

The Concept of Enlightenment

Leonardo Aranda

From the perspective of Adorno and Horkheimer, the current crisis in the West is referred to a much larger movement that goes from the origins of western thought in the ancient Greece, but has its most intense expression in the historical period of the Enlightenment, from which today's society is a consequence. The crisis that reason experiences in our times is not to be understood as a state of emergency, or as a side effect of a series of structural changes in society that, in this sense, are to be seen as a passing phase in the progress of humanity; but as the central tendency of reason to destruct itself. "If we talk of a disease that affects the reason, it should not be understood in the sense of having affected reason in a particular historical moment, but as inseparable from the essence of reason in civilization as we have known till the date"¹. In this sense, the criticism made by Horkheimer and Adorno should not be viewed only from the perspective of the thought originated as a result of the Holocaust, but as a radical critique of all Western culture, which is built upon the deep contradictions that arise from the Enlightenment ideals of 'reason' and 'progress'.

From the perspective of this critic, we can mention three major paradoxes in the Enlightenment: First, the domination of man over nature, which results in the domination of man by himself, and thus the destruction of humanity under the ties of nature from which man sought to emancipate. Second, the destruction of the myth by reason, which ends by the becoming of reason into a myth. And finally, the constitution of the individual in a 'self' that, in its most radical representations within mass culture, ends up destroying the 'self' that sought to establish and defend.

As can be seen, the three paradoxes become clear as three sides of the same trend, which the authors have characterized as Enlightenment. Thus, although the Enlightenment corresponds and is formalized in a historical period, it should be understood as a trans-historical larger movement, characterized by the search for the primacy of the individual over nature through the effort to hypostatize reason. In other words, the historical period of the Enlightenment is the conclusion of a series of far-reaching historical trends present in a much larger period in the history of thought. This characterization of the Enlightenment, of course, founded a radical critique that, while accepting the need for it, seeks to turn an improvement that would allow western culture to escape from barbarism to which it rushes every time with a greater force.

It is in this sense that critical theory decides to conduct a comprehensive review of reason, in search of that which within it is constituted as domination, in an effort to give rise to new opportunities for thought. The characteristic negative mood of critical theory should be seen, more than a pessimism, as the only way to highlight the difficulties and contradictions that have led thought to dull into a mere instrumental rationality.

Enlightenment: from the reason of the myth, to the myth of reason

The myth, as presented in the old thinking of Western culture, has served man as a way to shed light on nature, as well as a way to ward off the fear that it causes on humanity. To transform the forces

¹ Horkheimer, Max, *Critique of instrumental reason*, Trotta, 2nd edition, Spain, 2010, p. 179

of nature in something which can be understood through representation, has been a tendency of human beings since their earliest ages. This representation appears as "the unfolding of nature in appearance and essence, action and strength, which makes possible both myth and science, born of fear of man, whose expression becomes explanation"². Of course, for the ancient man, the myth is not experienced as a representation, but as an objective truth that designates a higher form of reason for which the individual can only participate in its adaptation to that truth. In the myth, we can find the traces of the central tension that marked the relationship between man and nature: On the one hand we can see how, through myth, man maps the natural forces to human forms, giving nature a sense of reason that suits his own interests, in other words, the myth is an adaptation of nature to the relations of domination which man exercises: natural activity is explained from the representations that man makes of its essence. However, on the other hand, the myth still constitutes a reversal of enlightened reason, while, for the mythological reason, if man is to be able for knowledge, it must be through his transformation in accordance with the truth, and not otherwise. In the myth we find a contradiction: on one side, the myth gives order to nature in accordance to human domain through concepts and representations. But, on the other side, however, in the myth we find a subordination of man to the laws of nature. The nature that we find in the myth is still a force which must be respected and implemented tribute, and men still is part of nature.

As it can be seen, the myth subjugates man to the existence of an objective truth that at various times has taken different names like magic, natural law or divine law: "Myths, like magic rites signify recurring nature. This is the soul of the symbolic: a being or phenomenon is represented as eternal, because it should become again and again in the event through the realization of the symbol"³. The myth retains therefore a bond with nature in terms of objectivity, which affirms the existence of an order of things independent of men's existence, and in this way holds the power of nature over the individual's will. The social life of man, their rites and customs, at the time of the mythical reason, is still marked by the course of the forces of nature.

However, for the enlightened reason, the myth lacks sufficient rationality, and what previously was seen as objectivity, becomes substrate domain, whereas, as mere representation, is based on the projection of man over nature: "At the base of the Enlightenment, myth has always seen anthropomorphism [...] The various mythical figures can all be reduced, as the Enlightenment, at the same denominator: the subject"⁴. In this regard, for Enlightenment, the myth provides explanations still too metaphysical, and thus fails in its will to exert its dominance. If man is to emancipate itself from the natural, it should be able to understand and master the forces that come into play in nature, and this can only be done through a type of knowledge that favors the particular experience under examination of reason.

Enlightenment reason postulates, therefore, that the way to find the truth does not go through any kind of metaphysical knowledge about it, but depends solely on the experience of man overturned within reason. At the same time, it says that, if the reason has a degree of fallibility this can be eradicated through science and its methods. "The Enlightenment [...] has always pursued the goal

² Adorno, T. and Horkheimer, M, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trotta, 4th Edition, Spain, 2001, p. 70

³ *Ibidem*, p. 71

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 62

of freeing people from fear and make them into gentlemen [...] The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world. Intended to dissolve the myths and overthrow the imagination through science"⁵. Thus, for illustration, the myth becomes the opposite of reason, and all that it holds becomes apparent explanation. Objectivity, in these terms, will now be defined by the ability of the man to turn away from his own subjectivity, and make the experience a measurable aspect of it. That is, to those features of things, able to be objectified.

True objectivity, understood until now as a superior truth from the subject and his experience, is supplanted in the Enlightenment for an objectivity that has its center in the human reason and that has as its guarantee and link with truth, in the examining of experience for the reason through the method of science. We have no doubt: the man has become the center of nature, whereas it is through his reason, that he can provide reality and objectivity to things. Thus, this is the way that the subject moves all metaphysical notion of truth and positions himself in the center of nature; position from which, of course, he is now able to justify any form of control and domination. The natural becomes one more field for experience, mere raw material for the survival of humanity. And so, every man's relationship with it will be marked by pragmatism and functionality. Adorno and Horkheimer will say: "The myth dissolves in Illustration and nature mere objectivity. Men pay the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise [...] in this transformation it is revealed the essence of things every time as the same: as material or as substrate of domain. This unity is the unity of nature"⁶.

In addition to this movement of objectification of the world, which separates the subject from the object of his knowledge, and that, in this distance finds the possibility of their domain; we can see in the Enlightenment a reciprocal movement that reveals the true nature of this kind of knowledge as mere domination: reason itself becomes a myth and justifies the need for each of its actions by pragmatism. Thus, the return to barbarism that history of mankind lives, can be found in its own logic within reason. The reason hypostatized as objective truth, denies the possibility of another type of access to the truth, branding them as metaphysical. In its own logic, the Enlightenment thinks that the progress of mankind is to be understood as the control of each individual to its laws, and thus justifies any sacrifice of nature and human beings in the name of this supposed truth. Historically, "this process gradually came to affect up to objective content of every rational concept. Finally there is a singular fact that may appear as rational per se; emptied of their contents, all the fundamental concepts have become mere formal shells"⁷. The reason becomes, then, its own myth, and this movement closes the possibility to other types of objectivity. In this sense Adorno will state:

The Enlightenment is like no other totalitarian system. Its falsity lies not in what always have been reproached by its romantic enemies: analytical method, reduction of its elements, decomposition through reflection, but that for it the process is determined in advance [...] With the prior identification of the world entirely thought, mathematized, with the truth, the Enlightenment is believed secure

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 59

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 64

⁷ Horkheimer, Max, *Supra*, p. 48.

against the return of the mythical, thought is identified with math. This left them, so to speak, emancipated, elevated to absolute instance.⁸

Thus, the primacy of reason, which has its ideological climax in the Enlightenment, becomes the myth that comes to destroy the ideals that gave itself strength, and marked the necessity of its own historical moment; thereby precipitating man regression to barbarism. Those forms of objectivity that allowed to think universal values such as justice, good, and truth, have been dismissed by reason, that turns itself an instrument of praxis, and cannot but be suspicious of those types of reason that are not useful for it. "The Enlightenment has rejected classical demands of thinking reason [...] because such a requirement is far from the imperative to govern the practice [...] The mode of mathematical procedure became, so to speak, in ritual of thinking. Despite the axiomatic restraint, that procedure was established as necessary and objective: transforming the thinking in a thing, an instrument as it calls it"⁹. Reason reduces its essence in the myth it makes of itself, and with it, eventually it finds its greater mastery over nature, while at the same time, it finds his greatest vulnerability to it. "On the way to modern science men renounce sense. Replace the concept by the formula, the cause by rule and probability"¹⁰. The reason, reduced to probability and pragmatism of the real, is neutralized in its highest pretensions, and thus closes the door to the possibility of man to emancipate itself of nature in his reconciliation with it. The reason becomes instrumentalized in the sediment of nature that opens the way to barbarism and the neutralization of reason itself. We are therefore in the paradox that contains two types of reason, one trying to reach the highest pretensions of humanity, and the other that believes it should only be a tool for man to achieve his pragmatic purposes without mediate consequences, and in this sense, does not see the need to assess such acts against any other ideal beyond itself. This paradox makes inseparable both types of reason, and yet is the evidence of the crossroads at which our contemporary world faces.

Domain, reason and nature

For Horkheimer and Adorno, that reason becomes domination is not in any way a departure from it to its opposite: since its inception, reason has involved different forms of domination over nature. If enlightened reason believes that nature should be understood as raw material, which aims only to ensure the survival of man is but because "intelligence that overcomes superstition should rule over disenchanting nature [...] What men want to learn of nature is to use it to completely dominate it and man himself"¹¹. In other words, it is in the objectification of nature through reason, where the man is more reliable of his domination over it. In the same way, it is only through thought that individuals can be removed from the rest of nature and achieve a higher degree of domination. However, the real contradiction is that the domination taken by reason has ended in the domination of men by themselves. And so, what began as a movement to emancipate the man from nature has resulted in further subjection of men, only with the difference that the ties are now exercised by the man himself.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

What at first instance results in a contradiction, is nothing but the consequent manifestation of enlightened reason: If the objectification of the world must be taken to the limit of its consequences, man himself, unable to subtract himself from nature, rather than in the abstraction of thought, has to fall under the ties of domination exercised by his own reason. In this sense, the contradiction accomplished by reason at the expense of humanity, should be attributed to the separation made between spirit and nature in the representation of man. Therefore, "the real difficulty of the problem of the relationship between spirit and nature is that the hypostasis of the polarity of these two entities is as unacceptable as the reduction of one another"¹². In other words, it is only in the abstraction of a man whose body may be humiliated and dominated, without implying submission of his spirit, where reason must be able to justify their domination of humanity. Hypostasized, reason doesn't see in the singular subject a man, but only one more object.

Thus, we see how domain, originally thought to be performed over nature, eventually was directed toward men as a logical consequence of reason itself. This domain can be viewed in two ways: one that occurs in the form of an 'inner domain' that the subject directs over his own nature, from which, in an attempt to get rid of it, he looks for every possible way to repress. And on the other hand, the domain that is present in the various levels of society and culture through the objectification of man and his desires which results in domination. Horkheimer will state:

In the process of emancipation, man shares the fate of all the rest of the world. The domination of nature has dominion over men. Every subject must participate in the subjugation of nature, both human and extra-human [...] what is usually characterized as an end 'individual happiness, health and wealth- derives its significance solely on its ability to become functional.¹³

The dominance of reason over men becomes, then, the bond that determines its nature and essence. The human being is defined as spirit or thought, and its nature is abandoned and abstracted as a mere object of study for the reason. Thus, the domain finds its way to the bodies, and the reason that initially was intended to save humanity loses any consideration of the human-nature in the process. When there is no humanity that can be defined in terms of existence, but as mere cogitation, the man is lost in numbers and statistics, and the reason, unable to sustain the ideals that can emancipate him, eventually ends converting him in its object of domination.

Thus the domain in which the man seemed lord, becomes in fact the same ties under which the great mass of individuals are to be suppressed, erasing their individuality, and constraining their willingness of making pragmatic decisions. Governments and social systems that were born under the banner of equality and freedom, in order to emancipate man and create free individuals, soon became the same that dominate humanity. "The domain faces the singular individual as the universal, as the reason of reality [...] What happens to all because of a few is always true as subjugation of single individuals by many [...] It is this unity of collectivity and domination, and not the immediate social universality, solidarity, which settles in the forms of thought"¹⁴. Finally, the society that promised to man his individuality becomes the one that will understand equality as homogenization, always intolerant towards heterogeneity or social change. Likewise, it is society that understands the reason as making pragmatic decisions, or free will as choosing into a wide

¹² Horkheimer, Max. *Supra*, p. 175

¹³ *Idem*, p. 116.

¹⁴ Adorno, T. y Horkheimer, M. *Supra*, p. 76.

amount of always the same goods, which ultimately offer only the same thing: the ideal of a man always identical to itself and to the other men.

The 'self' of Enlightenment

The man who favors survival as the supreme value of his existence, not only reduces humanity to pure nature, but likewise reduces himself and reason to mere mechanism, thereby nullifying all that is sought to be protected, which was the 'self' of humanity. For the Enlightenment which sought to emancipate man from all subjection to nature, and to any metaphysical principle, it was essential the constitution of the subject as an identity on which to set the possibility of a free will, that was capable of judging the acts of every man. In this way reason planned to constitute an ethics based on the exercise of reason, instead of obedience and subjection of man to any foreign law, other than that of the 'self'. "The self, that after the methodical elimination of all natural sign as mythological should no longer be the body and blood, nor soul and neither natural, built sublimated into transcendental or logical subject, the reference point of reason, the legislation instance of the act"¹⁵. In this sense, the subject of the illustration is the touchstone of everything that was posed, should be emancipated. However, in its historical realization, Enlightenment soon experienced the contradictions of its own dynamics and again turned that 'self' in the subject of its own negation, through the progress of reason, turning subjectivity in nothing else but a 'self' posed to be universal and equal to every other 'self'. "The men have been given their own as their own, distinct from all others, for greater security so it becomes equal. But since that 'self' was never fully assimilated the Enlightenment always sympathized with the social coercion, even during the liberal period. The unity of the manipulated collectivity consist on the denial of every single individual; It is ludicrous to society that could really convert him in an individual"¹⁶.

As well as other things suffered from a reduction in the process of objectification of the world, in the same way, the subject was soon victim of the same procedure, quickly making the subjectivity of experience relativized, subordinating his objective value to science. In the same vein, the individual was reduced in value as a subject, and seen as part of the mass. The singular man becomes an object, at the expense of rational will. New ways of securing appear to lead individuals and turn them increasingly into mere operators of machinery for the industry. The reason that in other time was trying to save the 'self' by emancipating it, shows its obsolescence in the individual that loses his 'self' within the mass and returns to the natural barbarism from which initially sought to emancipate:

The more complicated and subtle is the social, economic and scientific apparatus, to whose production management system the body has been adapted, the more poor are the experiences that it is capable [...] Through mediation of the total society, which invades every relationship and every impulse, men are reduced back to that against which had become the law of development of society, the principle of self: a simple generic beings, equal to each other by isolation in the community directed coercively.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

It is clear here that the authors refer mainly to those advanced forms of overcrowding and conduct of masses found in the various totalitarianisms, but the same principle extends to every society that comes from the Enlightenment, while this process is the one which builds all known industrial system to this day. Finally, the non-subject of the masses, is the same that stuffs industries for an underpaid wage, or that of any bureaucracy that must press a single button till tiredness to justify his job. The only distance between these non-subjects is the degree of suffering and the different degree to which their will has been annulled by the social coercion. The distance between himself and the objects he is trying to dominate is the result of mere pragmatism:

The universal dominion over nature turns against the same thinking subject, from which it only remains this 'I think' eternally equal, that must accompany all my representations. Subject and object are, both canceled. The abstract 'self', the right to register and systematize, has nothing before him than the abstract material, which has no other property than being substrate for such possession. The equation of spirit and world finally dissolved, but only so that both terms are mutually reduced.¹⁸

In this sense, the inevitable result of the Enlightenment, as it has been conducted to this day, is the reversion to barbarism. The individual who defines his identity through his reason, is a being destined for extinction, while the evidence of barbarism are repeated in the culture of every day. "The 'self' completely caught by civilization, dissolves in an element of that inhumanity that civilization tried to escape from the beginning. The oldest fear is true: that of losing one's name"¹⁹. Cruelty, violence, and a wide range of expressions of man's primitive nature, are always on guard of this substrate 'self' while mere physical survival. "The effort to give substance to the 'self' is marked on it in all its stages, or the temptation of losing it has always been accompanied by blind decision to preserve it"²⁰. The man, thus reduced merely to survival, is torn between a constant contradiction between individual self-preservation and self-annihilation as a species, to which he can't subtract as natural-being, but from which he is deleted as reasoning 'self', which in turn reduces their rational capacities, subject of all the humiliations to which he is abandoned in the social process determined by instrumental rationality. Finally the contradiction that the Enlightenment has towards this 'self' is trying to emancipate is that:

Absolutely isolated individual has always been an illusion. The maximally valued personal qualities such as independence, freedom will, justice and sense of it, are both social and individual virtues [...] The emancipation of the individual is not an emancipation from society, but the liberation of society from atomization, atomization that can reach its climax during periods of collectivization and mass culture.²¹

In other words, there can't be no individual without society and no society without species or species without nature. Nature, society and individual are irreducible concepts, but also inseparable from each other. The process of the Enlightenment, as necessary, in its historical moment, must be overcome to an emancipation of reason to be present in the form of a reconciliation between those concepts. In this sense, there is no return to nature or to myth, as there can be no denial of the technique. Man cannot ignore its own historical process. Rather there should be a reworking of

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 84

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 86

²¹ Horkheime, Max, *Supra*, p. 148.

reason that allows the resurgence of the qualities of the man which at first the Enlightenment tried to emancipate.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor, *Minima Moralia*, Taurus. 2nd edition. Spain, 1999.

Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer, Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trotta. 4th Edition. Spain, 2001

Horkheimer, Max, *Critique of instrumental reason*, Trotta. 2nd edition. Spain, 2010