

REVIEW

FROM PROF. D.SC. STYLIAN YOTOV ON THE DISSERTATION

CONTEXT AND NORMATIVITY IN THE CRITICAL THEORY OF

MAX HORKHEIMER AND THEODOR W. ADORNO

PRESENTED BY MAGGI NIKOLAEVA POPOVA

TO OBTAIN THE EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC DEGREE "DOCTOR" IN

PROFESSIONAL FIELD - 2.3. PHILOSOPHY

(HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY. CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY)

I. Dissertation data. Megi Popova holds bachelor's and master's degrees in philosophy from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (SU), acquired respectively in 2017 and 2018. In addition, she has specialization and experience as an editor. In the period after 2021, until now she is a high school philosophy teacher.

II. Data for the PhD candidate. Megi Popova was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in Contemporary Philosophy at SU in 2019 as a result of winning a competition. During her doctoral studies, she fulfilled all the regulatory requirements and the tasks agreed with her scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Vassil Vidinsky. In connection with her research, she specialized in Germany, at the universities of Bonn and Freiburg. In 2022, she was charged with the right of thesis-defense. She presented her dissertation work for preliminary discussion and defended it convincingly before the teaching staff of the "History of Philosophy" department of the SU. The final version of the text is in accordance with the recommendations made. During the realization of the dissertation, no violations were committed, as can be seen from the official applications. I myself have no doubts that the study was carried out independently by the dissertation student.

III. Dissertation and abstract data. The present dissertation arises from the formation of a purposeful interest in critical theory during the master's degree and the development of Popova's master's thesis, as far as her previous occupations were mainly with problems of epistemology, and with utopias – only in architecture. The study was conducted with a strong and convincing motivation that the classical insights of the main representatives of the Frankfurt School, such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, need a modern interpretation. One that can not simply fill gaps in our national reception, but must conform to contemporary standards for judging this theoretical legacy. Moreover, only recently have Adorno's lecture courses been available in their entirety, including in translation, as well as his seminars with Horkheimer. But it is also only in the last twenty years that the legacy of Hegelian dialectics has experienced a kind of renaissance thanks to new and original readings that overcome its scornful rejection by positivism and at the same time discover its kinship with the spirit of pragmatism. This rethinking of mutual influences

from "both sides of the Atlantic" in itself inevitably necessitates a new assessment of the role also of Marxism in critical theory, which "on native soil" must be aware of dealing with ideological prejudices as well. Realizing the *actuality of the topic*, Megi Popova carried out a research project that would hardly have been allowed in a previous political environment, and today risks encountering misunderstanding due to the dominance of other scientific fashions, even when they too discuss models of critical theory in general. Fortunately, she found understanding among her colleagues from the "history of philosophy" department at SU, and also provoked their interest herself, as a result of which the ideological heritage of the Frankfurt School, as well as that of Walter Benjamin, have scientific and cultural significance in our country, which they have not had until now. I have no doubt that before us is an achievement that will become a starting point and benchmark for further debate and research on the future and potentials of critical thinking.

By its nature, Megi Popova's dissertation combines a historical-philosophical and conceptual approach, on the one hand, by reconstructing key stages of the development of critical theory concepts in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, by philosophically assessing the very foundations of this multifaceted project, from a third, doing so with the help of the hypothesis of an unavoidable contextual connection of scientific thinking and practical action. *Technically*, the exposition is organized in an exemplary manner, with the highlights and results of the individual chapters standing out clearly. The conceptual apparatus is minimized, it is defined carefully, but it is also applied according to the specifics of the works, the object of the author's analyses. *The topic* of the research is brought out and described comprehensively simultaneously in the field, I would say, rather of academic deficiency in our country and in the surrounding environment of prevailing trends internationally related to the change of generations in the Frankfurt School. The dissertation *aims* at a more general, philosophical understanding of the possibility of critical theory in view of its normative validity and in view of its contextual conditioning, or: *How is it possible for criticism not to use external standards without remaining captive to contingent ones?* Megi Popova raises and defends the thesis that the way out of the paradoxes of classical theory, proposed above all by Jürgen Habermas, is not the only possibility, that an alternative can be found in Adorno's work that is also relevant in current debates about social criticism, but also for "dialogical reading" in general.

In the unfolding of the evidence, major influential positions have been taken into account, which is evident from the footnotes and the bibliography at the end of the text. According to official data, the dissertation consists of a preface and an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion, the exposition is spread over 267 pages and is accompanied by a bibliography, including 140 titles in Bulgarian, English and German. The abstract correctly and fully presents the main points in the dissertation, and the self-assessment of the contributing points is adequate. Popova's language is precise, her conclusions are clear and convincing, in a constant connection between them, the exposition is presented in a uniform style.

It is not so much the preface as the *introduction* to the dissertation that brings to light something worthy of attention. Megi Popova's research fits with her original voice into the debates surrounding "contextualism", conducted at an academic level in the field of social sciences and humanities in Bulgaria. The philosophical understanding of context as 'conditions of possibility' draws a line of demarcation from the 'unconditional', the dimension of 'analytic truths', from the trans-contextual validity of 'essences'. But along with this, the topic of context raises the question of "the realization of the possible", of the conditions for its transformation into "actual", of the difference between "nominal" and "real" definitions of essence, of "hypothetical necessity". There are few young colleagues like Megi Popova who, even as students, have mastered the "Zeitgeist" in modern philosophy, for which the ontological understanding of modal categories in logic seems to be one of the current and serious challenges.

For the reviewer, this part also remains a little unclear, since the "conditions" by which the concept of "context" is defined initially are qualified as "cultural conditions", but a little later, it is also referred to as "historical conditions". It is true that history could be understood as an aspect of culture, but it is also true that not every historical development is also a cultural development. Therefore, I think that at this stage it would be more appropriate for the "conditions" to be indifferent to their additional specification, and this would open the prospect of saturating them with "normativity", which, at least at the semantic level, is distinguished from the meaning of "culture" and from "history". Very often, by "culture" is meant a looser, relativistic regime than that of normativity, and in "history" a logic beyond all normativity is sought.

The *first* chapter actually starts from a more amorphous understanding of "context". It presents a kind of phenomenology of the contexts permeated by the biographies of the members of the inner circle of the Frankfurt School, from attempts to compensate for the institutional deficit due to the lack of specialized sociological centers in German universities to the First World War, but above all from the influence of those philosophical teachings that change the paradigm of the so-called "German classical philosophy". In a volume of ten pages (33-44) is a stylized line of thought development that led to Georg Lukács. As extreme as this summary is, it is entirely appropriate, for in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) historical determinism appears to be mediated far more by culture than directly dependent on economics. This context of influence seems to be sufficient justification why the line of argument does not start directly with Marx, but with a return to Marx, given the new role they play in the twentieth century: the authenticity of existential choice, the irrationalism of the will, of genealogy, or of the unconscious, the pluralism of values, the independence of goal-rational action. The new toolkit sets contexts open to mastering the present, but also to revising our understandings of the past. By the way, a caesura that we recognize also in relation to Michel Foucault – in relation to his own development and in relation to the reception of his work.

The only criticism I can level at Megi Popova for her work in the first part of the dissertation is historical-philosophical. It would not have been superfluous if she had paid attention to the factual access to the texts of the young Marx available to his theoretical researchers and political

users – both in the West and in the East – until the establishment of the Frankfurt School. But even without detailed knowledge of the manuscripts of early Marxism, a sufficient number of published works allow us to determine exactly what is the attitude of Marxism to ideologies and to utopias in general. The dissertation maintains the defense of its goal, to reveal these simultaneously legitimating and misleading or else illusory forms of knowledge as contexts with internal and one-sided or with external and detached normativity, which Marx, not without reason, distrusted and considered an ideological burden, undeserving future. With the same consistency, Megi Popova presents the result of her own understanding of the criticism characteristic of Marxism, as a renewing and transforming contextualization, which unfortunately turns out to be reductionist, recognizing the determining importance only of the economic-social relations in society and their natural necessity. It is not a question of whether this is an adequate reconstruction of normativism in Marxism, but it certainly appears that way in the eyes of the founders of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.

A *second* chapter is devoted to the emergence of an alternative model for critical theory, mainly as a contribution of Horkheimer, and as an attempt to ground it entirely in the dimension of the possible, i.e. without relying on any necessity inherent in the Hegelian philosophy of history. The pages dedicated to Horkheimer are an indisputable contribution to historical-philosophical research in our country due to the fact that such were done earlier only incidentally. Here the influence of Schopenhauer and the role of suffering as the core of morality is revealed as a universal form of empathy and interpersonal commitment that is absent in Marxism, or present only as a class condition. At the same time, Horkheimer does not hide that these anthropological predispositions are latent and weak, that their development depends on adequate knowledge and on the correct formation of complexes of role actions by social subjects. For her part, Megi Popova notes the dangers of this project: the unclear content of "suffering", the construction of "emotivist" ethics, the replacement of the driving forces in favor of an enlightened elite and at the expense of the working people, probably also the rejection of philosophy together with the rejection of any metaphysics in morality. In places in the dissertation, such a mindset is defined as "principled" but "decontextualizing" (135, 176, 184).

Horkheimer's programmatic article of 1937 deserves a special analysis (pp. 88-111). It is here that Megi Popova's thesis that attempts at decontextualization turn theories into ideologies is confirmed in the most convincing way. At the same time, it does not spare the failures of this project: the strengthening of the negativity of criticism at the expense of any form of positivity, the mistrust in any form of moral universalism, the preference for value decisions and solutions with possible effectiveness instead of those that resist counter-arguments.

The merits of the *third* chapter are in two directions. On the one hand, it reviews and evaluates contemporary attempts to interpret critical theory, its models, achievements and limits. I have no doubt that Megi Popova knows these projects very well. But I don't seem to find a clear position on the extent to which she grasps her own reading in favor of so-called "immanent criticism." At times she seems to equate it with "internal", in other places she seems to express

certain reservations about being counted among the advocates of "immanent criticism". Also, I think that the "real"- "actual" distinction, which Hegel made rather sporadically (and Kant's use of "real predicate" and "actuality" places the two terms at different levels in the theory), has been taken too uncritically, only because it has been put forward by some influential interpreters. However, does not such a doubling of the "conditions of realization" hide dangers of ideology, of discrediting a foreign criticism as weak and in favor of the real, in contrast to the exaltation of one's own criticism as strong and in favor of the actual as well? A scheme with which Hegel reaches the level of reason (Vernunft) and the others remain at that of understanding (Verstand), with which Heidegger listens to being it self (Sein), while others are in the plane of beings (entities, Seiende).

On the other hand, Megi Popova offers a strong interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno's joint book, by placing it in a new theoretical context – Nietzsche's instead of Marx's. This is by no means without grounds, insofar as the empirical results of the Institute for Social Criticism's collective researches bring to light the unsustainability of Marxism's reliance on a privileged class subject. The progressive class turns out to be subject to ineradicable prejudices, yearning for paternalism, prone to perverse solidarity, susceptible to manipulations and all kinds of temptations. With this, the vestiges of progressivism characteristic of the early Horkheimer fade away. I find it promising and in the future the interpretation blunted in the dissertation, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to be examined as a rhetorical text, as it has rightly been done with regard to Nietzsche and Foucault. The "exaggerations", "transformations" and "paradoxes" that Megi Popova talks about give another relief, especially to negative criticism. But they also blow up our notions of rationality. A result that both Horkheimer and Adorno are aware of. Which confronts them with a new task: Is another, the "non-half-partial" rationality still possible?

The *fourth* chapter is expectedly dedicated to Adorno, since after the Second World War it was he who undertook the most significant attempts to renew critical theory. At the beginning, Adorno's development is traced, mainly in his disagreement with the phenomenology of E. Husserl and with the fundamental ontology of M. Heidegger (pp. 184-198), and then – his attitude towards Hegel (198-213). Megi Popova's thesis on "decontextualization" allows her to easily and convincingly explain Adorno's accusations of a lack of dialectical mediation, on the one hand, in the "bracketing" and reliance on the "remaining", in the "reductions" of consciousness, and the "subordination to the object", on the other hand, because of the caricature of scientific thinking as a form of 'forgetting being', because of the mythologizing of some Being beyond beings, and ultimately because of a loss of the subject. The result is poor affirmativeness, an affirmation of the existing. It is no accident that Adorno returns to Hegel repeatedly, seeking a future for dialectics, because only it provides the tools for a critique of irrationality in the simple given. But with Hegel, the dialectic brings the thinking subject to such a celebration that it makes the object completely transparent, the reality turns out to be without any resistance to the concept. In the end, we have affirmativeness again, albeit with the opposite sign.

The idea of how to overcome thinking in totalities, how networks of concepts give a chance to the non-identical, lead Adorno to the *Negative Dialectics* (1966), to which the dissertation devotes a proper place (217-240). I will note in passing that, perhaps somewhat hastily, Megi Popova proposes a difference in the understanding of contradictions: in dialectics, in ideology and in the form of social antagonisms, and yet she maintains this difference everywhere. However, it can easily be supplemented by its inclusion in the topic of contextualization. The strength of her thesis lies elsewhere, where she brings to light Adorno's theses of the "residue" in objects and the "utopianity of concepts." In effect, this is a double tap on the issue of normativity. On the one hand, the meaning of ontological indispensability comes to the fore, with which all human thinking and action should be taken into account, on the other hand, the idealization in all science, which has a surplus value compared to its uses. "The constellation does not replace or oppose the concept, but the definition," writes Popova on Adorno's behalf. It is a weak "must" with which the concept opens up new horizons in the outline of which the law of identity cannot reach a final moment. From here to the alternative in art as a field of the non-identical, the distance is short.

However, at the end of the fourth chapter, Megi Popova states a completely different possibility, which it seems that Adorno himself was not aware of. The general statement about contextualism allows the dissertation to raise and test an original thesis that the reformulation of Kant's categorical imperative proposed by Adorno reveals another, I would say third, meaning of normativism. Hardly anyone would have missed the double treatment of Adorno: He who ignited the spark of youth discontent turned out to be timid and conformist. To most, Adorno's justifications that, for example, activism clouded theory and crushed the constellation of concepts seem ludicrous; that radicalism had an adequate place only in art - unrelated to life; in other words, they express ideology and affirmative thinking. But there is hardly a critical theory for which criticism is an end in itself regardless of the presence of crisis, i.e. of a context, of conditions to cause the possible to come to fruition. At the end of the dissertation, we discover the other face of contextualism – the conditions of intolerance, the need for resistance. The collapse of civilization brought about by the politics of National Socialism requires forms of radicalism that Kant's version of the categorical imperative lacks. Because it is unconditional. Adorno's version contains a kind of conditional: the establishment of total non-freedom requires an organization of thinking and actions, "so that Auschwitz is not repeated and nothing similar happens." Therefore, it feels literally "corporeal", not "discursive". And as if "barbarism" is never just a pure possibility.

The conclusion confirms the need to interpret Adorno's concepts not only sociologically, but philosophically, including metaphysically and morally, and points out anew the moments of weak and strong normativism that the contextualist approach can reveal.

IV. Scientific contributions. In my assessment of the contributions of the dissertation, I will add that Megi Popova offers convincing arguments for the presence of a moral-ethical dimension in the philosophical projects of Horkheimer and Adorno, which most often go unnoticed or are

assumed to be relativistic, and that this dimension contains a grounded normative for the sake of which critical theory is not only or primarily negative.

V. Remarks and Questions. I have no general comments or questions other than those stated in the text of the review. I believe that the corona-virus pandemic is a serious obstacle to testing the ideas of the doctoral student in an international academic environment.

VI. Publications, participation in scientific forums, awards. The attached references allow us to see that during her doctoral studies, Popova took part in six scientific forums. In connection with her dissertation, she has published eight articles presenting the results of her research. These provide sufficient insight into the main results of her research and allow the scientific public to form an opinion about her achievements.

VII. Personal impressions. In my capacity as a teacher at SU, I had the opportunity to see for myself Popova's analytical abilities even as a student. Her focus on the socio-political dimensions of philosophy pleased me that a young and competent colleague would continue research that has been undeservedly neglected in our country. Thanks to Megi Popova, I became aware of the potential of attempts to redefine Kant's categorical imperative, which until now have not been systematically explored.

I have no joint publications with Megi Popova.

VIII. Conclusion. Bearing in mind the listed merits of Megi Nikolaeva Popova's dissertation work, the depth of her knowledge in the field of her researched topic and her skills in this field to highlight important problems, to analyze them philosophically – both historically and systematically – I give my positive opinion and I think that the jury should award the doctoral student the scientific-educational degree "doctor".

Sofia, February 9, 2023