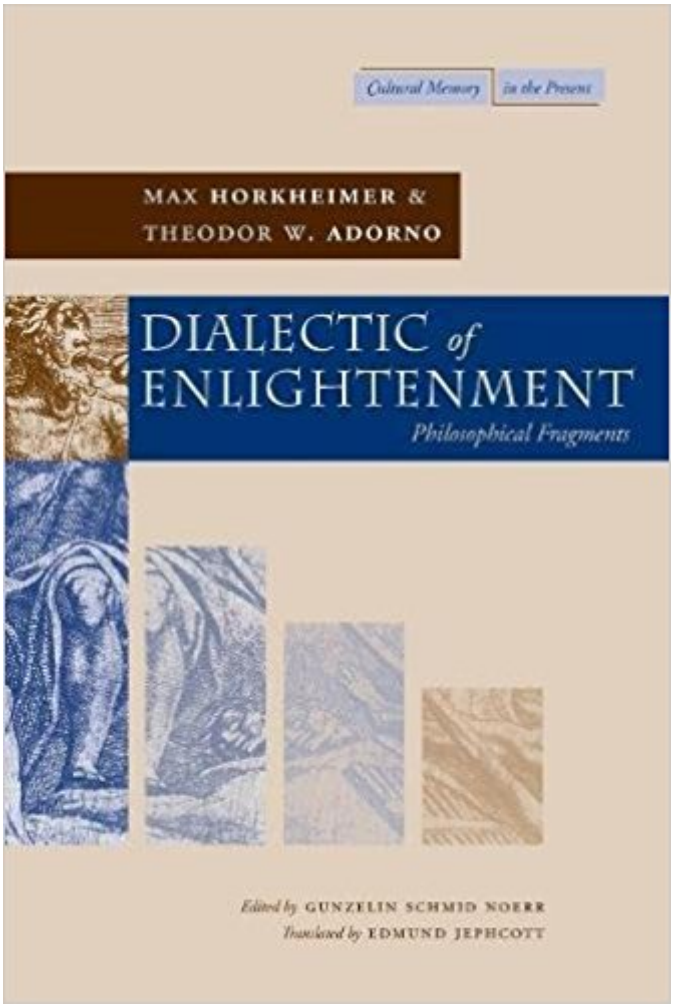
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Dialectic Of Enlightenment (Cultural Memory In The Present)



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Synopsis

Dialectic of Enlightenment is undoubtedly the most influential publication of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Written during the Second World War and circulated privately, it appeared in a printed edition in Amsterdam in 1947. "What we had set out to do," the authors write in the Preface, "was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism." Yet the work goes far beyond a mere critique of contemporary events. Historically remote developments, indeed, the birth of Western history and of subjectivity itself out of the struggle against natural forces, as represented in myths, are connected in a wide arch to the most threatening experiences of the present. The book consists in five chapters, at first glance unconnected, together with a number of shorter notes. The various analyses concern such phenomena as the detachment of science from practical life, formalized morality, the manipulative nature of entertainment culture, and a paranoid behavioral structure, expressed in aggressive anti-Semitism, that marks the limits of enlightenment. The authors perceive a common element in these phenomena, the tendency toward self-destruction of the guiding criteria inherent in enlightenment thought from the beginning. Using historical analyses to elucidate the present, they show, against the background of a prehistory of subjectivity, why the National Socialist terror was not an aberration of modern history but was rooted deeply in the fundamental characteristics of Western civilization. Adorno and Horkheimer see the self-destruction of Western reason as grounded in a historical and fateful dialectic between the domination of external nature and society. They trace enlightenment, which split these spheres apart, back to its mythical roots. Enlightenment and myth, therefore, are not irreconcilable opposites, but dialectically mediated qualities of both real and intellectual life. "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology." This paradox is the fundamental thesis of the book. This new translation, based on the text in the complete edition of the works of Max Horkheimer, contains textual variants, commentary upon them, and an editorial discussion of the position of this work in the development of Critical Theory.

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Customer Reviews

"Worth reading as an introduction to the peculiar synthesis of Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger commonly associated with the name of Herbert Marcuse."Ã¢â ¬â •Times Literary Supplement --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Text: English (translation) Original Language: German --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Horkheimer and Adorno cite the Latin adage, "If you add like to unlike you will always end up with unlike." This sentiment finds its modern articulation in the expression, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“You canÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t add apples and oranges.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• All arithmetical operations rely on a concept of equivalence to enforce the identity of units that makes meaningful sums possible. While equivalence poses as an empirical, value-neutral characteristic of objects, Horkheimer and Adorno show us that postulated equivalence is in fact ideological.I will provide my own example. In order to sum her columns, an accountant must assume all dollars she adds are equivalent, regardless of their origin and use. The dollar of a beggar buying bread is equivalent to the dollar of a billionaire buying another mansion. Qualities like justice and virtue attaching to individual uses of individual dollars must be ignored in order to permit meaningful sums to be made. In order to create the universe of bourgeois calculation, Horkheimer and Adorno explain, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“All gods and qualities must be destroyed.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•Hume famously demanded that all books containing no mathematical reasoning and experimental data be burned. This exemplifies Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim that "For the enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion."ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“The one,ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• of course, is money.If you ask an accountant how she can add dollars with unlike origin and purpose, she will laugh. I know this from personal experience. For her the question is meaningless. Knowledge for the enlightenment is defined by utility. Utility, in turn, is defined by serviceability to power. As

Horkheimer and Adorno put it, "Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters." The fact that the worldly masters lack qualities like benevolence and justice, which philosophers have known at least since Plato, has been forgotten by the Enlightenment. When Bacon talks about putting knowledge into operation, he doesn't mean putting knowledge in operation in service to the true and the just. He means putting knowledge in operation in service to King James.The so-called rationality of the technological universe has subservience to power as an unquestioned premise. To the bourgeois, the edicts of the ruling class are as palpably real as any scientific fact, perhaps more so. ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Power confronts the individual as the universal,ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Horkheimer and Adorno explain, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“as the reason which informs reality.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• The ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“enlightenedÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• bourgeois has overcome all metaphysical superstitions, including AristotleÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s distinction between potentiality and actuality. Whatever reality is actually created by the ruling class is, for the bourgeois, the only reality.The enlightened bourgeois makes no attempt to grasp the thing in itself, to get behind appearances and understand the social, historical and human meaning of things. These forms of metaphysical knowledge have been discarded by the Enlightenment.For Horkheimer and Adorno, OdysseusÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s response to the Sirens is paradigmatic of the strategy Enlightenment uses to prevent forms of knowledge Enlightenment has banished from tempting us to return to them. Odysseus adopts a twofold strategy. For his workers, Odysseus plugs their ears with wax so they canÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t hear the Sirens. Analogously, the working class is kept fully employed with mindless occupations and philistine diversions so that transformative literature and art that would inform them of the possibilities of happiness closed off by their servitude to the bourgeoisie remains unknown to them.For Odysseus himself, however, the strategy for dealing with the Siren song is different. Odysseus ties himself to the mast, so he can hear the Sirens, but canÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t act in response to their temptations. Analogously, the managerial class allows itself to enjoy literature and art that inform it of the possibilities closed off by bourgeois enlightenment. But it keeps these Siren songs meticulously compartmentalized from real world existence. It never allows art or literature to alter its actual form of life."No one ever acts honestly in the administration of states," says Plato (Republic 496d). Genocide. Slavery. Imperialism. Torture. Nuclear war. The list could go on. The rulers of this world are immoral and corrupt. They act only to enhance their power. They are indifferent to all considerations of morality and humanity.In 1620, Francis Bacon complained that knowledge was too theoretical and abstract. He wanted to put knowledge into operation. But what does that mean? Put knowledge into operation. Who will decide which operations?For centuries,

philosophers had known that the rulers of this world are immoral and corrupt. But after the Enlightenment, it becomes impossible to even fathom the idea that the rulers of this world might be immoral and corrupt. Why? Because we are busy putting knowledge into operation, and in order to competently perform the operations we are assigned, we must believe with our whole minds and hearts that these operations are unambiguously good. In order to be irreproachable Baconian philosophers, we are compelled to believe the rulers of this world are good.Bacon never challenges the evidence piling up over the centuries that the rulers of this world are immoral and corrupt. He compels us to repress the fact.To repress a fact we know is true is a clear violation of intellectual conscience. It requires the invention of a modern form of consciousness that is very good at repressing uncomfortable truths.We see the consequences today. Universities have wholeheartedly adopted the Baconian model of science. They are eager to put knowledge into operation in service to the rulers of this world. Thinkers who point out that the rulers of this world are, and always have been, immoral and corrupt, are marginalized and ignored.Engineers build weapons to sell to both sides of armed conflicts. Engineers build weapons capable of annihilating entire cities. Engineers build machines for extracting more fossil fuels from the ground. We are eager to put knowledge into operation, without even bothering to ask whether those operations are moral, wise, or even sane."The wise man," says Aristotle, "must not be ordered but must order." Aristotle never expected the rulers of this world to listen to the orders of wise men. He never expected anyone other than a small number of worthy disciples of philosophy to listen.The Enlightenment turns the wisdom of philosophy on its head. Now wise men and women allow themselves to be ordered. They put their wisdom in service to unwise, immoral, even insane rulers. If we don't reevaluate this decision very soon, the human race will annihilate itself as wise and efficient means are employed for insanely destructive ends.As Paul says, "The rulers of this world are coming to nothing" (1 Cor 2:6). They will take the rest of us with them if we continue to put wisdom in their service.

I've only read one other translation of the Dialectic, but this one was by far the better one. This is a must read for anyone interested in the evolution of our culture or philosophy. Their critiques of society apply to cultural change and advancement in a rich country in general; this book was relevant several years ago and will still be relevant decades from now.

One of the best books for me in several years, easy to read and excellent ideas. Thanks,

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, both prominents of the Frankfurter Schule of critical theory,

wrote this work during WWII. In their own words, the purpose of the book was to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism. Obviously their experiences as Jewish intellectuals fleeing for the national-socialist regime to the United States was a strong impulse for this view, but the book is not limited to a critique of nazism or even totalitarianism altogether.The main subject of the book, though that itself is already difficult to disentangle, is Enlightenment's betrayal of its own liberating capacity. Adorno & Horkheimer analyze this by means of various cultural metaphors, which in highly abstract, contradictory and aesthetic language (especially the parts by Adorno) trace the development of Enlightenment and its subsequent 'dark side' throughout an equally metaphorical history of culture and ideas. In a certain sense this may most remind readers not familiar with both authors of Foucault and his use of concepts like the Panopticon to express a view of power relations. The method of Adorno and Horkheimer is however not so much genealogical, as Foucault's is, as dialectical in its idealist form.The book consists of an introduction, two "excursions" and two chapters on the Enlightenment itself, as well as a series of aphorisms provided at the end as "notes and sketches". Each part of the book consists of a very abstract, very metaphysical and almost entrancing analysis of, in turn, the development of Enlightenment as myth out of earlier myth, the form of modern Enlightenment as instrumental reason and mass deception, and the limits of Enlightenment to its own rationality, in the form of anti-semitism. The language of the book is extremely difficult, even in English, and in the best (and worst) traditions of continental philosophy it contains a very great amount of layers and meanings, not all of which are free of internal contradiction. Readers familiar to Situationist works are perhaps best prepared for the effect, which is somewhat similar in method, if not in style, to Guy Debord.The introduction, "The Concept of Enlightenment", posits Enlightenment as thought liberating man from his natural shackles, and creating man as master of the earth. This process of liberation entails at the same time the possibility of man to protect himself from, and understand the workings of, nature, and also mankind's loss of being one with nature. In this process, the self is created as a subjectivity divorced from direct experience of the outside world. Man's memory of this is very vague and distant, but is present in everyone as a certain inchoate feeling of loss.This is also the main subject of the first Exkurs, "Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment". The story of the Odysseia is here used in many ways to provide metaphorical expressions for the role of myth in and against Enlightenment. Myths are primitive descriptions of the world, and in being so are already classifications used as a form of instrumental reason, which is the seed of Enlightenment. The role of sacrifice to the Gods, for example, is presented as manipulation of those Gods, and in so doing already expression of an Enlightened mind avant la lettre. Odysseus' adventure with the Sirens is

metaphor for man’s loss as described above: Odysseus, the Enlightened ruler, knows his loss but is constrained by his knowledge from acting on it; and the shipmates, the great mass of modernity, is only vaguely aware of the loss, and are not affected. But Circe, the Cyclops, and many other themes are used besides.The second Exkurs is "Juliette, or Enlightenment and Morality". The works of De Sade, in particular Juliette, here provide an expression of Enlightenments freeing and therefore contradictory character. Kant is contrasted with Juliette; where Kant is the restrained form of reason, reason as classifying and ordening power, Juliette is reason’s destructive power of old orders. Because Enlightenment destroys the validity of any appeal to tradition, religion, etc., it falls pray to itself, in that Enlightenment’s appeal to its own absolute values is undermined, in the same way that Juliette uses and is used by Catholicism in undermining it.The third chapter is "Enlightenment as Mass Deception", covering the subject of the culture industry. Here Adorno rants against all the vapid and degraded culture forms he perceives in the United States, although he never states it as valid only for the US, of course. There are many interesting insights and observations about modern culture and still valid ones too in this chapter, but Adorno’s general tone is that of the "hochbÃƒÂ rgerliche" bourgeois annoyed about the offenses against good taste he sees. Yet to dismiss it based on that would be superficial, even if we cannot agree with Adorno’s hatred for radio and jazz. His observations on American movies are very poignant, and in between his cultural criticism he hits on certain relations between the capitalist mode of production, its Enlightenment ideology, and the cultural superstructure that are very worthwhile for a patient radical.The fourth chapter is called "Limits of Enlightenment", and addresses directly the subject of anti-semitism and fascism more generally. Fascism is posited as Enlightenment turned against itself (it must be noted Adorno & Horkheimer were among the first to state this, even if it is somewhat of a cliche now). Enlightenment’s general instrumental reason knows only power as a measure of behavior. Therefore, it cannot tolerate the existence of groups that thrive, yet never have power, such as Jews and women. Whenever Enlightened society fails to satisfy the needs of its members, their anger is turned against such groups.The last chapter, "Notes and Sketches", is as said a series of aphorisms, familiar to people who have read situationist works, or for example Walter Benjamin’s notebooks.Overall, this book is an extremely complex, but very worthwhile philosophical critique of modern culture, and a very pessimistic and negative analysis of Enlightenment and its possibilities. It is hard work to get to the bottom of it, but nevertheless rewarding for any student of philosophy.

Essential reading for anyone interested in how culture became the way it is.

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