

Feminism and Images of Autonomy

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It is by now widely accepted that feminist politics has meant the expansion of our understanding of the nature of the political. Feminism's powerful critique of the oppressive character of traditionally structured relations between the sexes is seen to have added new depth and meaning to the slogan 'the personal is political'. Yet, in sharp contrast to the heyday of radical feminism which enthusiastically endorsed an uncompromising politicisation of personal life, we have in recent times seen a growing disquiet in some feminist circles about the proper limits of this undertaking. In particular, the early image of the liberated life which tended to counterpose freedom and dependence as irreconcilable values has come in for some much needed interrogation by Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and Jessica Benjamin amongst others.

This early sense of the antipathy between the free and the dependent life is perhaps most forcefully expressed in Shulamith Firestone's path-breaking *The Dialectic of Sex*. Following a vibrant critique of various dimensions of women's experience of oppression in modern society, Firestone's closing chapter proposes the broad outlines of an image of a feminist utopia. In retrospect, Firestone's portrait of 'cybernetic communism' appears somewhat disturbing. Her projected utopia describes a society in which the particularity of all intimate relations, all coupling and even the act of childbirth have been rendered redundant. Firestone looks forward to a society in which:

... instead of developing close ties with a decreed mother and father, the child might now form those ties with people of his own choosing of whatever age or sex ... children would not be monopolised but would mingle freely throughout the society to the benefit of all.¹

Firestone proposes an image of the emancipated life in which freedom is seen as a matter of the essentially isolated individual's capacity to enter into a series of arbitrarily chosen, merely transitory relations with others.

This early ideal of the liberated life has been tellingly evaluated by Jessica Benjamin in an important essay on contemporary feminist politics titled 'Shame and Sexual Politics'.² Benjamin holds that, to the extent that it describes freedom and personal dependency as exclusive needs, feminism's image of autonomy can only mean the resurfacing of a Jacobin terrorisation of the self and others. Benjamin is concerned not so much with the question of the viability of this image of autonomy but focuses, rather, on the issue of its human cost. She says:

Both the assertion of women's absolute autonomy and the shame at disclosing dependency threaten me with the feeling that once again a political movement will deny the initial thing that makes life worth living: that sense of

safety, of bodily intimacy and security, of familial and community cohesion which many have experienced as the price of revolution.³

With Benjamin and others, I suggest that we need to take another look at the legacy of a radical feminist understanding of the politics of personal life. It should, perhaps, be conceded here that the radical feminist insistence on the necessity for the constant surveillance of our patterns of dependent relations did offer a strategically important impetus to the early women's movement. Yet, to the extent that it constructs an image of autonomy pinned on a conception of freedom and dependence as exclusive needs, feminism still represents a very incomplete, merely negative political consciousness. Now that feminism is acknowledged as an established, albeit besieged, political presence, it needs to reconstruct its one-sidedly negative understanding of freedom as a freedom from the oppressive familial ties which mark a subordinated femininity. Contemporary feminism has now the opportunity and the task of developing an image of the emancipated life which strives to marry or mediate freedom and dependence as two reconcilable needs. I am not, therefore, advocating the road taken by the later Friedan in *The Second Stage* and Germaine Greer in *Sex and Destiny*. Though sympathetic to their critique of the legacy of a radical feminist understanding of the politics of personal life, I do not see the mere reassertion of select traditional patterns of familial and community ties as appropriate to the needs of the more mature feminist movement. We can, I suggest, sustain the radicalism of early feminist attempts to interrogate the impact of traditional gender relations without upholding the individualistic understanding of freedom which typically underpinned their conceptions of the emancipated life.



In the following paper I investigate some of the problems and possibilities which surround an attempt to construct an image of autonomy which mediates rather than counterposes freedom and dependence. I turn first to an assessment of Benjamin's proposals for overcoming a conception of the necessary antagonism between these two elementary values. Benjamin appears as one of the few modern feminist thinkers to insist on the necessity and possibility of reconstructing an image of the emancipated life which embraces our felt needs both for free, self-determining action and for intimate interpersonal ties. She formulates her proposals for the mediation of these two sets of needs as a direct response to Horkheimer's analysis of the dynamics of modern family life. So I begin with a brief discussion of the early Horkheimer's appraisal of the relations between the family and civil society.

PART ONE: JESSICA BENJAMIN ON BRIDGING THE FREEDOM/DEPENDENCE GAP

The main propositions of Horkheimer's sociology of the family are now rather well-known, thanks to their popularisation by Christopher Lasch. Horkheimer, to briefly summarise, proposes a definite productive and progressive dimension to family life in early bourgeois society. The progressive dimension of early bourgeois life is said to appear in two major aspects. The respect and reverence commanded by the father as authority figure in a tightly structured domestic life meant, on the one hand, that the male child learnt thoroughly the respectful obedience to duty required of him by bourgeois society. In this sense the family did what the market place was unable to do: it rationalised the irrationality of power.

The family became an agency for society; it shaped the human beings in such a manner that they became capable of the tasks which the social system demanded of them.⁴

Yet, despite this performance of a vital legitimating function, the family as the site of the boy's internalisation of the father's demands is conceded a fundamentally emancipatory aspect. His internalisation of the father's demands means that the male child assumes fully notions of individual responsibility and inner discipline thereby learning an attitude of independence. Horkheimer argues that the internalisation of familial demands in the early bourgeois family contributed to the formation of a strong ego capable of independence of thought and action. Horkheimer is not blind to the oppressed character of the role performed by women in the early bourgeois family. He admits that woman's submission to the authority of the patriarchal father/husband and her exclusion from a societal life managed by men can only mean the severe truncation of her own human development. Yet even in the mother's self-sacrificing devotion to her family Horkheimer contrives to find an emancipatory aspect. In sharp contrast to the calculating instrumental relations of the market place, the bourgeois family remained a haven of unconditional solidarity and trusting intimacy. Horkheimer comments:

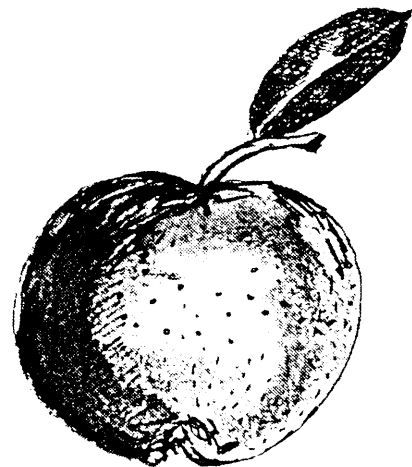
... common concerns took a positive form in sexual love and especially in maternal care. The growth and happiness of the other are willed in such unions. A felt opposition therefore arises between them and a hostile reality outside. To this extent, the family not only educates for authority in bourgeois society; it also cultivates the dreams of a better condition for mankind.⁵

According to Horkheimer, the collapse of the family as a dominant social institution has meant the almost total evaporation of the progressive, critical dimension of family life. The weakness

of the father now evident in monopoly capitalism causes the child to seek protection in the authority of such collective powers as: '... the class in school, the team in sports, the club and finally the state'.⁶ The assumption of individual responsibility and the attitude of independence derived from the internalisation of the father's authority is lost. A casualty also of the contemporary crisis in the family and the impending emancipation of women is the demise of the tender supportive relations with others preserved in family life. What threatens is: '... a regression due to atomisation and dissociation'.⁷ Significantly, however, Horkheimer does remark that while the tenderness and intimacy of love relations has certainly shrivelled in the modern family, bourgeois family life still remains the only place where such relationships can survive at all.

Jessica Benjamin's evaluation of this description of the progressive aspects of the bourgeois family appears in two separate essays. 'Authority and the Family Revisited: or a World Without Fathers?' appraises Horkheimer's model of the construction of the independent personality via the internalisation of the father's demands. A later piece called 'Shame and Sexual Politics' evaluates the assertion that a nurturant maternal love stands as an historical trace of the possibility of non-reifying relations with others. While she finds wholly unacceptable the former aspect of Horkheimer's assessment of the progressive potentialities of the bourgeois family, Benjamin is prepared to accommodate aspects of the second thesis into her own explicitly feminist standpoint.

Benjamin constantly repudiates Horkheimer's efforts to extract a progressive dimension from the boy's strong identificatory attachment to the patriarchal head of the household. Yet her critique does not simply revolve around Horkheimer's almost total unconcern with the unequal gender politics of the situation he upholds. Benjamin highlights, rather, what she takes to be the inadequate image of freedom which underpins Horkheimer's analysis. To her, Horkheimer's attempt to link the identification with the strong father to the construction of an independent ego promotes the '... undialectical and individualistic proposition that freedom consists in isolation'.⁸ Because Horkheimer sees freedom as a matter of the assumption of individual responsibility by an independent social actor, his picture of the emancipated life necessarily omits our elementary needs for solidarity and community with others. Benjamin argues that Horkheimer's internalisation model, which is based on the assumption that the denial of the need for the other is the route to the liberated, self-directing life in the end only merely reiterates the freedom/dependence anti-nomy which she identifies as such a disturbing feature of discussions within contemporary feminism.



In partial defence of Horkheimer it must, however, be said here that his more elaborated analyses from this early period on the historical construction of individuality as an ideal make clear that he by no means uncritically upholds the bourgeois ideal of the isolated self-sufficient social actor as a measure of authentic individuality.⁹ To him, genuine individuality is possible only in a social context which facilitates the free and equal participation by individuals in the practical determination of the character of their human environment. In terms of this wider perspective in which authentic freedom appears as a description of an ideal social life, Horkheimer's insistence on the necessity for a strong ego capable of assuming ethical responsibility, appears as an articulation of the merely negative conditions for the possibility of free action. A social life peopled by insecure, fearful individuals will inevitably provoke a turn to either the seeming reassurance of entrenched tradition or the safety of group conformism. To this extent, I suggest that feminism, itself a protest at the unfreedom of unexamined tradition, can have no real argument with Horkheimer's general standpoint here. Yet, as Benjamin rightly points out, feminism clearly does need to take issue with the patriarchal character of Horkheimer's account of the construction of the strong ego in bourgeois family life.

Benjamin finds Horkheimer's analysis of the progressive dimension of the maternal bond more palatable to a feminist perspective, although even here his description is seen to need some major reconstruction. On Horkheimer's account, a nurturant mother-bond which promises forgiveness and solidarity is counterposed to a father-identification which insists on self-responsible ethical individuality. To Benjamin, however, maternal love is capable of both forgiving solidarity and the encouragement of a self-reliant individuality. Far from being hostile to the other's assumption of independent subjectivity, maternal love is, Benjamin maintains, fully suited to the respectful recognition of the other's right to individuality. Feminism, she concludes, must discover freedom beyond rather than in opposition to this bond of maternal love. This proposal for a feminist reconstruction of Horkheimer's characterisation of the progressive aspect of bourgeois family life rests on a single vital move. By asserting the capacity of maternal love to supply an encouragement to individuation as well as a supportive love, Benjamin hopes to overcome both the patriarchal bias of Horkheimer's standpoint and the supposed antinomy between freedom, seen as the independence of the self-sufficient actor in civil society, and dependent relations with others in which a self-effacing mother love plays a pivotal role. With Benjamin, a libertarian mother-bond invests relations in the modern household with a supportive dependence mediated by a respect for and encouragement of the autonomy of the other.

There are, it seems to me, a number of things wrong with this attempt to overcome the freedom/dependence gap in radical feminist thought via a feminist appropriation of Horkheimer's sociology of the family. In the first place, Benjamin's supposition of the liberating potential of an enlightened mother-love does not provide the mediated conception of freedom and dependence it promises. There are two important considerations here. Benjamin's commentary on the individuating capacity of maternal love is not, as it claims, the feminist complement of Horkheimer's discussion of the individuating function of the boy's internalisation of the father's demands. Horkheimer's analysis represents an attempt to establish the mechanisms within bourgeois life which serve to construct a strong ego capable of independent action in public life. Benjamin, on the other hand, describes a maternal love which permits expression of an already constituted independent personality. The distinction here is substantive. Whereas Horkheimer had investigated the construction of the autonomous personality in bourgeois society as a problem, Benjamin's account of a

maternal love which respects the individuality of the other merely assumes the possibility of authentic individuality in bourgeois society. Benjamin's libertarian mother figure has the merely negative virtue of not actively thwarting an assumed capacity for independent self-definition. In Horkheimer, by contrast, the boy's identification with the bourgeois patriarch functions as a mechanism with the supposed capacity of engendering a disposition towards independence of thought and action.

Furthermore, Benjamin's appeal to a nurturant, albeit enlightened, maternal love in the end only repeats the terms of the antinomy it hopes to mediate. She calls upon a merely traditional, unnegotiated relationship in her efforts to show the possibility of effecting a reconciliation between freedom and dependence. Because Benjamin is, somewhat curiously, concerned with the supportive mother-bond only in terms of its impact on the other (the mother appears as the facilitator of the other's freedom) she necessarily continues to operate with an antinomial conception of the relation between freedom and dependence. Ultimately, Benjamin offers only an account of the compatibility between a supportive mother love and a liberating encouragement to individuation.

It seems that Benjamin's efforts to reappraise early radical feminist images of the liberated life do not in fact depart from any of its basic presuppositions. The early conception of a fundamental dichotomy between freedom, seen as the egoistic activity of the individual in civil society, and dependence, seen as a matter of traditional familial and community ties, remains. All that has changed is the preparedness to recognise the supposed compatibility between some traditional patterns of kin relations and an egoistic individuality. I suggest, however, that rather than simply challenging the, mostly well-placed, radicalism of the early feminist critique of tradition bound familial relations, contemporary feminism needs to attempt a far more thorough-going reconstruction of the one-sidedly negative conception of freedom employed by radical feminism. It is this negative conception of freedom, according to which the emancipated life appears as a mere matter of the absence of constraining, inhibiting relations which needs to be fundamentally rethought.

As indicated earlier, a negative conception of freedom was perhaps particularly suited to the strategic efforts of the early Women's Liberation Movement to have the urgency of its protest recorded. Today, however, when the more established movement is increasingly called upon to offer a positive feminist contribution to humanist discussions of the meaning of 'the good life', a merely negative image of freedom can only appear irrelevant and obstructive. Abstracted from its initial merely critical, strategic role and placed in the centre of discussions over the content of the emancipated existence, the early feminist understanding of freedom as the mere absence of constraining relations with others necessarily appears as a hollow disavowal of our profoundly felt needs for solidarity and community. Unlike Benjamin, then, I suggest the attempt to overcome the freedom/dependence split typical of feminist images of the liberated life requires nothing less than a fundamental reconceptualisation of the idea of freedom inherited from a tradition of radical feminist thought.

PART TWO: FEMINISM AND THE GOOD LIFE

Contemporary feminist theory has not, it is true, entirely neglected a critical evaluation of the conception of freedom employed by radical feminism. On the contrary, there has been much critical discussion within feminist philosophy of the so-called masculinist bias of the image of autonomy which has dominated feminist politics ever since de Beauvoir and her radical feminist interpreters. In essence, this critique holds that feminist politics



has mistakenly adopted an image of autonomy which has uncritically absorbed the formulations of the historical Enlightenment. Contemporary feminist philosophers point out that this image of the autonomy of the free, rational intellect has typically been formulated in terms of the domination of a masterful masculinity over a submissive, natural femininity. Given that this Enlightenment construction of freedom as the autonomy of the rational ego is said to entail a repressive gender politics, it appears fundamentally inappropriate to the formulation of the emancipatory hopes of the feminist movement.

Yet what is for the most part left unsaid is that the logic of domination discovered in the Enlightenment image of freedom represents a deformation of its origins in an essentially emancipatory, humanistic project. As Cassirer points out in his classic treatise *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, eighteenth-century thought was, in part, distinguished by its commitment to an understanding of the practical import of human reason. It held that: 'Man is not simply subject to the necessity of nature; he can and should style his own destiny as a free agent and bring out his destined and proper future.'¹⁰ It is this humanistic undertaking which the early Horkheimer draws upon in his efforts to construct an understanding of freedom as a description of a quality of social life itself. As already indicated, the early Horkheimer understands by authentic individuality not any mere absence of constraints but rather a practical capacity of each individual to, in concert with others, participate in the effective determination of the character of the good life. This humanist project in which Enlightenment thinking had its roots becomes blocked, however, when an instrumental reason, which recognises only the logic of domination, is released from its erstwhile status as mere means and elevated to the status of end or goal. In this case the image of freedom ceases to appear as a description of a quality of social existence and is replaced by an image of freedom as the critical consciousness of an abstract rationality.

It is this deformed image of freedom which has properly been the object of critique from modern feminist philosophers. Yet we

should not, I suggest, conclude thereby that contemporary feminism finds its natural theoretical allies in all those post-modern repudiations of the humanistic project of the historical Enlightenment. On the contrary, the needs of contemporary feminism suggest the specific appropriateness of an alliance with those efforts within modern critical theory to redeem the humanistic spirit of the Enlightenment project. I am thinking here particularly of such figures as the early Frankfurt School theorists and, more recently, Habermas. Contemporary feminism can, I suggest, most appropriately respond to its own emerging critique of a negative conception of freedom as the critical consciousness of a rational intellect by joining in with the efforts of a humanistic tradition in social theory to reconstruct an image of freedom as a quality of a humanising social existence.

In the present context it is not possible to sketch in any detail the kinds of alliances which might be effected between feminist theory and a tradition of critical social theory concerned to preserve the humanist spirit of Enlightenment thinking. In the remainder of the paper I propose only a brief discussion of how such a turn in its theoretical allegiance might promote a radical reconstruction in the terms in which the whole issue of the freedom/dependence relation has been formulated within feminist theory.

Up till now, feminist theory has typically encountered the issue of the relationship between freedom and dependence in merely naturalistic terms. Benjamin, for example, implicitly represents the need for the security of intimate kin relations and the aspiration towards individual autonomy as mere brute facts of human existence. The whole discussion is dogged by the absence of any recognition of the cultural and historical mediation of these demands and hopes: feminist debate typically centres not on the interpretation of felt needs but focuses only on the issue of their compatibility. The legitimating effect of this naturalistic construction of elementary human needs is particularly evident in Benjamin's formulation of the freedom/dependence relation. Because the need for solidarity and dependence appears for her a mere fact unmediated by any cultural experience, she unproblematically affirms the fixture of such needs in modern bourgeois life on a compassionate, self-denying 'natural' mother-love. Again, Benjamin's discussion of the character of individual freedom naturalises the bourgeois ideal of the self-sufficient ego buoyed up in its self-love by an unconditional mother-love.

This naturalisation of needs, which seemingly runs throughout feminist discussions of this issue, is, I suggest, the root cause of the manifest impasse reached in the debate. As long as freedom is understood as the negative aspiration of the self-sufficient ego and while the need for community continues to be interpreted as the flight of the embattled self into the security of a compassionate long-suffering love, then the patriarchal present clearly offers the best arrangement for coping with our 'elementary' needs. Ultimately, it would appear that the abdication by feminist theory from the task of proposing a critical perspective on the authenticity of our felt needs and demands means that it necessarily remains locked into a legitimization of present social relations as offering the most appropriate management of the needs spawned by it.

This proposal for undertaking a critical self-understanding of the character of our needs which is so vitally missing from feminist discussion is, nevertheless, powerfully elaborated within a broader tradition of critical social theory. This critical perspective on existing formulations of our elementary needs is, I suggest, provoked by those various attempts to establish the centrality of human community to any authentic or meaningful construction of the freedom of the individual. Within the early Frankfurt School, for example, an authentic individuality appears as a quality of an

ideal social life in which each individual has the practical capacity to effectively participate in the conscious determination of the character of their social environment. Again, Arendt makes community central to her positive understanding of freedom as the disclosure of each unique individuality through action.

From the vantage point of a positive account of freedom as a quality of social community which facilitates the free and equal participation by individuals in the practical determination of their social environment, we can get some perspective on the merely abstract character of a negative image of freedom understood as liberation from hardship and oppression. On this basis Horkheimer, for instance, suggests that a conception of individual freedom seen as the egoistic, self-directed activity of the isolated individual is at bottom only a portrait of an impotent will forever vulnerable to the real power of entrenched social norms which confront him/her as mere brute, objective facts. Importantly, Horkheimer's investigation into the authenticity of existing merely negative formulations of the demand for freedom in no way requires the denial of our felt needs. It proposes, rather, a critical self-understanding of their hidden radicalism. Because feminism typically naturalises present formulations of the demand for freedom, which is seen as the demand for the liberty of the egoistic, self-directed individual, its standpoint remains in essential conformity with the ideology of the status quo. With Horkheimer, by contrast, we arrive at an understanding of the radical consequences of the pursuit of individuality, a demand whose authentic realisation requires nothing less than a full reconstruction of the character of social life itself. More on the limits of this 'old' socialist 'solution' later.

We can, moreover, attempt to extract from the various formulations of freedom as the ideal of humanising community the main lines of a critical self-understanding of our presently constituted needs for dependence and community. I am, of course, not arguing here that our profoundly felt need for the protective embrace of compassionate private love relations can or even should be made to evaporate as mere cultural chimera. My point is only that, as long as feminism remains a party to a naturalisation of culturally mediated demands for the security and protection of privatised love relations, it necessarily remains locked into an endorsement of the, typically unfulfilled, promise of present gender relations.

Against this naturalisation of the need for community as a demand for the security of privatised love, I propose that, with Hannah Arendt and others, we attempt to understand this need as a very intelligible cultural fact. Arendt, for example, disputes the Rousseauian interpretation of the contemporary demand for the security of privatised love relations as the mere outgrowth of an instinctual compassion for the suffering of others. To her, this demand is the wholly understandable response of persecuted and enslaved groupings in the face of their oppression. According to Arendt, this kind of solidarity based on 'mere' sympathy and compassion actually becomes inevitable 'when the times become so extremely dark for certain groups of people that it is no longer up to them, their insight or choice to withdraw from the world. Humanity in the form of fraternity invariably appears historically among persecuted people and enslaved groups.'¹¹

Herself a militant Jewess, Arendt's interpretation of the demand for privatised love as a kind of protective defence in 'dark times' does not, of course, suggest a failure to recognise the profundity of such needs. We are not even committed here to the supposition that the need for this non-selective compassionate love could or should be totally supplanted given a utopian release from 'dark times'. It is, rather, the legitimating effect of a naturalistic identification of a specific management of human needs for community and solidarity with a generic instinct which

is up for question. The absence of 'insight or choice' in the elaboration of our needs for community ought to be particularly targeted by feminism. Given a positive understanding of freedom as a quality of human community, which makes the character of social life a matter of effective negotiation amongst all individuals, perhaps the intimacy of private love relations could become the proper object of choice rather than the only seeming defence available to individuals in a heartless world. If freedom appears as a characterisation of human community which fosters the full development of the individual's natural and acquired powers, then the love relations of private life could come to be embraced as a vital aspect of the individual's self-development.

So what's new? Thus far we have, it seems, only invoked the 'old' socialist criticism of all 'bourgeois reformism'. What we need, so it goes, is a socialist revolution to dissolve all those bitter experiences and nagging dilemmas of the present. And yet to confront those pressing problems with the mere abstract promise of a socialist feminist utopia is manifestly to risk alienating or suppressing that very critical, dissatisfied consciousness necessary to its realisation. The seeming irrelevance of the ideal of a fully humanised social life to the needs and discontents of the present is, however, only apparent. There is, after all, an inescapable utopian aspect, a positing of alternative possibilities, in the constitution of any critical consciousness. I suggest that feminist theory has, for the most part, not sufficiently appraised the character of the ideals it has assumed in the construction of its critique of the present. If we fail to submit a merely negative, liberal ideal of freedom to any significant analysis, we remain stuck fast on the horns of a seemingly inescapable bifurcation between freedom and dependence. To invoke a socialist utopia, in which freedom appears as a quality of social community which fosters the free and equal participation by all individuals in the practical determination of their social environment, is not, then, to simply offer the cold comfort of pie-in-the-sky solutions to immediate problems. It is, rather, a proposal which allows for the extension of the range of our critical consciousness. Without surrendering the power of the early radical feminist critique of traditional forms of interpersonal relations, we should, I suggest, begin to elaborate a critique of the image of autonomy adopted by it.

NOTES

1. Firestone, S., *The Dialectic of Sex*, Jonathan Cape, 1971.
2. See Benjamin, J., 'Shame and Sexual Politics', *New German Critique* No. 27, 1983.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
4. Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T. W., 'The Family', in *Aspects of Sociology*, Heinemann, 1973, p. 136.
5. Horkheimer, M., 'Authority and the Family', in *Critical Theory*, Seabury Press, New York, p. 114.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
7. Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T. W., *op. cit.*, p. 139.
8. Benjamin, J., 'Authority and the Family Revisited; or, A World Without Fathers?', *New German Critique* 13, 1977.
9. See Horkheimer, M., 'Rise and Decline of the Individual' in *Eclipse of Reason*, The Seabury Press, 1974.
10. Cassirer, E., *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Beacon Press, 1955, p. 9.
11. Arendt, H., 'On Humanity in Dark Times' in *Men in Dark Times*, Pelican, 1973, p. 20.