

REVIEW

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for acquiring the educational and academic degree of *Doctor of
Philosophy (Ph.D.)*
in Professional Field 2.3 Philosophy (History of philosophy;
Contemporary philosophy)
with a candidate
Megy Nikolaeva Popova

Ph.D. thesis:

*Context and Normativity in the Critical Theory
of Max Horkheimer and Teodor W. Adorno*

The dissertation "Context and normativity in the critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno" by Megy Nikolaeva Popova has a total volume of 267 pp. It is divided as follows: Foreword, Introduction, four chapters, Conclusion and Bibliography. The bibliography contains over 100 titles in Bulgarian, English and German, all of which are actually cited in the dissertation. The style is analytically clear, and the text is neatly arranged, with even each chapter beginning with its own introduction and ending with a conclusion. The research is completely self-contained, even raising strong authorship claims and systematically and committedly defending them.

The abstract accurately conveys the content of the dissertation, and the contributions are correctly formulated. With eight academic publications, as well as with numerous participations in various academic forums and with additional publications in cultural journals, the candidate significantly exceeds both the scientometric and informal academic requirements for acquiring the educational and academic degree "Doctor of Philosophy" (Ph.D.). Megy Popova also has

the additional honor of being a philosophy teacher at school and at university.

I have no conflict of interest with the candidate.

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In essence, the dissertation work "Context and normativity in the critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno" is the first comprehensive study of the concepts of critical theory (and their metamorphoses) in the works of Horkheimer and Adorno in Bulgarian. The applied method is a careful textual and historical-philosophical reconstruction of the main problems and concepts of the two authors, with a second authorial line of philosophical problematization superimposed on this line: namely, Megy Popova tests the relationship between contextuality and normativity in the understandings of Horkheimer and Adorno and , conducting her own interpretation, tries to defend them against various available criticisms. She insists that their profile of critical theory is to be relevant today.

The objectives of the study are detailed in the Foreword. Habermas' main critical note to Horkheimer and Adorno (and to the first wave of critical theory in general) is presented: that the critique of instrumental reason does not reflect on its own normative grounds! Here, the dissertation also indicates its own stake: to show, against Habermas, that the immanent critique does not need additional (external, metanormative) justification. Megy Popova also specifies that her approach is to "(re)construct a general theory; in a sense, the theory presented in Horkheimer's and Adorno's texts forms a whole tradition which is called critical theory' (p. 8). Then, chapter by chapter, the plan of the dissertation is laid out, the strategy being rather chronological, tracing different stages in the development of the conceptions of the two authors: from tracing the theoretical contexts that influenced Horkheimer and Adorno (Chapter One), through Horkheimer's early works from the 1930s (Chapter Two) and the joint *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as other publications from the 1940s (Chapter

Three) to Adorno's late works and that through the prism of the *Negative Dialectics* and *Minima Moralia* (Chapter Four)

The Foreword is somewhat non-trivially followed by “An Introduction to Understanding Context and Normativity”. Here, the doctoral student is actually trying to clarify the basic categorical apparatus with which she will develop her own author's line of problematization of critical theory as contextual theory. The basic concepts are "context" and "normativity", but the second not in the sense of acontextual universal normativity (as in Habermas), but as a source of a “practical must”: as a "utopia" that the context must be changed! I have to stress that the idea here is very interesting, but I still see a lot of ambiguities. For example, the concept of context was introduced through the definition of the academic supervisor "the cultural conditions for possible or actual manifestation or existence" (Vidinski 2019, 92).

However, further clarification is necessary: do these conditions (say the conditions of critical theory) form a homogeneous system ("total society", "capitalism") or are they scattered and heterogeneous (in the sense of the "historical a priori" or the "archive" of Foucault)? To what extent are these conditions a static frame of experience that traps actors, and to what extent is there eventfulness, transformative potential, and what, precisely, in the context? And how do we become acquainted with the; how do we understand what are the cultural conditions of the present (context) that we need (want!) to transform? Do all the cultural conditions that we find as contexts cause suffering and must be transformed?

In fact, I am referring to an influensive debate in critical theory—about the so-called “paradox of the subject”—that unfolded between contextualists (post-Foucauldians) and universalists (Habermasians) from the 1980s onwards. I understand the desire of the dissertation to "skip" the poststructuralist developments in critical theory and directly discover a "third way" between modernity and postmodernism (announcement at the end of the "Introduction"), but in philosophy “scipping” is difficult. I will return to this argument – for the need of a more careful treatment of poststructuralist critique as a specific development of “critical theory” – later. It will certainly help further to

better answers to the otherwise excellent leading question: How do we explain how and when 1) the descriptive function of critical theory to diagnose the "context" of our present is successfully combined with 2) its normative function to demand its change, correcting the injustices in the recent context.

Chapter One, "Contexts and Influences," largely "empirically" answers one of the questions I posed: whether the context is homogeneous or it is a multiple and dynamic constellation of heterogeneous conditions. The theories that influence and play the role of contexts for the emergence and development of the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno are numerous and heterogeneous: Megy Popova reconstructs them correctly, although a little formally in some cases (which is inevitable given the available limitations). Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Weber, Lukács, Kant, Hegel and Marx - these are the authors for whom conceptual similarities but also contrasts with Horkheimer and Adorno are sketched.

Quite rightly, the greatest attention has been paid to Marx: Megy Popova reads Marx carefully, takes into account the ambiguity in his writings and the possibility of him being reconstructed in opposite ways: "deterministic or messianic and utopian" (p. 58). However, she prefers not so much to criticize his determinism (she makes it soft) as to emphasize his contextualism and utopianism – i.e. to drag it in a desired direction. Such an interpretation is completely legitimate, but I wonder if a sharper and more confrontational reading of Marx, but also of Horkheimer and Adorno - explaining more the ambiguities and contradictions in their concepts - would not give more clarity to Megy Popova's own philosophical stakes.

The second chapter, "The Early Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer" realizes the first independent research on Horkheimer in Bulgaria (to which the analyzes of his later works woven into the next two chapters should be added). The doctoral student shows that the first ideologue of the Frankfurt Institute, although very close to Marx, in formulating the tasks of materialism and critical theory, made some serious revisions to Marx. For example, the transformation of the context (of

capitalism), i.e. the revolution, will not and cannot occur "by historical necessity": it must occur, but this "must" is of a different order to formal "necessity" – it is rather of the type of desire, or according to Horkheimer in the reading of Megy Popova it is a "moral must". The doctoral student also rightly emphasizes that, for Horkheimer, **suffering** is the main legitimizing resource of critical theory - of its transformative stake: namely suffering must be eradicated, relying on the moral values of compassion and solidarity. The author opposes the psychological, subjectivist and emotivist conceptions of suffering - she shows that "Horkheimer speaks of 'social suffering', i.e. suffering caused by the socio-economic conditions in which groups of people find themselves' (p. 78). This is an orthodox Marxist position, but there is a problem: what is the privileged vantage point from which—if we don't trust people's subjective testimony—we can tell them that they are suffering, even if they don't realize it?

Megy Popova labels this problem via Lukács as a lack of "class consciousness" - we know that the orthodox Marxism effectively corrected this lack with violence (i.e. caused suffering). To avoid this paradox of Marxism - from its over-privileged 'scientific' point of view to treat suffering with more suffering - later critical theorists such as Axel Honneth, Luc Boltanski, Nancy Fraser and many others take as a source not of their diagnoses not the "scientific" or "philosophical" postulates of critical theory, but people's articulations, their everyday complaints, which - however subjective - must be listened to and carefully generalised.

So here I mark another problem that I hope Megy Popova will react to in the future: to consider what, if not what people tell us, might witness their suffering, and hence its structural conditions? However, we cannot help but put aside our philosophical arrogance and trust, at least partially, in the empirical sociology, psychology, anthropology, as Horkheimer wanted. And what a task he directly sets in all his early works, including the programmatic "Traditional and Critical Theory," which is admirably reconstructed.

The third chapter, "Dialectics of the Enlightenment and the Critique of Instrumental Reason," reconstructs in detail the two authors' famous

joint book, managing to distinguish but also connect their approaches in it, using their other works from the 1940s. Megy Popova furthermore shows different possibilities for reading the otherwise total procession of instrumental reason in history - as "continuity" or as a hyperbolized "allegory". She also shows how through the concept of the "culture industry" Adorno extends and in a sense "redirects" the Marxist understanding of practice from its reduction to socio-economic relations to culture and art, i.e. the line between base and superstructure blurs, and reification and commoditization take on a broader meaning.

An important observation is that both instrumental reason (Horkheimer's priority concept) and the "culture industry" (Adorno's), with their principle of equivalence and technological reproducibility, are opposed to an ideal of spontaneity and autonomy of the art, which is now being swallowed up by the perverse rationality of capitalism. I would recommend here a further consideration: whether, through the sharp opposition between repetition, reproduction, reification, affirmativeness, on the one hand, and spontaneity, autonomy, uniqueness, negativity, on the other, Adorno and Horkheimer are not reproducing a specific version of an ontological difference similar to the authentic-inauthentic distinction that Adorno later criticized in Heidegger? And does he not try to overcome it in *Negative Dialectic*, although not very successfully? Maybe more detailed comparisons with some "postmodern" concepts that overcome such distinctions might be helpful: for example, "imitation", "simulation", Derrida's "iteration is alteration" or Deleuze's "repetition and difference".

The last chapter "Critical theory as a negative dialectic" represents an attempt to see critical theory in epistemological terms in its completeness (but that means also in its fundamental incompleteness) as a negative dialectic. But at the same time, the critical theory should also be completed in a normative plan - in the horizon of *Minima Moralia*, a specific - contextual and categorical at the same time - moral imperative is assigned to it.

Epistemologically, a careful and valuable reconstruction of the transformations to which Adorno subjected the Hegelian dialectic in

order to free it from the dogmatic pre-supposition of identity has been carried out. As with Hegel, if "concept and object (and other dialectical pairs) are understood as mediated, that is, mutually constitutive, then at the meeting ("collision") between concept and object, the concept changes and this process is a kind of immanent critique, but at the same time, the object also undergoes change' (p. 208). But with Adorno, the concept does not dominate the object and can never coincide with it, and in the attempt to encompass it, there always remains an irreducible negative "residue" that overturns the concept, etc. Here, in the future, I would recommend thinking about how Adorno's negative dialectics differs from hermeneutics, in particular from radicalized critical hermeneutics such as Derrida's deconstruction or even the radical ontology (transcendental empiricism) of Deleuze. The normative plan is even more interesting: how is the author's dilemma, posed by Popova before critical theory, solved - how to position it both contextually and normatively, beyond formal universalism, however? Without tracing the reconstructions in detail, the general skeleton of the decision is as follows: Entirely contextual, the context as an event shows what in it cannot be tolerated - what should never be! For Adorno, such a borderline event is Auschwitz. That Auschwitz can never be repeated is a categorical imperative, because its monstrosity is indexically, entirely immanently, self-indicated from the context! No justification needed!

I highly agree with this thesis. There are such events - and Auschwitz is the most monstrously vivid - that completely immanently indicate a limit of what is permissible and immediately universalize this limit. However, the danger lies in the subsequent interpretation - when we go looking for the conditions for the possibility of such a singular event. Since the event is singular and unique, it does not allow for easy typifications, which means that we cannot easily arrive at its structural conditions. We can very easily slip into quick analogies. And begin to ignore some in order to universalize other aspects of things, so that everything merges into one: and there is no longer a difference between "democracy", "capitalism", "fascism", "instrumental reason", "empire" and etc.

Adorno and Horkheimer are always on the razor's edge in this regard: they seem both to radically implement such an ideological generalization in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and to constantly run away from it, or at least from turning it into practical action. Sequential contextualism, however, would require something more: not just a one-time traumatic reaction to a singular context, but a slow and continuous – hermeneutical – entry into different situations in which the events slowly and entirely indexically allow us to draw out typological similarities and differences, i.e. to identify the heterogeneous conditions of the context, and assess which of them cause unacceptable suffering and which do not.

However, all these reflections and questions are provoked by a strong philosophical text - precisely because it is strong, clear and devoted. Since it not only meets, but also exceeds the requirements of this procedure, I declare: I wholeheartedly support Megy Nikolaeva Popova to be awarded the educational and academic degree "Doctor of Philosophy" in Professional field 2.3. Philosophy (History of philosophy. Contemporary philosophy).

February 12, 2023

Sincerely yours,

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