

**Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer**

*Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. Rodney Livingstone.

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About a third of the way through this short text, we find a bit of representative dialogue expressing Horkheimer's near total pessimism regarding the future: 'The world is mad and will remain so. When it comes down to it, I find it easy to believe that the whole of world history is just a fly caught in the flames.' Adorno responds, 'The world is not just mad. It is mad and rational as well' (39). While both famous critical theorists, through their recorded exchange, struggle to find some basis to look toward the future, Adorno consistently emerges as the more optimistic of the two.

The publisher provides the book's provocative and suggestive title, which in the course of reading shows itself to be a near brilliant choice. The rather informal conversation, recorded here by Greta Adorno, is made more stimulating at each and every step by imagining these two old pessimists working their way toward some alternative version of the Communist Manifesto (yes, that manifesto), though in this instance, as Adorno notes, the point is to bring about a particular *understanding* of the world. Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach is nearly inverted. The philosophers have retreated to interpreting the world, with only the faintest glimmer of hope that it might be changed. Adorno is explicit: 'We are not proposing any particular course of action,' (55) while Horkheimer, with a ring of desperation, expresses the view that their theory 'will benefit practice *somehow or other*' (101, my emphasis).

A transcription of a conversation occurring March and early April, 1956, we find here the two friends and collaborators engaged in the sort of banter only those with long histories together can achieve: friendly, mocking, sometimes random, knowing each other's moves well, and including a willingness to explore and even embrace inconsistency. Their responses to each other sometimes have a certain playfulness to them: motorcycle riding is interpreted as alienated work activity mimicking the sound and speed of the workplace with Horkheimer maintaining that the rider's 'true pleasure in motorbike riding is in the anal sounds it emits' (12). The publisher calls the work (with due reference to Adorno's view of jazz) 'a philosophical jam session, in which the two thinkers improvise freely, often wildly, on central themes of their work—theory and practice, labour and leisure, domination and freedom in a political register found nowhere in their writing' (ix).

The two begin with a discussion of the role of theory in the world *circa* 1956. Horkheimer claims in the text's first sentence, 'What we see today is a doubling of the world' (2). Here, beginning with a well known Frankfurt School orientation, thought is understood to have turned increasingly to 'scientific statement,' meaning that something like positivism (the mode of thought of the bourgeoisie) reigns supreme—thinking is a pure reflection of the world, lacking a critical, subjective factor. Adorno and Horkheimer concur that 'rigidly dogmatic' (Adorno) Marxism does the same thing. The problem is deepened, according to Horkheimer, by the fact 'that we no longer have either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat' (3) and further that 'the

party no longer exists' (4). All of this together yields what might be the most persistent problem taken up by the Frankfurt school: in the flattened, one-dimensional world of late capitalism, where is one to find a shred of subjectivity? Here, the two offer slightly different perspectives. For Horkheimer, speaking itself implies universality and 'Whatever is right about human society is embedded in the language—the idea that all will be well. When you open your mouth to speak, you always say that too' (5). He further invokes Dewey, while claiming to have a 'more modest' position than Adorno, suggesting that all truth claims begin 'the process of discussion.' (7) By contrast, for Adorno, thought intimates utopia: 'thought necessarily includes reflection... The gesture of the savage who pauses for an instant to reflect whether or not he wishes to eat his prisoner contains teleologically the end of violence' (7). This is a recurring idea for Adorno. Recall his reflections on Odysseus in *Excursus I* of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press 2002, 60) where, according to Adorno, through Homer's account, the violence enacted by Odysseus is transformed: 'But when speech pauses, the caesura allows the events narrated to be transformed into something long past, and causes to flash up a semblance of freedom that civilization has been unable wholly to extinguish ever since.' While utopia is forever latent in the attentive pause, the problem is to bring this latency to reality.

Horkheimer's 'more modest' position is actually defined relative to his *more utopian* vision regarding the relationship of happiness to work. From this perspective, Horkheimer sees much of Adorno's hopefulness as 'reformist' (22, 41): 'Your view is that we should live our lives in such a way that things will get better in a hundred years. That's more or less what the parson says too' (20). While both seem to hold in principle that happiness must in the end be understood as separate from work, Adorno claims that, in a rationally planned society, he would be willing to 'spend two hours a day working as a lift attendant,' (22) thereby prompting Horkheimer's charge of reformism. We can see here that it is precisely Horkheimer's utopianism that produces what looks like conservatism. Happiness 'would be an animal condition viewed from the perspective of whatever has ceased to be animal' (16). The 'other' to the system lies at the level of animality: 'Are these not all animal qualities: a not-too-strenuous life, having enough to eat, not having to work from morning to night? Preventing violence being done to man's nature?' (86–87)

Nothing short of the abolition of work will do, a position well beyond that of Marx, at least in volume three of *Capital*, where he states that there will always exist a realm of necessity, the key to freedom being simply the 'reduction' of the work day, a position Horkheimer would undoubtedly consider reformist. Adorno is close to Horkheimer here, adding that, they must 'include a section on the objection: what will people do with all their free time?' (32).

But, says Horkheimer, given the lack of a subject capable of bringing this about, 'We can expect nothing more from mankind than a more or less worn-out version of the American system' (21). He declares further that 'Europe and America are probably the best civilizations that history has produced up to now as far as prosperity and justice are concerned' (35). Adorno responds that a new manifesto can hardly 'call for the defense of the Western world' and that they cannot abandon Marxist terminology (36-7). Horkheimer retreats to the position that 'we want ... as much as possible of this Western culture ... taken over into the next stage of history, in particular the tradition of rationality' (43), but also, apparently, 'the preservation for the future of everything that has been achieved in America today, such as the reliability of the legal system,

the drugstores, etcetera' (63). Horkheimer, even as the discussion focuses on the politics that might lead to a utopian future, hovers near the thought that the most likely change is for the worse and that we might just need to hold on to what we have.

Horkheimer's pessimism leads him, at least at some of these moments, to embrace something like liberalism. In response to Adorno's claim that the idea that 'things could be otherwise' might occur to all of mankind, Horkheimer, prefiguring the trajectory followed by some elements of post-modern theory, expresses a fear of consensus: 'I find it repellent for people to believe that if only everyone could agree, something essential would have been achieved. In reality, the whole of nature would tremble at the thought. The truth is, on the contrary, that all will be well *only as long as they keep one another in check*' (46, my emphasis). In the face of a 'situation compared to which Nazism was a relatively modes affair,' the proper response to Social Democrats is not to call for communism or the dictatorship of the proletariat. For Horkheimer, 'The radicality of the formulation deprives the statement of its radicality' (58). Better to challenge the Social Democrats as inconsistent with their own ideals. So, for Horkheimer, *radicality* lies in a direction that could reasonably be construed as a *moderate* one.

Despite all of this, Horkheimer states that the only way to avoid catastrophe is through socialism, suggestively floating the idea for 'an appeal for the re-establishment of a socialist party' (87). He is also insistent that it be 'clear from our general position why one can be a communist and yet despise the Russians.' Adorno suggests that the party have a strictly 'Leninist manifesto.' (87)

All of this is done in the context of what both regard as a near impossible situation. The forces of production have reached a point at which the elimination of need is actually possible (31). But the subjective dimension has all but vanished. There is no relevant party. The subjectivity of the proletariat is non-existent. So, what are two alienated intellectuals to do? The radicality of their vision for the future (varying in its gradations) coupled with the radicality of their pessimism (also varying in its gradations) leads to impasse. If there is a lesson here, it may be that radicals should take care not to see their vision as too fantastic or their current situation as too nearly impossible. Theorizing is, then, more likely to connect with radical practice, perhaps coinciding with Adorno's 'innermost feeling' that 'it could all change at a moment's notice' (38).

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