

# *Trump and the eclipse of reason*

---

Trump and the eclipse of reason

By Charles McKelvey

May 27, 2020

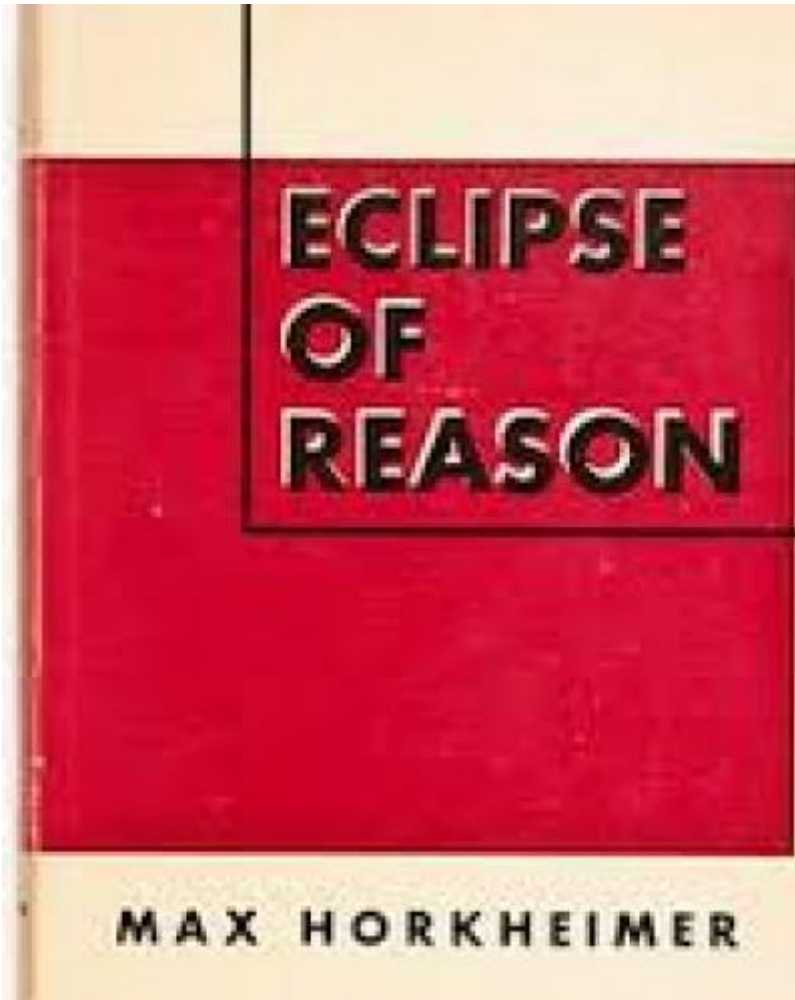
Max Horkheimer was a prominent critical Marxist theorist, of the so-called Frankfurt School, who was compelled by the Nazi rise to power to leave Germany in 1933. He and his colleagues of the Institute for Social Research were relocated to Columbia University in New York City in 1934, returning to Frankfurt in 1949.

In *Eclipse of Reason*, published in 1947 and based on a series of public lectures presented at Columbia University in 1944, Max Horkheimer maintained that ancient Greek philosophy and the European Enlightenment had upheld that reason could determine what human ends and goals ought to be. However, the Enlightenment, in critiquing Christianity, undermined this philosophical affirmation of human reason. The Enlightenment maintained that the claims of religion cannot be verified through the scientific method of empirical observation, and thus they cannot

be shown to be valid or right. However, Horkheimer argues, this critique of religion came to be applied to philosophy itself. There emerged the idea that human ends and goals cannot be determined through reasoning, because they cannot be empirically verified. Reason was thus reduced to finding the means to a predetermined end; the ends themselves cannot be verified. The power of reason was eclipsed.

Fascism, Horkheimer maintained, is the culmination of the eclipse of reason. Inasmuch as Enlightenment ideals such as freedom or democracy cannot be verified, there is no basis for demonstrating that democracy is more reasonable than fascism. Fascism is the culmination of the Enlightenment, in that philosophy's incapacity to demonstrate that fascism is wrong is rooted in Enlightenment epistemological assumptions.

The philosophical question of Horkheimer would later become a cultural dilemma, provoked by international events, such as the African anti-colonial struggle. By the 1950s and 1960s, the sensitive observer of the international scene was able to discern that the African nationalist movement defined its reality as a "colonial situation," while Europe was moving toward a great denial, in which it would overlook the significance of colonial domination in shaping global inequalities. Truth seemed to depend on one's vantage point as colonizer or colonized.



At the same time, in the universities, the social sciences and humanities arrived to understand that value commitments, preferences, and presuppositions unavoidably influence analyses and interpretations of texts; and that truths are not universal, but partial and plural.

Most academics in the North were content to live in a world of plural truths. It was a sign of sophistication that fit comfortably in an academic world of scholars from all fields that included a smattering of persons from the cultures of Asia and Africa. But in the real world beyond academia, there is a need to know. When the academics let the relativist implications of their academic work stand, without raising further epistemological questions, they retreated from their obligation to the people, leaving their human needs unattended.

The people, abandoned by the intellectuals, looked for certainty, but without guidance, and they found it in places far removed from knowledge. As occurred in Horkheimer's time, unexplored and unresolved epistemological issues functioned to give space to the most reactionary forms of thinking, sanctioning exclusion, inequality, and aggression. In Horkheimer's time as in ours, apparently progressive epistemological assumptions culminated in the most reactionary forms of thinking and action.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Jesuit theologian and philosopher Bernard Lonergan undertook the formulation of a cognitional theory that completed the unfinished epistemological task of the time. His cognitional theory, largely ignored beyond Jesuit circles, explains practical concrete steps that we humans can take, if we truly have a desire to understand, in order to arrive to a universal understanding of issues that pertain to the true and the right. Although we begin the quest for understanding with a partial formulation that is informed by our social context, if we are driven by a desire to know, and if we seek personal encounter with persons of other horizons, we are able to discover questions that are relevant to the issue at hand, questions that we did not know to ask when our understanding was confined to our own social context. If we address these questions, we arrive to an understanding that takes us beyond the partial understanding with which we began.

I studied Lonergan's cognitional theory after I had previously encountered black nationalist theory at the Center for Inner City Studies in Chicago in the early 1970s, where I had learned a black perspective on global affairs, which centered on colonial analysis; a perspective that was fundamentally different from white historical and social scientific perspectives, which were trapped in colonial denial. I could see that the experience had led me to discover and address questions that previously had been beyond my horizon, and this experience of cross-horizon encounter had transformed my understanding.

The further application of Lonergan's cognitional theory, beyond the critique by black scholars of European colonialism, does not require a great leap. The power of the black nationalist critique was due to its connection to a social movement constituted by an oppressed sector of the society, in this case the black movement in the United States, which, particularly in its black nationalist tendency, also was connected to the anti-colonial struggle in Africa. Adapting Lonergan's cognitional theory to a global social context defined by various manifestations of colonial domination and anti-colonial movements, we can see that the key to understanding is personal encounter with the utterances, speeches and writings of the leaders and intellectuals of anti-colonial and anti-neocolonial movements of the Third World plus China, with a desire to understand questions relevant to the issues at hand. Such an intellectual journey of discovering and addressing relevant questions by a person of Europe leads to an understanding that takes one beyond the European colonial denial.

Thus, we have the key to the political and intellectual work that should have been done with respect to the peoples of the North in recent decades, but was not undertaken. Armed by an understanding of understanding, intellectuals and activists should have led the people to an understanding of a host of questions relevant to the sustained and multi-faceted crisis of the world-system, which are understood by the leaders and intellectuals of the Third World plus China. These include, among others: the sources of the sustained structural crisis of the world-system; the reasons for the development of the North and the

underdevelopment of the South; the factors in the spectacular economic ascent of the USA and in its recent relative decline; and the alternative world-system that the neocolonized peoples not only want to construct, but are struggling in practice to confront. This last is especially important for the peoples of the North, because it is the basis for hope in the future of humanity.

Having not done this, we have left the people without consciousness of the road to understanding the true and the right. We have left them vulnerable to the reactionary forces that prey on their need to feel secure in an insecure world. We have left them without the power of reason, and without the capacity to recognize self-serving politicians whose method is the lie and the manipulation. We have left them vulnerable to the rhetorical strategies of a Donald Trump.

We should have taught our people that there is universal truth, but it cannot be a European universalism, nor can it be imposed; that there never is certainty, but there is the high probability of being correct in the context of an evolving knowledge seeking universality. And on this foundation of knowledge, there can and ought to be conviction and social action in defense of the human creation of a just, democratic, and sustainable world.

At this historic moment, we do not have the right to say that it is too late.

---

<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/especiales/comentarios/223924-trump-and-the-eclipse-of-reason>



**Radio Habana Cuba**