21
ARENDT AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

Seyla Benhabib and Clara Picker

Biographies and Theories

Any consideration of Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt School is likely to be thwarted from the start by the profound dislike which Arendt seems to have borne toward one of the Frankfurt School’s most prominent members, namely, Theodor W. Adorno. Arendt’s aversion to Adorno presumably began when Arendt held Adorno personally responsible for the failed attempt of her then husband Guenther Stern (later Anders) to receive his habilitation (second dissertation) at the University of Frankfurt in 1929. Adorno was among members of the faculty of the University of Frankfurt who would be evaluating Stern’s habilitation, essential to secure a teaching post in a German University. He found the work unsatisfactory, thus bringing to an end Stern’s hopes for a university career. It was also in this period that Arendt uttered her notorious statement regarding Adorno – “Der kommt uns nicht ins Haus” – meaning that Adorno was not to set foot in their apartment in Frankfurt (Young-Bruehl 1982: 80; Benhabib 2012: 33). While this hostility on Arendt’s part never diminished, Adorno seems to have endured it with a cultivated politesse. However, Adorno’s correspondence with Gershom Scholem reveals that the dislike between Arendt and Adorno was mutual (Angermann 2015: 191).

Arendt’s temper flared up several more times at Adorno: in the aftermath of World War II, in a letter to Karl Jaspers (Köhler and Saner 2001: 697), she accused Adorno of trying to collaborate with the Nazis in the early 1930s on account of a publication in a student newspaper. In the 1940s, Arendt became convinced that Adorno and his colleagues were preventing the publication of Walter Benjamin’s posthumous manuscripts (Arendt to Heinrich Blücher on August 2, 1941, in Köhler and Saner 2000: 72–73; Schöttker and Wizisla 2006: 146). Finally, Arendt’s animosity toward Adorno was reactivated upon the publication of The Jargon of Authenticity (Adorno 1973 [1964]), a book which contained strongly polemical criticisms of Martin Heidegger—Arendt’s former mentor and lover who had been an active and public supporter of the National Socialist regime from 1933 to 1936. Arendt expressed these criticisms and accusations primarily in her private correspondence with friends and interlocutors; direct interactions between Arendt and Adorno appear to have been rare. The only preserved direct correspondence between Arendt and Adorno took place in the Winter of 1967, when Arendt was preparing Illuminations, the first publication of Walter Benjamin’s writings in the American context (see Schöttker and Wizisla 2006: 176–177, 178–181; Benhabib 2011, 2018). The tone of this correspondence is polite yet reserved, underscoring the absence of any personal rapport between the correspondents.
However, such psychological attitudes and personal animosities should not dominate or constrain our evaluation of a thinker's interpretative legacy. Despite their personal tensions, the relationship between Arendt's and Adorno's work has become the object of increased scholarly interest (see Rensmann and Gandesha 2012). Indeed, the absence of intellectual recognition and collaboration between Arendt and members of the Frankfurt School seems quite puzzling in light of the similarities of their biographies, intellectual origins, theoretical interests, and political diagnoses: Arendt, as well as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, on whom we will focus in this chapter, were shaped by the intellectual milieu of the Weimar Republic; they were of German-Jewish descent (Adorno on his father's side) and were compelled to emigrate to the United States in order to escape the deadly grip of National Socialism. Moreover, they shared a profound intellectual admiration and personal affection for Walter Benjamin and sought to keep alive Benjamin's intellectual legacy. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the present context, common to them is a deep theoretical preoccupation with what we might tentatively call the “diagnosis of modernity as crisis”: the idea that modernity portends a novel historical dynamic that is intimately tied to the catastrophes of the twentieth century – the rise of fascism, the Holocaust and Stalinism. Investigating this historical dynamic and its implications thus became a central philosophical and political task in the lives of these German-Jewish émigrés. Among the themes that occupied Arendt and the members of the Frankfurt School are the persistence of human misery in the face of mighty technological progress and the overcoming of old forms of bondage at the expense of new kinds of unfreedom.

Their reactions to the catastrophes of the twentieth century were political as opposed to theological or philosophical. They never lost faith in human beings' capacity to start anew and change their collective conditions of existence (Arendt), or to anticipate the “wholly other” (Adorno and Horkheimer) and imagine a more just and humane future. Arendt tried to retrieve the project of political freedom, in the sense of building republics in which freedom could be housed, from the leveling and unreflective qualities of mass society. Adorno and Horkheimer insisted on the hope that human emancipation would not herald an empty but concrete utopia. Thus, they were fundamentally united in their belief that human misery could be overcome, even in the face of developments where despair was more tempting.

The question of anti-Semitism and the eventual destruction of European Jewry is a particularly sharp lens through which to observe the theoretical affinities and differences among these thinkers. This is because they shared a view of the Holocaust as historical rupture that necessitated a reexamination of the philosophical tradition on the one hand, and a profound reorientation of intellectual activity on the other. Arendt’s early claim that

the institution of concentration and extermination camps .... may very likely become that unexpected phenomenon .... which must cause social scientists and historical scholars to reconsider their hitherto unquestioned fundamental preconceptions regarding the course of the world and human behavior

(Arendt 1950: 49)

and Adorno’s insistence that “[a] new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar happens” (Adorno 1973: 365) both speak to this concern. Moreover, Arendt and the Frankfurt School understood modern anti-Semitism as but one expression of a historical crisis that had given rise to the reorganization of European societies along totalitarian lines.

However, their respective analyses also reflect the central intellectual and political differences between these thinkers. Arendt’s commitment was to a civic republicanism grounded
in a phenomenology of Athenian democracy which was not nostalgic but anticipating the hope for new foundings under conditions of modernity as well. By contrast, Adorno and Horkheimer sustained a critical allegiance to a tradition of Marxism that the reality of Stalinism had rendered practically impotent and historically obscure.

With respect to their theories of modern anti-Semitism, we view Arendt’s approach to explaining the origins of European anti-Semitism, and the solutions she offers to go beyond it, as being strongly inflected by her commitments to an autonomous Jewish politics in the interwar period; a commitment that is neither Zionist nor simply anti-Zionist. Horkheimer, by contrast, begins his analysis of anti-Semitism with a rather orthodox Marxist view in 1939, but as the extent of the destruction of the European Jewry becomes clear, together with Adorno, this analysis is supplemented by an increasingly psychoanalytic diagnosis of anti-Semitism in the Dialectic of Enlightenment (1942–47).

**Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: Adorno and Horkheimer**

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the rise of modern anti-Semitism had to be explained in the context of the large-scale structural changes that accompanied the transformation of nineteenth-century liberal capitalism into what they called often “monopoly capitalism.” The latter term refers to a historical phase in which the self-contradictory nature of capitalist society gives rise to a state of permanent crisis, leading to the transformation and partial replacement of indirect social mediation (via the free market) with direct political domination. Adorno and Horkheimer thus viewed fascism and National Socialism, despite the occasional anti-capitalist rhetoric that these movements embraced, as a continuation of the capitalist world order. In Horkheimer’s “The Jews and Europe” (1939), we can see that this premise leads to two crucial consequences: if this “new” anti-Semitism has to be understood as “an emissary of the totalitarian order, which has developed out of the liberal one” (Horkheimer 1989 [1939]: 77) then (a) one has to situate modern anti-Semitism within the context of the specific historical tendencies within capitalism, and (b) one has to come to terms with the fact that a return to the liberal order would not do away with the very structures which gave birth to modern anti-Semitism in the first place. Thus, “whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism” (Horkheimer 1989 [1939]: 78). Specifically, Horkheimer explains modern anti-Semitism to be a consequence of the decline of the sphere of circulation:

> The Jews are stripped of power as agents of circulation, because the modern structure of the economy largely puts that whole sphere out of action. They are the first victims of the ruling group that has taken over the canceled function. The government manipulation of money, which already has robbery as its necessary function, turns into the brutal manipulation of money’s representatives. (Horkheimer 1989 [1939]: 90)

While this account is certainly vulnerable to accusations of Marxist functionalism (Benhabib 2011: 24), Horkheimer does not suggest that anti-Semitism itself has an economic purpose or rationality. Instead, anti-Semitism here appears as a symptom that corresponds to the general substitution of direct domination for indirect anonymous social mediation. Nevertheless, the account of modern anti-Semitism in “The Jews and Europe” lacks specificity and remains underdeveloped in important aspects.

As Martin Jay has documented (Jay 1986: 90–100), Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s position on anti-Semitism was changing throughout the 1940s. While the economic dimension continues to be significant, it is the position of the Jew in “mental imaginary of Nazism”
(Rabinbach 2000: 52) that begins to gain prominence. This new analysis is announced in the “Elements of anti-Semitism” chapter of the Dialect of Enlightenment (henceforth abbreviated as DE).

In DE, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the emergence of totalitarianism necessitates a revision of both Hegelian and Marxist theories of history. This is because both traditions imbue the historical process with a positive meaning. The Marxist view did so by understanding history as enabling human emancipation through the increasing control of nature via the technological organization of social labor. The Hegelian perspective grasps history as the continuous unfolding of Reason itself. Both perspectives thus enable a view of history as progress, and it is this particular understanding of history that, from the standpoint of the 1940s, could no longer be upheld. The Marxian philosophy of history which postulated man’s increasing emancipation from the forces of nature is now supplemented with a Nietzschean and Freud-inspired vision of progress as the repression of life instincts and the growth of psychic resentment (see Wiggershaus 2001 for an account of the Frankfurt School’s “Nietzschean Moment”). Labor is indeed the sublimation of desire, as Hegel had argued (Hegel 1977 [1807]: §190–195); but the act of objectification through which desire is transformed is not an act of self-actualization but an act of fear and repression, leading to the domination of nature within oneself. The Hegelian view of history as the progressive unfolding of Reason is supplanted by a Weberian understanding of progress as progressive rationality. “Progressive rationality” here refers to the human species’ growing ability for self-preservation. It is thus a rationality of the domination of nature, understood as the control of both external nature and man’s inner nature. The decisive feature of both these dynamics is that they eclipse the moment of self-reflection. Nearly two decades after the publication of DE, Adorno would describe the progress of rationality in its unreflective form as being “at the bottom nothing other than the exploitation of nature transferred to men and continuing to work in them” (Adorno 2006 [1964/5]: 16).

From the standpoint of the Holocaust, the history of human civilization (which Adorno and Horkheimer here take to be coextensive with the history of the Enlightenment) appears not as the continuous unfolding of emancipatory reason but rather as the development of an ever more complex barbarism. In this sense, the myth of Odysseus (understood as the original myth of modern individuality) and the fact of the Holocaust act as bookends to the self-destructive dynamic of the Enlightenment: the myth which is Enlightenment and the Enlightenment which becomes myth first in scientific positivism and, eventually, in Nazi propaganda. The transformation of Western civilization into open barbarism through the emergence of totalitarianism reveals that the development of civilization was, from the outset, driven by a dialectical antagonism between culture and barbarism. Caught in the wild currents of this civilizational dynamic, the Jews become its privileged objects of sacrifice.

Nazi anti-Semitism is a special case of organized paranoid delusion. But what is it that makes the Jews particularly vulnerable objects of such paranoid fantasies? In order to answer this question, Adorno and Horkheimer interrogate the content of secular “nationalist” anti-Semitism as well as its ideological predecessor, Christian anti-Judaism.

Part of Adorno and Horkheimer’s reflections on secular, National Socialist anti-Semitism operate within the framework of analysis laid out in Horkheimer’s “The Jews and Europe”: modern anti-Semitism is understood as a historically specific societal phenomenon, feeding on the “destructive urge which the wrong social order spontaneously produces” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1942–7]: 137). However, rather than elaborating on the historical circumstances that can account for the specific content of the anti-Semitic imaginary (e.g., the historical realities that are hypostatized and racialized in anti-Semitic ideology), Adorno and Horkheimer draw on psychoanalytic categories to explain what could be called “subjective” factor, i.e., the psychological mechanisms that make individuals and masses receptive to anti-Semitic propaganda.
To do so, they utilize the concept of “false projection” (which they sometimes also refer to as “pathic projection”). *False projection* can be understood as a kind of deformed mimesis (Ibid.: 154). Mimesis refers to the mechanism through which the human species has learned to regulate its fear of nature (and, by extension, of “the other” in more general terms). In mimesis, the fear of the other is mastered through a “form of mimicry or semblance that appropriates rather than replicates its object in a non-identical similitude” (Rabinbach 2000: 55). Yet, if mimesis “makes itself resemble its surroundings, false projection makes its surroundings resemble itself” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947]: 154). As a consequence, the subject projects its own internality onto an external object, and in this process “[i]mpulses which are not acknowledged by the subject and yet are his, are attributed to the object: the prospective victim” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1942–7]: 154).

Importantly, Adorno and Horkheimer do not regard the mechanism of projection per se as pathological. In a sense, the process of perception itself can be understood as “mediated immediacy,” as a mechanism by which subjective elements are unconsciously transferred to an apparently ready-made object. But without the element of reflection this mediated immediacy is reified and thus acquires “hallucinatory power” (Ibid.: 160). *Reflection* here refers to a subject’s capacity for negating its initial judgment; to its ability to “conceptually carry through the failure of the absolute claim and thereby continue] to qualify his or her judgment” (Ibid.: 161). This capacity for negation distinguishes “thought” from “fixed judgment.” The latter is immovable and characterized by “paranoid over-consistency.” Instead of negating his judgment,

the paranoiac clings obdurately to the claim which has caused the judgment to fail. Instead of going further by penetrating its subject matter more deeply, thought places itself entirely in the hopeless service of the particular judgment.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1942–7]: 61)

The pathic moment of false projection is thus not projective behavior as such but the exclusion of the element of reflection from that behavior. This results in a paranoid condition of a totalizing kind. The subject, no longer able to differentiate between himself and the outside world, loses all abilities that are predicated on this capacity: “Instead of the voice of conscience, [the subject] hears voices; instead of inwardly examining itself in order to draw up a protocol of its own lust for power, it attributes to other the Protocol of the Elders of Zion” (Ibid.: 156).

**Anti-Semitism and the “Jewish Question”: Arendt**

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt repeatedly insists that eliminationist anti-Semitism has to be understood as a central component of the National Socialist worldview. Criticizing the “failure to take seriously what the Nazis themselves said,” Arendt argues that the fantastical nature of anti-Semitic propaganda – the fact that, as she puts it, anti-Semitism presents an “outrage to common sense” – must not lead one to conclude that it was “merely a pretext for winning the masses or an interesting device of demagogy” (Arendt 1979 [1951]: 3). Urging her readers to take modern anti-Semitism seriously, Arendt rejects theological and metaphysical accounts of European anti-Semitism. Far from constituting an eternal dimension of the relationship between Jews and gentiles, eliminationist anti-Semitism has to be understood as a specifically modern phenomenon. As such, it reflects the disintegration of traditional political structures in Europe, and, in particular, the decline of the nation-state in the aftermath of European imperialism (Benhabib 2011: 31). In contrast to the religiously motivated anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages, modern anti-Semitism has to be grasped as a
political phenomenon. Challenging explanations of anti-Semitism that subsumed the latter under broad categories such as nationalism and xenophobia or that declared it epiphenomenal to movements of the economy (Arendt 1979 [1951]: 4), Arendt seeks to explain its origins through a reconstruction of the “Jewish question” in modern European history. At the heart of her theory of anti-Semitism lies a fundamental paradox: the rise of modern anti-Semitism coincides with the decline of the modern nation-state and “reached its climax at the exact moment when the European system of nation-states and its precarious balance of power crashed” (Ibid.: 3). Therefore, it could not be treated simply as a product of nationalism and xenophobia.

In Arendt’s view, at least part of the explanation is to be found in the convergence of political, economic, and psychological factors that both tied the Jews to the nation-state and undermined their ability to adapt to its transformations. Arendt’s account of the emergence of the modern nation-state anticipates some elements of her theory of modernity that she would later fully develop in The Human Condition (1958). Specifically, she grasps the modern nation-state as a symptom of the deepening split between state and society in the eighteenth century and its transformations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a phenomenon which she will call “the rise of the social” (Arendt 1958: 46ff).

The modern nation-state needed the Jews, relying both on their financial resources and on their political loyalty for its consolidation. In return, it rewarded wealthy Jews with social privileges that made them dependent upon state power and prevented their integration into society. The Jews didn’t much object, as this privileged status coincided with their own aspirations to maintain a separate identity (Arendt 1979 [1951]: 13).

In financing the state’s beginnings, the Jews also tied their destinies to its further developments. When, in the wake of imperialism, the fortunes of the nation-state waned so did those of the Jews. The extraordinary capitalist development of the nineteenth century pushed the expansion of national economies eventually beyond the borders of the nation-state and came to rely increasingly on the exploitation of resources through imperialist ventures. Unluckily for the Jews, in the ensuing imperialist scramble, the bourgeoisie, which constituted the driving force behind economic expansion, came to rely on a very different kind of ally, “the mob” (les déclassés), in its quest for power (Benhabib 2011: 13).

Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as Arendt then seek to understand the rise of modern anti-Semitism and the eventual destruction of the Jews of Europe through socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological categories. In this respect, they differ from many others such as Gershom Scholem, Jacob Taubes, Martin Buber, Leo Baeck, and Kurt Blumenfeld, for whom the European catastrophe was first and foremost a Jewish catastrophe that transmuted traditional Christian Jewish hatred and anti-Judaism into eliminationist anti-Semitism through the methods of mass destruction available to the modern state. Whereas Horkheimer moves from a political-economic toward a more psychoanalytically oriented diagnosis of Nazi anti-Semitism in his joint work with Adorno, Arendt’s analysis remains historical, emphasizing the “configuration” and “crystallization” (see Benhabib 2003 for these categories) of certain elements in the development of the modern European state formation and its imperialist transformation.

At this point, we would like to highlight a particularly interesting divergence between Arendt’s approach and that of Adorno and Horkheimer – namely, their respective attitudes toward the explanatory potential of psychological, and in particular, psychoanalytical, categories for the study of modern anti-Semitism. On the one hand, Arendt as well as Adorno and Horkheimer regards modern psychology as problematic insofar as it constitutes a product of scientific positivism. However, while this leads Arendt to avoid psychological explanations for political phenomena, the Frankfurt school repeatedly utilizes psychological categories in both their empirical research and philosophical reflections. The convergence of
Arendt’s and the Frankfurt School’s critiques of positivism thus contrasts with their respective attitude toward the utilization of modern psychology in their own research.

In the second part of this chapter, we will examine their critiques of positivism. We will then turn to a discussion of Theodor Adorno’s methodologically most rigorous deployment of psychological categories in The Authoritarian Personality. Finally, we will analyze Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem which, as we argue, resonates with The Authoritarian Personality in important ways. Far from being incompatible, it is our contention that these analyses can also be read as complementing each other.

Arendt’s Distinction between Knowing and Thinking

There are the three major philosophical influences on Arendt’s thought: phenomenology, Heideggerian Existenz philosophy, and Aristotelian doctrine. Indicative of Arendt’s affinity with phenomenology are her rejection of the traditional dichotomy between being and appearance, her affirmation of the primacy of appearance, and, consequently, the centrality of the realm of human experience (Arendt 1977: 17). Rejecting the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenological (or appearing) world, phenomenology makes the investigation of appearances its central task. Since appearances are no longer contrasted with their presumed being or essence, phenomenology considers the knowledge we can obtain about appearances as objective rather than subjective. This allows the over-coming of the notorious dichotomy between subject and object.

Martin Heidegger would work out the full implications of this approach in Being and Time (Heidegger 1962 [1927]). While we will not go into detail about the relationship between Heidegger’s and Arendt’s thought, we would like to draw attention to one feature of Heidegger’s philosophy that became particularly important for Arendt’s own thinking: the distinction between categories of knowledge concerning nonhuman entities and categories adequate to the realm of human experience, and, consequently, for the disclosure of “being.” The former categories, which are associated with a scientific worldview, might allow for knowledge about “what” entities are; however, only the latter categories address the question of “being” by asking “who” humans are.

While Arendt would work out a forceful critique of some dimensions of Heidegger’s philosophy and develop her own distinctive framework, we can also find a similar link between concepts and the experience of the individual in her thinking. Arendt’s most important categories like “labor,” “work,” and “action” are not merely intended to describe what people happen to do. Rather, they seek to illuminate how individuals experience what they are doing. Just as Heidegger’s existentials (existentialia) can be understood as categories expressing the fundamental ways in which Dasein relates to the world, so too labor, work, and action are existential categories that seek to grasp how human beings experience the world in and through practice (cf. Benhabib 2003 [1996]: 102–122).

From this philosophical vantage point, modern society, and specifically the rise of modern science, progressively endangers the possibility of experience per se. The inherently expansive nature of what could be called “the scientific worldview” penetrates all realms of human life with far-reaching and disastrous consequences; indeed, it threatens our ability “to think” itself. The modern world, Arendt notes in The Human Condition, is one in which “knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought [might] have parted company for good” (1958: 3). If this were to continue, “then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is” (Ibid.). The distinction between “know-how” and “thought” that Arendt here invokes is critical: “thinking,” for Arendt, constitutes an activity that exceeds the mere ability to cognitively
process information. In her essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt clarifies the specificity of thinking by invoking the Kantian distinction between “reason” (Vernunft) and “intellect” (Verstand). While “intellect” strives after verifiable knowledge, “reason” is the “urge to think and to understand” (Arendt 2003 [1971]: 165). Thinking is thus not concerned with the accumulation of knowledge and in that sense it differs profoundly from a “scientist’s thirst for knowledge for its own sake.” Rather, it constitutes a quest for meaning and as such it cannot serve any predetermined practical goal. It is an activity that mainly consists of examination and reflection: an activity that implies the preliminary rejection of all “accepted opinions and ‘values,’” because it “relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules” (Arendt 2003 [1971]: 177).

Conversely, “thoughtlessness” or the inability to think – a category that will play a significant role in Arendt’s account of the notorious Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann – refers to a state of mind in which the ability for this kind of reflection has been lost: a condition in which one’s thinking can neither be penetrated by “the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence” nor examine its own claims from a standpoint external to itself (Arendt 2003 [1971]: 160).

The Frankfurt School Distinction between Traditional and Critical Theory

Kant’s distinction between “intellect” (Verstand) and “reason” (Vernunft), which inspires Arendt’s dualism between “knowing” and “thinking,” also plays a crucial role in the Frankfurt School’s critique of positivism. In his essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1972 [1937]), Horkheimer compares scientific positivism with “critical theory.” Both the specialized sciences and those philosophical theories that consider their achievements to be the only valid model of knowledge perpetrate an epistemic illusion: they encourage us to consider the object of cognition as a ready-made, ahistorical reality, and they construe the relationship of the knowing subject to this object as one of passive cognition or limited experimentation. Such “traditional theories,” under which Horkheimer subsumes philosophy as well as certain social science methodologies, question neither the historical constitution of their subject matter, nor do they reflect on the purposes to which knowledge they produce is put in society. This second dimension is less significant for Horkheimer than the manner in which the concepts, constructions, and scientific operations of traditional theories produce a distorted image of social reality.

Horkheimer distinguishes the critical theory of society from a critique of the economy, even if the former and the latter are inextricably linked (Horkheimer 1980 [1937]: 627/247; Benhabib 1986: 152 ff). The critique of political economy does not reify the economy but considers the tendencies of society as a whole and analyzes “the historical movement of the period which is approaching its end” (ZfS: 1937: 627/247). Critical theory aims at more than the given laws and structures of society: it judges the given in the light of a normative standard, namely, the “realization of the free development of individuals” through the rational reconstitution of society (Ibid.: 628/248).

What Arendt calls “thinking” may be helpfully compared to what Horkheimer characterizes as “critical theory.” For both, such activity entails penetrating beyond the surface of appearances not to denigrate them but to grasp their true significance. For Arendt, this involves a rejection of accepted points of view that serve to hide the novel and distinctive aspects of the phenomena, thus condemning us to a repetition of commonplace wisdom. Arendt is less concerned with disclosing the hidden meaning behind the appearances than with comprehending the uniqueness of the given through judging it in all its worthy and repulsive aspects. She understood her work in The Origins of Totalitarianism as facing up to the historically unprecedented nature of this phenomenon, and for this reason, totalitarianism
needed to be distinguished from tyranny as well as from dictatorship and only then could we begin to understand its true dimensions.

For Horkheimer too, critical theory dissolves the tyranny of the given and of the commonplace upon our intellect by exposing its formation or constitution through social praxis. What is made by humans can also be changed by them. Remaining true to a Marxist-Hegelian theory of the social constitution of reality, Horkheimer argues that critical theory liberates us by disclosing the contingency of our sociohistorical world. For both, critical thought is in the service of freedom. Arendt understands such freedom in classical civic-republican terms as the founding of new constitutional orders in which freedom can be housed (Arendt 1978). For Horkheimer freedom is the unfolding of human capacities through the rational reorganization of society such as to overcome the constraints of the capitalist system and to realize its unredeemed potential.

But remaining true to the historically conditioned character of critical theory itself, by the late 1930s, the critique of traditional theory is replaced by the “critique of instrumental reason.” On the one hand, this turn can be explained by reference to the triumph of Hitler and fascist forces throughout Europe. Indeed, the impact of these events on the Frankfurt School's theoretical activity can hardly be over-appreciated. However, we would also like to emphasize another historical phenomenon that constitutes an important background condition for Adorno and Horkheimer's work. Here, we are thinking of the failure of the Russian Revolution (from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism the latter failed in that it did not trigger a global revolution) and the subsequent degeneration of Marxism into Stalinism. Indeed, published transcripts of Adorno and Horkheimer's private discussions suggest that these developments had led them to ask whether a critical theory along Marxist lines was even a possibility in their own historical moment (Adorno and Horkheimer 2011 [1956]). The fact that Arendt did not share this particular set of concerns might help to better appreciate the distance between her and the Frankfurt School's intellectual and political commitments in light of all diagnostic commonalities.

“Instrumental Reason” versus the “Rise of the Social”

“Instrumental Reason” is perhaps among the most well-known phrases of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School through which they sought a synthesis of Max Weber's theory of modernity as rationalization with Marx's analysis of the spread of commodity fetishism (cf. Habermas 1973; Held 1980; Honneth 1985; Benhabib 1986). Weber used the concept of ‘rationalization' to describe a process of cultural disenchantment (Entzauberung) and societal differentiation. Societal differentiation signified the separation of the capitalist economy from the political state and the bureaucracy, the family and other institutions of civil society. The autonomization of the economy in the nineteenth-century period of liberal capitalism meant, ideal-typically, that the market would be governed by its own logic of the purchase and sale of commodities, including the sale and purchase of labor force as a commodity. The rise of a modern bureaucracy that administered public and private organizations according to legally promulgated, predictable, and formal rules of conduct was made possible by a capitalist economy which provided the basis for the monetized salaries of the bureaucracy; such a bureaucracy in turn was needed for the functioning of a market which was dependent upon the legal rational application and administration of the laws of property and contract. Cultural disenchantment referred to the concomitant shifts in cultural norms (such as the increasingly elevated status of the natural sciences and the ethical value of the autonomous personality).

In his History and Class Consciousness, Georg Lukács provided an unforgettable synthesis of Weberian rationalization and Marxian commodification processes which became
paradigmatic for the Frankfurt School (Lukács 1971 [1923]). While accepting Weber’s analysis through a Lukácsian lense, Adorno and Horkheimer could no longer share in the latter’s revolutionary optimism. By the 1930s, in light of the failure of European revolutionary movements, the seemingly unstoppable rise of fascism, and the consolidation of Stalinism in the Soviet states, revolutionary optimism had itself become ideological – if not Stalinist. In this context, the Weberian diagnosis that modernity would end in producing “professionals (Fachmenschen) without heart and sensualists without soul” regained actuality even if not all emancipatory hope was lost (Weber 2001 [1930]: 124). In the Dialectic of the Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer maintained that the two moments of cultural rationalization for Weber, namely the value of the autonomous personality and the radical separation of nature from culture – the dualistic ontology of modern science – were incompatible (see Benhabib 1986: 164–171). The promise of the Enlightenment to free man from his self-incurred tutelage could not be attained via a reason that is a mere instrument of self-preservation. However, it would be wrong to conclude that Adorno and Horkheimer simply succumbed to political and intellectual pessimism. Their published works as well as posthumously published notes and conversations give testimony to the seriousness with which they continued to interrogate possibilities for new revolutionary openings (Adorno and Horkheimer 2011 [1956]) and critically reflected on their own role as intellectuals in the context of their specific historical moment (see Adorno 1993).

Hannah Arendt shares Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s somber perspectives on modernity to a certain extent. But whereas the Frankfurt School theorists retained this mind-set after their return to Germany in the 1950s, Arendt’s encounter with American republicanism (see King 2015), the Hungarian rebellion of 1956, the Civil Rights Movement in America, and the outbreak of the student movements in 1968 gave her hope that the spirit of freedom had not entirely perished in the hearts of men and women (Arendt 2006 [1963], 1969).

The Human Condition (1958) is the work in which the outlines of something like Arendt’s theory of modernity emerge. It is also due to this work that many commentators have mistakenly considered Arendt a nostalgic theorist of the Greek polis and its virtues (cf. Holmes 1979). “The rise of the social” is the phrase through which Arendt tries to capture her understanding of modernity. Without the well-established contrast in German sociology between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (Ferdinand Tönnies), this phrase is hardly intelligible, since “the social” in English ubiquitously refers to all spheres of human activity, productions, and relations. There are three dominant meanings of “the social” in Arendt’s work (Benhabib 2003 [1996]: 22–27). At one level, the social refers to the emergence of the capitalist exchange economy when what Arendt calls “glorified housekeeping” becomes the public concern par excellence. The national economies of modern states displace the concern with the public sphere of politics. At the second level, the social refers to mass society. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, the principal characteristic of mass society is said to be loneliness. She writes,

Loneliness, common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government .... is closely connected with the uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all.

(Arendt 1979 [1951]: 475)

Statelessness preceded the condition of the mass of men who, having no protection by a public authority, are uprooted and eventually rendered superfluous (Arendt 1979 [1951]:
Arendt’s resounding call of the “right to have rights” of every human being is an appeal to reconstruct the political systems of modernity such as to eliminate statelessness and superfluousness. Superfluous peoples are easy to dispense with in extermination camps.

Yet it would be wrong to think that Arendt, like Adorno and Horkheimer after 1939, saw a straight line from “the sling shot to the atom bomb” in Adorno’s words (Adorno 2006 [1964/5]: 12). Nor did she think it inevitable that modernity would result in totalitarianism. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, she was interested in the principle of equality, which modernity had ushered in, and was more focused in exploring its paradoxical possibilities than submitting to the drumbeat of instrumental reason. This Tocquevillian orientation yields the third aspect of “the rise of the social” for Arendt, namely, life in civil society and civic associations which becomes possible only through the spread of equality in modernity. By “equality” Arendt does not just mean political and legal equality but also the eventual equalization of tastes, behavior, and manners. Arendt’s historical writings on the Jewish question (see Arendt 2007), her early biography of Rahel Varnhagen (Arendt 1974 [1957]), and her discussions of racism, nationalism, and imperialism in Part Two of The Origins of Totalitarianism show her to be exploring the dialectic of equality and difference in modern societies.

She writes,

Equality of condition, though it is certainly a basis requirement for justice, is nevertheless among the greatest and most uncertain ventures of modern mankind. The more equal conditions are, the less explanation there is for the differences that actually exist between people; and thus all the more unequal do individuals and groups become . . . .This perversion of equality from a political into a social concept is all the more dangerous when a society leaves but little space for special groups and individuals, for then their differences become all the more conspicuous.

(Arendt 1979 [1951]: 54)

This insight of Arendt into the dialectic of equality and difference is, we believe, the most consequential aspect of her view of modernity. It is also what gives Arendt’s thought a new actuality in the contemporary world at a time of the explosion of identity-based struggles. We believe that it is Arendt’s cultural sociology of modernity (rather than her clearly inadequate understanding of the economy in modern societies) that most deserves emphasis.

The reasons for the comparatively hopeful nature of Arendt’s assessment of developments in the 1960s, in particular, can be traced back to the above-mentioned contrast between her civic-republican perspective versus Adorno and Horkheimer’s struggle with the Marxist tradition. Even if Adorno and Horkheimer had started to doubt whether Marxism could be rescued from its Stalinist degradation into positivism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2011 [1956]: 4), they still remained convinced of ultimate inadequacy of gradual reform. As Adorno remarks (in response to a caution against reformism by Horkheimer), “[r]eform of the administration cannot be brought about by peaceful means” (Ibid.: 22). And yet, their assessment of global prospects in 1956 suggests that they regarded such a fundamental change as absolutely necessary. “If we let history go its own way and just give it a little push,” Adorno notes, “it will end up in a catastrophe for mankind.” To which Horkheimer responds, “Nothing can be done to prevent that except to bring in Socialism” (Ibid.: 87).

In conclusion, we would like to consider one of Arendt’s most well-known thesis about the “banality of evil.” It is our claim that the Frankfurt School’s theory of the “authoritarian personality” throws unexpected light on what Arendt may have meant with this phrase.
The Authoritarian Personality and Adolf Eichmann

The Authoritarian Personality, now considered a classic in the field of social psychology, provided Adorno with the opportunity – and challenge – to translate his theoretical categories into an empirical research program. The project, which was part of the Studies in Prejudice series sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, sought to investigate whether it was possible to identify psychological patterns that made individuals more or less receptive to antidemocratic ideas (Adorno et al. 1969 [1950]: 2). The aim of the study was not to provide an account for the existence of anti-Semitism in society – such an account, the authors emphasize in the volume’s introduction, would require a sociological or historical, rather than psychological, approach. Instead, it proceeded from the question why “certain individuals accept [anti-Semitic ideas] while others do not” (Adorno et al. 1969 [1950]: 3).

To do so, Adorno and a team of social psychologists from the University of California at Berkeley, designed a set of questionnaires and mapped the collected answers on three different scales: the A-S scale (to measure anti-Semitism), the E-scale (to measure ethnocentrism), and the Político-Economic Conservatism scale. While each of these scales measured attitudes in specific areas, the later developed F-scale aimed at measuring “antidemocratic tendencies in the personality itself” (Adorno et al. 1969 [1950]: 13). The F-scale is methodologically noteworthy in that it aimed to measure the potential, the “readiness” of individuals, for fascism (rather individuals’ active commitment to different forms of prejudice). The basis for grouping different opinions and attitudes within a particular scale was “the conception that taken together they expressed a single general trend” (Ibid.).

The F-scale consists of nine variables, which were adapted from the interpretative frame that Adorno and Horkheimer had deployed in the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” chapter in the Dialectic of Enlightenment (Buck-Morss 1977: 178–181). Here, Adorno and Horkheimer had approached anti-Semitism as product of a specific configuration of psychological tendencies which, conversely, were rooted in the social structure of postliberal capitalist society: conformism (or “conventionalism”), authoritarian submission and aggression, a lack of critical reflection, sexual repression, pathetic projection, superstition, and stereotyping (i.e., a disposition to think in rigid and inflexible categories) (Adorno et al. 1969: 228; Buck-Morss 1977: 181).

For the purpose of this chapter, we would like to highlight two aspects in this context. First, the classification of individuals into different psychological types can itself be regarded as an instance of the very behavior the study associated with the authoritarian personality type. In Adorno’s words, “the rigidity of constructing types is itself indicative of that ‘stereopathic’ mentality which belongs to the basic constituents of the potentially fascist character” (Adorno et al. 1969 [1950]: 746). However, Adorno argues, there is good reason for the “persistent plausibility of the psychological approach,” since there exists an objective societal trend toward the liquidation of individuality in modern society. Thus, “[t]here is reason to look for psychological types because the world in which we live is typed and ‘produces’ different ‘types’ of persons” (Ibid.: 747). This theoretical premise, which “comprehends the typification of men itself as a social function” constitutes the critical aspect of the authors’ typology (Ibid.). (For a detailed discussion of Adorno’s struggle with the study’s self-reflexivity problem, see Gordon 2017.)

Second, one cannot help but notice the similarities between the F-scale variables and Hannah Arendt’s phenomenological assessment of Adolf Eichmann’s character. In Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt had coined the by-now infamous, and still controversial, expression “the banality of evil” so as to give voice to what she regarded as the most puzzling feature of this Nazi war criminal – namely, the latter’s “thoughtlessness.” Eichmann, she argued, was no “Iago and not Macbeth,”
except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all ... He merely, to put it colloquially, never realized what he was doing... It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.

(Arendt 1965: 288)

For Arendt, it was precisely the banal quality of Eichmann’s character that constituted the central moral and legal challenges of his trial (Arendt 1965: 26–27). In this context, the term “thoughtlessness” is not synonymous with “forgetfulness” or “negligence,” but is meant to signify a specific mentality, or psychic syndrome. For Arendt, Eichmann was “thoughtless” in that he displayed a puzzling “inability to think.” In her later essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt describes this inability to think in terms of a peculiar combination of flexibility and rigidity on Eichmann’s part: on the one hand, Eichmann adapted with considerable ease to the rules and standards of judgment of his trial – rules and standards that couldn’t have been more different from those that had been operative in the Third Reich. On the other hand, this flexibility was contrasted with a peculiar kind of mental rigidity, which Arendt saw manifested in Eichmann’s language. The latter, Arendt notes, was made up of a “limited supply” of clichés and “stock phrases,” rendering Eichmann “utterly helpless only when confronted with a situation to which none of them would apply” (Arendt 2003 [1971]: 158–159). For Arendt, this rigidity pointed to a lack of the capacity for reflection in Eichmann’s part: such clichés and stock phrases provided certain scripts that enabled us to live our daily lives without constantly falling into deep reflection of our experiences. Hence, they protect us against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; the difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.

(Arendt 2003 [1971]: 160)

In other words, Arendt’s concept of thoughtlessness indicates absence of the capacity for reflection, leading to what the Frankfurt School theorists would have called a reification of thought. It designates a mode of cognition that operates by consistently imposing a fixed set of learned rules on reality, no matter how contradictory the result may be. In this sense, “thoughtlessness” also indicates the inability for facing up to experience.

Certainly, while “the banality of evil” thesis has been much misunderstood, it was Arendt’s generalization about the behavior of Jewish Councils, appointed by the Nazis to administer territories in East and Central Europe, that caused much bitter rebuttals and hurt in the Jewish community, earning her Gershom Scholem’s caustic remark that she lacked “Ahabat Israel” (love of the Jewish people) (Scholem 1964: 51–56). Arendt’s continuing and almost militant involvement with Jewish and Israeli politics contrasts with the silent acceptance and solidarity with Israel that Adorno and Horkheimer displayed (see Angermann 2015).

Yet, Max Horkheimer’s private notes from this period reveal that he as well was highly critical of the Eichmann trial – indeed, that he even regarded the circumstances surrounding the latter as potentially harmful. “The formal grounds for the trial,” Horkheimer observed, “are obviously untenable” since “Eichmann did not murder in Israel, nor can Israel wish that the seizure of political criminals in the asylum they should or should not have found become the general rule” (Horkheimer 1978: 194). Against the claim that objections of this sort had
to be measured against the important educational function of the trial, Horkheimer argues that the trial would do more harm than good in this respect:

Both among Israel’s youth and the sympathetic masses in other nations which one hopes to win over, the unconscious suspicion that the slain are being used for political means, that they serve tactical and propagandistic ends, will constitute an obstacle, however legitimate the national purpose will be.

(Ibid.)

Thus, Horkheimer concludes, “nothing good will come of this trial, neither for the security and position of Jews in the world, nor for their self-consciousness” (Horkheimer 1978: 196).

Conclusion

Despite all personal enmities and rivalries, Arendt’s work, as well as Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s, exhibits a remarkably rich synthesis of German Philosophy from Kant to Hegel, to Husserl, Heidegger, and beyond, with great focus on sociohistorical and cultural realities. For all of them National Socialism, in particular, signified a “break in civilization” (Diner 2000) of such magnitude that the imperative of thinking became to understand how Auschwitz was possible. They brought to this question the formidable analytical tools of German Idealism and social theory. It is this passion for understanding how what happened was possible that forms for them an ethical imperative. Thought must be in the service of emancipation, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s language; for Arendt, thinking must grasp the new such as to enable vistas of freedom.

It is by reading and engaging with their multiple legacies that we will gain the richness of perspective and analytical sharpness to understand the past in order to master our own future.

References

Primary Texts by Arendt, Adorno, and Horkheimer:

By Theodor W. Adorno:

By Hannah Arendt:

308
ARENDT AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL


By Max Horkheimer:

Secondary Texts

SEYLA BENHABIB AND CLARA PICKER


Further Reading


