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## **SYNOPSIS**

of a dissertation

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Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno"*

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The defense of the dissertation will be held on ..... in ..... of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" before a jury consisting of the following members:

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The dissertation consists of 267 pages and is comprised of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The bibliography lists 140 titles in Bulgarian, English, and German languages.

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# Introduction

## Relevance and Motivation

Almost a hundred years after the founding of the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung) in Frankfurt (in 1923), or the so-called Frankfurt School, research in Bulgaria on the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer is insufficient. In the last ten years, the interest especially in Walter Benjamin has been growing more and more among philosophers, sociologists, philologists. One characteristic of the studies on the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Marcuse) in Bulgaria is that they are traditionally sociological. This is normal, given the fact that critical theory uses the method of social analysis inherited from Karl Marx; this is also due to two other reasons: one is that the critical program itself, developed by Horkheimer in 1931 with his inaugural lecture as director of the Institute, suggested that critical theory be an interdisciplinary theory combining purely scientific research with philosophical theory; the second reason is that the main programmatic, dominant text of critical theory has always been *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is also justified. Here, I do not want to break or refute this approach and tradition, but to supplement them: to theoretically bring out more clearly the purely philosophical element, the purely philosophical "grounds", without which the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer remains incomplete.

I will first outline several reasons for choosing to explore the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno. The first occasion is the one already mentioned - insufficient research on the critical theories of the Frankfurt School in the Bulgarian academic field. The second more concrete and theoretical reason is a question that Jürgen Habermas raises as an accusation against the theories of Adorno and Horkheimer: critical theory does not theoretically justify its (crypto)normativity; put even more strongly: normativity in the theory, which includes all evaluations, diagnoses, criticisms, is not based on a more general theory that gives the criteria of this normativity. If Habermas' "accusation" needs to be made even more specific, we can draw attention to a sentence from his afterword to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "If the Enlightenment is caught in an unstoppable process of self-destruction, where then does the criticism that establishes this derive its right for such a diagnosis?" (Хоркхаймер, Адорно 1999, 325). In fact, the study can be taken as an attempt to answer this question, referring to the texts of Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as an attempt to

(re)construct what is not clearly stated in the texts themselves as the source of this normativity, but is implicitly present.

### **Subject and Objectives of the Study**

The focus of the study is the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno as presented in the texts analyzed in this dissertation. More specifically, the subject includes the very transformation of this theory and its main specifics: contextuality and normativity.

The main objective of the study is to address the issue raised by Habermas regarding the theories of Adorno and Horkheimer (and other philosophers of this tradition) by exploring it at a more abstract level. The problem of where an immanent critique derives the grounds for its assessments, diagnoses, denials is posed through the concepts of context and normativity. The question extends to asking what critique is at all: the philosophical social critique of Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory. If a critique is completely immanent, how can it be normative, evaluative, or utopian at the same time? This question does not suggest that it contains a paradox, but that the relationship between critical theory's contextuality and normativity needs further justification. Thus crystallizes the main initial contradiction: between contextuality (or immanence) and normativity (or utopianism) of criticism. The purpose of the study is to show how not only this contradiction "disappears" within the framework of critical theory, but also the contextuality (immanence) and normativity (utopianism) of criticism function together and are specific to the critical theories of Adorno and Horkheimer and serve to explain and better understand the theory.

Regarding Habermas's question: it is not directly answered as it is posed, but my point is to show that it contains certain premises which are unfounded or at least not obvious; they will be refuted in the research. The main such premise is that a more general (rational) normative theory is needed to ground the normative position, the assessments that the theory contains.

### **Methodology**

The explanation and examination of the method of inquiry assumes that there are various approaches to historical-philosophical research, all of which stem from the different ways in which a text can be interpreted. Not only do different methods of reading exist, but there are also different purposes, applications, and outcomes of reading, speaking, and

writing about texts. There are many theories behind all this, which it is too much to go into here. I will only outline a few ways of reading, understanding and using Adorno's and Horkheimer's texts that can answer the question of research method. We can read and talk about a text critically, dialogically, (re)constructively, ideologically, practically (instrumentally), and possibly in other ways; in most cases, reading texts, speaking and writing about texts is some combination of different approaches. I accept that they all involve interpretation (according to Gadamer) rather than experiencing (according to Dilthey). In the present study, I will combine several approaches. First of all, research involves a basic element of reconstruction, which always involves interpretation, and in this sense is always a construction. Secondly, the reading will be ideological in a very general sense: my approach to the texts of Adorno and Horkheimer will have as its main task the extraction, the laying bare, the (re)construction of the "ideology" in the texts, or the main idea of the theory. To the extent that this research can answer the question of what is the role and potential of critical theory today, what effects can theory have for practice, to the extent that research can include practical elements: reading theory for the purposes of the present. The method of place studies enters into a dialogue with the texts of Adorno and Horkheimer and to an even lesser extent is a critical study. The method also includes an attempt to reconstruct a more general context that will serve to understand the theories of Adorno and Horkheimer. The research method will not be comparativist: a comparison of the theories of Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as not focusing on similarities and differences, but aiming to (re)construct a general theory; in a sense, the theory presented in Horkheimer's and Adorno's texts forms a whole tradition that is called critical theory in the specific sense of the term critique. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the research will be to answer the question of what critical theory is. If a traditional answer to the question of what critical theory is is that it is an immanent critique, then the understanding here of critical theory at least offers additions to this interpretation; the assumption is that it is not enough.

### **Main Claim**

The central thesis of the critical theory interpretation proposed in this study is that the philosophy of Adorno and Horkheimer cannot be exhausted and understood without capturing and recognizing the moral sentiment and commitment that is present under the general concept of normativity.



## **The Understanding of Context and Normativity Within the Dissertation**

"Contextualism" refers to the perspective and the overarching "paradigm" in which the critical theory is situated. This positioning is not inherent to the theory, but rather imposed for the purpose of research. Contextualist theories, like critical theory, examine, describe and explain phenomena through the examination of context, exploring the context's dependence and/or influence, as well as the formation, transformation and destruction of contexts. This context-centered approach differs from the long-standing philosophical tradition of abstracting, transcending, and bracketing context, which aims to investigate things "in themselves" beyond cultural influence.

In this dissertation, the following will be understood under the term "context": the cultural circumstances that shape the reality or potential of something.

The term "context" will refer specifically to the historical cultural situation encompassing the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, with a focus on the common characteristic of the cultural line starting from the Enlightenment.

"Context" will also refer to the history and evolution of critical approaches, specifically Marxism.

The origin of normativity in the theory is contextual and driven by specific cultural conditions, often expressed in negative terms. In critical theory, transcending context through normativity is inherent, as the aim is to critique and transform the current context. However, criticism does not undermine contextuality, as it refers to a potential alternative context, revealing a possible state of affairs and striving for change. This distinction between "possible" and "must" reflects the critical attitude, which carries a negative "must not" known as the normativity of the theory.

### **Chapter One: Contexts and Influences**

This study's first chapter, "Understanding the Background and Influences," delves into the context in which critical theory operates. This context encompasses the historical, cultural, and intellectual fields that are interrelated and have an impact on each other. The

chapter provides an overview of the cultural and historical background being criticized by the theory, as well as the philosophical tradition that critical theory both builds upon and transforms.

The chapter focuses on exploring the various contextual elements that form Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory and provide a deeper understanding of it. The context in which the theory is developed has two key functions: grounding the theory and providing a negative critique. On the one hand, the theory is dependent on its context, but on the other hand, its main objective is to critique and transform that context through a negative moral stance.

It's important to note that the choice of specific moments from the various contexts that influenced Adorno and Horkheimer's theories is intentional and selective, focusing on typical rather than atypical influences. The inclusion of Marx's theories in this chapter is important as many of the themes and problems addressed by Marx are also present in Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theories. The chapter examines how these themes and problems are situated and transformed within Marxism and the wider field of social analysis and critical approaches. Ultimately, the chapter aims to understand how the critical attitude evolves over time.

## **Chapter Two: The Early Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer**

The second chapter focuses on Max Horkheimer's early theory. It can be read independently, but also highlights key moments and concepts that are crucial to the overall study. This early Horkheimer theory is not completely systematic, but is more so than his later works in classical critical theory such as the "Dialectic of Enlightenment," Adorno's texts and books, and Horkheimer's later books. The theory itself seems to be disintegrating as rationality collapses, becoming chaotic, emotional, pessimistic, and fragmented. In these early texts, Horkheimer still employs traditional philosophical techniques.

Horkheimer's early theory is centered around the concept of suffering, which serves as both the starting point and final goal of the theory. The practical purpose of the theory is to overcome social suffering, which can be justified either by the need to alleviate suffering or by the irrationality of the world that requires systemic change. These two interpretations of the theory's purpose should be combined to form a more comprehensive understanding. The

stake of the theory is to change the conditions that lead to suffering, rather than just alleviating its effects.

Horkheimer's early theory draws from various heterogeneous traditions including the young Marx, Schopenhauer, Lukács, Kant, and Hegel. The combination of Marx's social analysis method with Schopenhauer's focus on suffering results in Horkheimer's pessimistic theoretical attitude. As he engages with Lukács's interpretation of Marx, the role of theory and the critical theorist becomes more important and minimalist. The critique of ideology, which was inherited from Marx, becomes central to Horkheimer's theory as ideology takes a more prominent place in society.

The relationship between theory and practice in Horkheimer's early texts can be understood through different levels of modality. The first level presents the world as having a definite historical genesis, revealing its potential for transformation. The second level asserts that this potential is not just an abstract possibility but a real historical one. Horkheimer uses socio-historical analysis, inherited from the young Marx and influenced by Lukács, to substantiate this analysis. The third level of modality is the transition from the possibility of transformation to the need for it. This is when the theory becomes normative in a weak utopian sense.

To fully understand Horkheimer's early theory, one must acknowledge his ever-present moral commitment, which can be traced until Adorno's latest writings. This moral commitment is rooted in context and not based on universal rational morality. Similarly, the normative aspect of the theory, that the world must be transformed, also has contextual rather than universal grounds.

### **Chapter Three: Dialectics of the Enlightenment and the Critique of Instrumental Reason**

The third chapter of the study primarily focuses on the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The motif and approach to critiquing instrumental reason is a central theme in the interpretation of the book, but it is not the sole focus. The book is more closely aligned with Horkheimer's philosophy than Adorno's. Horkheimer's book *Critique of Instrumental Reason* has a supportive role in the study of the problematic, but the approach of the critique of instrumental reason itself is more significant than the book itself. This is because the book

critiques various manifestations of instrumental reason but does not provide a theory of it. Horkheimer's 1947 book *Eclipse of Reason*, which was published in the same year as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is also important in this period and line of criticism targeted at a specific type of rationality.

The book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a crucial aspect of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and is considered an emblem of the theory. The present study focuses on the book for several reasons. First, when writing about two authors who developed a similar but different theory, joint projects are important to highlight the intersections, overlaps, and divergences between Horkheimer and Adorno's positions and approaches. Second, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* marks a transformation in critical theory, from Horkheimer's early Marxist approach to a cultural critique and critique of (im)rationality and from Adorno's style of philosophy closer to Benjamin to a more Marxist approach influenced by Lukács' theory of communication applied to culture. Third, the book traces the mode of contextualizing theory and attention to cultural context. Fourth, the theme of irregularity is crucial to the study of normativity, and the main thesis regarding normativity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that it critiques irregularity in various historical, social, and cultural spheres as a manifestation of a failure of rationality. The reading suggests that the book describes this irregularity, although whether it should be understood normatively or as a diagnosis is debatable.

The third chapter traces the transformation of critical theory along several lines that mark a trend. First, the relationship between critical theory and practice is becoming increasingly mediated through culture and ideology, making these spheres the main focus of critical theory. Second, immanent critique, which reveals the contradiction between ideas and reality, becomes increasingly insufficient as a source of critical potential. This is because Adorno's and Horkheimer's criticism is primarily aimed at the dominant and irrational modern rationality, so immanent critique is no longer enough. A critique is needed that is based on shared values and is neither external nor solely concerned with the foundations of the system.

## **Chapter Four: Critical Theory as Negative Dialectics**

The fourth chapter aims to present the very method of critical theory as negative-dialectical, as a negative dialectic, since the negativity, the negative moment in the theory is the *differentia specifica* that distinguishes the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer from other currents and trends in the critical tradition - Marx, Weber, Lukács, Marcuse, Benjamin, Habermas, etc. This is a thesis that is accompanied by the initial intuition and assumption that precisely negativity is something central to critical approaches, dispositions, methods in the first place. The critical always presupposes some negative moment, and what is specific here is that the negative moment is most clearly visible in the critical theory (Adorno's, but also Horkheimer's). With Horkheimer, the negative moment is always visible as a starting point in his texts, but it is not thematized theoretically, but often manifests itself in the form of pessimism. With Adorno, negativity is discussed theoretically, it is a central point, but it would be a mistake to turn it into a "principle" of the theory, since negativity is not principled, but contextual.

It has already been traced how the main theoretical influences in Adorno and Horkheimer found their roots in German idealism and the critical line of Marx, Lukács, Weber, and therefore, they adopted and insisted on dialectics as an approach in their research; Adorno inherits the dialectical tradition of Hegel and Marx, but brings out the negative moment as central to the dialectic as it contextualizes it; dialectics is the correct theoretical approach, but since the world is incorrect (*falsche*), then dialectics can only be negative; in a radical reading of Adorno, it could be argued that for him negativity is inseparable from dialectics.

In order to trace Adorno's dialectical approach, the focus in this chapter will be mainly on his later writings (after the 1950s), thematizing critical theory itself, as well as its relationship with practice. In his books *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* and *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno criticizes Husserl and Heidegger, respectively, precisely in the lack of dialectics in their approaches, the search for the first and basic, the unmediated. Negative dialectics will be the main focus in this part of the study, but to understand what negative dialectics is, Adorno's lectures will also be used (*Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, *Introduction to Dialectics*, *Ontology and Dialectics*, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, as well as others texts from this period).

The question for critical theory - its relation to practice and the relation of practice to theory, or more generally - the relation between theory and practice, will be central when examining Adorno's negative dialectics. Thus, a large part of Adorno's research that could answer the questions "what can be done", "what is the way out of the damaged life", "which

practices have transformative potential", etc., will be missed: these are his studies devoted to aesthetics and art. The focus will be mainly on the role of theory: what is, what can be and what should be the relationship of critical theory (as negative dialectics) to practice, to context, to the world. This question has faced critical theory since the *Eleventh Theses on Feuerbach*, in which the distinction between descriptive, purely theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy is dissolved. On the other hand, the main accusations against the philosophy of Adorno and Horkheimer are in the lack of practical commitment, resignation; here once again that central question will be posed: what is the practical potential and commitment specifically of Adorno's negative dialectic.

In the seeming contradiction between contextuality and normativity in critical theory, negativity is the moment that allows them to be contained, since normativity in theory is only negative, it consists in the denial of context; therefore, whenever normativity is spoken of here, it is assumed that it is only about negative normativity.

If negative dialectics is an "ontology of the incorrect/wrong state of things" (Adorno 2004, 11), then social ontology and practical philosophy - ethics or moral philosophy - cannot be separated from each other. Thus, one of the main aims of the chapter is to explore Adorno's ethics, which is initially bound up with negative dialectics, and how it can provide a clearer answer to the original question about the foundations of the theory.

Negative dialectics as a theory combines within itself a contextual "background" - an immanent critique and a normativity, which in most places is found as a (moral) assessment or utopia. What makes such a combination possible is negativity. Normativity, utopia, ethics (or moral philosophy) in this context - in Adorno's late philosophy - are and can only be negative. Thus it becomes possible to overcome two main problems that are posed as questions in relation to the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer: 1) how is it possible to have a critique, a diagnosis, a way out of the total context that the theory presents - this is the question that Habermas raises ; 2) how is it possible for a negative theory to give a positive "result", or how is it possible for a theory to be constructed negatively. An answer can be given when the two moments of the theory are thought of as functioning together: criticism, diagnosis, the way out of a total (damaged, incorrect) context, is possible through denial; in contrast to Hegel's determined negation (*Bestimmte Negation*), here the negativity is normative in a moral sense: the negation does not result in "taking away", but only the negative normative statement that the context, the world, the totality should not be as it is; in this sense, theory only opens possibilities for practice, but does not become practice. For its

part, this negativity can only be constitutive within some context, but it cannot be a principle of theory; negativity cannot function independently, but only in context.

## Conclusion

We have traced how negative normativity accompanies critical theory since Horkheimer's early texts, in which the fact of suffering occupies a central role for the "beginning" of critical theory. In Horkheimer's early writings, the role of critical theory inherited from Marx as a critique of ideology (Ideologiekritik) is preserved and even strengthened, due to the strengthening of the role of ideology in late capitalism. The main thing that a critique of ideology aims to reveal is the historical-social character of the world, which also means showing the possibility of its transformation. Unlike Marx's critical theory, which shows the logic and principles of the possible transformation of the world, Horkheimer brings to the fore the need for transformation - the introduction of a normative element into the theory: the world not only can change, but must change.

In the period after Adorno and Horkheimer left Germany, the focus of theory was primarily on a critique of instrumental rationality and a cultural critique. Critical theory's engagement with practice begins to become increasingly mediated, as theory at this stage has to take more steps to have any role for practice. It becomes more and more difficult for the theory to stand on some autonomous position, to "seek" between the spheres of social totality. Critical theory is gradually losing its addressee - it is not the proletariat for a long time, since at the same time ideology covers every subject and it loses its autonomy. The tendency towards the totalization of society that Adorno and Horkheimer mainly describe in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* affects and deforms critical theory itself: besides losing its ability to be directly engaged with practice, it becomes increasingly negative in order to preserve this deformation as much as possible. can be more minimal. Indeed, this is also the answer I offer here to the frequent accusations of resignation, withdrawal from practice, and negativity of critical theory: critical theory does not and cannot stand in an autonomous privileged position and remain unaffected by context. What it can do is resist: negativity (along with the moral stance) is resistance at the level of theory.

In conclusion, I want to add some things that go beyond the narrow field of research and outline some implications, possibilities and horizons of thinking from this text.

There is one (probably) intrusive absence in this study: Adorno's aesthetic texts, his texts on art, his aesthetic theory. If this element is introduced into the study, it will probably succeed in dispelling the gloomy and pessimistic picture presented in his purely theoretical texts. The utopia that Adorno speaks of periodically in *Negative Dialectics* would find its



continuation in the deliverance that can be sought in the realm of art. Adorno's aesthetics are absent here for several reasons. First, the research focus is specifically on critical theory: what is the potential and role of (pure) critical theory for and in the context that the theory itself describes; in this sense, the thesis here is that the solution to the problems that theory poses need not be automatically and necessarily sought outside theory: in practice or in art. Therein lies Adorno's call for a return to theory. Second, the focus on Adorno has been dominated by studies of his aesthetics and philosophy of art.

One of the broader aims of the research was in fact guided by the idea that Horkheimer's critical theory, and especially Adorno's, should be brought back to philosophy, since in the Bulgarian academic field the interest in Adorno was primarily sociological; Adorno studied primarily in the field of sociology as a sociologist; Adorno is better known for his analyzes of music and other arts; Adorno has also been studied to some extent by philologists. Horkheimer, as one of the directors of the Institute for Social Research, who carried out a methodological turn in critical theory, who set the main programme of the Institute, who all along played the role of the Institute's frontman, and last but not least, who managed to convey the complex ideas of critical theory in an accessible language, is not sufficiently (if not at all) studied in Bulgaria. Without sounding immodest, I hope, in this sense, the research has filled in some gaps. The gaps are gradually but slowly being filled thanks to the translations that are being made: during the writing of this text, *Minima Moralia* was published in Stiliyan Yotov's translation. By this I do not mean that Adorno, Horkheimer and other critical theorists should not be studied sociologically, philologically, musicologically, etc., but that they should also be studied philosophically, primarily philosophically, since they are philosophers; following the very programme of critical theory set by Horkheimer in 1931, we must maintain the idea that critical theory is an interdisciplinary theory and that only interdisciplinary research can provide a good, if not complete, understanding.

The interpretation and reading of Horkheimer's and Adorno's theories that are offered here are quite classical on the one hand, and on the other hand they may seem non-classical, modernized to some readers. Classical, because the line of critical theory traced here is the tradition of German idealism and Marxism: Kant, Hegel, Marx - this is the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer; every reading and interpretation is in some sense purposeful and selective: choosing and laying down what is important and central to the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer and "bracketing" the less important; traditions have their centre and periphery, and interpretation can shift the places of central and peripheral for a philosophical

tradition. The selection of the figures and the main ideas forming a tradition also gives results in its possible continuation. German idealism and Marxism, which in turn is also a continuation of the tradition of German idealism, is the formative theoretical context of critical theory itself. There may be alternate ranks: Nietzsche, Freud, Marx; Schopenhauer, Lukacs, Weber; Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx; Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud or many others. The classical selection of Kant, Hegel and Marx as the main philosophers together with their theories brings out the dialectics as the main approach for the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno; in a sense, the study, tracing the transformation of critical theory from Marx to Horkheimer and Adorno, thereby also traces the transformation of the dialectical approach - the dialectic becomes negative.

On the other hand, the "non-classical" moment in the reading and interpretation of the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer is in considering it as a contextual and negative-normative theory and in general the way in which these two elements together explain the theory. The point is that contextualism and normativity are much broader concepts and "paradigms" than the dialectical and critical "paradigms"; by themselves they still say nothing concrete about the specifics of the theory. The task was to show the particular type of contextuality and the particular type of (negative) normativity in the theory and how these concepts can serve to understand the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer.

A leading hypothesis, or idea, that accompanied the whole study was that criticism, the philosophical social criticism of critical theory, even that of Marx, should contain a normative element: weak, negative, minimalist, utopian. If Kant's critical method, generally speaking, answers the question of why things are the way they are, that is, examines the conditions of possibility and reality, then Marx's criticism, because of the historical character of the study of these conditions, his criticism reveals the possibility, the real possibility of change of the world, as well as the logic by which this change would occur. And if the possibilities for the transformation of the world in Marx's theory grow out of the immanent contradictions that should be resolved, then the negative dialectics of critical theory tells us that this does not necessarily happen, that there is no necessity for the contradictions to be resolved. If there is no such necessity, there is more than ever such a need; the need, the must, what is called here with the general concept of normativity, acquires the utopian character. There is no necessity for changing the world, but there is such a need and utopia.

## **Contributions**

1. Investigating the role and place of normativity in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's critical theory, interpreting it as both contextual and normative.
2. Reconstructing and interpreting key moments of Adorno's philosophy in the context of the critical tradition and highlighting negativity as a central concept.
3. Providing a comprehensive study of Horkheimer's critical theory, including its genesis, role and transformation, which is a first-of-its-kind contribution to the Bulgarian academic community.
4. Addressing Jürgen Habermas' criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory and offering a response and argument for the grounding of its normativity.
5. Tracing the evolution of critical philosophy from Karl Marx to the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer.
6. Deriving an ethical (moral) theory from the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno.

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