

EVALUATION STATEMENT

on the dissertation thesis to obtain PhD degree in 2.3. Philosophy (History of Philosophy. Contemporary Philosophy) *Context and Normativity in the Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno* by **Maggie Nikolaeva Popova**, PhD candiadate at the History of Philosophy Department of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

by **Prof. Hristo Petkov Todorov, PhD**, Philosophy and Sociology Department, NBU

The dissertation of Maggie Nikolaeva Popova *Context and Normativity in the Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno* was prepared in the doctoral program of the Department of History of Philosophy of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. The reference attached to the documents shows that with her previous publications the author fulfils the minimum national requirements for obtaining the PhD degree. From the author's declaration of originality and credibility and the similarity report prepared by Assoc. Professor Vasil Vidinski, it is evident that the similarities found in the dissertation are regulated and do not bear signs of plagiarism. The dissertation is 267 pages long. It consists of an introduction, four chapters, conclusion and bibliography. The bibliography contains 140 titles in Bulgarian, English and German.

Explaining his motives for choosing the research field and in particular the research problem, M. Popova points out two things. First, in our scientific literature the legacy of the Frankfurt School, including its two most significant and influential figures – Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno – has been studied one-sidedly mainly in a sociological key. It now needs to be supplemented by a clarification of the philosophical foundations of Critical Theory. Second, the question raised by Habermas about the grounding of the normativity of Critical Theory continues to stand as a major intellectual challenge for Critical Theory. The author sets herself the task, through a reconstruction of the works of the two authors, of extracting from them possibilities for answering this question.

I have two remarks to the first of the two requests. It is not quite correct to claim that the philosophical side of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory has been neglected in the Bulgarian philosophical literature. Let me just mention here the first serious Bulgarian monograph on Critical Theory, Krasimir Kanev's book *The Aesthetic Dimension of Social Criticism. Art and Aesthetics in the Critical Theory of Herbert Marcuse* (1991). I am not quite

sure that it is possible, and that it corresponds to the intentions of the founders of Critical Theory themselves, to separate the philosophical from the other elements of the theory. The author herself notes that Critical Theory is by its very design an interdisciplinary theory. Nevertheless, I believe that a focus of analysis on the philosophical ideas important to Horkheimer and Adorno, such as that undertaken by Maggie Popova, is entirely justified.

With regard to the second query, I can only say that the author has addressed a truly central, I would even say crucial, question for Critical Theory: on what grounds does Critical Theory, being itself part of the socio-historical reality of "late capitalism" require social change to overcome this reality. The author understands perfectly well the importance of this question, has the courage to take up its debate and has found adequate tools to do so. Her aim is precisely defined: she does not make the systematic claim to offer a direct answer to the question, but aims, through a historical-philosophical reconstruction, to make manifest in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno the possibilities of such an answer.

The dissertation is excellently composed logically and stylistically. The opening chapter outlines the social, academic and intellectual conditions under which the Institute for Social Research emerged after the First World War and the Frankfurt School was formed. The second chapter deals with the early works of Max Horkheimer, which set the framework and direction of Critical Theory thinking. The third chapter discusses the most influential work of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in exile. In the final fourth chapter, the author deals mainly with Adorno's work in the post-World War II period. The end result is a comprehensive, rich, dense account of the early history of the Frankfurt School, focused around a central problem.

In his famous 1937 article *Traditional and Critical Theory* on which M. Popova pays due attention to in the second chapter of the dissertation, Max Horkheimer points out that the main feature of critical theory in comparison with the traditional type of theory is that it develops an awareness of its own social-historical conditioning. Every philosophical and socio-scientific theory depends on social and cultural conditions external to it. Theories of the traditional type, however, are either blind to these conditions or abstract from them (in the terms of this dissertation, they engage in "decontextualization"). In contrast, critical theory develops an awareness of its own conditioning and integrates this awareness into its cognitive achievements (i.e., being contextual, this theory does "contextualizing").

A consciousness of one's own historical conditioning is characteristic of all variants of Marxism. The question is how, on basis of generally contingent conditions such as history offers, it would be possible to deduce 1) the necessity of social change and 2) social change

(i.e. "normativity") necessary in its content and direction. An important conceptual motif inherited from Hegel plays a major role in resolving this question in classical Marxism about the necessity of social change called simply "social revolution." It's about the understanding of history as a lawful "natural-historical process" (Engels). The necessity of social change is a consequence of the operation of objective laws of history, which have at their base an economic nature. The historical process has a clear direction and what happens in history is subject to inexorable objective laws realized through the actions of people. By virtue of these same objective laws, historical change also has its perpetrator in the person of the proletariat.

However, when, due to complexly intertwined circumstances, Horkheimer, Adorno and their followers abandoned the ideas of the laws of history and of the proletariat as the driving force of the revolution, the question of the necessity of social change became acute. Its solution, according to the reconstruction of M. Popova briefly looks like this. Human suffering accessible to sociological observation in the "context" of late capitalism is the moral impulse that makes Critical Theory "demand" social change (in the language of the thesis, the "transformation" of society). Alongside this, early Critical Theory, with the help of its sociological toolkit, also discovers possibilities for such change in this same historical 'context'. However, the conclusion of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* written during the war is profoundly pessimistic: the instrumental reason is so almighty that there is no lifeline beyond it. Henceforth, the critique of the existing ("context") cannot be other than negative. Its message goes like this: 'we know how it should not be, but we do not know and are not obliged to say how it should be'.

This nihilistic conclusion provokes dissatisfaction in Habermas and a number of other writers because when it does not commit itself to the notion of some positively evaluated condition, Critical Theory inevitably deprives itself of the possibility of justifying the criteria of social criticism and risks becoming something of a fad or whim of vain and self-indulgent people (Odo Marquart).

Showing great sensitivity to the texts of both authors and to the contexts of their emergence, M. Popova offers an insightful reading of Horkheimer and Adorno's Critical Theory that keeps it within the field of the meaningful and away from the extremes of nihilism. I count this as an achievement and a credit to the author, though I am far from holding to such a reading myself.

In her doctoral thesis, Maggie Popova has achieved the research goal she set for herself. A real and actual problem has been formulated, to which an adequate approach and

instrumentation has been applied. Convincing conclusions have been drawn. The composition of the work meets the objectives of the research. The language is clear and precise.

The volume of the abstract is 31 pages. The abstract accurately reflects the main points of the thesis content and meets generally accepted standards. It contains a list of the author's contributions to the dissertation, as well as a list of eight publications on the topic of the dissertation. The contributions are valid and are unambiguous.

I have no personal impressions of the author. I have no joint publications with her and have no conflict of interest.

CONCLUSION: The dissertation *Context and Normativity in the Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno* by Maggie Nikolaeva Popova meets all the requirements to obtain PhD degree in 2.3. Philosophy (History of Philosophy. Contemporary Philosophy). As a member of the Scientific Jury I will vote FOR the awarding of this degree to the author.

Signature:

(Prof. Hristo P. Todorov, PhD)

Sofia, February 12, 2023