

Foucault's
understanding of the
enlightenment with
that of horkheimer
and adorno



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The Enlightenment has frequently provided the context or impetus for a number of contemporary analyses in critical theory.

The period of the Enlightenment, perhaps above any other, has been an attractive topic to a number of different theorists from various European countries and theoretical schools. Brewer, writing about Diderot, identifies “[w]hat is contemporary about the Enlightenment” with its emphasis on critical theory and theoretical analysis, what he calls its “ self-reflexive, self-problematizing investigation into the real as it is produced in and by symbolic representation” (1993: 6). In this essay it will be considered how Foucault and Adorno and Horkheimer challenge and problematise the Enlightenment, and in particular how their theories subvert the traditional model of reformist, progressive, knowledge-based rationality that characterizes many interpretations of the period, and which is articulated in Ingram’s analogy of the Platonic Allegory of the Cave (1990: 2): “ Prior to enlightenment people are bound to the prejudices and illusory appearances of their society in much the same way that slaves chained to the bottom of a cave since birth are bound to the deceptive shadows of things projected on the wall before them. The essential differences between Foucault’s understanding of the Enlightenment and that of Horkheimer and Adorno will be charted as being that whilst Foucault reimagines the Enlightenment as a period broken off from the medieval period that preceded it, and equally separate from modernity, the views of the Frankfurt School, more explicitly historical materialist, engage in a complicated understanding of the period which is at once both disavowal and reclamation. The difference is one of focus; whilst Foucault looks for the Enlightenment in the Enlightenment

itself, Adorno and Horkheimer's understanding is one firmly grounded in the paucity of modern culture, highlighting how, to quote Gibson & Rubin (2002: 9): " Enlightenment reason had lost its liberating potential in the age of monopoly capitalism. " Foucault's analysis of the post-medieval or classical age – for our purposes synonymous with what is commonly referred to as the ' Enlightenment' – figures the period as one which was contingent with a movement away from punishment and towards discipline, a product of Enlightenment thinking which sought to apportion, categorize and control society.

Thus in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault charts a movement away from the public spectacle of torture and execution – and the potential contained therein for unruly crowds, mass uprisings, and undesired public sympathy with the accused – towards the more disciplined, organized institutions which both characterized and had their genesis in the Enlightenment period (the most salient example in Foucault's work being the modern prison). In Foucault, the Enlightenment's privileging of reason is writ large, and it is during this period that the close association (figured throughout Foucault's work) between knowledge and power, takes on its clearest form. This is evidenced in his asides regarding death in *The Birth of the Clinic* (2003: 153) at the time: "[w]ith the coming of the Enlightenment, death, too, was entitled to the clear light of reason, and became for the philosophical mind an object and source of knowledge. The desire to control and to monitor has, as a consequence, the desire to " surveiller" those who stand outside of the carefully outlined tenets and standards of societal conduct, something which Foucault figures by re-appropriating Bentham's concept of the Panopticon.

Martin et al. (1988: 125) examine how, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault “ explored the ramifications of such management, as behavior that defied public expectations about what was acceptable was differentiated into a spectrum of types and parceled out among a variety of institutions – insane asylums, hospitals, prisons, and other places of segregation.

Enlightenment thinking centred on the belief that this form of organization was a genuinely efficient and desirable means through which society might function; what Foucault's analysis exposes is the manner in which this organization rather reinforced the inequalities, problematic elements and hegemonic elitism that characterized European society at this time. Where I depart from Foucault, however, is that I believe the Enlightenment thinking was informed and influenced by a strong reformist, meliorist mentality, and not simply an exercise in cynical elitist organization and control. Although an antipathetic thrust characterizes their treatment of the Enlightenment in much of their work, Adorno and Horkheimer's most explicit critique of the Western philosophical tradition that culminated in the rationality of the ‘ classical age’ can be found in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this text, the ‘ universal’ aspects of Enlightenment rationality are critiqued, as they were in Adorno's analysis (vide supra) in *The Culture Industry*. Read about theThe authors are reacting against the Enlightenment project as a holistic philosophical enterprise, to its “ emphasis on universal history, the autonomy of the subject, and the unity of reason and rationality through the transparency of language and communication” (Hohendahl, 1995: 7).

This has led, in a manner very different from the basis for interpretations of Foucault, to a series of poststructuralist readings which, to quote Hohendahl <https://assignbuster.com/foucaults-understanding-of-the-enlightenment-with-that-of-horkheimer-and-adorno/>

(ibid. , figure Adorno “ as a rigorous antimetaphysical thinker who struggles against any form of (Hegelian) synthesis, someone who seeks out ruptures and breaks and consistently attacks the traditional epistemological preference for identity. Hence, the new context for the interpretation of Adorno is the work of Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, and Derrida. ” Foucault’s position can be usefully contrasted with Adorno and Horkheimer’s identification of the ‘ dominant ideology’ inherent in all mass cultural products. In *The Culture Industry*, a narrative of inversion is charted from the Enlightenment principles of rationality to the manner in which they have been reconstituted in the modern age; the authors argue that “ the feature of enlightened reason which accounts for this reversal is its identification of rationality and understanding with the subsumption of the particular under the universal” (2001: 5). Compare this with Foucault’s analysis, in *Madness and Civilization* (2005: 191) of those “ schemers with “ cracked heads”” who, during the classical age, “[added] a muffled accompaniment of unreason to the reason of the philosophers”, and where “ the rationality of the Enlightenment found in them a sort of darkened mirror, an inoffensive caricature.

The antipathy in Adorno and Horkheimer towards cultural and Enlightenment subsumption of the particular is informed by what Hohendahl identifies (1995: 9) as Adorno’s interest in “ marginalized phenomena that have traditionally escaped the logic of the grand ri?? cit of history. ” In this regard, there are parallels between Adorno and Foucault in their reimagining of the traditional liberal reformist model of Enlightenment ontology, in which the fallacies of the grand narrative are exposed in the context of their historically

and socially contingent particulars. Moreover, Adorno's critique of the enlightenment project becomes, as Hohendahl has noted (1995: 7) the focus of deconstructivist analyses of his work, which seek to differentiate Adorno's position on the enlightenment with that of Marxist theory and other members of the Frankfurt School, such that: " the question of reason and rationality becomes the touchstone for the poststructuralist reading. Hence, the poststructuralist appropriation tends to deny the dogmatic unity of Critical Theory; it seeks to foreground epistemological problems and shows little interest in the question of social praxis and political relevance.

However, this interpretative paradox does not mean that Adorno is detaching himself from the Enlightenment tradition, nor that he is necessarily attempting to re-write that tradition in the same way that Foucault attempted to in his reconstruction of the transitional period from punishment to discipline in *Surveiller et Punir*. Moreover, it is important to situate Adorno and Horkheimer's work as presenting at any one time, in the words of Hayes (1999: 5), one " among a number of polarizing accounts of rationality" or Enlightenment. Rather, Adorno champions the notion of a rationally organized society in which, as he argues in *Negative Dialectics* (1973: 204), the ideal would aim " to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members, and to negate the internal reflexive forms of that suffering. " Thus Cook argues (2004: 3) that Adorno " sees himself as carrying forward this [Enlightenment] tradition with its emphasis on rational, autonomous, and critical thought", and that furthermore Adorno " claims [in the same text] that his work contributes to enlightenment by promoting the self-critical spirit of reason.

However, one would be tempted to nuance this interpretation to identify what Roberts has called “ the vanishing point of Adorno’s dialectic of enlightenment” (1991: 11). The pivotal point around which Adorno’s analysis of the Enlightenment turns is thus his critique of its attempt to supersede nature, and to chart a divorce of humanity from the natural context from which it cannot, Adorno contends, be extricated: Enlightenment, which depended for its progress on the dialectic of subject and object, ends in the destruction of the resistance (the latency) of nature. Its self-destructive terminus is the cessation of the dialectic in the indifference of subject and object. Indifference is thus the vanishing point of Adorno’s dialectic of enlightenment” (Roberts, 1991: 11).

This break with nature is a characteristic of the Enlightenment’s ontology of what Witkin describes as the “ mythic consciousness” (2002: 35) identified by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. These ways of thinking, or rather this overarching epistemological paradigm, serve to “ inscribe the alienated antagonistic power of nature which ultimately manifests as the power exerted by man over himself and his fellows in the effort to master the world and exploit nature” (ibid.). However, and as Adorno and Horkheimer write in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972: 222), the quest to break with nature through language has failed, and reason (Crook 2004: 80), “ has served the function of an organ of adaptation”: human race with its machines, chemicals, and organizations – which belong to it just as teeth belong to a bear, since they serve the same purpose and merely function more effectively – is the dernier cri of adaptation in this epoch.

” Contrast this with Foucault’s assertion in *The Order of Things* (2004: 121) that “[t]he only indelible constant guaranteeing the continuity of the root throughout its history is the unity of meaning: the representative area that persists indefinitely. Crook articulates the central thesis of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* succinctly when he notes that Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of the enlightenment project figures it as one in which had, as its aim, the desire “ to install human control over nature as a way of warding-off the fear of nature has the ultimate effect of engendering an even greater fear of the products of human technology” (1994: 133). It is this (failed) attempt that characterizes the central thrust of the authors’ critique of the Enlightenment project, one which leads them to an extrapolative critique of modern society and modern culture. Foucault’s understanding of the Enlightenment is, by contrast, more nuanced. Rather than seeing a dominant ideology in the manner of Adorno and Horkheimer, or figuring the imposition of the universal through a subsumption of the particular, Foucault considers the Enlightenment ethos “ not as faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude [of] permanent critique” (Foucault 1984: 42).

This emphasis on critique, and the contextual and rational elements contained therein, is something which is lacking in Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis, which (in the context of their critique of modern culture) posits a dominant ideology behind every cultural artifact. Durham & Kellner (2001: 102-3) have identified this ontological weakness as a characteristic of their work as well as that of others: films and other forms of media culture should be analyzed as ideological texts contextually and rationally, seeing some

texts as more progressive radical or liberal responses to rightist artifacts and ideological positions, rather than, say, just dismissing all media culture as reactionary and merely ideological, as certain monolithic theories of the “ dominant ideology”, such as the classical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), many Althusserians, some feminists, and others, are wont to do. To conclude, it is evident that no Foucaultian reading of the Enlightenment per se presents itself in his writing; rather, Foucault attempts both to subvert conventional narratives of the period, and to restore or privilege those which he finds more apposite, and does both these things at the same time. As Hayes has observed in the context of Foucault's analysis of Kant's ' Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? (1999: 5), “ Foucault's desire both to counter and to retrieve Kant exemplifies conflicts.

.. in many forms of “ systematic” discourse”, conflicts which are equally present in Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of the Enlightenment from the critical point of view of the subsumption of the particular under the universal that the era typifies, whilst simultaneously figuring themselves as bearers of the Enlightenment torch, and standard bearers for a coherent theoretical tradition. Indeed, whilst Foucault explicitly reimagines the narrative of Enlightenment to modernity, Adorno and Horkheimer have a more complicated interpretation of the Enlightenment, the materialist historical narrative of Marx, and then the contemporary modern cultural scene, as Brown (2001: 200) has identified: “ The Frankfurt School did not, however, abandon the idea of a unidirectional linear history; indeed, its pessimism was precisely based on the view that this history, the only one available, was turning out badly.

This is evidenced in their pessimistic reading of a continuity, identified by Held (1992: 157) “ in the thought of Kant, the Marquis de Sade and Nietzsche”, such that whilst Nietzsche lies in between these two figures, “[a] continuity exists, Horkheimer and Adorno maintained, between elements of liberalism, developed and exemplified by Kant, and totalitarian thought and practice, anticipated by de Sade. Foucault figures the link between Enlightenment thinking and de Sade in a more explicitly antithetical manner in *The History of Madness* (2006: 99), noting that, during the eighteenth century, “ reason and libertinage were juxtaposed but not identical”, and that, “[w]hen the Enlightenment triumphed, libertinage was forced underground, and was never really formulated before Sade’s *Justine* and above all *Juliette*. The problem with Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique however, and this is a problem to which Foucault objected, is that the critical theory presented in texts such as *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* becomes self-referentially circular by presenting a critique of a philosophy firmly within and through the terms of that philosophy itself; as Hoy & McCarthy have noted in the context of this text (1994: 114): “[s]ince the book on the enlightenment is itself caught up in the modern era with its faith in reason, it cannot claim to know of an alternative to enlightenment. It is perhaps this paradox, more than any other, which means that any coherent ‘ understanding’ of the Enlightenment as a period per se, is resisted in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, and problematised in Foucault’s analysis.