

EVALUATION STATEMENT

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on dissertation thesis to obtain PhD degree in 2.3. Philosophy (History of Philosophy,
Contemporary Philosophy), entitled "Context and Normativity in the Theories of Max
Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno" by Megi Nikolaeva Popova, PhD candidate at the History
of Philosophy Department of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Scientific supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Vasil Vidinski, Faculty of Philosophy, St. Kliment Ohridski
University

I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for the defense of the dissertation
of Megi Popova by order of the Rector of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" No.
RD38-617 of 18.11.2022.

Megi Popova graduated with a bachelor's degree in Philosophy in 2017 at Sofia University
"St. Kliment Ohridski", and in 2018 — with a master's degree in "History and Contemporary
of the Philosophy" at the Department of History of Philosophy at the same university. During
her doctoral studies (2019-2022), she studied for a while under the Erasmus+ program at
three German universities: Freiburg, Bonn and Frankfurt (Oder).

As evident from the title, the dissertation addresses the problem of normativity in the
theories of two representatives of the early Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor
W. Adorno. This is not the place to express my own attitude towards these theories, so I
would give a very broad outline of it, echoing Adorno's gesture: *there is no right in false
theory*. From this perspective, the efforts that the PhD candidate made — by interpreting
Horkheimer's and Adorno's texts — to find any kind of normativity, even a weak one, an
implicit one, a negative one, one denying the overall context (late capitalist society), are to
be congratulated. Admiration deserves also her undertaking (successfully executed, in my
opinion) to fill a gap in the Bulgarian humanities with a study focused on the philosophical
issues in the early Frankfurt School. The gap is entirely explicable as far as these theories
turn out to be the most (again, in my opinion) futile attempt to preserve some of the basic
postulates of Marxism (on the role of philosophy, on "false consciousness"/ideology,
dialectics, etc.) and to abandon others perceived as dogmatic (on a deterministic
understanding of the relation between base and superstructure, on the role of the
proletariat, on revolution and communism). This futility caused precisely by negativity has
manifested itself in Horkheimer's pessimism and Adorno's minimalism about social norms
and individual behavior, well noted in the doctoral thesis.

The dissertation consists of a general introduction, followed by a separate introduction to the understanding of context and normativity, and four chapters, each beginning with an introduction and ending with a conclusion, which makes it easier to comprehend the text and follow the intricately woven thread of reconstructions. The whole ends up with a general conclusion and a bibliography of titles in Bulgarian, English and German. The total volume is 266 pages of text.

Outlined among the aims of the study is an attempt at finding a reply to Habermas's critical question addressed towards Horkheimer and Adorno's theories concerning the lack of normative criteria on which their diagnosis of society is based and to Habermas's criticism in general. The answer is sought in the direction of sublation (*Aufheben*) of the contradiction between normativity/utopianism and contextuality/immanence. Thus a certain form of normativity is revealed, which is only implicitly present in the authors' texts: it is a very specific, negative form of normativity, not grounded in a more general normative theory.

Throughout most of the work the approach is reconstructive (based on the history of philosophy), but also affirmative, as far as, on the one hand, the PhD candidate is not being critical of the theories, and on the other hand, she is attempting to reconstruct Adorno's and Horkheimer's ideas in such a way as to discover some potential to make them topical.

Chapter 1, "Contexts and Influences," examines the interweaving historical, biographical, and cultural contexts within critical theory emerges and develops. The influences on its formation of authors such as Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Weber, Lukacs, and Freud are outlined. I would note as a great merit of this part of the work the complex analysis of the contradictory combination between the critical approach, the claim to scientism and normativity in Marx.

In the following three chapters, Horkheimer's and Adorno's works are examined chronologically, beginning with Horkheimer's early texts (ch. 2); through the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" written by both Horkheimer and Adorno; through some of Adorno's later culture-related writings, and Horkheimer's later works (ch. 3); up until Adorno's "Negative Dialectic" and moral philosophy (Ch. 4). These structure makes it possible to trace the transformation of critical theory from the search for some possibility of a rational organization of society to the abandonment of this hope due to the diagnosis of late capitalist society as totally overwhelmed by instrumental rationality turning into irrationality. On the other hand, the explicit focus not so much on the differences between the two authors but on their similarities allows the reader to discern the specificity of their theory, laying emphasis on negativity, in relation to other theories within the critical tradition. Adorno's last significant work, "Aesthetic Theory", is not included in the study. It does not really have a direct bearing on the problem of normativity, but it would also be relevant from a purely philosophical point of view, as far as it contains an attempt, albeit fragmentary, to give a bold outline of a cognitive theory according to the principles of the

negative dialectic, i.e. to ground a theory of knowledge of the non-identical upon the experience of perceiving works of art.

The starting point of early critical theory is the discovery of socially inflicted suffering, and overcoming it is the final practical stake. This stake presupposes not an alleviation of suffering but a transformation of the socio-economic relations that give rise to it. It is precisely in this stake that the PhD candidate recognizes "a way of grounding normativity" (p. 113) and a utopian impulse in Horkheimer's early theory. In it, the possibility of change is associated with the perception of the present/context as historical, and the desire for change, which in the dissertation is identified with a need (whose need?) for change, is referred to as a 'weak' normativity. The author is aware that this implies a 'reconceptualization' or change in the content of the concept. Normativity is thus equated with a critique of context/society. It is not universal, but contextual insofar as it relates to the particular context and negative insofar as it says what ought not to be. Precisely because its grounds are contextual, they have no need for a general normative theory. I don't think that's a convincing answer to Habermas' critical question, because the content of the concept "normativity" is changed to 180-degree, so the question is simply sidestepped. To some extent the PhD candidate here follows Adorno's own approach, described in "Negative Dialectics" (ch. 4) - to modify the content of the concept in order to better know the particular on which the concept imposes a limiting framework. I see two problems with this approach: 1. It can very quickly lead us into Orwell's world - war is peace, freedom is slavery, etc. 2. In addition to serving cognition, concepts also serve communication, but continuous and abrupt changes in their content impede it. This leads to the emergence of various jargons that enclose research in the humanities in sectarian communities. Also problematic for me is the unquestioning acceptance of the thesis of the "objectivity" of suffering, coming from Marx and reinforced by Horkheimer and Adorno, and the task of critical theory "to impute suffering" (p. 78), regardless of the opinion of those concerned, because the latter is seen (in line with the tenets of Marxism) as the product of a "false consciousness"/ideology conditioned by social conditions of inequality.

The next chapter, mainly devoted to the "Dialectic of Enlightenment", deals with the critique of instrumental reason and its role in establishing domination over nature (internal and external) and over other people (an issue of more interest to Horkheimer). The critique of objectification is also touched upon (rather exciting Adorno), in relation to the analysis of the culture industry. I should note that the problem of context and normativity, which is only indirectly related to the issues most discussed in Dialectics of Enlightenment, is not abandoned in this part of the study either. Although the text does not provide direct grounds for this, I would agree with the PhD candidate's interpretation that the critique in the Dialectic of Enlightenment is directed at instrumental reason in particular, rather than reason in general, given Horkheimer's later reflections (The End of Reason) on means-oriented 'subjective' reason and ends-oriented 'objective' reason. I see less ground for agreement in the elaborate reconstruction (with Weber's involvement) of the myth of

Ulysses as a "historical allegory" to argue that the critique of instrumental reason in its development applies mainly to late capitalist society, not to civilization as a whole, in response to a similar reading by Habermas. The reflections in this chapter extend to Adorno's later works in relation to the critique of pseudo-culture and administered culture. Horkheimer's later works, *The End of Reason*, *The Sunset of Reason*, and *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, are also touched upon, in which theory is increasingly divorced from practice, and negativism and pessimism are intensified.

Along with the description of negative dialectics as a method of critical theory in ch. 4, the author finds the normative point in Adorno's claim that negative dialectics is "an ontology of contradiction, of the wrong state of the world." In the negation of this condition, she argues, lies the possibility of utopia. Thus she approaches the concept of 'utopia' in the same way as she approaches the concept of 'normativity' - she radically alters its content, insofar as it focuses on the desired state, and the undesired is only its starting point. This can also be interpreted as an application of Adorno's own method of focusing on the "residue" in the subject that is not captured by the concept. But even so, this does not, it seems to me, invalidate my objection concerning the communicative function of concepts. In ch. 4, Adorno's moral philosophy is also set out, making a very successful transition from the sense of negative dialectic in epistemological and social terms, namely privileging the particular over the general, to the moral imperative. It prescribes non-participation in the damaged life whose instrumental rationality, carried to its extreme, is, according to the author, the cause of the Holocaust, and also non-admission of the social conditions that made it possible.

In summary, I would like to say that the proposed dissertation represents a very thorough and serious study of the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, which demonstrates a highly successful engagement with both the texts of the authors themselves and the literature on their work. It is set on the one hand in the context of the critical tradition (from Kant through Marx and Lukacs, to Horkheimer and Adorno) and on the other hand in the context of the dialectical tradition (from Hegel to the transformation of dialectics into the negative in critical theory). In this sense, the study fully satisfies the historical-philosophical claim. I have some skepticism about the overly apologetic attitude towards the authors, which is manifested, in addition to an unquestioning acceptance of their basic theses, and in an uncritical application of some of their methods. The contextual, negative normativity discovered by the PhD candidate (and fully justified in her interpretations of the texts) can be reduced to the almost anecdotal: "I don't know how it should be, but it doesn't have to be this way". It is no coincidence that Horkheimer and Adorno have difficulty identifying the addressee of their theory and do not fully clarify whether this is some "imagined witness" from the future or some intellectual avant-garde. The "weak" normativity does not, I think, answer Habermas's question, mentioned above, in substance, but it also does not answer another question of his, sounding more generally: if "false consciousness"/ideology is all-encompassing, where does one get a critique that is not ideological? More importantly, though, negative, contextual normativity, whose only role is to deny the reality, opens up all

other possibilities for the world/society, including less favorable ones than the existing. Unless we have accepted the view (implicit in the theories of Horkheimer and Adorno) that we live in the worst of all possible worlds. But this is something that no one, not even the mentioned authors, could know if all possibilities were open.

The abstract is made as required. The required number of publications is available. The contributions are correctly presented. Here I would like to point out one more contribution that the PhD candidate would hardly agree with. The assiduously research into the paths without exit are no less important than the breakthroughs in science, including the humanities.

Conclusion

Despite of the several critical remarks, my opinion with regard to the awarding of a PhD Degree to Megi Popova is positive because of the knowledge, professional skills, culture of thinking and expression demonstrated in the dissertation, which even surpasses that of the authors under study, as evident in some of their texts.

10.02. 2023 r.

The author of the statement: