

*Adorno and Horkheimer: Enlightenment and Antisemitism*¹

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Introduction

There is little doubt that the holocaust has had a recognisable effect upon critical theory in general and critical accounts of antisemitism in particular. Perhaps most significant is the idea that the holocaust brings into question the entire edifice of modern *praxis*; that antisemitism and the holocaust becomes the index or marker of the failure of modernity as a whole.

In particular this notion manifests itself in a distrust of modern modes of social scientific enquiry, with the assertion that rather than being a tool of explanation and understanding, social sciences collaborated with the phenomena in question. As a consequence, accounts of antisemitism written either during or after the holocaust have sought an intellectual basis that is believed to free itself from such complicity. However, as this essay discusses, at least in relation to Adorno and Horkheimer's thought, problems nonetheless remain.

These problems can be encapsulated in one overarching theme: that 'post-holocaust' critical accounts of antisemitism fail to achieve the necessary distance between themselves and the phenomena they are investigating. Indeed, this point manifests itself in the recognition of antisemitism as a uniquely *modern* phenomenon, one that enters the world at the same time as the advent of political emancipation. Thus, by representing antisemitism and the holocaust as modernity's index, the quest for emancipation is itself called into question. And, in this way, the antisemitic notion that emancipation was always doomed is replicated.

This despondency is echoed in the idea that, far from producing absolute freedom, modern emancipation creates absolute unfreedom or domination. With reference to the attempt to account for the emergence and development of antisemitism, a common motif is that this phenomenon only arises once humanity takes on the characteristic of the herd or mass, and as such, is devoid of autonomy and its accompanying subjectivity. This obviously leads to serious questions being asked about notions of legal and moral responsibility.

Further ways in which critical accounts actually echo the antisemitic worldview include the idea that antisemitism, though produced by the nature of modernity, can be located in a realm or sphere in some way distinct from modern society itself. As a consequence of this perception, the idea that society is an 'imposition' upon a more primeval mode of existence (again a mainstay of antisemitic thought) is given significance. Moreover, this also reproduces

¹ I would like to especially thank Robert Fine and Alison Diduck for their unflagging assistance in the preparation of this paper.

the popular notion of antisemitism as 'latent', rather than attempting to understand it as a consequence of *visible* developments within society and social relations.

Finally, issues arise as to the representation of 'the Jews'. In Adorno and Horkheimer's work, as in that of many others,² the analysis of the emergence of antisemitism focuses almost entirely upon the antisemites; i.e. that is, it focuses upon how the citizen or modern social actor becomes the antisemite. Implicit within this focus, therefore, is the development that the Jews *as Jews* (in their flesh and blood) disappear from view and are replaced by a *concept* of 'the Jews', and the connection between concept and reality is rarely considered. Thus, the exclusion of Jews sought by antisemitism is again reproduced within critical accounts.

Moreover, this theoretical exclusion of Jews is replicated and reinforced within the content of the concept itself. Most importantly, the concept of 'the Jews' implies that of all members of society, it is only they who are said to stand outside universal historical developments. Indeed, they are often represented as embodying the very aspects of existence that modernity excludes, in the present case, notions of (unregulated) nature and transcendent freedom. And, in this way, the antisemitic image of 'the Jew' as standing outside of history, as well as the myth of a Jewish 'essence' is repeated. This point is reinforced through the notion, again present in antisemitic thought, that the Jews themselves are incapable of being truly emancipated because of their very 'nature'.

In this paper, I attempt to draw out these difficulties as manifested in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the consequences that follow for critical theory's engagement with the phenomena of antisemitism and the holocaust.

The Dialectic of Enlightenment

Adorno and Horkheimer first outlined in 1941 their ideas on 'Elements of antisemitism: limits of enlightenment'. The chapter with this title was written between 1941 and 1945 and was published in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*³ in 1947. Writing during and in the immediate aftermath of the holocaust, they addressed the complexity of the relationship of antisemitism to modernity in the shape of a new research outline for the social sciences. The analysis of the elements of antisemitism was seen to require a new social scientific approach, including the bringing together of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud in order to construct an adequate theoretical frame, but the assumption remained that the phenomenon of modern, political antisemitism was susceptible to explanation with the tools of a recognisable social science.

One of the most common themes in all critical accounts of antisemitism is

² See for example H. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, Brace and Co., London, 1979); Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Polity Press, Oxford, 1991); Z. Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Polity Press, Oxford, 1993); J.-P. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (Schocken Books, New York, 1995).

³ Verdon, London, 1989.

that something more is at stake than 'merely' antisemitism: that the modern animosity to Jews is in some way representative of other, deeper problems and frictions within modernity itself. This is certainly true of the account given by Adorno and Horkheimer. One of their crucial contributions to our understanding of the relationship between modernity and antisemitism is a more focused critique of the concept of 'enlightenment' itself in which they call into question what has come to be termed the 'Western tradition' in general and the praxis of emancipation in particular.

Parallels with the thought of Hannah Arendt⁴ are illuminating. Like Arendt, Adorno and Horkheimer wrestle with the difficulty of avoiding a collapse into nihilism. Just as Arendt argues that the rise of antisemitism 'does not mean that what came crashing down in the crisis (perhaps the most profound crisis in Western history since the downfall of the Roman Empire) was mere façade' [Arendt; 1979; 9], so Adorno and Horkheimer argue that 'Enlightenment which is in possession of itself and coming to power can break the bounds of enlightenment' [1989; 208]. However, some twenty years later, in *Negative Dialectic*,⁵ this 'melancholic' optimism was replaced by a more consistently pessimistic attitude. Adorno later lost confidence in the belief that antisemitism, which he signified under the name of 'Auschwitz', could be explained within the terms of even a renewed form of social scientific knowledge and research. It will be argued here that the seeds of his turn to 'nihilism' were already present within the account of antisemitism that he and Horkheimer presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Critical theories of antisemitism can be roughly divided between those schools that understand antisemitism as a reaction to modern social and political conditions,⁶ and those that perceive it as a result or product of modern social and political conditions or as a potentiality inherent within them.⁷ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno's and Horkheimer's thought on antisemitism falls into the latter camp: antisemitism for them is associated with the concept and practices of fascism which in turn are associated with a specific moment within capitalist development. Fascism is understood in this work as an emergent property of bourgeois society in its imperialist phase and also as a part of the social and political praxis which is generated within this

⁴ Hannah Arendt's most sustained treatment of antisemitism is to be found in the first section of *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, Brace and Co., London, 1979).

⁵ T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, tr. E. B. Ashton (Routledge, London, 1973).

⁶ See for example K. Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in L. Colletti (ed.) *Early Writings* (Penguin, London, 1992); F. W. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. and ed. W. Kaufmann (Vintage, New York, 1989); J.-P. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (Schocken Books, New York, 1995).

⁷ This approach is especially characteristic of postmodern accounts of antisemitism and the holocaust; see for example J.-F. Lyotard, 'The Grip (*Mainmise*)', *Heidegger and 'the Jews': A Conference in Vienna and Freiburg*; 'Europe, the Jews, and the Book', in *Political Writings* (1993), tr. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (UCL Press, London); *Heidegger and 'the Jews'*, tr. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990). For an account of Lyotard's understanding of the holocaust, see D. Seymour, 'Lyotard: Emancipation, Antisemitism and the Jews', in *Social Theory After the Holocaust*, ed. R. Fine and C. D. Taylor (Manchester University Press, forthcoming). See also Z. Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters* (Polity Press, Oxford, 1987; *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Polity Press, Oxford, 1991); *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Polity Press, Oxford, 1993).

phase. In this respect, Adorno and Horkheimer replicate Arendt's 'chronology' of antisemitism. They differ with her, however, on a crucial point.

Arendt argued a subtle 'in-between' position. She thought that whilst the roots of antisemitism could be traced back to elements present within the prior period, its dominance 'over all competing "isms"' [Arendt, 1979; 9] represented the birth of an entire new political structure which she conceptualised as 'totalitarianism'. Adorno and Horkheimer emphasise the first part of Arendt's argument—the roots of antisemitism within modern bourgeois society—at the expense of the second part—the newness or originality of modern antisemitism. Instead, they emphasise the compatibility of antisemitism with the development of capitalism. This difference is reflected in the following contrast: for Arendt the totalitarian form of antisemitism represents the demise of the nation-state and nationalism; whilst for Adorno and Horkheimer the fascist form of antisemitism is perceived as the 'pinnacle' of nationalism itself. This aspect of Adorno's and Horkheimer's work reaches its apotheosis in their argument that the Fascist form of antisemitism is merely an aspect of 'mass society' in which no specific qualities attach to antisemitism itself.

A further significant difference between Arendt and the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* concerns their respective understandings of the relationship of antisemitism to modernity. Adorno and Horkheimer understand antisemitism as a modern phenomenon, yet paradoxically trace its 'elements' far back in time—much further than does Arendt—and see it as an admixture of both modern and archaic modes of domination. It may be accurate to say that for Adorno and Horkheimer antisemitism arises as the coming to the surface of forms of domination that had been expelled or repressed by the onward march of enlightenment itself. This is not to say that by resorting to 'pre-modern' factors in their account of antisemitism, Adorno and Horkheimer return to what Arendt termed 'eternal antisemitism' [Arendt, 1979; 7]; it is more the case that they see repressed archaic forms of domination as attaching themselves to antisemitism, and to the modern scapegoating of Jews, as the result of thoroughly modern conditions.

Finally, it is appropriate to note here another theme that runs through *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that of the relationship of real Jews to the concept of 'the Jews'. Adorno and Horkheimer are interested in explaining the link between antisemitism and 'the Jews' and seek to explain why Fascism should turn Jews (in their flesh and blood) into the concept of 'the Jews'. However, they do not invert this question to examine the Jews themselves and *their* relationship to the concept of 'the Jews'. This lacuna is reflected in the organisation of 'Elements of Antisemitism'. It comprises seven sections. As the chapter progresses, Adorno and Horkheimer move from a discussion of Jews to the emergence of the antisemitic category of 'the Jews' exclusively through a discussion of antisemites and antisemitism. In this process, actual relations between Jews and other people(s) disappear so that antisemitism is explained solely in terms of the antisemites. Inherent in this is the idea that antisemitism represents a form of 'projection' which has little or nothing to do with Jews themselves and is attached to Jews regardless of their own actions and agency.

In this regard, Adorno and Horkheimer remain well within the terms of a 'scapegoat' thesis, which

implies that the scapegoat might have been anyone else as well [and] upholds the perfect innocence of the victim, an innocence that insinuates not only that no evil was done but that nothing at all was done which might possibly have a connection with the issue at stake [Arendt, 1979; 5].

Antisemitism and the Dialectic of Enlightenment

In the 'Introduction' to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer state that antisemitism's 'irrationalism' is deduced 'from the nature of the dominant ratio itself, and the world which corresponds with its image' [1989; xvii]. Thus, antisemitism is to be understood as an 'irrationalism' that emerges from its relationship to modern rationalism, each produced in relation to the other through the dialectic of enlightenment. They characterise antisemitism as a 'by-product' or more accurately a 'waste product' of the 'dominant ratio'. This notion of 'waste' not only brings into focus the relationship between antisemitism and the 'dominate ratio', but also the relationships to the body that such a metaphor implies.

If the dominant ratio and the rationalism and emancipation associated with it is implicit within enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer then show how the irrationalism, of which antisemitism is a part, is produced from it. This they do by highlighting a series of paradoxes. In the opening lines of the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 'The Concept of Enlightenment', Adorno and Horkheimer state that '[i]n the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates with disaster triumphant' [1989; 3]. They seek an answer to the question of why enlightenment and disaster have run together through the relationship of two theses: 'myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology' [1989; xvii]. Their argument, in brief, is that within myth there is contained an element of enlightenment in the sense that myth seeks to emancipate men from the domination of nature; whilst within enlightenment there is the mythical idea that nature is an unchanging and unchangeable force to which one must submit. In explaining how such inversions come to pass, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasise the mediation of social relations between people through their relationship to nature. This mediation points to the inversion that occurs in their dialectic of enlightenment: that human efforts to dominate nature and thus to emancipate ourselves from nature end up by our being dominated by it to such an extent that domination itself appears as natural, rational and eternal.

The central element of this thesis is contained in the idea of the instrumentalisation of reason: that is, the idea that reason—the ability to think and reflect upon the world—has entered into the service of domination. To explicate this thesis, Adorno and Horkheimer draw upon Marx's analysis of 'commodity fetishism' [1995]. They argue that inherent within the instrumentalisation

of reason, especially in its modern positivistic form, is the perception of the world and all things within it in terms of their quantitative rather than qualitative (and unique) aspects. In this way the nature of things, i.e. their specific qualities, are replaced by their merely abstract and universal forms as measures of quantity. The triumph of form over content is completed through the 'sublimation' of commodities and the substitution of exchange-value for use-value. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that in the triumph of formalism not only are 'qualities dissolved in thought, but men are brought to actual conformity' [1989; 12]. In a process of generalised exchange, in which each can be exchanged for the other, all individual qualities, all aspects of uniqueness, all forms of 'particularity' must be erased as a threat to the 'generality' that is the foundation of positivistic thought:

Men were given their individuality as unique in each case, different to all others, so that it might all the more surely be made the same as any other. But because the unique self never wholly disappeared, even after the liberalistic epoch, the Enlightenment has always sympathised with the social impulse. The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual: for individuality makes a mockery of the kind of society which would turn all individuals into the one collectivity. The horde which so assuredly appears in the organisation of the Hitler Youth is not a return to barbarism but the triumph of repressive equality . . . [1989; 13]

Further, any metaphysics which goes beyond the empirically given, is ruled out of court, given the status of 'superstition' and 'myth'. The most 'progressive' stage disavows and criticises its immediate predecessor as 'metaphysical' and all that is deemed 'superstition' thereby becomes the 'other' or 'enemy' of enlightenment in its latest, most rationalistic stage.

Adorno and Horkheimer thus highlight the paradoxical situation of individual existence that arises within the modern rationalistic age—to survive men must at one and the same time annihilate themselves. This relationship between 'self-preservation' and 'self-destruction'⁸ is explained through reference to the nature of modern science, its application to the natural world through technology and the capitalist economic imperative. The argument rests on the inversion of man's domination over nature into its opposite. Modern means of production reflect this inversion through the repetitive cycle of technological production. Through technology, human beings work incessantly upon what 'is', i.e. that which through positivist science is perceived as unchanging and formal nature. In their relations to the machine (as a virtual appendage) they reflect the never-ending sameness of nature through their own repetitive and unchanging work. They must become like the 'nature' upon which they work and give up any notion of their own specific individuality or uniqueness. It is in this sense that reference is made to self-preservation as self-destruction: for individuals to live, they must deny themselves.

Implicit in this argument, Adorno and Horkheimer point to the manner in which the dialectic of enlightenment negates the sovereignty of man and promotes the 're-introduction' of fear. It is modern instrumental reason, accord-

⁸ For a detailed discussion of these aspects, see *DE*, pp.27–31.

ing to this account, which gives rise to the 'mass', the 'collective', the 'horde'. Human beings still live in fear, fear of the forces of nature, and should their incessant activity cease for a moment or should they reflect for a moment upon their condition, they will be confronted by that which a positivistically driven rationality declared out of court: the uniqueness, diversity and specificity of nature both in its organic and human forms. One of the psychological consequences of this inversion, one that is important for the analysis of antisemitism, is the 'obsessive' character of modern existence and the repression, projection and paranoia which goes along with it.

In this account of the dialectic of enlightenment, it is 'the Jews' who stand for that which is prohibited within the modern age: metaphysics and transcendence, nature and diversity. 'The Jews' come to represent the particularism that has no place within the rational order of things and the metaphysics which is reduced to 'superstitious mumbo-jumbo' by its fascist successor. They become the 'other' of antisemites who are themselves reduced to conformity like 'blinded men robbed of their subjectivity [and] set loose as subjects' [1989; 171]). For Adorno and Horkheimer, antisemitism is not of itself integral to the world of late capitalism and it is implied that fascism could survive and prevail as a system of domination without the murder of millions of individuals who fell into or were forced into the concept of 'the Jews'. From a purely rationalistic standpoint, they argue, antisemitism is 'irrational' in that it does not serve the dominant order in any utilitarian way: neither economically nor politically nor militarily. However, because of its very lack of necessity, it serves, as Adorno and Horkheimer phrase it, as a 'luxury for the masses' [1989; 170]. Antisemitism serves as a 'luxury' because it permits that which in the normal course of events is denied: it is waste in the sense of being useless or superfluous. One of the permissions granted by antisemitism is involvement in actions that are irrational, that serve no purpose, that break free from the incessant necessity of the scientific-technological world in which they are implicated.

Throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer stress the manner in which enlightenment incorporates what at first sight appears either as unnecessary or as opposed to itself. This is the case for the 'luxury' of antisemitism. As they state,

[t]he fact that the demonstration of its economic uselessness tends to increase rather than to lessen the attraction to the national panacea, points to its true nature: it does not help men but panders to their urge to destroy. The true benefit for the Volksgenosse lies in collective approval of his anger. The smaller the actual advantages are, the more stubbornly he supports the movement against his better judgement. Anti-Semitism has proved immune to the argument of inadequate 'profitability'. It is a luxury for the masses [1989; 170]

Here Adorno and Horkheimer point to the function of antisemitism within the context of the enlightened world as an outlet for instincts and impulses that are forbidden in the course of 'progress'. By providing an outlet for these 'taboos', antisemitism permits the even smoother running of the rationalised structure itself: it provides a discharge for the 'superfluous' energy denied by

the structures of instrumental rationality, whilst simultaneously giving rise to an unparalleled barbarity—a barbarity that is all the more vicious because of its otherwise forbidden nature.⁹ The metaphor of waste relates to bodily evacuation and to the taboos that attach to it within modern civilisation. Antisemitism is presented as a kind of revel within the sphere of the prohibited—a partaking of the forbidden fruit that is endowed with the aura of taboo.

Adorno and Horkheimer liken antisemitism to an ‘idiosyncrasy’ in which its constituents, ‘the Jews’ and the antisemites, represent the twin aspects of what remains ‘taboo’ within the overarching scheme of things. As they state,

[t]he old answer of all the anti-Semites is an appeal to idiosyncrasy But idiosyncrasy inheres in the particular. The general, that which fits into the functional context of society, is considered to be natural. But nature which has not been transformed through the channels of conceptual order into something purposeful, the grating sound of a stylus moving over a slate, the *haut gout* which recalls filth and decomposition, the sweat which appears on the brow of the busy man—everything which has failed to keep up, or which infringes the commandments which are the sedimented progress of the centuries—has a penetrating effect: it arouses disgust [1989; 180]

Antisemitism represents an ‘idiosyncrasy’ which, though disallowed by the progressive stages of enlightenment, serves enlightenment’s entanglement with domination: ‘Fascism is also totalitarian in that it seeks to make the rebellion of suppressed nature against domination directly useful to domination’ [1989; 183]. The tabooed idiosyncrasy is termed ‘uncontrolled mimesis’ [1989; 181] of that which civilisation outlaws. In the ‘organic adaptation to others’ characteristic of fascism, such mimesis has not been dispensed with but has come under increasing control, and Adorno and Horkheimer point to the two stages through which the control of human relationships to nature through mimesis has passed, ‘by organised control of mimesis in the magical phase: and by rational practice, by work, in the historical phase’ [1989; 180]. The irony is that modern positivistic thought, and the technological practice with which it is identified, is itself mimetic behaviour and sublimates the overt ‘primitive’ or ‘mythical’ fear of nature identified with earlier phases,

Society continues threatening nature as the lasting organised compulsion which is reproduced in individuals as rational self-preservation and rebounds on nature as social domination over it. Science is repetition, refined into observed regularity, and preserved in stereotypes. The mathematical formula is regression handled consciously, just as the magical ritual used to be; it is the most sublimated manifestation of mimicry All that remains of the adaptation to nature is the obduracy against nature [1989; 181].

In this positivistic-technological world, in which all spontaneous (organic) relations to nature are prohibited, people are unable to confront their own repressed nature. Perceiving such tendencies as an ‘isolated remnant’ [1989; 180]; and ashamed of them, these individuals (in the name of self-preservation)

⁹ In his excellent and informative *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, Simon Jarvis points to the anti-capitalist nature of antisemitism. Although quite correct, it appears to me that Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument leads to a far deeper critique of ‘enlightenment’ *per se*.

refuse to acknowledge them as their own and project them (with hostility) onto others.

'The Jews' as the Representatives of Nature

Enter the Jews. The Jews fulfill this role because of their social position within the sphere of circulation, a sphere which vanishes from sight with the emergence of 'mass society' and appears outmoded and superfluous. The Jews' methods of 'doing business' now take on the characteristics of a natural disposition,

They seem to translate long verified human relations back into individual power relations: in trying to influence the purchaser by flattery, the debtor by threats and the creditor by entreaty. [1989; 182]

Since this 'relationship' of idiosyncrasy (of particularity) concerns apparent aspects of nature now declared out of bounds, the whole transaction takes place in the sphere of the tabooed. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the attraction of antisemitism as a political phenomenon is precisely due to the fact that it permits dominated individuals to partake in the praxis that was hitherto denied them. It is, therefore, a 'rationalised idiosyncrasy' in the sense that Fascism permits it in the interests of a more efficient domination.

The mental energy harnessed by political anti-Semitism is this rationalised idiosyncrasy. All the pretexts over which the Föhrer and his followers reach agreement, imply surrender to the mimetic attraction without any open infringement of the reality principle—honourably, so to speak. [1989; 185]

It is in this sense, that Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that 'the persecutor and persecuted belong to the same sphere of evil' [1989; 171]. Moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer are also implying that, within this permission, to lose themselves in nature, the antisemites are in fact mimicking their own projected nature. In other words, they see in 'the Jews' a reflection of their own simultaneously repressed and desired nature. It is for this reason that they conclude that, antisemites 'cannot stand the Jews, yet imitate them' [1989; 183].

In developing this argument, Adorno and Horkheimer point to an element of antisemitism which has caught the attention of other critical thinkers: the idea that antisemitism can only be understood as a mass phenomenon and depends upon the simultaneous coming together of 'individuals' who have been 'robbed of their subjectivity'. It is in developing this point that the metaphor of waste as bodily evacuation comes to the fore. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the antisemite loses himself in his 'relationship' to the projected object of his own natural and tabooed self—'the Jews'. This point is explained by reference to 'smell' as the most 'natural' of mimetic behaviour, since in smell one becomes a part of the object itself. Smell is the most prohibited means of mimesis since the division between self and nature that is so essential an aspect of the dialectic of enlightenment, is completely overcome:

The multifarious nuances of the sense of smell embody the archetypal longing

for the lower forms of existence, for direct unification with circumambient nature, with the earth and mud. Of all the senses, that of smell—which is attracted without objectifying—bears closest witness to the urge to lose oneself in and become the ‘other’. When we see, we remain what we are; but when we smell, we are taken over by otherness. Hence the sense of smell is considered a disgrace in civilisation, the sign of lower social strata, lesser races and base animals [1989; 184].

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that for ‘civilised individuals’ involvement in such forbidden behaviour is only permissible if it serves a given end, which in this case is, chillingly, its ‘elimination’, ‘[a]nyone who seeks out ‘bad’ smells, in order to destroy them may imitate sniffing to his heart’s content, taking unrationalized pleasure in the experience’ [1989; 184].

In these tabooed but permitted acts, the antisemite dissolves himself in the authority that permits them and into the herd of other antisemites. It is this which Adorno and Horkheimer understand as the ‘schema of anti-Semitic reaction’.

Anti-Semites gather together to celebrate the moment when authority permits what is usually forbidden, and become a collective only in that common purpose [1989; 184].

It is in this authorised acting out of the taboo that Adorno and Horkheimer find the meaning within the apparent meaninglessness and irrationality of the rituals, uniforms and symbols of the ‘Fascist formula’. They are an ‘imitation of magic practices, the mimesis of mimesis’ [1989; 183]—a plastic copy of those modes of archaic domination, repressed but now placed into the service of domination. This is the way that fascism makes ‘the rebellion of suppressed nature against domination directly useful to domination’ [1989; 183].

The question remains: why is it the Jews who come to represent barred and tabooed nature? Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that the Jews became the focus of this infernal process—and came to represent ‘nature’—because they were perceived as not only distinct from the ‘national society’ but also as a threat to it. This was the case, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, whether or not ‘the Jews as individuals really do still have those mimetic features which awaken the dread malady, or whether such features are suppressed’ [1989; 185]. As a mirror of the projection of natural impulses which are those of their persecutors, ‘the Jews’ become the subconscious desires of the antisemites themselves. Not only are the allegations against the Jews—that they seek world domination, that they are purveyors of black magic, that they seek to poison and destroy the world—the subconscious desires of the antisemite, but since their persecution rests upon primitive modes of domination, mimesis and magic, now given rational purpose, they become the victim of other, related primitive practices, including that of sacrifice:

Disguised as accusation, the subconscious desire of the aboriginal inhabitants to return to the mimetic practice of sacrifice finds conscious fulfillment. When all the horror of prehistory which has been overlaid with civilisation is rehabilitated as rational interest by projection onto the Jews, there is no restriction. The horror can be carried out in practice, and in practical implementation goes

beyond the evil content of the projection [1989; 186]

Whilst it may appear from this account that Adorno and Horkheimer treated the concept of 'the Jews' as one created solely by antisemites—and in so doing implied a version of the 'scapegoat' thesis—such a view should be moderated by an account of the specific reasons of why the Jews became the 'chosen people', i.e. those 'branded as evil by those who are absolutely evil' [1989; 168]. Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledge that Jews themselves have been active within the dialectic of enlightenment, and so have partaken of the movement in which 'civilisation is the victory of society over nature which changes everything into pure nature' [1989; 186]. They indicate, however, that in their contribution to this progress, Jews succeeded in avoiding the reversion into mythology:

They did not eliminate adaptation to nature, but converted it into a series of duties in the form of ritual. They have retained the aspect of expiation, but have avoided the reversion to mythology which symbolism implies....They are declared guilty of something which they, as the first burghers, were the first to overcome: the lure of base instincts, reversion to animality and to the ground, the service of images [1989; 186].

It is also to be noted that just as the persecution visited upon them was the admixture of archaic and modern forms of domination, so too were Jews associated with both stages. The paradox, however, is that the justification for the attack upon them is based upon their ability to escape that which their murderers have themselves fallen victim to—the myth of the mimesis of nature and its associations of barbaric animalism and sacrifice.

Because [the Jews] invented the concept of kosher meat, they are persecuted as swine. The anti-Semites make themselves the executors of the Old Testament: they want the Jews who have eaten of the tree of knowledge to return unto dust [1989; 186].

The implication is that antisemitism represented a reversion not only to nature but to the 'basest' aspect of nature. For Adorno and Horkheimer, antisemitism was the vehicle for a crisis of the 'Western tradition' that far exceeds Jewish / gentile relations themselves. It became the negative resolution of the dialectic of enlightenment—a resolution that destroys not only the Jews and the antisemite, but also the very notion of subjectivity.

'The Jews' as Representatives of Freedom

Not only do the Jews represent nature, but in Adorno's and Horkheimer's view of antisemitism, 'the Jews' are also representatives of 'metaphysics'. This point draws upon another of the central themes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno and Horkheimer understand the dialectic of enlightenment as the gradual increase of a positivism that refuses any meaning to the world other than the appearance of the empirically given. They argue that this refusal is inherent within the instrumentalisation of reason and its implication with domination over nature.

For the scientific mind, the separation of thought from business for the purpose of adjusting actuality, departure from the privileged area of real existence, is as insane and self-destructive as the primitive magician would consider stepping out of the magic circle he has prepared for his invocation; in both cases the offence against the taboo will actually result in the malefactor's ruin. The mastery of nature draws the circle into which the criticism of pure reason banished thought [1989; 26].

In other words, reason is robbed of its ability to reflect critically upon its own categories of thought and the idea that anything may be thought beyond the empirically given, metaphysics in general, is disavowed and endowed with the label of myth. Metaphysics shares the same fate as that of the nature that remains 'outside' or 'beyond' rational mastery: 'nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear' [1989; 16].

Yet, as in their discussion of nature, Adorno and Horkheimer point out the way in which this extreme positivism, this extreme rationality, also 'reverts back into mythology'. Metaphysics becomes as taboo as nature:

Factuality wins the day; cognition is restricted to its repetition; and thought becomes mere tautology. The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind in resignation in reproducing existence. Hence, enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude [1989; 27].

It is within this dialectic that the Jews, as representatives of metaphysics, as something beyond the given, come to be 'tabooed'. As was noted above, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasise the manner in which each successive phase of the dialectic of enlightenment delegitimises its predecessor with the accusation of 'myth': 'One after the other, mimetic, mythic and metaphysical modes of behaviour were taken as superseded eras' [1989; 37]. This dialectic of 'overcoming' is concretised by Adorno and Horkheimer through the manner in which oppositions born in one phase come to be incorporated in the dominant thought of the later phase. Speaking of the stages of critical thought, i.e. oppositional thought, they state:

[Opposition] suffer[s] what triumphant thought has always suffered. If it willingly emerges from its critical element to become a mere means at the disposal of an existing order, then despite itself it tends to convert the positive it elected to defend into something negative and destructive. The philosophy which put the fear of death into infamy in the eighteenth century, despite all the book-burnings, and piles of corpses, chose to serve that very infamy under Napoleon The metamorphosis of criticism into affirmation does not leave the theoretical content untouched, for its truth evaporates. Now, of course, a mechanised history outstrips such intellectual developments, and the official apologists—who have other concerns—liquidate the history that helped them to their place in the sun, before it can prostitute itself [1989; *xii*]

In this last sentence, which refers to the latest 'progress' in the dialectic of enlightenment, the reference to 'liquidation' is far from coincidental. Rather, it points to the claim that is being made here, that it is 'the Jews' who came

to represent the metaphysics of transcendence—that of rights, freedom and emancipation—which on the one hand justified the emergence of bourgeois society, and on the other hand became the taboo of the fascist society which emerged from it.

In explaining this point, Adorno and Horkheimer appear to have had in mind Marx's *On the Jewish Question* [1992]. They argue that it was the Jew's historical economic role—their 'fate' [1989; 175]—that was partly responsible for their becoming representative of the metaphysics of freedom:

The Jews were the colonisers for progress. From the time when, in their capacity as merchants, they helped to spread Roman civilisation throughout Gentile Europe, they were the representatives—in harmony with their patriarchal religion—of municipal, bourgeois and, finally, industrial conditions [1989; 175].

However, with the 'progression' of bourgeois society, both the Jews' role and the values they came to personify were increasingly declared superfluous. The reason for this relates to Marx's idea that rights are indelibly linked to the sphere of exchange or circulation,¹⁰ a sphere which was identified as the province of Jews. However, with the emergence of mass society this 'space' was itself colonised by increasing large-scale productive monopolies which faced the consumer directly.¹¹ With the destruction of the middle-class as the class of the sphere of circulation, the Jews' specific economic function came to an end. Furthermore, this change into 'mass society' also brought with it the demise of the individual subject.¹² Without the self and the social basis on which the self can emerge, notions of rights are not just superfluous but are a threat to the emerging order.

As Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledge, this need not of course have resulted in the physical extermination of the Jews. One of the 'elements of antisemitism' was the Jews' economic position, so that they came to be the 'scapegoat' for the injustices of the system as a whole:

the fear and hatred aroused by the non-transparency of social relations is revenged on mediators, on those (the Jews) who are taken to epitomise the sphere of circulation itself, as though their mediation were itself the reason for society's lack of transparency [Jarvis 1998; 63].¹³

However, the murderous impulses arise within their persecutors because of their projection onto the Jews of their own frustrated desires,

Liberalism had allowed the Jews property, but no power to command. The rights of man were designed to promise happiness even to those without power. Because the cheated masses feel that this promise in general remains a lie as long as there are still classes, their anger is aroused. They feel mocked. They

¹⁰ See *On the Jewish Question*, K. Marx in L. Colletti (ed.), *Early Writings* (Penguin, London, 1992).

¹¹ For a discussion of this process, see 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 120–167.

¹² For a detailed discussion of this point, see Max Horkheimer, 'The End of Reason', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (Continuum, New York, 1982).

¹³ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Polity, Cambridge, 1998). See also *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 172–176.

must suppress the very possibility and idea of that happiness, the more relevant it becomes. Wherever it seems to have been achieved despite its fundamental denial, they have to repeat the suppression of their own longing. Everything which gives repetition for such repetition, however unhappy it must be in itself....draws upon itself that destructive lust of civilised men who could never fulfill the process of civilisation [Adorno and Horkheimer, 1989; 172]

The very idea of freedom embodied within the notion of rights came to be regarded as a metaphysics that could not be accounted for in the positivistic rationalising of the world, in which ‘what you see, is what you get—and nothing more’ It came to be rejected as containing the remnant of a superstition that current knowledge had declared a myth. And, because of their association which such a metaphysics, the Jews came to be as taboo as the values that they were said to embody. Adorno and Horkheimer conclude these points in the following manner,

[t]hose who always wanted to be first have been left far behind The kaftan was a relic of ancient middle-class costume. Today it indicates that its wearer has been cast onto the periphery of a society which, though completely enlightened, still wishes to lay the ghost of its distant past. Those who proclaimed individualism, abstract justice, and the notion of the person are now degraded to the condition of a species. Those who are never allowed to enjoy freely the civil rights which should allow them human dignity are referred to, without distinction, as ‘the Jew’ [1989; 175]

Adorno and Horkheimer seek to explain how this *ressentiment*¹⁴ serves the ‘dominant ratio’ itself. They argue that the antisemites’ image of the Jews cannot bear the thought of their ‘true happiness’—the thought of ‘happiness without power’ [1989; 172]—and the masses’ own longing for this happiness, now embodied in ‘the Jews’, is reflected back to them as something offensive and loathsome,

The illusory conspiracy of corrupt Jewish bankers financing Bolshevism is a sign of innate impotence, just as the good life is a sign of happiness. The image of the intellectual is in the same category: he appears to think—a luxury which the others cannot afford—and he does not manifest the sweat toil and physical effort. Bankers and intellectuals, money and mind, the exponents of circulation, form the impossible ideal of those who have been maimed by domination, an image used by domination to perpetuate itself [1989; 172]

Conclusion

Whilst Adorno and Horkheimer avoided the majority of the ‘pitfalls’ Hannah Arendt claims have beset accounts of modern antisemitism—eternal antisemitism, the ‘scapegoat’ thesis, the concept of ‘the Jew’ as the creation of the antisemitic imagination—in their attempt to reformulate the theoretical approach to antisemitism, problems still remain, not least the echoing or

¹⁴ For the concept of *Ressentiment*, see F. W. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. and ed. W. Kaufmann (Vintage, New York, 1989). See also D. Seymour, ‘Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Antisemitism: The Dialectic of Rights and *Ressentiment*’ (unpublished).

traces of antisemitic thought itself. In other words, despite their sincere efforts, their account still remains in thrall to the phenomena it is investigating. These point will now be disussed.

The charge of eternal antisemitism cannot be upheld. It is of course true that recourse is made to archaic forms of domination which are identifiable for them in the phenomenon of antisemitism itself. However, their thesis is designed to highlight how these archaic modes are themselves sublimated into the dialectic of enlightenment, they do not claim that their history can be understood in terms of an equally archaic 'Jewish Question'. At first sight, the criticism implied in the 'scapegoat' thesis appears more valid. The persecution of the Jews is ultimately traced back to the nature of their persecutors. The Jews become, therefore, the screen upon which the antisemites project their own resentment. It is a resentment that has little to do with the Jews per se. Thus the question that must be asked in the light of these comments is again 'why the Jews?'

To a certain extent Adorno and Horkheimer have addressed why the Jews became the representatives of 'forbidden nature' and of 'metaphysics'; they associate the Jews with the idea of freedom, emancipation and rights and refer to the class position of Jews in the sphere of circulation. Yet such answers do not appear satisfactory: if 'the Jews' were not the sole owners of the circulation sphere, why initially did they become its representatives? In seeking the answer to this question, Adorno and Horkheimer offer an explanation that in many respects is similar to Arendt's thesis as to why the Jews failed to become politically (and socially) 'assimilated'.

On a social level, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that because of their economic role as 'intermediaries', the Jews could not be permitted to 'put down roots and so they were dismissed as rootless' [1989; 175]. Because they appeared as the 'colonisers of progress' [1989; 175], those harmed by this 'progress' focused their attention and resentment against the Jews. Finally, in their relationship to the state in the period preceding Fascism, i.e. in the nineteenth century,

the Jews remained independent on an alliance with the central power. General justice protected by the state was the pledge of their security, and the law of exception a spectre held out before them. The Jews remained objects, at the mercy of others, even when they insisted on their rights [1989; 175].

Here, similarities with Arendt's thesis are clearest.

Adorno and Horkheimer were no doubt wary of providing any information that may have added grist to the antisemitic mill. It is, perhaps, for this reason that, in terms of the Jews' economic function, they state that, 'Commerce was not their vocation but their fate' [1989; 175]. When we turn to the 'deeper' psychoanalytical reasons as to why the Jews should be the screen of antisemitic projections, the case is not so conclusive. Adorno and Horkheimer state:

[t]he existence and way of life of the Jews throw into question the generality with which they do not conform. The inflexible adherence to their own order of life has brought the Jews into an uncertain relationship with the dominant order [1989; 169].

Here, the idea of the Jews' 'particularity' or non-universality is more posited than developed. It points to the idea that there was something about Jewish existence as Jewish existence that may have been partially responsible for the catastrophe that was visited upon those caught within the Nazi's definition. Yet, the very notion of the particularity of the Jews echoes the antisemitic argument that the Jews, either for genetic or religious reasons or for reasons of sheer 'stubbornness', provided their own ground for not being emancipated. In seeking to understand how it was that Jews were transformed into the concept of 'the Jews' by the antisemitic imagination, Adorno and Horkheimer lose sight of the actuality of Jews.

In Adorno and Horkheimer's account, antisemitism comes to embody all the problems they identify within the dialectic of enlightenment. The Jews increasingly come to personify those aspects of enlightenment *praxis* that are excluded and tabooed. The implication is that the 'actual reversion of enlightenment civilisation to barbarism' [1989; *xvi-xvii*] comes to be represented within antisemitism and antisemitism becomes the very mark of 'the limits of enlightenment'. It is as if the dialectic of enlightenment negatively resolves itself around the question of antisemitism and as if the Jews serve as the index of enlightenment *praxis*. Rather than helping us to understand the meaninglessness of antisemitism, the danger of this thesis is that antisemitism is endowed with a disproportionately powerful significance. The 'Jewish Question' comes to be elevated into the question of the failure of 'western' thought itself and antisemitism comes to signify something more than the specifics of anti-Jewish hostility. Adorno's and Horkheimer's thesis in this way begins to echo the antisemitic claim that only through 'solving' the Jewish Question, can all other outstanding issues of contemporary society be resolved. In this account, Adorno and Horkheimer remain within the sphere of socio-historical research, yet they do not avoid presenting antisemitism in terms akin to an eschatology of satanic greatness and thus lay the foundation for the extreme nihilism exhibited in later works.