out to be not universal enlightenment but universal blindness (DA 48, DE 42). In this way it plays into the hands of totalitarian movements. Fascism was indeed not exceptional but symptomatic (DA 175, DE 166).

1.3 The Aufklärung and Hegel and Marx

The concept of the dialectic of enlightenment is thematically complex. The first element in it is the spirit of the Aufklärung, i.e. Western man’s axiomatic belief in reason as the foundation of freedom and the source of culture (DA 3, DE xiii), a faith whose formulation goes back to men like Kant. In this thematic structure, the voice of Hegel can also be heard, inasmuch as the uncomplicated 18th century belief in progress (in the sense of a linear development towards freedom and light) had to make room for the dialectic principle, i.e. Hegel’s idea that it is only through oppositions that historical development can reach glorious freedom. Further, the

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4 KV 113, ER 115-116, maintains that the mimetic taboo especially affects any art which is authentic, ‘the refuge of mimetic behaviour’. See his Ästhetische Theorie, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1973, pp.178, 86.

thematic structure also contains a good dose of crisis–philosophy, for faith in progress is abandoned and dialectical reversal is explained as dialectical decline. Progression is interpreted as regression. It is on this issue that the Neo–Marxists can tie in with Schopenhauer’s pessimism (Horkheimer), Nietzsche’s nihilism (Adorno) or Freud’s or Heidegger’s critique of culture (Marcuse). Finally, it is above all dialectical materialism which has been assimilated into the composition of the dialectic of enlightenment. Here I am thinking of Marx’s analysis of Western capitalism as a system in which man wanted, by means of labour, to free himself from nature, but in which he has nevertheless ended up alienated from himself by his enslavement to the world of so–called ‘commodities’ – economic goods, which are actually the result of human and social work, have been made into something independent and given mythological expression.\(^6\)

In all of this we are dealing with a form of ‘Neo–Marxism. All sorts of key points in Marx’s teachings have been pushed aside, including the theory of the class struggle and the idea of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject in the making. In the Neo–Marxist view, as we have already mentioned, even the workers are enveloped by the established order. The web of myth has been woven across all strata and classes of the population. Here is to be found the prime reason for the Neo–Marxists’ cultural pessimism. It is also why Marx’s doctrine of an ideal state has evaporated. Horkheimer hardly mentions it, and then only in terms of a ‘utopia’ (KV 173, ER 186).

1.4 Neo-Marxism in Distress

Neo-Marxism is in distress because it mistrusts the Enlightenment but nevertheless cannot see how Western thought can deploy itself outside of the Aufklärung tradition. On the one hand, the Neo-Marxist wants to cling to the idea of self-enlightening reason, and he rejects all romantic irrationalism as fruitless escape. On the other hand, he is forced to brand reason as the ‘organ of domination’ which is party to the ‘guilt’ of cohesive social blindness (DA 45, 48, DE 39, 41–42). And it makes no difference

\(^6\) Marx spoke in this connection of the ‘fetishism of commodities’, i.e. the mythical and metaphysical projection of the social character of work on to the products themselves. Modern man has fallen under their spell as if they were a ‘second Nature’. See Capital Part I, ch. I, section 4. According to Marx this spell is broken once man opts for a new form of production, a view which the Neo-Marxists do not entirely share (cf. 2.4 and 7.3).
whether this blindness is expressed in the viciousness of a concentration camp or in the soul-destroying organisation of a factory or in the insipidness of industrial art and mass culture.  

Neo-Marxism’s distress is reason’s distress. Reason can order and reason can obey – what reason can not do is to free itself from the structures of authority and command. Reason cannot extricate itself from the dialectic of its own development; indeed, at every step it seems to become yet more entangled. Modern man’s mythical-scientific respect for the given facts – facts which man himself has moulded(!) – eventually becomes in itself a cast-iron fact which makes man powerless and which ushers in an inevitable and even fatal development. The scientist comprehends and masters the detail, but the entirety retaliates by making itself independent. It becomes an uncomprehended power-structure which turns the tables on man and blinds and stuns even the enlightened self-assured scientist. Mythology has absorbed freedom, even freedom of thought. Where man neglects thinking and reflection, thinking takes its revenge on him in the impersonal structures of mathematics, technology and organisation (DA 48, 47, DE 41, 40).

Thus a twofold question arises. First, how can society free itself from the dialectic of enlightenment? Second, how can reason escape from this dialectic? Here is the crux, the doubly heavy cross which the ‘critical theory’ has to carry.

Before I take a closer look at this question myself, I want to trace how the Frankfurt philosophers have searched for a way out. We shall consider, in the following order:

• Horkheimer and Adorno’s ideas in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and related publications from the forties (ch.2),

• the problems that Marcuse deals with in *Eros and Civilization* (ch.3) and *One Dimensional Man* (ch.4),

• the negative tenor of Adorno’s chief work *Negative Dialectics* (ch.5),

• Habermas’s ideas about recent capitalist ideology (ch.6) and his critique in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (ch.7),

• and Horkheimer’s religious solution dating from about 1970 (ch.8).

• We conclude with an evaluation and radicalisation of the criticisms (ch.9).

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7 KV 165, ER 176. I take ‘industrial art’ to refer to intervention by industrial techniques of reproduction in the internal structure of art. This point was stressed by Walter Benjamin. Adorno, to the contrary, considered this increasing intervention as a degeneration of art. See J. Habermas, ‘Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik’, *op. cit.*, pp.184.