

# Dialectic of Enlightenment



**Dialectic of Enlightenment**

**Critical Theory and the Messianic Light**

**Jacob Klapwijk**

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## *Foreword by Lambert Zuidervaart*

The Dutch edition of Jacob Klapwijk's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appeared during a turbulent time.<sup>1</sup> Although student protests had subsided somewhat and the Vietnam War had ended, a deep sense of unease pervaded Europe. I moved there not long after Klapwijk's book was published, to work on my Adorno dissertation,<sup>2</sup> arriving in West Berlin on September 3, 1977, two days before the Red Army Faction (RAF) kidnapped German industrialist and former Nazi Hanns-Martin Schleyer. By mid-October Schleyer was dead, as were three imprisoned members of the RAF. This marked the end of "German Autumn" (Deutscher Herbst) and a turning point in radical resistance to the administrative state.

During the next three years in Berlin I witnessed firsthand struggles among the New Left to sort out the legacy of the Frankfurt School, even as students, professors, and state agencies vied for control of German universities. These struggles had counterparts in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Western Europe. Klapwijk's study of the Frankfurt School, whose members the European New Left often accused of elitism and resignation, had immediate social resonance and political relevance. Although his book did not receive much attention in Germany at the time, I found it illuminated deep tensions that not only pervaded critical theory but also expressed themselves in conflicts over the future of a democratic society.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dutch edition of Klapwijk's book entitled *Dialektiek der verlichting: Een verkenning in het neomarxisme van de Frankfurter Schule* was published in 1976 and 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Zuidervaart, *Refractions*. This book appeared in 1981 as a PhD diss. at the Free University, Amsterdam. Portions are incorporated into Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*.

Klapwijk's study appeared during a time of intellectual transition. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer had died soon after their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was republished, Adorno in 1969 and Horkheimer in 1973. Jürgen Habermas, their most prominent successor, spent most of the 1970s away from Frankfurt and outside a university setting, at the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg. Herbert Marcuse, whose passionate critique of late capitalist society made him a celebrated spokesperson for the New Left in North America, died in 1979. So too, Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Vollenhoven, the founders of the reformational philosophy that informs Klapwijk's book, died in 1977 and 1978, respectively. The 1970s were a time of intellectual transition as a new generation took up the projects left open by the founding figures in both critical theory and reformational philosophy. Klapwijk's book pointed toward new directions in both schools of thought.

The publication of an English translation three decades later holds more than simply historical interest, however. Klapwijk's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides a sympathetic, succinct, and critical introduction to leading figures and ideas of the Frankfurt School. It also demonstrates how reformational thinkers can learn from another school of thought while probing its limitations and lacunae. It provides a model of "transformational philosophy," as Klapwijk would describe it on the fiftieth anniversary of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven's founding what is now called the Association for Reformational Philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Implicitly Klapwijk structures his book around the dialectical tension or "ground motive" of nature and freedom, which Dooyeweerd considered central to modern Western thought and culture. According to Dooyeweerd, intellectual culture after the Renaissance and Reformation swings back and forth between commitments to our controlling nature through science and technology and to our pursuing human freedom as being exempt from such control.<sup>4</sup> Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse recognize the dead-end into which this dialectic of nature and freedom

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<sup>3</sup> Klapwijk, "Reformational Philosophy," 101-34. See also Klapwijk, "Antithesis, Synthesis," 138-52.

<sup>4</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots*. For a detailed analysis of how the nature/freedom ground motive gets articulated in modern philosophy, see Dooyeweerd, *New Critique*, vol. 1, 167-495.

has driven Western culture and society, Klapwijk says, but they cannot discover a satisfactory exit. Although Habermas's diagnosis seems less grim, he too, at least in the early writings Klapwijk discusses, finds no way out. For all of them, Klapwijk claims, enlightenment reason, which was supposed to promote and secure freedom in society, fails to deliver on its promises and turns into its opposite.

Yet Klapwijk recognizes the legitimacy of the Frankfurters' concern for human suffering, and he sympathizes with their criticisms of economic exploitation, political repression, and technological tunnel vision. Their problem, he says, is that they continue to expect reason to save us. Here, too, Klapwijk remains faithful to Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. Both of them rejected what Dooyeweerd called "the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought,"<sup>5</sup> arguing instead that all theoretical endeavors, indeed all rational activities, receive fundamental direction from outside themselves. More precisely, like all other human practices, theory and reason depend on religion—religion not as the organized practices and institutions of specific faith communities but rather as the spiritual direction in which all of life proceeds.

This is why Klapwijk concludes that the Frankfurters' dialectical construction of human history is at bottom an insufficiently clarified "expression of faith." Their critical theory, he says, has not been "sufficiently critical" to perceive that it "depends on an attitude of faith and ultimate commitment." Rather, "theoretical reason becomes a force all on its own, and faith in the dialectic becomes a self-sufficient dogma. And in fact ... the dogma begins to show mythical traits." For his own part, Klapwijk chooses instead for what he calls a "personal faith," one that follows "the messianic light." In acknowledging an "exterritorial" basis for human existence, such a faith enables those that follow this light to "remain faithful to the earth," avoiding both presumption and despair "in the midst of bruised and damaged life."

There Klapwijk's introduction to critical theory ends. As I am sure he would acknowledge, however, this is really just a beginning. One would like to know whether his critique remains

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<sup>5</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*. See also Vollenhoven, *Calvinism*, section 1.

pertinent to later developments in critical theory, especially after Habermas completed his “communicative turn.”<sup>6</sup> One would also like to learn what difference following the messianic light would make for a critique of contemporary society that matches the Frankfurt School’s contributions in radicality and scope.<sup>7</sup> But these matters would require a different project, one for which Klapwijk’s study prepares the way. His study demonstrates a deep continuity among Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and the early Habermas, amid their differences. Klapwijk indicates how this continuity is a source of both strengths and weaknesses. The challenge for his readers is to reach their own assessments about the Frankfurt School’s provocative and penetrating account of the dialectic of enlightenment.

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<sup>6</sup> The seminal work in this regard is Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*.

<sup>7</sup> Proposals along these lines can be found in Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy*, which pursues a “critical retrieval” of Adorno’s insights in the light of Habermasian criticisms.

## *Preface to the English Edition*

In the course of history, reason has always been experienced as a special gift of heaven to humankind. Reason liberated people from threats and evils, it lightened the heavy yoke of nature, and it gave individuals grip on their own situation. Moreover, in favored times, it elicited moments of political freedom, justice, and personal self-determination. In the modern era the fathers of the Enlightenment even presented reason as the unshakable foundation of freedom in politics and society.

But wasn't this Enlightenment claim an untenable position? Can reason be elevated as the ultimate beacon of hope for the modern world? Did reason not lose its innocence during two world wars and under dictatorial regimes that caused unimaginable violence and suffering? Did it not afterwards, under the flag of technological progress and rational expansion, produce new systems of political control, economic exploitation, and blind repression? These were the questions that Horkheimer and Adorno and the other members of the Frankfurt School confronted us with and that I analyzed in the Dutch version of this book in the 1970s.

In our century things have changed considerably. The cold war has been ended. The world has opened itself to commerce and communication. Old and new economic mega-powers plan their technological and administrative strategies on a world-wide scale. The question arises: Is enlightenment reason rediscovering its pathway to the future in terms of increasing freedom, dignity, and justice for all the inhabitants on earth? Prospects like these are contradicted by the facts. Technological domination, mass manipulation, worldwide poverty, environmental

degradation, widespread terrorism, and financial crises testify to the same societal paradox as the Frankfurt theorists analyzed decades ago. A regime is operative that in spite of its rational aims elicits contrary results.

Here is the fate of our time. Reason is idolized as the ultimate compass for the future but it fails to enhance freedom and generates effects that threaten all life on earth. Critical awareness about these self-destructive tendencies is rare. Experts combat the failures of reason with more reason and without recognizing its paralyzing results. What we need at the moment is a new critical vision, the need for a light—the Frankfurt theorists named it “messianic light”—that is shining from outside on a system that has discredited itself.

Thus I welcome the initiative of Wipf and Stock to publish this English edition, making a wider readership acquainted with the challenges of the Frankfurt School and its critical theory. I express my heartfelt thanks to Colin Yallop and Ineke Yallop-Bergsma, who, thirty years ago, translated the original manuscript with great care. At that time unforeseen circumstances hindered its publication. For now, we adapted a few expressions and statements to the present situation, but the main text has not been changed. We also updated several footnotes. A bibliography has been included. Last but not least, Lambert Zuidervaart, an expert on the Frankfurt School and particularly on Adorno, has kindly contributed an instructive foreword which will help readers to gain a better understanding of the author’s position.

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