

Nietzsche and Frankfurt School critical theory on the idea of domination

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The concept of domination and its affect on human history attracted attention of philosophers since antiquity. Enlightenment relieved the new aspect of domination which was not clearly visible in the earlier historical periods - domination through knowledge. Philosophers of different schools reacted to the new reality around them. This essay is focused on the thoughts of three outstanding thinkers - Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900), Theodor Adorno (1903 - 1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895 - 1973). Last two philosophers worked together closely for a long time and are known as the founders of *critical theory*. The aim of this essay is to compare the role of domination in the philosophy of Nietzsche and in the critical theory.

Idea of domination was one of the key themes for Nietzsche who insisted that the basic concepts - *good* and *bad* were consequences of power relations [1]:

The pathos of nobility, ... the lasting and domineering feeling ... of a higher ruling nature in relation to a lower type, to a "beneath" - that is the origin of the opposition between "good" and "bad."

He went beyond and stated that domination had played a critical role in the creation of a language itself [1]:

The right of the master to give names extends so far that we could permit ourselves to grasp the origin of language itself as an expression of the power of the rulers: they say "that is such and such"; they seal every object and event with a sound.

But "*masters*" are not the ultimate power. "*Slaves*" change the meaning of the words with the help of morals [1]:

The slave revolt in morality begins when the resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values ... all noble morality grows out of a triumphant affirmation of one's own self, slave morality from the start says "No" to what is "outside," "other," to "a not itself." And this "No" is its creative act.

These words help to understand Nietzsche's idea that western culture goes downhill since Socrates (469 - 399 BC) when people started to reflect instead of acting which Nietzsche considered to be wrong [2]. Nietzsche saw his time as a triumph of the weak over the strong. The weak use morality (which is crucial in our reflection practices) to dominate [3].

Horkheimer and Adorno came from the marxian tradition which is very different from the nietzschean one. But the idea of domination is one of the key concepts in the critical theory they developed. According to them, domination is in the core of our method of understanding since Enlightenment [4]:

Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital ... What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts.

And it leads to the degradation of a human being (both - masters and servants) [4]:

The servant is subjugated in body and soul, the master regresses. No system of domination has so far been able to escape this price.

In addition, the level of freedom is constantly decreasing in the society - (as Horkheimer and Adorno would probably say) if understanding itself is understood only as the power of manipulation then this concept of understanding is linked to a tyranny [5]. Horkheimer and Adorno saw this dangerous tendency and insisted that the domination had to be limited [4]:

Domination ... has had to limit itself. The instrument is becoming autonomous: independently of the will of the rulers.

Nietzsche and critical theory agree that civilization goes downhill. And improper use of the domination is the root cause of the degradation. Nietzsche thought that domination of the weak over the strong leads to inability for intensity to be demonstrated. Critical theory stated that domination of the organizations over the individual leads to the regression of a human being - we are loosing creative capabilities: 'Fantasy withers' [4].

Loosing of creativity in human worried all three thinkers. Nietzsche had a hope for the great man of the future who would save us. Horkheimer and Adorno saw the Nazis inspired by this idea in their own country. This can explain why they turned their eyes to the past believing that it contains the solution for the contemporary problems.

References

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2. Michael Roth. *From Struggle to Intensity, part 4*. Video lecture, 2013.
3. Michael Roth. *From Struggle to Intensity, part 5*. Video lecture, 2013.
4. Horkheimer and Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947)*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott.
5. Michael Roth. *From Critical Theory to Postmodernism, part 2*. Video lecture, 2013.