

The Idea of Tolerance and The Perspective of The Individual

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How is critical theory possible? – The question must have had an immediate urgency in the context in which Adorno was writing the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia*. The legitimacy of Max Horkheimer's distinction between critical theory and traditional theory and the social relevance of the interdisciplinary research programme at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* were radically at stake given World War II and the ongoing destruction of the European continent through fascism. Exiled in the United States, Adorno was facing the breakdown of civil society, the subjugating logic of industrial production, the rise of the consumer society, the solitude of the individual. The historical context has changed but late-capitalist production, individualism, and consumer society did not disappear.

How is critical theory possible? – the question still demands. The answer to this question that motivated Adorno to write the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia* is “the sphere of the individual”: in this sphere, he contends that “... critical theory lingers not only with a bad conscience” (“Dedication”).¹ In the individualist society, the historical meaning of the social and the inner conflicts of society are repressed, but they re-appear in the experience of the individual. Moreover, in an individualist society, the emancipatory power of contestation can only come from the individual. The aphorism is the form that imposes itself in order to take into account this condition of the individual. The negative is given with this form because the aphorism does not lead to synthesis. It refuses to be integrated with the dialectical unification of opposites. However, the aphorism is not sealed – it is not a hedgehog as in the case of Schlegel's Romantic idea of aphorism – it leads the individual beyond itself. It intends to reveal and express from the perspective of the individual the meaning of the social, the various relations of actual society to the individual, and how far disconnected they may be from a true sense of universality. There is no encompassing theory, no argument-based connections between definitions, no conclusions, but in each fragment, a new unique reflection on basic concepts of modernity and modern society arising from a minimal individual sensibility; – how does critical theory appear from this condition?

Tolerance is such a concept to which Adorno draws our attention in the aphorism “Mélange” (§ 66). It is a fundamental principle in a multicultural society. The idea of tolerance is based upon the argument that all people and all races are equal, but “it lays itself open to the easy refutation by the senses”.² Given the scientific evidence that Jews are not a race, the idea of tolerance does not alter the fact that in the event of a pogrom, it is the Jew who is intended to be killed. The “refutation” of the idea of tolerance is not limited to the factual event of genocide. As an abstract normative ideal, the idea of tolerance is complicit in supporting social mechanisms which neglect differences between individuals and stimulate convictions that not enough has been done to consider individuals as equal. In this way, the individual is subsumed under a standard of which they fall short. “To assure the black”, says Adorno (who is using here the N word in German), “that he is exactly like the white man, while he is obviously not, is secretly to wrong him still further.”³ From the perspective of the individual, the idea of tolerance

appears to be an instrument of adaptation to a given standard of norms. However, the aphorism that critically reveals this complicity between the idea of tolerance and the system of industrial capitalism cannot guarantee avoiding the risk of being unjust in its turn. Nor can the individual that opposes the normative ideals of the system: “stubborn enthusiasm for blacks gets along with outrage at Jewish uncouthness”.⁴

How then is critical theory possible? – The question is not resolved. The answer is not given once and for all. Yet the very act of addressing this question anew in the present context of political activism attests to the power of critical theory.

Notes

1 I slightly changed the English translation of *Minima Moralia* by E.F.N. Jephcott (London / New York, Verso, 2005) in accordance with the original text that I quote in the footnote. “In ihr [die Sphäre des Individuellen] verweilt die kritische Theorie nicht nur mit schlechtem Gewissen.”

2 “Es setzt sich der bequemen Widerlegung durch die Sinne aus, [...]”

3 “Attestiert man dem Neger, er sei genau wie der Weiße, während er es doch nicht ist, so tut man ihm insgeheim schon wieder Unrecht an.”

4 “mit der sturen Begeisterung für die Neger verträgt sich die Entrüstung über jüdische Unmanieren.”

Biography

Arthur Cools is professor in the philosophy department at the University of Antwerp. He teaches Contemporary Philosophy (continental tradition), Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics. He publishes in the field of critical theory, philosophy of literature, hermeneutics and contemporary French phenomenology. He is the author of *Langage et subjectivité. Vers une approche du différent entre Maurice Blanchot et Emmanuel Levinas* (2007) and has co-edited *Levinas and Literature. New Directions* (2021), *Kafka and the Universal* (2016), *Debating Levinas' Legacy* (2015), *Metaphors in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (2013), and *The Locus of Tragedy* (2008) amongst others.