

## STATEMENT

concerning the dissertation of Meggy Popova

### ***Context and Normativity in the Critical Theory of M. Horkheimer and Th. Adorno***

The dissertation is of 267 pages – quite an impressive volume in regard of its “genre”. It consists of an Introduction, four chapters and a Conclusion. In the bibliography about 140 titles are listed – in Bulgarian, English and German. In Chapter 1 the author describes the theoretical context in which the views of the two representatives of the Critical Theory are originally formed. The next three chapters concern three consecutive stages of development of these views. In the second chapter M. Popova discusses the early theory of Horkheimer and mostly the grounds of his critical position. The theme of suffering is of foremost importance in this regard. Chapter 3 presents the collection “Dialectic of Enlightenment” – a publication emblematic for the Frankfurt School. It is focused on the instrumentalization and irrationalization of reason. In Chapter 4 the author discusses Adorno’s conception of negative dialectic as a kind of critique.

The theme concerning the “contextuality – normativity” relation is among the central ones for the Frankfurt tradition in social and political philosophy. An evidence of this is, e.g. the fact that one of the most influential nowadays publications in the said tradition is “Between Norms and Facts” by J. Habermas. Concerning the Critical Theory, in particular, this theme has an object- and a meta-dimension. What are these authors’ grounds to criticize social reality and whether these grounds are of moral/normative nature? But also, what motivates them to adopt a critical attitude to this reality and whether these motives are of moral/normative nature?

It is easy to explain the problematization of the contextuality – normativity relation from the perspective of the Critical Theory, if we take into consideration two of its characteristics – the modernist opposition of fact and value and the Hegelian holistic understanding of social reality. If we judge from the perspective of these two presumptions, we inevitably encounter the question, how on earth a contextually conditioned and yet morally critical attitude to reality would be possible. Of course, in a different worldview frame of reference, say, if the context is regarded as being diverse itself, i.e. as characterized by conflicting tendencies, value orientations, interests, cultural traditions, etc. then this problem - how a contextually conditioned morally critical attitude to the reality which is determining this very attitude is possible - is trivialized.

The dissertation is distinctly self-reflexive – M. Popova more than once formulates the aim of her study. One of these formulations seems to be most accurate – it refers to J. Habermas’s critique to the Critical Theory, namely, that the latter does not explicate and substantiate the criteria which underlie the characterizations of certain features of social reality as morally unacceptable and therefore deserving critique of normative nature. “Actually, this study can be understood as an attempt to answer this question by referring to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s texts, as well as an attempt to (re)construct what has not been openly stated in these texts as a source of this

normativity, but is implicitly present". (p. 6, Summary) The author's position is – and this can be indirectly considered to be the main thesis of the whole work – that throughout the development of the views which are called in sum "Critical Theory" the critique of social reality is properly normative.

The dissertation has, in my opinion, merits which are rarely to be found in other representatives of its "genre" – perfect knowledge of the relevant texts by Horkheimer and Adorno, competent work with publications of other authors which refer to the study's theme, profound and convincing analyses of the views of these two representatives of the Critical Theory in different stages of their development. I was impressed also by the fact that the author refers regularly to studies of Bulgarian authors and does this in an "organic" way, i.e. not "artificially", on pragmatic motives. As I already mentioned, the work is characteristically self-reflexive – every chapter has an introduction and a conclusion, which might seem somewhat pedantic, but is actually quite helpful for the reader. And, most importantly, it is a manifestation of authentic interest in the matter of the research, manifestation of an ambition to find solutions of the problems that have been identified in the course of the study.

I have a critical remark concerning a certain ambiguity in the presentation of the relation between the ways in which the Critical Theory and the classic Marxist tradition treat the problem about the tension between the scientific and the normative approach. I mean the relation between objective predetermination of the revolutionary transformations of society – one of the central ideas of Marxist philosophy – and normatively motivated active participation in the realization of these transformations. As it is stated in the dissertation, the answer to the question "why must the world be changed" which social science, including the Marxist one, gives is that such is the course of the historical process. "However, for Horkheimer and Adorno this "must" is not a necessity (or at least probability), it has moral grounds", p. 72

This statement of the author, as well as other ones in the same vein, creates the impression that she holds the opinion that from a classic Marxist perspective the motivation for participation in the revolutionary transformation of society is not of moral nature. Which is not the case with the Critical Theory. In my opinion, however, although in this respect there is a difference between the two theories, it is not between claiming a factual and claiming a normative nature of the said motivation, but in quite a different dimension. Actually, there is no problem about a contradiction between a scientific and a normative approach in Marxist social philosophy – a contradiction which is among the central problems that the Critical Theory deals with (see e.g. pp. 67, 72). Such a contradiction appears when this matter is treated in a *a-la Hume*, or *Weber* manner – in the sense that from judgments about facts no value judgments can be inferred. However, Historical Materialism can be characterized in this respect rather as ethical naturalism, or perfectionism. In the sense that the difference between the Good (the progressive) and the Evil (the reactionary) is a matter of fact as determined by the objective nature of the historical process, but it does not follow from this, that the Good is not Good, and there is no place for a moral (normative) motivation to contribute actively to progress (and in this sense to do good) in

this frame of reference. And the same is valid also about assuming a critical attitude to the objective circumstances which hinder progress.

I suppose that something of this sort must have been meant by Andrew Sayer, cited by M. Popova on p. 79 as morally qualifying the strife to objective “flourishing”. Classic Marxism’s social determinism does not exclude moral normativity at all. It simply isn’t understood in the frame of reference of an opposition between fact and value which is characteristic for the Critical Theory. So, there is no difference between Historical Materialism and the said theory in the sense that in the former case there are no morally normative grounds for social criticism, and in the latter they are present. The point is that the moral normativity in the two cases is of different nature.

Coming back to the merits of the dissertation, I claim that it is definitely a professional piece of research. The dissertation’s Summary is in the due format. I have no objections concerning the contributions claimed there. In the final analysis, my opinion is that this dissertation provides ample ground for Meggy Popova to be awarded the educational and academic degree “Doctor of Philosophy”.

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