

THE DIALECTICAL IMAGINATION BY MARTIN JAY: THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Chapter 8 of *The Dialectical Imagination* by Martin Jay discusses *Dialectic of The Enlightenment*, written during WWII by Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno and published in 1947. I haven't read the book, though thanks to commenter Neighbor6 I have a copy, so this discussion is all based on Jay's description. *Dialectic of The Enlightenment* (my copy is titled *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but I will use Jay's) opens with this:

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world.* It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.

The footnote references Max Weber's quote, which I found here:

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental.

I think that's how most of us would characterize

the Enlightenment, as closing the door on superstition and opening the door to scientific inquiry. The obvious dark side of this apparently good thing is that nature becomes an object for study and manipulation; and human beings who are part of nature become objects for study and manipulation as well. The point of scientific inquiry moved quickly from an effort to understand to an effort to dominate. Science was primarily directed at supporting the production of goods and services and war machines. Adorno wrote that if Marx had his way, the whole world would become a "giant workshop" P. 259. Philosophy also became an element of the support system for a society based on industrial production. Kant's effort to generate a morality from first principles failed, but for decades, it provided a basis for the morality that supported the capitalist system. Then the full potential of the power to dominate became clear as Hitler and Stalin achieved total domination and pushed the world into a nightmarish war.

A second problem, beyond domination, is the reductionism of science. As Horkheimer put it, "the formula supplants the image;". P. 270. All that does not serve the capitalist system, about humans, animals, resources, the atmosphere and the planet itself, all of that is meaningless and is ignored. That includes all those spiritual and communal feelings that hold people together in groups of all sizes. It also includes our fellow feelings with other creatures, our feelings of oneness with the natural world, our gratitude for the bounty of the world, our respect for the beauty and power of the world, all useless and meaningless.

Jay begins Chapter 8 with a quote from Max Horkheimer

If by enlightenment and intellectual progress we mean the freeing of man from superstitious belief in evil forces, in demons and fairies, in blind fate—in short, the emancipation from fear—then denunciation of what is currently called

reason is the greatest service reason
can render. P. 253.

Given the results of the 20th Century,
Horkheimer can easily be excused for taking this
pessimistic view. In any event, the idea of
domination of nature became the focal point of
the work of the Frankfurt School after WWII as
the scholars worked to understand its
ramifications. In a way, that work replaced the
goal of unifying theory and practice, a central
goal at the beginning of the Institute for
Social Research, as it became obvious that this
was not feasible. It was the last break with
Marxism.

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Jay doesn't explain why the Frankfurt School's
effort to combine theory and praxis failed, and
why the scholars of the Institute concluded that
philosophy and what they called speculative
thought cannot provide a way towards social
revolution and the betterment of society, so
I'll take a shot. One of the things I see in
Jay's book is that the scholars of the Frankfurt
School believed deeply in the openness of the
future. Jay writes:

In fact, the Enlightenment, for all its
claims to have surpassed mythopoeic
confusion by the introduction of
rational analysis, had itself fallen a
victim to a new myth. This was one of
the major themes of the Dialectic [of
The Enlightenment]. At the root of the
Enlightenment's program of domination,
Horkheimer and Adorno charged, was a
secularized version of the religious
belief that God controlled the world. As
a result, the human subject confronted
the natural object as an inferior,
external other. At least primitive
animism, for all its lack of self-
consciousness, had expressed an
awareness of the interpenetration of the
two spheres. This was totally lost in

Enlightenment thought, where the world was seen as composed of lifeless, fungible atoms: "Animism had spiritualized objects; industrialism objectified spirits." P. 260.

The scholars of the Institute completely rejected the idea that the world is closed; they saw it as infinitely open, and driven by human action. The world is not a collection of mindless fungible lifeless atoms, operating under simple laws or under the control of God. Instead, its future is open, radically open, open in ways we can't imagine. Any social theory that could predict the future would have at its root the assertion that the social world, the world we humans create, operates under a set of definitive and permanent rules, like a clock or a computer. If there is no God, if there are no computer program, then how is it possible to create a theory that would lead to a praxis that would lead to a better society?

On the other hand, once we imagine ourselves, us humans, as part of a boundless and terrible and beautiful universe, we open up a vast panorama for action. The goals of that action are set by humans, hopefully through a decent political process, hopefully guided by our best thinking and our best judgment. That process continues even as Republican thugs carry on their war on the entire world. And it's worth noting that nature, far from being dominated by humans, is quite able to overwhelm us.