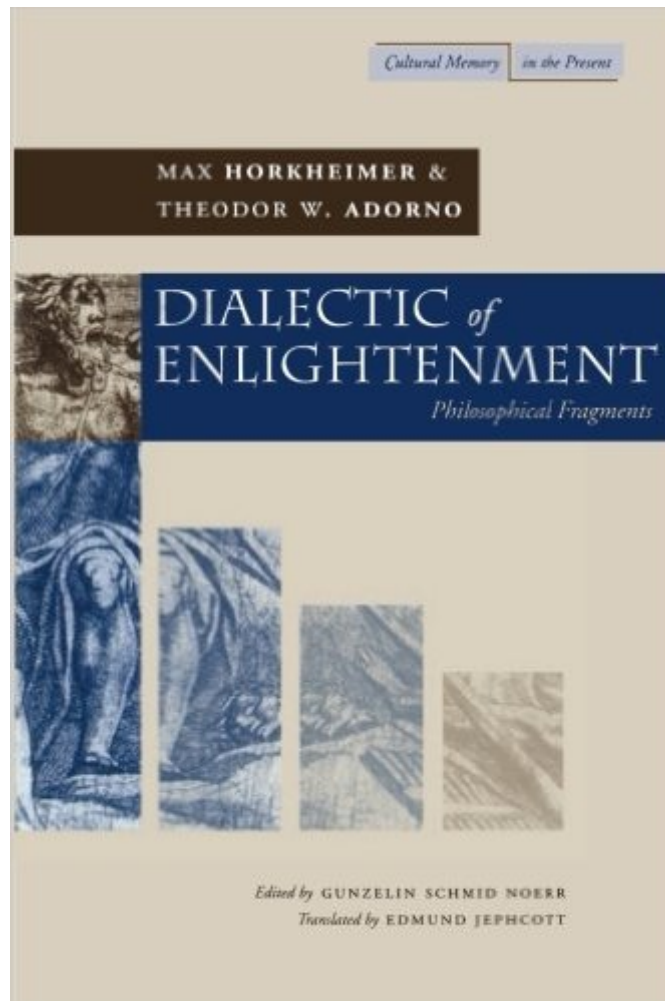


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Dialectic Of Enlightenment (Cultural Memory In The Present)



Synopsis

Dialectic of Enlightenment is undoubtedly the most influential publication of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Written during the Second World War and circulated privately, it appeared in a printed edition in Amsterdam in 1947. "What we had set out to do," the authors write in the Preface, "was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism." Yet the work goes far beyond a mere critique of contemporary events. Historically remote developments, indeed, the birth of Western history and of subjectivity itself out of the struggle against natural forces, as represented in myths, are connected in a wide arch to the most threatening experiences of the present. The book consists in five chapters, at first glance unconnected, together with a number of shorter notes. The various analyses concern such phenomena as the detachment of science from practical life, formalized morality, the manipulative nature of entertainment culture, and a paranoid behavioral structure, expressed in aggressive anti-Semitism, that marks the limits of enlightenment. The authors perceive a common element in these phenomena, the tendency toward self-destruction of the guiding criteria inherent in enlightenment thought from the beginning. Using historical analyses to elucidate the present, they show, against the background of a prehistory of subjectivity, why the National Socialist terror was not an aberration of modern history but was rooted deeply in the fundamental characteristics of Western civilization. Adorno and Horkheimer see the self-destruction of Western reason as grounded in a historical and fateful dialectic between the domination of external nature and society. They trace enlightenment, which split these spheres apart, back to its mythical roots. Enlightenment and myth, therefore, are not irreconcilable opposites, but dialectically mediated qualities of both real and intellectual life. "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology." This paradox is the fundamental thesis of the book. This new translation, based on the text in the complete edition of the works of Max Horkheimer, contains textual variants, commentary upon them, and an editorial discussion of the position of this work in the development of Critical Theory.

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Customer Reviews

"Dialectic of Enlightenment", one of the most celebrated texts of the Frankfurt School, endeavours to answer why modernity, instead of fulfilling the promises of the Enlightenment (e.g. progress, reason, order) has sunk into a new barbarism. Drawing on their own work on the "culture industry", as well as the ideas of the key thinkers of the Enlightenment project, (Descartes, Newton, Kant) Horkheimer and Adorno explain how the Enlightenment's orientation towards rational calculability and man's domination of a disenchanted nature evinces a reversion to myth, and is responsible for the reified structures of modern administered society, which has grown to resemble a new enslavement. Furthermore, Horkheimer's and Adorno's treatise was one of the most ambitious attempts to synthesise Marxist economic analysis with Freudian psychoanalysis, and is developed with much complexity and skill. Their philosophical and psychological critique of the Enlightenment concepts of reason and nature (which they identify as the loci of domination) spans almost the entire history of Western thought up until recent times, from Homer to Nietzsche. The book was written in 1944, during a phase of the war when the threat of Fascist victory still hung ominously over Europe, and when Horkheimer and Adorno themselves had to flee Germany to America. "Dialectic of Enlightenment" thus represents one of the most pessimistic strands of Marxist thought, giving up all expectations of a people's revolution in Western Europe. This was, in addition to the outbreak of the Second World War, due to the meteoric rise of extremely right-wing reactionary parties in the twenties, and their subsequent popularity, which ruled out by fiat any chance of a popular support for the left.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, both prominents of the Frankfurter Schule of critical theory, wrote this work during WWII. In their own words, the purpose of the book was to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism. Obviously their experiences as Jewish intellectuals fleeing for the national-socialist regime to the United States

was a strong impulse for this view, but the book is not limited to a critique of nazism or even totalitarianism altogether. The main subject of the book, though that itself is already difficult to disentangle, is Enlightenment's betrayal of its own liberating capacity. Adorno & Horkheimer analyze this by means of various cultural metaphors, which in highly abstract, contradictory and aesthetic language (especially the parts by Adorno) trace the development of Enlightenment and its subsequent 'dark side' throughout an equally metaphorical history of culture and ideas. In a certain sense this may most remind readers not familiar with both authors of Foucault and his use of concepts like the Panopticon to express a view of power relations. The method of Adorno and Horkheimer is however not so much genealogical, as Foucault's is, as dialectical in its idealist form. The book consists of an introduction, two "excursions" and two chapters on the Enlightenment itself, as well as a series of aphorisms provided at the end as "notes and sketches". Each part of the book consists of a very abstract, very metaphysical and almost entrancing analysis of, in turn, the development of Enlightenment as myth out of earlier myth, the form of modern Enlightenment as instrumental reason and mass deception, and the limits of Enlightenment to its own rationality, in the form of anti-semitism.

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