BOOK REVIEW


This is a timely and stimulating book bound to demolish some widespread preconceptions on the relations between the Frankfurt school and Logical Positivism. As conventional wisdom has it, the ‘Positivmusstreit’ took place in the sixties and early seventies being a dispute between dialectically oriented philosophers (and sociologists) on the one side and “positivists” on the other side. In *Positivmusstreit* (PS in the following) Dahms shows that this story tells us less than half of the truth. In fact, the ‘Positivmusstreit’ of the sixties was the continuation of a dispute whose first round had taken place between the Frankfurt School and the Vienna Circle already in the thirties. Moreover, and this is the most interesting part of the story Dahms has to tell us in PS, this early quarrel took place only after serious intentions had failed to establish a cooperation between these philosophical currents.

Dahms’ reconstruction of the suppressed and largely unknown history of the complex relations between the Logical Positivists of the Vienna Circle and the Frankfurt School isn’t only of historical interest. PS may also be considered as a contribution to the ongoing debate on a reassessment of the philosophy of Logical positivism. The Frankfurt School and its adherents succeeded in caricaturing Logical positivism as a narrow-minded philosophical doctrine guilty of “blind scientism”, “hostility against reflexive thinking”, “positivistically reduced rationality” and similar vices. If this characterization would have been true, even a momentary thought of cooperation would have made no sense at all.

One of the virtues of PS is that he does not take into account only the “of®cial arguments” but also the hidden moves behind the curtain as they can be reconstructed from letters and other “inof®cial material” of the protagonists. For the first time a wealth of previously unavailable archive material is presented to the reader rendering Dahms’ narration sometimes a real suspense story. PS consists of two parts. The first is dealing with the “first positivism dispute” of the thirties, the second is
concerned with the ‘Positivismusstreit’ between the Frankfurt School and the critical rationalism of Popper and his adherents in the sixties and early seventies. In this review I’ll concentrate on the bulk of the first part dealing with the relations of the Frankfurt School and the Vienna Circle leaving aside the topics of American pragmatism and critical rationalism.

Horkheimer and Neurath were the leading figures of the unification project that preceded the eventual break. They met several times to discuss the matter. The general feasibility of such a project resulted from the common fate of exile, the general “leftist” orientation of both groups (cf. PS, pp. 21ff) and even common academic roots. Moreover, the two parties suffered from “complementary deficits”. The realm of mathematics and empirical sciences was virtually screened off by the Frankfurt School, while the consideration of the historical and social sciences must be judged to be underdeveloped on the side of the Vienna Circle (cf. PS, p. 37). As Dahms suggests, this could have led to a cooperative division of labour. This project, however, failed. As Dahms convincingly argues, to a large extent Adorno is responsible for this failure. He succeeded in persuading Horkheimer to radically change his policy and to seek the confrontation with Logical positivism. In 1937 Horkheimer published the extremely polemic paper ‘Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik’ in which he sided Logical positivism with Heidegger’s “neoromantic metaphysics”. According to Horkheimer, both philosophical currents were grounded in the desolate shape of the bourgeois society, and both had to be considered as supporters of Nazism. Being confronted with this accusation, the positivists were, of course, extremely upset. In particular, since they had had the impression that the still ongoing negotiations with Horkheimer were on the right track. Neurath urged Horkheimer to publish a reply in the School’s journal ‘Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung’. With flimsy reasons, this was refused by Horkheimer. Neurath reacted by cutting short the relations. As Dahms reports, even thereafter some members of the positivists kept on maintaining loose contacts to Horkheimer’s ‘Institute of Social Research’. But the topic of cooperations never appeared on the agenda again.

One might think that a sounder philosophical base for the confrontation between the Frankfurt School and Logical Positivism was provided by the distinction between “critical” and “traditional” theory put forward in Horkheimer’s article “Traditionelle und Kritische Theorie” published in the same issue of the Zeitschrift. Allegedly, “critical theory” epistemologically differs in essential ways from “traditional” theories, e.g., theories of the natural sciences. Traditional theories are “objectifying”, critical theory was said to be “reflexive”. Critical theory aims at producing enlightenment in agents who held it enabling them to determine what their true inter-