

Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments

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The secondary literature on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is vast but most contributions focus on one isolated aspect or chapter of the book. Much of it is meta-theoretical and often sidesteps detailed textual analysis. There is a general tendency to overstate the extent to which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* constitutes a turning point in Critical Theory. Schmid Noerr, one of the most authoritative commentators in the German-language literature, asserts that in his writings from the 1930s Horkheimer had seemed more optimistic about the possibility that Critical Theory could be articulated with critical empirical scholarship as well as radical political action than *Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggests (Schmid Noerr, 1987: 437). He also points out, though, that several projects that involved empirical research, and which were begun in parallel with and completed after *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, closely followed the programme of Critical Theory as formulated by Horkheimer in the 1930s, including proposals for reform of the education system

meant to prevent the emergence of the ‘authoritarian character’ prone to fascist mobilization (Schmid Noerr, 1987: 448). Observations like these suggest that there are multiple shifts in emphasis between the many different texts that comprise the canon of Critical Theory but no definitive and central shift of perspective. This chapter is based on a close reading and examination of key passages of the text and concludes that the idea that there was a ‘negative turn’ of which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was the avatar is simplistic and unconvincing.

ON DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments was written between 1941 and 1944 in Los Angeles by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in close cooperation, also involving Gretel Karplus-Adorno, who typed both men’s dictations, and Leo

Löwenthal, who contributed to the first three sections of the chapter 'Elements of Antisemitism'. Five-hundred mimeographed copies of a first version were informally distributed in 1944 under the title *Philosophical Fragments*. In this version, the first chapter, which in 1947 was renamed 'The Concept of Enlightenment', was titled 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'. The Amsterdam publisher Querido Verlag, a leading publisher of German-language exile literature, published the book under its final title, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, in 1947. The word 'enlightenment' means both the specific eighteenth-century movement of that name and a general notion of incrementally, albeit not linearly, progressing self-consciousness observable throughout human history. The title clearly references its principal proposition: 'enlightenment' contains both the seeds of its own destruction and the potential of an escape route from that destruction. As stated in the preface, the critique of the enlightenment 'is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xvi; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 21/xviii).¹

The body of the work consists of five chapters of roughly equal length and a final section of twenty-four short pieces ('Notes and Sketches') that pick up various aspects of the argument. The first chapter of the book is (since the 1947 version) 'The Concept of Enlightenment'. It is followed by two chapters that are designated as 'excursus', or digressions, related to the first chapter. The fourth chapter, 'Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', was also initially intended to be an excursus. The last chapter, bar 'Notes and Sketches', is 'Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment', which is divided into seven theses, the last of which was added in 1947. The writing generally refuses the linear logic expected of regular academic philosophy. Instead, each section starts with a fragmentary perspective,

explores its contradictions, suddenly comes to a halt and moves on to another fragment. This style of writing may appear repetitive and circular, as similar arguments are made from only slightly differing angles using different fragments of empirical or historical material. No argument is ever exhausted or concluded – arguments are rather brought into a constellation in what resembles the montage technique used by some avant-garde novels and films of the first half of the twentieth century. This unusually open style puzzled even close collaborators at the time who were familiar with the substantive arguments, and has since contributed to the book's reputation as being hermetic and esoteric. For Horkheimer, the concept of 'dialectic' meant first of all the refusal to treat any phenomena in a reductionist manner: this conception of 'dialectic', thinking about history and society as a dynamic and contradictory totality, was developed by Horkheimer in a series of essays in the 1930s and must be kept in mind when reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The actual phrase 'dialectic of enlightenment' was first used by Adorno in a letter to Horkheimer in November 1941 in the context of his reflections on a book on the Marquis de Sade (Gorer, 1932; de Sade is discussed in the second excursus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Adorno wrote that this book (not in fact referenced in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) provided him with 'a lot of ideas' (Wiggershaus, 1995: 310).

Several publications by Horkheimer and Adorno from the years preceding *Dialectic of Enlightenment* anticipate aspects of the latter's argument and can usefully be studied to make it more accessible. The most obvious preparatory text is Horkheimer's 1936 essay 'Egoism and the Freedom Movement: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era' (Horkheimer, 1982). This essay takes its inspiration from the contrast between the pessimistic and optimistic strands of bourgeois anthropology (such as between Hobbes and Rousseau). Horkheimer develops a dialectic of the constitution of bourgeois

subjectivity – ‘anthropology’ – in a historical framework reaching from ‘early modernity’ to the (then) present. The aim of the essay is to derive the character structure and political practice of contemporary fascist demagogues from the contradictory character of bourgeois society, rather than seeing them as forces that somehow struck from outside that society. In other writings in the 1930s, too, Horkheimer used readings of what he called ‘the dark writers of the bourgeois epoch’ – those who explored and systematically exposed its most violent and illiberal aspects – as a method to get under the skin of contemporary society. This method resonates with a sentence from Karl Marx’s ‘Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’: ‘these petrified conditions must be made to dance by having their own tune sung to them’, which Adorno pointed to as a key methodological inspiration (quoted in Wiggershaus, 1995: 189).

Another key influence on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was Benjamin’s text ‘On the Concept of History’, which Adorno received (via Hannah Arendt) in June 1941 (Wiggershaus, 1995: 311). Benjamin, who had committed suicide in September 1940, identified liberals’ and socialists’ belief that they were sailing with the wind of progress as one of the chief causes of their failure to defeat fascism.

While they were writing, news about the Holocaust continued to build up, and the analysis of antisemitism became another focus of the book. The fifth chapter, ‘Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment’, is therefore best seen as the actualization (in both senses of the word) of the conceptual work done primarily in the first chapter, informed also by the large-scale empirical research on the causes of antisemitism that Horkheimer, Adorno and other members of the Institute undertook from March 1943 (Ziege, 2009).

Horkheimer and Adorno state in the book’s preface that its aim is ‘to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xi;

Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 1/xiv), and they relate the fragmentary nature of the book to the collapse of their initial plan to structure the book along the disciplinary boundaries of sociology, psychology and epistemology. Scholarly disciplines, though, became meaningless in the context of ‘the present collapse of bourgeois civilization’. Fascist demagogues and liberal scholars feed off the same zeitgeist, marked by the ‘self-destruction of the enlightenment’. Science and scholarship are therefore no longer potent weapons against fascism, and this even affects ‘tendencies opposed to official science’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xii; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 17/xv). It is for these reasons that ‘in reflecting on its own guilt’, thought finds that it lacks a language. Self-censorship has made censorship superfluous, which seems to be ‘the ambition of the educational system’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xiii; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 18/xv). The cult of facts and probabilities has flushed out conceptual thinking, a crucial means of resistance: ‘the blocking of the theoretical imagination has paved the way for political delusion’, i.e. fascism (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xiii; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 18/xvi). The ‘self-destruction of enlightenment’ inhibited the writing of the book but also provided its primary subject matter – it became thereby an exercise in self-reflection. Thinking that aims at enlightenment is inseparably linked to freedom in society, but also in its very concept (as in the societal institutions with which it is intermeshed) ‘already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today’. Enlightenment must reflect on this ‘regressive moment’ in order to survive. Thinking must salvage its ‘sublating [*aufhebenden*] character’, i.e. its ability to drive the actuality of historical progress beyond its limitations, preserving but negating it in the making of a truly humane world. Only critical, conceptual thinking is able to contribute to this: thought that has been deprived of concepts easily falls

‘under the spell of any despotism’. Only critical, conceptual, self-reflective thinking can guard against paranoia.

Horkheimer and Adorno assert the classic Marxian point that ‘the increase in economic productivity... creates the conditions for a more just world’, which spells progress but at the same time tremendously increases the social power of those who control production. Individuals are better provided for than ever before, but they ‘vanish before the apparatus they serve’. This state of things is completed by ‘the flashy and noisy propagation of spirit [*der gleißnerischen Verbreitung des Geistes*]’: while spirit’s true concern is the ‘negation of reification’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xv; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 20/xvii), the spread of *reified* spirit – i.e. culture in the form of things and commodities: *Kulturgut* – kills off spirit and with it the hope for the better state of things. ‘The flood of precise information and brand-new amusements makes people smarter and more stupid at once’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/ 1997/2002: 20/xv/xvii). Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize that their concern is not the same as that of the conservative ‘critics of civilization’ who promote ‘culture as a value’: ‘What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfilment of past hopes’. The ‘selling out of culture’ would not *in itself* be particularly deplorable: the point is that it helps in ‘converting the economic achievements into their opposite’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xv; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 21/xviii). Capitalist civilization has not only destroyed metaphysics, i.e. the transcendental element in thinking that pushes beyond the reality of ‘that which is’, but has itself become metaphysics: the ‘hygienic factory’ and the commodities that are produced there are imbued with the power to transcend what they actually are. The critique of the reification and destruction of spirit is meant to help reaping ‘the economic achievements’ of the capitalist economy, and *thereby* to defeat fascism and other delusions.

‘THE CONCEPT OF ENLIGHTENMENT’

As the first chapter contains the principal argument of the book on which the other chapters build, it will be presented here in greater detail.

‘The Concept of Enlightenment’ consists of three sections of roughly equal length, divided into nine, six and seven rather long paragraphs respectively. Most paragraphs contain several trains of thought that often dialectically negate each other. This complex style of presentation means that any kind of summary treatment of the whole would be liable to distort the argument: the essential points tend to be suspended in the tension between blocks of text that destabilize each other’s meanings. The argument of ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’, like that of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in general, is therefore best presented through close readings of selected substantive sections. I will concentrate on reconstructing the third section (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 29–42; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 52–66/22–34) as it is the most comprehensive part of the chapter. The main motives of the first two sections are, very briefly, as follows:

- In the first two paragraphs of the first section, a quotation from Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is used to introduce the concept of enlightenment: enlightenment lets itself be guided by nature in order to be able to command it in practice; knowledge is for the increase of power, not of happiness.
- The enlightenment translated myths into concepts, but then (in the form of positivism) went on to dismiss concepts for being merely myths in disguise, including its own core ideas, such as that of ‘human right’: enlightenment critique destroys its own concepts and becomes destructive of enlightenment, a process that is summed up in the formula ‘Enlightenment is totalitarian’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 6; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 28/4); ‘totalitarian’ means here that nothing is left out – it is complete and without gaps (not ‘totalitarian’ as in ‘totalitarianism’, although that might have been intended as an connotation).

- The fourth paragraph argues that enlightenment denounces myth as the projection of human subjectivity on to nature; both rationalism and empiricism aim to abstract from particularity and quality through emphasis on systems, logic, numbers, equivalence.
- The following three paragraphs discuss myth as an early form of enlightenment that gradually turns into the enlightenment that destroys myth while preserving aspects of the mythical. Myth was always part of the attempt to dominate nature; through patterns of replaceability, representation, fungibility, abstraction and signification, logic gradually emerges from magic and myth.
- The last two paragraphs present the enlightenment, beginning with myth, as a response to fear whose expression it turns into explanation. Anything outside the systems of naming and explaining is taboo. This is still the case with positivist science, which, like myth in the beginning, is concerned with banning the fearsome, dangerous and unknown. As long as it does this, however, it remains unfree.
- The second section begins with reflections on the separation of art from science, their differing relationships to truth, and the role played by the distinction between language as a system of signs and language as a system of symbols. Art remains akin to magic that tries to influence nature by mimicking it, whereas science tries to dominate nature through work. Bourgeois revolutions have typically preferred faith over art and science; Horkheimer and Adorno refer to militant religiosity as a characteristic of modernity. In the (fascist) present, 'the utterly enlightened' turn the irrationality of faith into rationally organized fraud (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 20; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 43/15).
- The third paragraph of the second section turns back to the discussion of the germs of enlightenment in prehistoric times. Social domination emerges together with a division of labour that makes magic a concern of a specialist: the magician. Magic rituals, then ideas, then concepts, then science are in the service of domination until domination is secure enough to do away with them altogether. On the way, human history has produced a number of ways in which enlightenment negated but also preserved magic (fourth paragraph).
- The fifth and sixth paragraphs discuss the mathematization of science as 'totalitarian', as

mathematical equations turn even unknowns into already knowns (again, 'totalitarian' means it is so complete that it knows even the unknowns). Horkheimer and Adorno argue, *pace* Husserl, that thinking becomes an automatized process and a tool. Positivism rejects atheism as metaphysical and happily tolerates religion as well as art as long as they do not claim to contribute to cognition. Everything that exists is subsumed to logical formalism, while reason (including its potential for transcendence of the existing towards a humane world) is subsumed to the world as it exists (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 26; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 49/20). This circularity means the defeat of reason by myth. Existing social injustice becomes sacrosanct, immune to critique by reason.

- In the final paragraph of section two, Horkheimer and Adorno return to the more specific critique of the capitalist present: rather than being subjects, individuals are reduced to being functions and carriers of conditioned reactions in a web determined by 'the agencies of mass production and its culture' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 28; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 51/21).

The third section of 'The Concept of Enlightenment' is in three parts: the first paragraph develops the theme of 'self-preservation' as central to both myth and enlightenment; the following three paragraphs explore the Sirens episode from the *Odyssey*; and the last three paragraphs return to a more modern context and discuss aspects of agency of the exploited, culminating in a critique of modern socialism and the labour movement.

At the beginning of the third section, Horkheimer and Adorno single out as central to enlightenment philosophy, and indeed as 'the true maxim of all Western civilization', Spinoza's formulation, 'conatus sese conservandi primum et unicum virtutis est fundamentum': 'the endeavour of preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 29; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 52/22; this is from Spinoza's *Ethica*, pars IV, propos XXII, Coroll.). This is, they argue, the one point in which all the differing religious and philosophical tendencies of bourgeois thought coincide.

Enlightenment detects myth 'in any human utterance that has no place in the functional context of self-preservation'. The concept of the self was gradually stripped of all 'natural traces' – denounced as 'mythological': body, blood, soul, 'even the natural ego' – so that it was sublimated to the transcendental or logical subject, 'the reference point of reason, the legislating authority for action' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 29; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 52/22). Enlightenment judges that 'those who abandon themselves directly to life, without any rational reference to self-preservation, regress to the prehistoric'. Instinct itself is as mythical as are superstition, thoughtlessness and lust. The process of self-preservation (the economy) is 'based on the bourgeois division of labour' and forces the individuals 'to mould themselves body and soul on the technical apparatus' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 29–30; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 52/23). Once enlightenment, virtue and rationality are grounded in self-preservation, the stripping down of the increasingly abstract notion of the self continues to its dismal extreme point in (logical rather than Comtean) positivism that abolished even the (fairly abstract) Kantian 'transcendental subject of cognition'. Cognition is now considered a matter of logical processes that are not dependent on subjectivity. Logical positivism has eliminated with thought 'the last intervening [literally: interrupting] agency between individual action and social norm'. After subjectivity has eliminated itself from its own consciousness, it has become *sachlich* (objective/thingly/value-free) and 'free from the polyvalence of mythical thinking and of signification in general'. Reason has become 'a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools'. Like manual work, it is instrumental and subject to goals it would not dare to challenge (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 30; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 53/23). From the critique of reason's reduction to a tool for tool making, Horkheimer and Adorno move (within the same paragraph) to their critique of the centrality of formal logic in the context of contemporary logical positivism. Typically for

Dialectic of Enlightenment, they argue here on two levels at once, a specific historical and a generic or genetic one: 'The exclusiveness of the laws of logic' (in the specific context of contemporary logical positivism) stems from the single-minded functionality of reason that has limited itself to being a mere instrument, whereas, more generally speaking, it stems 'from the compulsory character of self-preservation'. The latter 'ever again comes down to the choice between survival and death which still reverberates in the principle that from two contradicting propositions only one can be true and only one false' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 30; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 53/23). The proposition here is that the most modern philosophical fashion reflects a mental reaction that used to be adequate for prehistoric humans who needed to decide whether to run away or to throw the spear in a split second, without any ambiguity or the luxury of pondering on shades of grey: in prehistory there was no time for dialectics. This begs the question, of course, why such caveman philosophy, geared towards excluding the middle, seems cutting-edge in the twentieth century (and now the twenty-first)? This question is addressed by the following sentence, which contains a different, but complementary argument:

The formalism of this principle... is caused by the opacity and the entanglement of interests in a society in which the maintenance of forms and the preservation of individuals only accidentally coincide. The expulsion of thought from logic ratifies in the lecture hall the reification [*Versachlichung*] of human beings in factory and office. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 30; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 53/23)

Logical positivism's concern with form is caused by the fact that society subordinates the preservation of individuals to the preservation of social forms (i.e. the mode of production). Excessively formal thinking follows from the preponderance of social forms over social individuals and their concrete needs. Enlightenment subsumes any hesitancy and ambivalence under the category of 'mythological thinking' and therewith under a taboo. This taboo 'encroaches on the power that

imposed it': enlightenment encroaches 'on spirit which is what enlightenment itself is'. Once spirit as enlightenment has finally reduced itself to the formal poverty of (logical) positivism – imposing binary caveman thinking: yes/no, kill/run – it goes into reverse and destroys the unfolding of spirit, i.e. itself. The process that had started out as the promise to exorcize nature ends up unleashing nature, namely the single-minded, ultimately self-destructive pursuit of self-preservation pure and simple, culminating in capitalist crisis and modern warfare. Tragically, the self-destruction and regression of the spirit (i.e. of enlightenment) is fuelled by its own fear of regression: the process in which the self has alienated [*entfremdet*] itself from 'mere nature' was so painful that the self is horrified by the notion of falling back into nature (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 31; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 54/24). This horror causes the regression: the fear that humans could regress to that heart of prehistoric darkness made them do the most horrible things – right in the heart of *historical* darkness: 'The living memory of prehistory, of its nomadic and even more of the truly pre-patriarchal periods, has in all millennia been expunged from people's consciousness with the most terrible sanctions'. In the modern period, torture by 'fire and the wheel' has been replaced by 'stigma with which it branded any irrationality as leading to perdition'.

The acknowledgement that evolving civilization has softened itself to the extent that torture has been replaced by stigma is followed – in the same paragraph – by sarcastic remarks on the bourgeois love for 'lesser evils' and moderation. Even enlightened hedonism is well tempered: lust that has learned to hate itself 'through millennia of work pressure' remains 'mean and mutilated'. It 'remains under the spell of the self-preservation to which reason, that has been deposed meanwhile, has once trained it' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 31; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 54–55/24).

Enlightenment slandered the fear of unsubdued, threatening nature as superstition, while it made domination of internal and external nature the absolute purpose of life. In developed industrial society, 'when self-preservation has finally been automated, reason is dismissed by those who, as controllers of production, have taken over its inheritance and fear it in the disinherited' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 32; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 55/24–5): the dialectic of enlightenment, or of reason, takes on a new form, as the triumph of increasingly rationalized self-preservation leads the ruling class (those who control production) to turn against reason because they fear that reason has now jumped ship and gone over to the exploited. In this particular perspective, the dialectic of enlightenment – at least in the paranoia of the ruling class who sense the irrationality of their domination – coincides with the class struggle in developed capitalism. This train of thought is not further developed here, though, and Horkheimer and Adorno continue with the primary motive of this section: 'The essence of enlightenment is the binomial [*die Alternative*] whose inevitability is that of domination'. This formulation needs careful reading: 'the binomial' is as inevitable as domination is, which is not to say that it is in fact inevitable – nothing in the text suggests that domination *is* inevitable. The point here is that *as long as* enlightenment takes place under the conditions of domination, it remains restricted to thinking in alternatives of either/or – kill or run (i.e. binomials) – that are the signature of nature. Horkheimer and Adorno sum up:

Human beings were always forced to choose between their subjugation under nature or that of nature under the self. With the spread of bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating. Under the compulsion of domination, human labour has always led away from myth but under conditions of domination it has always fallen back under its spell. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 32; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 55/25)

The conclusion at the end of the first paragraph of section three is unequivocal: enlightenment is self-defeating *because and as long as it comes in the form of domination*.

DISCIPLINE AND DEAFNESS IN ODYSSEUS' FLOATING FACTORY

The following three paragraphs of section three (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 32-7; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 55-60/25-9) discuss the Sirens episode from the twelfth book of the *Odyssey*, the Homeric epic from the eighth century BCE. Sirens are seductively singing demons, often connected with death (they are sometimes depicted as half bird, half woman, like harpies); whoever listens to their singing will die. The aspect of Homer's text picked up on by Horkheimer and Adorno is how Odysseus deals with the danger. As Odysseus' ship is taken as a metaphor for a workplace – a kind of factory under conditions of quasi-slavery – this section is in fact a reflection on the concept of labour. The discussion of the Sirens episode in chapter one has therewith a different focus from the excursus on the *Odyssey* in chapter two, which is chiefly a refutation of contemporary romanticizing readings of Homer. They are connected, though, through the interpretation of the character of Odysseus as a prototype of bourgeois subjectivity due to his use of cunning rationality in the service of the struggle for self-preservation. The bourgeois subject is required to be totally in the present moment. To survive, one must not dwell in the past. This is, however, just what the Sirens offer: they sing about the past. Getting lost in their song promises enjoyment: their song is proto-art, art not yet 'neutralized to being merely art'. Their naughty promise of enjoyment threatens the patriarchal order represented by nautical discipline. Horkheimer and Adorno are scathing about the disciplining process: 'Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self – the identical,

purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings – was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 33; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 56/26). To lose oneself – which means to lose one's *self* or one's ego – is tempting but as it was such hard work to produce the self, the bourgeois subject must be determined to keep it up. The process of producing the self is that of civilization, whose path 'was that of obedience and labour, over which fulfilment shines always only as semblance, as beauty deprived of power': art is the beauty of a hard-working, beauty-less world.

Odysseus' men must row like crazy and have their ears plugged: 'those who work are forced to look ahead, full of energy and keenly focussed, ignoring anything that lies to one side' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 34; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 57/26). 'Odysseus, the landowner, who has others working for him', by contrast, keeps his ears unplugged: he chooses to be exposed to the temptation but has himself bound to the mast, while his men can hear neither the Sirens nor their boss asking to be unbound. In the name of self-preservation, Odysseus arranges a fettering constellation to the effect that neither he nor his workers are able to abandon work discipline, but he affords himself the torturous luxury of being exposed to the temptation that he knows he will want but cannot allow himself to give in to. He denies happiness to himself as much as his men, but he at least wants to know what he is missing. The Sirens' tempting promise of happiness is 'kept out of the way of praxis' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 34; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 57/27), reduced to art: something to be contemplated at a distance. Homer depicts here the separation of art and labour.

Horkheimer and Adorno discuss in the following paragraph the relationship between Odysseus and his men, focusing on the image of Odysseus in bondage. The image demonstrates his remarkable power: the workers work while the boss is chained to the mast; his power is so

secure that it can be deputized. This implies, however, regression as well as increased power (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 34–5; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 58/27): exemption from labour means mutilation. As in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the lord becomes dependent, while the bondsman who works on the thing from which the lord is separated enjoys the element of independence that the involvement in direct production grants (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 35; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 58/27). For Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus' bondage points to both, the differentiation and development of skills and knowledge that civilization comprises and the increasing 'fixation of instincts through greater repression' through which 'imagination withers'. 'The curse of unstoppable progress is unstoppable regression', which implies that those who have been left behind by progress 'represent not only untruth': those at the cutting edge are fettered by their own civilization, while some dimension of truth may be accessible to those less 'developed'.

In the following paragraph, Horkheimer and Adorno explore the other side of the relationship, that of the rowers. Here the focus is on their enforced deafness, which mirrors the self-induced immobility of their commander. 'The autocratic intellect... detaches itself from sensuous experience in order to subjugate it' and is likewise affected by regression. The intellect's 'domination over the senses' (such as when it plugs the ears in order to facilitate the labour process) takes place through the 'unification of the intellectual functions' (all energies are concentrated on one task, such as, in the Homeric image, rowing), whereby thought resigns itself to producing unanimity (the unanimity of the hard-working team of rowers). Both thought and experience are impoverished in the process of their separation: the deafness of 'the compliant proletarians' is the equivalent of 'the immobility of those in command' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 36; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 59/28). The Sirens episode is summed up as follows:

The more complicated and refined the social, economic and scientific apparatus, to the operation of which the system of production has long since attuned the body, the more impoverished are the experiences of which it is capable.

In other words, the system of production has attuned the body to the societal apparatus destroying its ability to make experiences. Science-based rationalization of production turns qualities into functions and humans back into amphibians:

The elimination of qualities, their conversion into functions, spreads from science via rationalized modes of work to the life world that is shared by all modern human societies and approximates it once more to that of the amphibians. The regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear with their own ears what has not been heard before, to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped; it is the new form that delusion assumed after all its mythical forms were defeated. Through the mediation of the total society that subsumes all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had struggled to overcome: mere species beings, identical to one another through isolation within forcibly directed collectivity. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 36; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 59–60/28–9)

'Delusion' [*Verblendung*] has merely changed form: mythical delusion has become enlightened delusion. The history of society has returned humans to their prehistoric starting point. Horkheimer and Adorno interpret the image of the rowers as representing 'modern workers' in three different contexts that are unified by the societal totality, production (factories), culture (cinemas) and politics (collectives): 'The rowers, unable to speak to one another, are all harnessed to the same rhythms, like modern workers in factories, cinemas and collectives'. It is important to note that, in spite of the overall emphasis on civilization as the history of 'spirit' and 'the self', Horkheimer and Adorno assert here a materialist perspective: while 'conscious manipulation... *additionally* render[s] the oppressed stupid and deflect[s] them from the truth', conformism is enforced

first of all by ‘the concrete conditions of work in society’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 36-7; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 60/28–9;

REIFIED REASON CAN BECOME EMANCIPATORY

The fifth paragraph begins – like many in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – with the counterargument: ‘This logical necessity’, i.e. the necessity of the powerlessness of the workers, ‘is not final, though’: the element that would empower the workers to end domination seems to be, in sturdy idealist fashion, their ability to think. Thinking is ‘the servant whom the master cannot control at will’. The human capacity to think is not *necessarily* subservient to power: the master’s tools can, after all, undo the master’s house, or rather are needed for doing so. Horkheimer and Adorno in particular celebrate here the positive upshots of reification and alienation. Domination has ‘reified’ [*verdinglicht*] itself by taking on the forms of law and organization, and in the process had to limit itself. These instruments of domination have gained some independence in the process, as the mediating instance of *Geist* (spirit) moderates the immediacy of exploitation: ‘The moment of rationality in domination also asserts itself as something different from [domination]’. The object-like quality of the means of domination – language, weapons, machines, thought – makes these means universally available, including for those pursuing ends other than domination, and therewith implies the critique of domination. It seems that Horkheimer and Adorno argue here not only that the instruments (guns, etc.) *can* be turned around but that their object-like, thing-like character *asks for it*. It is in this sense that progress, *by way of* being the progress of domination, is *also* the progress of the *negation* of domination – which is, of course, just what the phrase ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ means. It is here a surprisingly optimistic

concept. In the capitalist present, thought may have lost its self-reflexivity and today’s machines may mutilate their operators, but ‘in the form of machines... alienated reason moves towards a society which reconciles thought [in its reified forms, namely material and intellectual apparatuses]... with the liberated living beings’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 37; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 60–1/29–30).

Of course, Horkheimer and Adorno instantly pour cold water on the hints of optimism in this account of reification by pointing out how ‘the rulers’ react to the objective openness of the historical situation: smelling the rat, ‘the rulers’ denounce reason itself as ideology, which brings the discussion back to one of the book’s leitmotifs, the attack on (Comtean as well as ‘logical’) positivism. The ruling ‘cliques’ (fascist and proto-fascist) have abandoned rationalist justifications of their ‘misdeeds’ and use instead the rhetoric of intuitions, mission and destiny, posturing ‘as the engineers of world history’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 38; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 61/30). Horkheimer and Adorno conclude this paragraph with a reflection on productivity, power and class in contemporary capitalism:

Now that the livelihood of those still needed to operate the machines can be produced with a minimal part of the labour time which the masters of society have at their disposal, the superfluous... mass of the population...are drilled as additional guards of the system, so that they can be used today and tomorrow as material for its grand designs...Misery that consists of the contrast between power and impotence is growing immeasurably, in tandem with the capacity permanently to abolish any misery. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 38; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 61–2/30)

The following paragraph explores the contradictory state of thinking under these conditions. Thinking about thinking is central to Critical Theory that constitutes an exercise in self-reflection: enlightenment’s enlightenment. It begins by stating that ‘the reason of

the reasonable society' is not in fact reasonable (it is so only in the sense in which the father orders his children 'to be reasonable, or else'). The good news is that this system's inevitability is only an illusion; the bad news is that thinking that is societally constituted 'as an instrument of domination' cannot dissolve this illusion (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 39; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 62/31). Unfortunately, a type of *in itself* emancipatory thinking does not exist, but the crux of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument is that the nature of thinking *as such* points beyond its own social-historical constitution. Thinking cannot escape the entanglement that keeps it 'ensnared in prehistory' (the struggle for self-preservation), but at least it can recognize 'the logic of either-or... with which it radically emancipated itself from nature, as this nature itself': *we are able to understand that we escaped nature only by means of being very much like nature*. We have not yet transcended nature, and in this sense we are not human – humane – yet, and we know it somehow, due to the relentlessness of thinking itself: unstopably consistent thinking, relentless in this respect like nature, cannot stop short of recognizing, and then challenging, its own nature-like character. Thinking produces a kind of overflow that enables it to reflect on itself. Its steady trickle is the basis of humanity's hope for emancipation.

Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of dialectics precludes any attempt to separate the good bits of enlightenment from the bad bits. Enlightenment is emancipatory and liberating only *through* its instrumental and dominating aspects: this is the dialectic of enlightenment. The remainder of this paragraph elaborates this notion. Horkheimer and Adorno state bluntly that people cannot but represent nature to themselves 'in such a way that it can be mastered' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 39; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 63/31). They relate the notion of thinking as an instrument to that of identity: an instrument or a tool is a thing that is *the same thing* in a variety of different situations. In this sense it stands out

as something 'known, unitary and identical' from a world of 'chaotic, manifold and disparate' objects: I have one (identical) hammer but I use it to hit many different (non-identical) nails. Likewise, the concept is 'the mental tool that fits into just that point in many things where one can clutch them'. Horkheimer and Adorno caution against any form of thinking that tries to deny its own instrumental character, such as mysticism and some forms of utopian thinking: the assumption there could be a mystic union of concept and thing, or subject and object, is delusional. They applaud enlightenment, by contrast, for coldly declaring and asserting domination as a process of separation. When enlightened thinking separates subject and object, it reflects reality and is, in this sense, true; at the same time it is false when it believes things ought to be the way they ('positively') are. Domination is at the root of both superstition and enlightenment. When enlightenment denounces superstition, it actually denounces *itself* (albeit in its own earlier guise, and not consciously). Although enlightenment means domination, it also makes the dominated 'audible in its alienation'. The rate of increase of domination of nature by enlightenment seems to correspond to the increase of the counter-tendency, the greater hearing that the same enlightenment grants to alienated nature. As it did through myth, exploited nature continues to speak through enlightenment, but it speaks differently. When spirit recognizes itself as 'nature split from itself', spirit *is* in fact nature that invokes itself as blind and mutilated, whereas in prehistory nature used to invoke itself, using humans as its medium, as *mana*, as omnipotent. 'When spirit modestly confesses that it is domination and as such *not something other than nature* [*in Natur sich zurückerkennend*], it dissolves its claim to domination that subjects it to nature' (italics added). Domination of nature is not to end, but it ought to recognize itself honestly for what it is, and thereby – as *self-reflexive* domination of nature – transform itself into a softer, more enlightened, maybe humane form of domination of nature: it would thereby

begin to *transcend* nature. Human history (as humane history) would finally begin (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 40; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 63/31–2). The weapons with which humans have subjugated nature always have undermined human freedom as much as they rendered it possible, and they need to be radically transformed. ‘Through recognition of nature within the subject, which constitutes the unrecognized truth of all culture, enlightenment is antithetical to domination as such’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 40; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 64/32). This is one of the clearest statements of the benign side of the dialectic: Horkheimer and Adorno describe transformed, self-reflective, emancipatory enlightenment as ‘the unrecognized truth of all culture’. The enlightenment that tends to ‘confus[e] freedom with the business of self-preservation’ is denoted ‘bourgeois’. The positivistic hostility to conceptual, transcendental, truly philosophical thinking ‘left the field wide open for the lie’. Lies cannot be distinguished from truth anymore where truth has been ‘neutralized to being *Kulturgut*’, i.e. accumulated ‘cultural goods’ that are summed up in the chauvinistic notion of cultural heritage.

THE INSUFFICIENT RADICALISM OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT’S SOCIALISM

The last paragraph of ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’ begins with a critique of the insufficient radicalism of the labour movement: ‘socialism, in a concession to reactionary common sense, prematurely confirmed as eternal that necessity’, namely the necessity of the societal domination that results from the struggle for self-preservation against overwhelming, hostile nature. The domination of nature, though, reflects and extends nature itself, whose essence is nothing other than necessity and the struggle for self-preservation, thereby trapping humanity in prehistory:

the progress towards history proper, the history of humane society reconciled with nature, is arrested. When humanity fights and dominates nature, it *is* nature; when humanity reconciles nature on the basis of acknowledging its own being part of it, it *transcends* nature. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that socialism ‘elevated necessity to being the basis [of society] for all time to come and degraded spirit – in keeping with time-honoured idealist tradition – to the pinnacle [of the superstructure], clutching therewith too frantically the heritage of bourgeois philosophy’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 41; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 64/32). In other words, the nominally Marxist notion that the economy was the ‘basis’ and that anything to do with thinking was housed upstairs in the ‘superstructure’ is a continuation of bourgeois thought that ‘degrades’ spirit by elevating it out of the realm where it would make a difference: the relationship with nature. In this traditional perspective, nature would continue to be ‘posited as entirely alien’ as it had been in mythology. Nature that remained alien and unreconciled, however, was bound to stage a backlash against its domination by human civilization and ‘become totalitarian and absorb freedom, socialism included’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 41; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 64–5/33).

This (Benjamin-inspired) comment on the socialism of the labour movement is followed by a general round-up of the argument of ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’. Enlightenment ‘subjected everything particular to its discipline’ but in the process ‘allowed the uncomprehended totality as the domination of things to rebound on being and consciousness of humans’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 41; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 65/33). The situation is not entirely without hope, though: ‘But true praxis capable of overturning the state of things depends on theory’s intransigence against the comatose state in which society allows thought to ossify’. It seems that those scattered bits of thought that escaped

reification – such as Critical Theory, perhaps – can, by being intransigent, inform ‘true praxis’ that will shake society out of the coma that makes thought ossify. Here Horkheimer and Adorno add an attack on the (then as now) influential conservative ‘critique of civilization’: ‘Fulfilment is not jeopardized by the material preconditions of fulfilment, unfettered technology as such’. The question of technology is not the ‘supreme’ but the wrong question as ‘the fault lies with a social context that induces delusional blindness [*gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang*]’. The ‘mythic-scientific respect that people all over the world pay to what the given facts are’ has become ‘a fortress before which even the revolutionary imagination despises itself as utopianism and degenerates to the compliant trust in the objective tendency of history’. Horkheimer and Adorno encourage here ‘the revolutionary imagination’ not to capitulate before the positivistic fetishization of facts: ‘The spirit of a theory that is intransigently formulated in this perspective might be able to turn around that of merciless progress when it has run its course’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 42; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 65/33).

The notion of the achievements of progress brings the argument back to Bacon’s dream of the unimaginable wealth of the future, referred to in the first paragraph. Horkheimer and Adorno note that Bacon’s dream has surpassed itself:

In multiplying *Gewalt* [i.e. violence, power, force, domination] through the mediation of the market, the bourgeois economy has multiplied also its things and forces [*Kräfte*] to such an extent that their administration no longer requires kings, nor even the bourgeois themselves: it only needs all. They learn from the power [*Macht*] of things finally to forgo domination [*Macht*]. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 42; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 66/33)

‘It only needs all’ must be the understatement of the century. On close reading, and considering the historical context, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is much more Mountain Hut

Halfway House than ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’, where Georg Lukács famously housed Adorno in the 1962 preface to his *Theory of the Novel* (Lukács, 1971: 22). Bacon’s utopia that ‘we should command nature in action’ has revealed itself as the dream (read: nightmare) of perfecting human domination *in society*. In the process, though, human knowledge has increased so much that it can finally begin to dissolve domination for good. Unsurprisingly, the optimism of this account of what humanity can achieve is dampened in the last sentence of the text that points forward to the discussion of the ‘culture industry’: ‘But in face of this possibility enlightenment, in the service of the present, is turning itself into total deception of the masses’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 42; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 66/34).

‘EXCURSUS 1: ODYSSEUS OR MYTH AND ENLIGHTENMENT’

Dialectic of Enlightenment addresses contemporary concerns by way of working through materials that are far from contemporary. The extreme point of this method is ‘Excursus 1: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment’, the book’s second chapter, a reading of passages from the *Odyssey*. Horkheimer and Adorno indicate in the first pages of the chapter what directed this choice of material (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 43–6; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 67–70/35–7), pointing to how the Homeric epics had been used to denounce liberalism and modern bourgeois individuality. Some nineteenth-century conservative German ‘humanists’ had celebrated the Homeric epics as documents of genuine, archaic humanity, whereas some proto-fascists sensed that Homer’s protagonists were already quite capable of rational thinking, cunning, mediation and even exchange relations. The fascists understood that even the earliest of the Greek classics already had one foot in (emerging) bourgeois society: Homer had not in fact

painted uncorrupted images from a myth-soaked past that both conservatives and fascists dreamed of tapping into. Horkheimer and Adorno observe that the fascist critics 'made a correct observation here' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 45; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 68/36). The excursus on Odysseus puts a finger on a sore point at which bourgeois humanism made itself vulnerable to fascist attack: the humanists celebrated as 'myth' something that was in fact already a document of enlightenment, clearing the ground for the fascists' *anti-humanist* celebration of myth.

Horkheimer and Adorno, by contrast, deal with the literary form of the ancient myth (the epic) as a case study of the dialectic of enlightenment. Odysseus' adventurous journey home from Troy is read as a tale of the making of the bourgeois subject by resisting and overcoming temptations, conquering the emerging subject's internal nature. The chief motive is the notion that civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 55; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 79/43) as renunciation of desires: throughout the epic, Odysseus, whose most prominent qualities are patience and cunning, has to conquer his own impulses. Repeatedly gifts are made that, resembling sacrifices to gods and demons, amount to exchanges of equivalents that are not in fact equivalents: sacrifices are attempts to cheat the gods by offering them things (say, an animal) that are much less valuable than that which the humans in question expect to receive in return (survival, good winds, luck in warfare, etc.). Odysseus' cunning consists in his accepting the powers of the mythical forces he finds himself confronted with while discovering gaps. The most pronounced of his tricks is the (literal) denial of his own subjectivity by claiming his name is 'nobody' (which in Greek sounds similar to his actual name). After his successful return home, Odysseus engages in the reconstitution of another civilizational form of sacrifice and denial of instinctual drives:

marriage. Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrate that Odysseus' actions are driven by a form of rationality that dovetails with that discussed in 'The Concept of Enlightenment'.

'EXCURSUS 2: JULIETTE, OR ENLIGHTENMENT AND MORALITY'

While the excursus on the Odyssey provides a relatively straightforward argument based on the interpretation of one principal source, the second excursus is much more complex, based as it is on a constellation of texts that conventionally would not be discussed together. It begins with an exploration of the concepts of reason and enlightenment in Kant and other enlightenment philosophers, emphasizing that reason creates order out of itself, as opposed to submitting to order externally imposed (which it denounces as 'tutelage'). Horkheimer and Adorno point to the ambiguity in the concept of reason as denoting, on the one hand, the utopia of liberated conviviality (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 83; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 106/65) and, on the other, calculating thought in the service of self-preservation. The central theme of the chapter is the question of how enlightened thinking attempts, and fails, to argue that moral behaviour is reasonable without recourse to doctrines that it must dismiss as so many superstitions. If it postulates the existence of an ethical instinct, it finds it impossible to argue why the latter is superior to its opposite, which is equally evident empirically. Fascism draws the most unequivocal conclusion and does away with morality.

The chapter illustrates the ambiguities of Kantian moral philosophy by reading it through the writings of the Marquis de Sade, chiefly the novel *History of Juliette* (1797), as well as Nietzsche. De Sade's novels contain both pornographic narrative, which often depicts sexual practices that take the form of complex, mechanical, almost machine-like arrangements, resembling modern team

sports, and philosophical speeches and tracts that belong to the most radically atheist and materialist texts of the Enlightenment period, anticipating elements of later nihilism. Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize the closeness of both de Sade and Kant to enlightenment rationalism and of Nietzsche to fascism respectively.

The first third of the chapter (the first seven paragraphs; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 81-93; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 104-117/63-74) provides the general argument, culminating in the observation that the mainstream representatives of the Enlightenment movement rejected the radicalism of Kant's first critique as they understood it undermined the, as it were, reasonable amount of superstition and religion that bourgeois society required, while Kant himself limited the 'critique of pure reason' through his moral philosophy 'in order to rescue the possibility of reason' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 93; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 117/74). Horkheimer and Adorno add that 'unreflectingly enlightened thinking' (i.e. that of lesser thinkers than Kant) always tended towards scepticism (later, positivism and, arguably, more recently, post-modernism), i.e. the rationalist doubt of the 'transcendental' validity of reason itself, especially its utopian aspects such as the goal of universal peace. 'Dark thinkers' like de Sade and Nietzsche are contrasted to both the dialectician Kant and the various forms of (proto-liberal) bourgeois sceptics, as consistently rationalist thinkers who attack morality and civilization as so much mythology. The remainder of the chapter (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 94-119; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 117-43/74-93) mainly explores the radicalism of the 'dark thinkers'. The discussion moves from the rationalist rejection of pity and philanthropy to the discussion of the relationship between work and enjoyment – the idea that lust is only allowed as a break, and in reasonable terms rather than excessively as festival – and finally to love, marriage, family and the domination of women.

'CULTURE INDUSTRY: ENLIGHTENMENT AS MASS DECEPTION'

Culture, the sphere of activity of spirit, or enlightenment, has become 'industry' and therewith deception. The logical presupposition of this idea, the central thesis of the fourth chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is that the concept of 'culture' is meaningful only if it is opposed to industry, the sphere of self-preservation, production, exploitation, manipulation and domination of nature. Culture that has become industry is a scam. One of the countless imprecisions of the available English translations makes even the title of this chapter problematic, as there is no article in the German text: it is 'Culture Industry', not 'The Culture Industry'. The definite article wrongly added by the translators facilitates the misinterpretation of 'the culture industry' as a determinate, particular sphere of cultural production, perhaps in the sense of 'popular culture'. This is not what the chapter is about, though. 'Culture industry' is about culture *as such* that has become what it should be a negation of, thereby negating itself. In this sense, culture as 'culture industry' is another dimension of the dialectic of enlightenment.

The chapter's starting point is the rejection of the principal complaint of modern 'cultural critique': modernity's social differentiation created 'cultural chaos' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 120; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 144/94), a position that was ubiquitous at the time in either its right-wing, proto-fascist version or the conservative-liberal one that animated much of classical sociology. Horkheimer and Adorno make the opposite claim: contemporary culture systematically produces sameness everywhere, even across political divides. Culture has always been business, but now it has abandoned any attempts to hide it. Although written in the United States, the text hints at the fact that the new world did not seem altogether new to these German refugees: 'In Germany the graveyard

stillness of the dictatorship already hung over the gayest films of the democratic era' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 126; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 150/99). The claim that there is cultural continuity between liberal and fascist regimes refers to Weimar Germany and the Third Reich first, then to the latter and 'the West'.

Standardization and centralization derive neither from technology as such, nor from consumers' demands but from the inner logic of the social totality. Within the latter, the 'cultural monopolies' are relatively weak and dependent: 'the objective societal tendency in the present era' is incarnated in the leaders of steel, oil, electricity and chemistry concerns to whom the producers of culture 'must hurry to adapt' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 122; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 147/96). Culture (or spirit) is an index, not the cause of the societal misery. Formulaic culture saves subjects the effort that Kantian epistemology had postulated is involved in synthesizing sense data into perceptions: culture industry 'does [their] schematizing for [the subjects]' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 124; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 149/98). The tension that characterizes great artworks, resulting from the artist's ever failing struggle to create identity between the logic of the material and the style of its artistic shaping, fails to come about because the cultural artefact's form and matter are already prefabricated for each other (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 131; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 155/103).

One of the key themes of the chapter is the collapse of the separation of high and low culture which damages both ((Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 135–6; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 160–1/107–8). Horkheimer and Adorno describe 'the circus, the peep show, or the brothel' as much as Schönberg's twelve-tone music as eccentric and 'embarrassing' to society: culture industry domesticates, perfects, streamlines and mainstreams *both*, high and low culture, and in the process exorcizes whatever could be recalcitrant about them. The split between cheap and dirty amusement and high art should in fact

be defended as it is witness to the division and falseness of society itself. Horkheimer and Adorno applaud 'cartoon films' that 'were once exponents of fantasy against rationalism' and 'redeemed animals and things by having their technology electrify them'. Lesser examples, domesticated by culture industry and lacking any subversive imagination, 'merely confirm the victory of technological reason over truth' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 138; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 163/110). 'Traces of the better state of things persist in those features of the culture industry by which it resembles the circus' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 142–3; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 168–9/113–14). Culture industry is 'causing meaninglessness to disappear at the lowest level of art just as radically as meaning is disappearing at the highest'; it imposes the same schemata of meaning on everything and in the process ruins all. Under the regime of culture industry, 'to be entertained means to be in agreement' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 144; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 170/115). Concerning high culture, Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize that artworks have always been commodities (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 157; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 184/127): the purposelessness of great art depended on the anonymity of the market. Beethoven was a great businessman. The artwork is classically described as being determined by (internal) purposiveness without (external) purpose, but its own purposelessness is owed to purposes dictated by the market. Horkheimer and Adorno do not in fact critique culture industry for having turned all culture into commodities (as conservative and romantic 'cultural critique' does): on the contrary, part of what they lament is the *false dissolution* of its commodity form. An extreme point of this process is radio broadcasting, which lends itself to centralized, fascist manipulation. Under conditions of culture industry, the classical concert is attended in order to gain the prestige of having been there and of knowing all kinds of things about it (its exchange-value, as it were) rather than for the enjoyment (its use-value). Artworks

are denigrated to being *Kulturgüter* (culture-goods, now often supplied or subsidized by the state as advertisements of itself) when they should be *aufgehoben* (sublated, overcome, resolved) in a liberated society (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 160; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 188/129–30).

'ELEMENTS OF ANTISEMITISM: LIMITS OF ENLIGHTENMENT'

'Elements of Antisemitism' consists of seven numbered sections. The first six have clearly demarcated themes and develop different aspects of the argument, whereas section seven, added to the edition of 1947 only, mostly restates in more pointed form some of these arguments.² Like its reprise in the seventh section, the argument of the very short first section of 'Elements of Antisemitism' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 168–70; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 197–9/137–9) is disturbingly acerbic in tone even by the standards of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno sarcastically explore the meaning of the concept of 'truth' in the context of 'the false social order'. They state that the fascist doctrine of race is empirically true because the fascists *made* it true: the Jews are now the 'anti-race' or 'counter-race' that attracts the 'will to destruction' which the false societal order cannot but produce. It also speaks the truth about the fascists themselves, who 'express their own essence' in the image they create of 'the Jew': it is the fascists who desire 'exclusive property, appropriation, limitless power, at any price'. Horkheimer and Adorno add that the modern hunger for limitless power paradoxically emerges 'while economically there is no need any more for domination'. The liberal response to the fascist doctrine, by contrast, is 'true as an idea' only: 'By positing the unity of mankind as in principle already given, though, the liberal thesis contributes to the ideological legitimization of the existing

order' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 169; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 198/138). The fact that there are still Jews who have not entirely assimilated to the (false) totality is an embarrassment to liberalism. Liberal support for Jews is therefore half-hearted. The fact that 'progress brought with itself cruelty as well as liberation' had been evident in the ways 'the great representatives of the Enlightenment as well as the democratic-popular movements' treated the Jews, and it now also showed itself in the assimilated Jews' own character. They joined 'the modern bourgeoisie' when it was already 'in the process of moving on towards regression to naked domination' in fascism. The assimilated Jews adopted the liberal belief in the integrative 'harmony of society' at a time when this harmony was already morphing into the *Volksgemeinschaft* (the nation in the state of declaring itself race) that murdered them. The opening salvo of 'Elements' thus defines the illusory commitment to liberal society as the main cause of helplessness in the face of this society's fascist metamorphosis.

While the first section presents antisemitic nationalism as a movement of the modern bourgeoisie in its post-liberal state, the second section (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 170–2; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 199–202/139–41) looks at 'antisemitism as popular movement'. For the commoners, antisemitism is 'a luxury' without material benefits. In class society, wealth and happiness are reserved for the elites. If a group from outside the traditional elites acquires wealth and happiness, they must be trampled down. The Jews are, in the context of European society, just such a group. 'The banker and the intellectual... form an imagery of the denied longings of those crippled by domination which domination utilizes for its own perpetuation'. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that antisemitism is a particular form of appearance (*Gestalt*) of spirit (*Geist*) entangled in domination. 'Spirit' being the desperate effort of humans to break out of domination, antisemitism helps obscure the spirit's entanglement in domination itself. The entanglement

in what it struggles to overcome is the fundamental malady intrinsic to civilization as such, and this fact explains antisemitism's impenetrability: 'straightforwardly rational' explanations and refutations of antisemitism (in terms of economics and politics), even if they are entirely accurate, are bound to fail 'because rationality as entangled with domination is itself at the root of the malady'. Only reflection on the entanglement itself would help, i.e. a form of reflective rather than 'straightforward' rational explanation. The argument of the second section culminates in the claim that antisemitism is 'a ritual of civilization' that is 'pointless' if looked at from a rationalistic perspective: 'The pogroms are the true ritual murders' (ritual murder libel thus being a case of projection). Rituals are not rational, but they reflect the rationality of society.

The third section of 'Elements' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 173-6; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 202-5/141-4) is in two parts. The first part deals with one of the structural preconditions of antisemitism, namely the need for capitalist producers to deflect their responsibility for exploitation on to a scapegoat. The key idea here is that capitalist production conceals its exploitative character and 'shouts: stop thief!, pointing at the Jew' as an old-fashioned representative of the sphere of circulation. The second part attempts to explain why the Jews are the obvious group to be cast in that role historically: 'The Jew was not allowed to put down roots and was hence slandered as rootless'.

Section four (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 176-9; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 205-9/144-7) deals with religion, the chief claim being that religion was 'subsumed' when it became a cultural artefact but not 'overcome [*aufgehoben*]'. This destroyed the delicate dialectic between truth and deception that had characterized spirit (i.e. the dynamic of human civilization) in its traditional, religious form: there had been priestly deception and manipulation but also the longing for redemption. Spirit-as-religion in its modern incarnation ends up hating spirit (or rather, ends up allied

with those who do). Section five Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 179-86; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 209-16/147-53) contains an anthropological discussion of how civilization preserves the traces of its subjection of nature, and how it becomes quasi-nature in the process. Modern civilization develops a destructive fury against the 'anachronistic' remnants of its own initial stages (including mimesis and magic as representative of the first attempts of human civilization to get a grip on nature) but in fascism ends up celebrating and fetishizing mimetic and magic behaviours (formulae, rituals, uniforms, etc.). Section six (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 187-200; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 217-30/154-65) discusses paranoia and projection, which are, on the one hand, characteristics of fascist antisemitism but, on the other, fundamental to human perception of reality – part of dealing with nature – and thus intrinsic to civilization. Horkheimer and Adorno pick up the psychoanalytic explanation of modern antisemitism but refract it through their reading of Kantian epistemology (according to which every perception contains an element of projection by the subject and is guided by fears, desires, etc.), framed by a conception of the evolution of human civilization. This allows them to propose an argument about *what kind of* projection and paranoia is implicated in fascism and antisemitism – namely the kind that is unreflectingly spellbound by self-preservation and in the process loses contact with reality as its touchstone.

Section seven (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 200-8; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 230-8/165-72) mostly recapitulates in condensed form the overall argument of 'Elements', articulating some aspects rather more strongly than in the previous sections: the responsibility of German liberalism for fascism; the implication of progressive-democratic leftism in the general tendency of a 'rage against difference' and thus, at least indirectly, in antisemitism; the anachronism of the liberal-bourgeois order in the face of the ability of humanity's productive forces to rebuild human society on the

basis of abundance rather than artificial scarcity. Section seven, along with the first three sections, is therewith the most immediately fruitful source for discussions of antisemitism from a perspective that is political as well as societal and economic.

'NOTES AND SKETCHES'

The twenty-four short pieces in 'Notes and Sketches' cover a range of subjects, including education, liberalism, fascism, the philosophy of history, crime and punishment, the body, individuality, morality and animals. The last piece is titled 'On the Genesis of Stupidity', in which Horkheimer und Adorno state that the 'emblem of intelligence is the antenna of the snail' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 256; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 288/213). They seem to imply here that human sense-activity – like the enlightenment in general – should be directed at the world in the hesitant manner of the snail's 'groping face [*tastendes Gesicht*]'. This image concludes the book.

Notes

- 1 I have worked from the German text and used, and silently modified, both standard English translations, neither of which is entirely reliable.
- 2 For a detailed analysis of the seventh section see Stoetzler (2009), and of sections one to three see Stoetzler (forthcoming).

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