

B. Ricardo Brown Version of Book Review of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, 2002, in *Critical Sociology*
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Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, 2002, Intro., biblio., 282 pages. \$55.00 cloth; \$21.95 paper.

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The editor and translator of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* do not mention the earlier complete English translation. For better or worse, that 1968 translation has become one of the standard introductions to Critical Theory, and it has also served to turn many readers away from Critical Theory. The previous English translation forced many students to struggle with its seemingly odd sentence constructions, obscure language, and a complete lack of references. It is therefore welcome that this important new edition appears with extensive textual and reference notes, comments on the important drafts, as well as brief essays on the authorship of the chapters and the efforts of Horkheimer and Adorno to soften their overt Marxist references. One is also gladdened by the translators rejection of Frederic Jameson's suggestion that the *Dialectic* should be an "occasion of forging a powerful new Germanic sentence structure in English..." (*Late Marxism* 1990:3)". Whatever the literary merits of the "German accent" of the Cummings translation, the practical result was to discourage students and novice readers rather than to draw them into a fruitful experience with Critical Theory.

Perhaps the difficulties with the text lent to it an aura of density and elitism that facilitated a more conservative reading of the text than was warranted. The *Dialectic* has been seen as an culturalist response to marxism, or even an outright repudiation of marxism. The Frankfurt School did develop one of the most striking anti-Stalinist critiques, and they were not shy about criticising the Soviets. Moreover, there is a certain elitism to the works of the Frankfurt School which is most easily seen in their retention of a distinction between high art versus popular or mass culture. The editor has supplied us a great service by elaborating on how the move away from marxism was in no way a move away from Marx.

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In an admirable short essay the editor situates the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the development of Critical Theory and takes note of the textual changes undertaken by the authors. Friedrich Pollack, to whom the *Dialectic* was dedicated, had cautioned the pair to tone down some of their obvious references to Marx and to then current debates regarding State-Capitalism for fear that their use of the term might be taken out of context. As refugees, Horkheimer and Adorno were concerned about the continued hospitality of the United States. However, there is another aspect of the rhetorical changes that is worth noting. These changes produced a more expansive understanding of fascism and authority for both the authors and many readers. This new understanding necessitated that Horkheimer and Adorno move away from certain Marxian categories.

....in the mid-1940s Horkheimer and Adorno... had distanced themselves from a form of Marxism which assumed the primacy of economics. Instead, the importance of control through politics and the culture industry moves clearly into the foreground....Horkheimer and Adorno decisively rejected a mechanistic interpretation of Marx of the kind adopted by the Second International and by the Soviet orthodoxy, but they did not deny the fundamental importance of the economic order for the totality of social orders in the modern period (252).

So in the period between the original 1944 manuscript and the 1947 version, “capitalist” became “entrepreneur,” “monopoly” became “economic apparatus,” “mass culture” became “the culture industry,” “class domination” became “domination,” “exploitation” became “enslavement” (251). These changes are especially prevalent in the chapter on the Culture Industry .

Horkheimer had expressed reservations prior to the republication of the text in 1969. The *Dialectic*, he said, was too much a product of its time and could be easily misunderstood in the context of the 1960s and 1970s. There is, he says, “the difficulty of reexpressing the old ideas” without it being lost on current readers that their intention was to argue the necessity “to renounce the belief in the imminent realization of the ideas of Western civilization and yet to advocate those ideas --- without Providence, indeed, against the progress attributed to them” (246). One could argue that this kind of intellectual intervention is no less necessary today,

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when “crusades” are undertaken to “liberate” other nations and to protect “Western civilization.”

The subtitle of the *Dialectic*, “Philosophical Fragments,” has been restored. This phrase is important for a number of reasons. First, it points to Horkheimer and Adorno’s rejection of a system, a rejection that any prospective codifier of Critical Theory deliberately or unwittingly ignores. This fragmentary critique is the very form of negative thinking that Horkheimer and Adorno placed in opposition to the systematic tendency of Traditional or bourgeois theory. Horkheimer and Adorno take seriously Nietzsche’s view that “a will to a system is a lack of integrity” or a hobgoblin of petty minds. It is the very style of presentation that prevents Critical Theory from becoming a system of philosophy or an anthropology. Fragments, aphorisms, and essays are the best forms in which Critical Theory thrives and are the forms that comprise the *Dialectic*.

“Philosophical Fragments” refers equally to the mode of critique and to the style of presentation. Thus *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was not intended as a completed work. Adorno’s intended his “Philosophy of Music” as the third excursus. The fragments which comprise the final section “Notes and Sketches” blend seamlessly into the journals of Horkheimer’s *Dawn and Decline*. Bringing forward the fragmentary nature of the text has the added benefit of reminding students and readers that their inability to produce a systematic, codified reading lies not in themselves, but was already doomed to failure – or is a profound misreading of the text.

Dialectic of Enlightenment has always been a work that thrills, enthralls, and frustrates --- often simultaneously--- any serious reader. This new translation does not change this situation, but it does open up new avenues for interpreting the text, the reception of Critical Theory, and current tendencies in the American reception of Critical Theory. Perhaps most important is that this new *Dialectic* puts to the test the more conservative readings and appropriations in service of the status quo. At the same time, the despair that the authors felt in the encounter with the

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steadily multiplying forms of fascism on the left and right will be equally understood.

Although this new translation cannot hope to alleviate all of the difficulties with the *Dialectic* --- obscurity was at times intentional, after all--- it does provide us with a thoroughly updated and greatly more accessible edition of a work, the presence of which whose presence marks most of contemporary social theory and Cultural Studies. In the *Dialectic*, we find Horkheimer and Adorno at the moment when their project had become a critique of culture emerging from Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. It is a timely translation, for like them we find ourselves in a period marked by the demand for negation and affirmation “of the ideas for Western Civilization... against the progress attributed to them.”

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