

CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE: A RESPONSE TO BEN AGGER

Andrew Wernick

Despite its limitations, Ben Agger's attempt in *Dialectical Sensibility I & II* (CJPST I, 1 & 2) to provide an orientation for contemporary critical theorising has the merit of thematising most of the key issues. In the politically, ideologically and theoretically confused aftermath of the 1960's, the emancipatory project needs philosophical clarification. Any coherent metatheoretical proposal addressed to that end is indeed to be welcomed — if only as a provocation to debate.

Agger's vision of how radical intellectuality ought to develop has a great deal of appeal, especially for those of us grappling with the uncomfortable antinomies of academic existence. Critical theory, emancipated from the elitisms of party and school, re-integrates itself with mass politics by identifying itself with the social and anthropological self-consciousness of actual rebellious constituencies; at the omega point, criticism finally loses its character as a separate, specialised activity altogether and merges into the universal "dialectical sensibility" it has engendered. Unfortunately, Agger's position is vitiated by the very qualities that give it resonance. His particular distillation of early Marx, Marcuse and Freire expresses a form of self-negating moralistic utopianism that is all too prevalent in the contemporary intellectual left. Agger's recommendations deserve serious attention; their inadequacy points towards a critique of the perspectival matrix within which they have been generated, and which in my view must itself be transcended in any project of re-vitalising and re-politicising critical theory. Without pretending to be systematic, the following more specific objections to Agger are being advanced.

1. The Frankfurt Question.

In *Dialectical Sensibility I*, Agger's negative evaluation of the Frankfurt

ANDREW WERNICK

thinkers (particularly of Horkheimer and Adorno) goes overboard. I have no quarrel with the view that during the Hitler-Stalin period critical theory succumbed to fatalism, and a radical de-politicisation which drove it by the mid-1940's into an un-dialectical dead-end. By the end of World War II the Frankfurt thinkers had begun to fixate on their dystopian projection that a "totally administered" industrial order was destined to emerge on a global scale, its social contradictions permanently frozen, and the prospect of liberation extinguished, even as a dream. The unrelieved pessimism of such works as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* indeed represents a marked retreat from the dialectical openness of theory to historical potentiality which the Frankfurt thinkers hoped to recuperate from the materialist tradition. Critical Theory's descent into despair had its aspect of truth. The tendency towards social pacification and cultural incorporation highlighted by the Horkheimer circle may not represent the principal axis of late capitalist socio-cultural development; but it is, nevertheless, a real feature of that development and one that persists into the present.

Agger correctly criticises Horkheimer and Adorno for hypostatising the particular period of historical catastrophes through which they were living; but instead of elaborating this insight by exploring an alternative reading of modern history, he perpetuates their error of de-historicisation (in his terms, their "historicism") by counterposing to their abstract account of the dialectic of enlightenment an equally abstract argument about the eternal psychological nature of man. One can readily accept the principle, fundamental for a Marcusean, that the human instincts react negatively when the organism's desires and projects are manipulated or frustrated. Domination and alienation imply rebellion, and it is worth grounding such an anthropological *a priori* in order to show how social domination has psychological limits. Only once in the last forty years has there been any real evidence of mass revolutionary potential in advanced capitalist societies, "working-class" or otherwise. Who could deny that there has been a steady decline in the autonomy and efficacy of "public opinion" as a power in the actual formation of state policy, *pari passu* with the rise of a highly centralised communications and entertainment complex, peddling its confetti of facts, myths and opinions to an increasingly privatised populace? Even after one has taken note of Horkheimer and Adorno's error in extrapolating the corporatist trends of the nightmarish 1930's and 1940's into an indefinite future, one is still left with the problem of how to account for the historically relative truth that the period between 1920 and 1960, which formed the immediate backdrop to critical theory's strident neo-Weberian polemic against the rise of instrumentality as a master-category of public discourse, did witness the consolidation of a remarkably "one-dimensional" socio-cultural order. That this phase of conservatism was followed by new

CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

rebellions and extreme cultural turmoil does not diminish advanced capitalism's prior success in containing its structural contradictions, it merely indicates the actual course of history for which critical theory must *post facto* find some rational account.

In short, granted the need to de-absolutise and de-ontologise the Frankfurt theses concerning the "eclipse of reason", the "decline of the individual" and the triumph of "total administration", what is required is less the re-thronement of philosophical anthropology that Agger prescribes than theoretical developments in the domain of socio-historical analysis. As a priority, we need to better understand the complex and contradictory dynamics alive in the "superstructural" and mass-psychological development of industrial capitalism. The problem for theory is how to combine an understanding of the structural moments of opposition and containment in a single, synthetic, historically concrete analysis. How, in other words, does the dialectical tension between cultural normalisation and crisis/revolt actually function in a given conjuncture, and how are we to account for the apparently unpredictable alternations between periods of adaptive conformism and periods of ferment? Armed with this kind of knowledge, not only would we be able to refine our understanding of issues confronted by the Frankfurt thinkers themselves — such as fascism, consumer consciousness etc. — but we would also be in a position to grapple with certain contemporary puzzles. What, for example, is critical theory to make of the recent outbreak of a messianic youth movement, or of the contrasting experiences of France, where that movement combined with a working-class upsurge to produce a quasi-revolutionary explosion, and the United States where "middle America" proved to be the Nixon-supporting rock on which it smashed to pieces? Again, what is the real political significance of the ecological question, punk rock, Anita Bryant? In general, how do the rhythms of culture mediate political-economic processes in advanced capitalism, and what conclusions follow for transformational politics?

If Agger appears to underestimate the force of the social analysis that accompanied their drift to pessimistic contemplativism (and so misidentifies the theoretical corrective that should be applied), he also polemically distorts what the Frankfurt thinkers considered to be the real practical aim and value of their work. "People do not revolt or act constructively to transform society because they have read works of critical theory" says Agger, intending to be devastating, "but because their current lives are no longer bearable" (CJPST II, p. 22). However it is a crude misconception to suppose that the Frankfurt School intended its critique of ideology to stir people into action, let alone *en masse*. It is impossible for anyone reading Adorno, for example, to imagine that his philosophically opaque commentary was conceived as propagandistic communication with "the people". A small audience of fellow theorists is

ANDREW WERNICK

evidently what he had in mind, and even here he realised he was thinking against the grain. In the Preface to *Philosophy of Modern Music* he writes:

The author would not wish to gloss over the provocative features of this study. In view of what has happened in Europe and what further threatens the world, it will appear cynical to squander time and creative energy on the solution to esoteric questions of compositional techniques ... From an eccentric beginning, however, some light is shed upon a condition whose familiar manifestations are now only fit to disguise it ... How is a total world to be structured in which mere questions of counterpoint give rise to unresolvable conflicts? (p. xiii)

The practical posture of critical theory in the 1930's and 1940's was essentially defensive, to preserve in a form that could not be swallowed up into the gibberish of slogans and media vulgarisation, a theoretical tradition that refused accomodation to the givens of the modern world and a critical sensibility which experienced that world as a tragic negation of its own civilisational potential.

We are wholly convinced — and therein lies our *petitio principii* — that social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought. Nevertheless, we believe that the notion of this very way of thinking, no less than the actual historic forms — the social institutions with which it is interwoven — already contains the seed of the reversal universally apparent today. If enlightenment does not accomodate reflection on this recidivist element, then it seals its own fate ... In the enigmatic readiness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the sway of any despotism, in its self-destructive affinity to popular paranoia, and in all uncomprehended absurdity, the weakness of the modern theoretical faculty is apparent.

We believe that these fragments will contribute to the health of that theoretical understanding...

(Horkheimer and Adorno,
Dialectic of Enlightenment,
Herder and Herder p. xiii)

CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

The oracle of substantive reason may be tinged with idealism, but it certainly harbours no agitational ambitions. Far from assuming thought to be the prime mover in the historical process, its fate is seen to be bound up with the progress and regress of social freedom.

As for the actual content of the critical sensibility which the Frankfurt thinkers wished their theoretical work to keep alive, Agger's criticisms are more to the point. He mentions their under-emphasis of the oppressive dimensions of the traditional family, and their typically high bourgeois prejudice against potentially creative forms of mass-popular culture. I would add that, because of an understandable but exaggerated fear of modern irrationalism, they also lacked an adequate appreciation of the Dionysian, ecstatic and magical elements of human experience. A yearning for mass pagan ritual was as important an ingredient as authoritarianism in the mass-psychology of German fascism — but one to which critical theory gave virtually no attention. In Horkheimer and Adorno's hysterical opposition to the contestative and theatrical aspects of the 1960's student movement, and in the latter's notorious polemic against jazz, one can see how much they were in the grip of an unreflected reaction-formation against antinomianism which at times seriously undermined their capacity for making rational aesthetic and political judgements.

Allowing for these ideological deficiencies, however, the Frankfurt School must be considered to have been remarkably successful in the practical goal it actually set itself. The critical theorists of the Institute did manage to keep alive, during the Dark Ages of fascism and the Cold War, a current of philosophically grounded social criticism which was resistant to invasion by the dominant forms of mystification and "terrible simplification", and which they were ultimately able to relay to a future generation better situated than its mentors to actualise their critique in revolutionising praxis. Besides the diffuse international influence in the 1960's of such popularised slogans as Marcuse's "one-dimensional society", in West Germany itself the line of filiation between Frankfurt School writings and the ideas of the New Left was unambiguous and direct. There, the rapid passage from a liberal protest against Cold War censorship and traditional hierarchy in the universities to an anti-authoritarian movement at war with a "society of total administration" would not have been possible without the mediation of modern German radical theory. The historical irony is that the New Left's ultra-activist "devaluation of theory and ... overhasty subordination of theoretical work to the *ad hoc* requisites of practice" (Habermas, *Towards a Rational Society*, H.E.B. 1972, p. 33) which so horrified the older generation of critical theorists, was itself rationalised in terms of early Frankfurt analysis of the continuities between liberal-democracy and fascism as variant forms of capitalist incorporation. The

ANDREW WERNICK

conviction that history has missed the emancipatory boat can as easily ground a politics of "global contestation" and "wargasm" as it can one of stoical resignation or cautious reformism.

Finally, Agger's contention that early critical theory's central weakness was its hostility to psychological analysis, whose absence from their work is symptomised in the erroneous postulate that human nature is infinitely manipulable (their "denial of subjectivity"), also requires some qualification. I will leave aside the question of the adequacy of Horkheimer's thesis concerning the historical "decline of the individual", except to note that his celebrated essay on the subject in *Eclipse of Reason* argues not that all individuality is becoming extinct, but that in the sphere of mass culture, the cult of the celebrity and the star system masks the process of growing conformism that it reinforces. "The real individuals of our time are the martyrs who have gone through the inferno of suffering and degradation in their resistance to conquest and oppression, not the inflated personalities of popular culture..." (*Eclipse of Reason* 1947 OUP p. 161)

A more general point that Agger seems to overlook entirely is that the very recovery of anthropological and psychological themes by left-wing thought, which he deems so essential and applauds in the later writings of Marcuse, was a collective concern of the Frankfurt School ever since breaking with the economicist Marxism of Grunberg and Grossmann in the early 1930's. Along with Wilhelm Reich, one of the Institute's signal historical achievements was to initiate a rupture with the ingrained puritanism of post-1848 official leftism by seriously confronting tabooed questions of sex and psyche posed by Freud. With the *Studien über Autorität* and *The Authoritarian Personality*, the Frankfurt thinkers undertook a path-breaking set of theoretical enquiries into the relationships between family, character-structure, sexuality and authoritarianism. The anthropological interest in reconstructing and accounting for the authoritarian psyche encouraged Marcuse to ransack Freud for insights into the anthropology of liberation. All this being so, it is extremely one-sided to view early critical theory as in essential continuity with the rabid psychologism of the Second and Third Internationals, on the grounds that "they accepted the orthodox Marxist critique of 'philosophical anthropology' and of all theories which tend to hypostasise a static human nature" (CJPST II p. 23). Far from "failing to integrate psychological with sociological perspectives in such a way as to comprehend the biological-anthropological foundation of human being" (*ibid.* p.23) the Institute's attempt to analyse, for instance, the connection between popular support for Hitler and the decline of familial patriarchy represents virtually the first serious attempt since Marx and Engels to examine these missing mediations in the tradition of the analysis they founded.

Of course, what Agger most objects to in early critical theory's alleged anti-

CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

anthropologism is the way in which it grounded a bleak prognosis for the possibility of liberation. His strictures in this respect are related specifically to Horkheimer's thesis about the "decline of the individual" and Adorno's conception of "the damaged life"; but he is remarkably silent about the extent to which Marcuse, whose lead he claims to be following, himself shared Horkheimer and Adorno's pessimism about the capacity of contemporary individuals to withstand corporatist and consumerist integration. In *Eros and Civilisation*, Marcuse advanced a neo-Freudian psychology in order to show both how capitalism draws on the psychic resources of the population it organises, as well as how the characterological transformation essential for the formation of a free society is thinkable in terms of anthropological theory — and indeed present as a real possibility in the desublimation process late capitalism is constrained to undergo. In that text, and still more in *One-Dimensional Man*, its sociological extension, the accent falls on the negative moment of this cultural dialectic: the way in which, once traditional controls are relaxed, the programme of the pleasure-principle is co-opted to reinforce the subjugation of "happy consumers" to the unmediated pleasures of commoditised gratification.

2. Descent into Pragmatism.

As a solution to the mind/action split he diagnoses to be at the heart of emancipatory theory's current difficulties, Agger urges the development of an activist social theory tailored to the function of "advising and stimulating ongoing rebellion". In his laudable desire to transcend the one-sided contemplativism for which "positivist Marxism" and early critical theory are equally castigated, he unfortunately falls into a form of radical pragmatism that is just as one-sided as the theoreticism he rejects.

I whole-heartedly agree that there is a practical and theoretical need to politicise social theory — but the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach ought not to be treated as an excuse for collapsing all the necessary mediations. The kind of synthetic socio-historical understanding Agger wishes to see theorists contribute to the process of radical conscientisation is hardly possible without the utilisation of certain formal conceptual elements whose very availability presupposes the existence of precisely that abstracted mode of theoretical activity he dismisses as "cerebral", "contemplative" and "positivist". *Capital*, for example, may not turn the masses to revolution, but a non-mystified understanding of social reality can hardly avoid reliance on ideas in some measure drawn from it.

It is evident that Agger, in refusing *a priori* the truth claims of social

scientific and philosophical activity conducted outside the realm of politico-ideological practice, effectively denies the possibility of objective knowledge. The relativism to which such a position leads can paradoxically concede the contemplativist enemy too much: it is more damaging to show how a particular instance of erroneous historical analysis is incorrect than merely to proclaim that every attempt at objectivity is scholastic. Agger's relativism is not, however, whole-hearted. He seems to hold that there is an objective truth to human nature, if not to the historical process sociated man acts out, and that knowledge of this nature is necessary both to give theoretical coherence to the reconstructed consciousness connoted by "dialectical sensibility" and to justify the recommendations/predictions advanced by "radical empiricism". Yet one would have thought that any such notion of a fixed human nature would be irreconcilable with a refusal to allow theorising a meaning beyond that of its practical functioning. What kind of theory is supposed to apprehend this particular objective truth?

In addition to these difficulties, Agger's epistemologically restrictive conception of theory also undermines its capacity to give advice. For Agger, the paramount task of radical social science is to relate "human suffering and the resistance which it occasions to the visible, palpable prospect of a qualitatively different society". In the revolutionary long-run, its special function is taken over by the transformed social collectivity in the cognitive self-management of all by all. Agger's conception not only instrumentalises the relation between theory and praxis (the former is the advisory handmaiden to the latter), but reduces it to purely ideological terms: the relation between self-reflection and action within a process of radicalisation.

Leaving aside the logical question of whether an "advisory" role for theory *now* is compatible with its *eventual* dissolution into praxis, Agger's dismissal of objectivistic socio-historical interpretation in effect deprives the advisory activity he recommends of a crucial political resource — the faculty of strategic reasoning. Agger's radical social science would ideally function only to show those in struggle how their rebellion points to a future beyond domination and alienation, and how their own discontent and resistance is linked to that of others in an interrelated context of structured repression and potential liberation. However, it is never sufficient for the successful outcome of a revolutionary social struggle that there be just mass radical consciousness, the game of power must also be won. Rational political strategy, in which the directing intelligence can be as broadly based as conditions permit, absolutely requires detached, theoretically and empirically informed analysis of the unfolding historical situation. Whatever its intent, the liquidationist attitude to the contemplative moment of theory has as its counterpart a liquidationist attitude to politics.

CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

In fact, it is precisely here, in an anti-objectivism which in the moralistic name of epistemological democracy refuses to consider the possibility of strategic theory, that Agger reproduces what I find the central weakness of the Frankfurt School thought he criticises. Not pessimism, but anti-instrumental purism stands at the centre of critical theory constitutional apoliticism; and it is this which needs to be corrected in any project of its "repoliticisation". The demonological connotation of "positivism" in critical theory's lexicon, as much as it usefully serves to orient a campaign of de-fetishisation, symptomises an extreme and thorough distrust of all theoretical objectification, the refusal, for fear of joining the ranks of the manipulators in a totally manipulated social universe, to treat the socio-historical situation faced by political actors as a reality external to their projects and hence susceptible to rational calculation.

3. The fate of intellectual culture.

Paradoxically, if Agger's conception of a revitalised critical theory is under-politicised in one respect, it is quite over-politicised in another. Incapable of thinking the instrumental as opposed to the ideological dimension of political activity his position at the same time tends to be totalitarian in its opposition to "disengaged scholarly activity" — *i.e.* to theorising not demonstrably related to practical ends outside itself. Agger does advance "the notion that cognition can become a form of mental play, reiterating Marcuse's vision that alienated work can be eliminated and thus fundamentally transformed under a different social order." (*CJPST*, I, 2, p. 68). (Intellectual) play is inseparably linked with the world of necessity and purpose denoted here by "work". It is arguable that we have reached one of those points in intellectual history where the reproduction of knowledge about "dead" traditions has become an obstacle in the development of new ones. Agger, however goes much further. Silent on any possible distinction that might be made between scholarship and scholasticism, he proposes as a vector for emancipatory practice the virtual dissolution of academia. "While this may be a painful and troubled process", he admits, "I can think of no better way of contributing to social change than to transform the traditional disengagement of the lonely scholar, in the process creating an archetype of dialectical sensibility." (*Ibid.* p. 48) By placing such extreme emphasis on the motive of social engagement, Agger lapses into the kind of immediacy and instrumentalism which Horkheimer and Adorno always thought was fated to dissolve the transcendental element of Western reason — albeit that his intellectual instrumentalism is ostensibly related to the long run emancipatory needs of humanity rather than to the mere bureaucratic demands of the moment.

Worse still, Agger's contempt for "cerebral Marxism" and "experts"

ANDREW WERNICK

betrays more than a trace of a populist anti-intellectualism that has always tended to limit the civilisational vision of the left, and which is particularly strong in the moralistic atmosphere of North American radicalism. In his rush to eliminate the invidious and power-ridden dichotomy between "expert" and "non-expert", Agger continually runs the risk of simply endorsing the *ressentiment* of the latter towards the former. In justifying his position that the intelligentsia ultimately has no right to exist as a separate social stratum, Agger situates himself within the utopian project so dear to the early Marx, the abolition of the division of labour. "It would be hypocritical", he says, "to preserve the role of the traditional Marxist intellectual while counselling others to destroy the division of labour." (*Ibid.* p. 68) He takes for granted that the specialisation of activities, particularly along the mental/manual axis, is necessarily oppressive and hierarchical and as such constitutes a malignant feature of social life that it would be progressive to eradicate. Refusing to separate strategy from programme, Agger insists that the battle against the "tyranny and hegemony of expertise" must begin now. "The radical intellectual begins to live the revolution by becoming *more* than an isolated intellectual, refusing to stay within the confines of the academic role. It is this multi-dimensionality of role-playing that I contend is revolutionary." (*Ibid.* p. 47).

Even as a maximalist programme, the traditional leftist panacea of abolishing the division of labour needs a good deal more critical attention than it usually receives. For example, the question of specialisation versus all-round development as a goal for the individual must be clearly distinguished from the structural problem of how to better integrate intellectual, materially productive and aesthetic activities within the social collectivity. Durkheim's distinction between a "forced" and a "spontaneous" distribution of individuals into socially necessary tasks seems a particularly fruitful lead to follow in this context. At any rate, it is one thing to propose that intellectuality be generalised throughout the society, and quite another to urge the disappearance of a specialized intellectual culture, as that is traditionally understood. As a final goal, such an aim is dubious, but to transform the utopian vision of a negated division of labour into a contemporary moral imperative, at a time when the whole tradition of Western intellectuality is compromised by commoditisation and instrumentalisation, strikes me as culturally irresponsible. Agger himself does not side with barbarism, but the Maoist concern to resolve the expert/non-expert contradiction provided ideological cover in China for an unholy alliance between official Zdanovism and popular anti-intellectualism against the entire non-technical intelligentsia, modern-critical as well as traditional. No more than a moment's reflection is required to figure out that a combination of Red Guard "anti-expertism" and rhapsodising *à la*

CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

1844 Manuscripts is an inadequate foundation from which to develop a critical or strategic perspective on the present condition of Western intellectual and scientific culture.

One suspects that it is precisely the respect they display towards the classical European intellectual tradition that Agger finds most irksome in the writings of Horkheimer and Adorno. Does not an elitist German academic mandarism lurk behind Horkheimer's defense of contemplative rationalism and Adorno's maddening infatuation with convoluted modes of expression? Undoubtedly, but why is intellectual conservatism something of which they should necessarily be ashamed?

To the extent that he lacks a feeling for the cultural issues at stake in what Horkheimer called "the eclipse of Reason", Agger's "dialectical sensibility" is relatively impoverished. Nietzsche, whose writings on the psychology of being dominated helped inhibit the early critical theorists from developing a naive (and orthodox) over-identification with the subjectivity of the working-class movement, outlined in his later works a trenchant analysis of the link between *ressentiment* and anti-intellectualism. The totalising consciousness connoted by "dialectical sensibility" that Agger wishes to foster would have far greater claim to synthetic inclusiveness if Nietzsche's insights could be critically appropriated. This, however would force a rather drastic modification in the vector for radical theorising that Agger recommends.

Sociology
Trent University