İSTANBUL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Felsefe Arkivi
Archives of Philosophy

Felsefe Arkivi
Archives of Philosophy,
felsefearkivi 2025

https://doi.org/10.26650/arcp.1579505
Submitted 05.11.2024
Revision Requested 15.01.2025
Last Revision Received 25.03.2025
Accepted 25.03.2025
Published Online 28.04.2025

Araştırma Makalesi

Open Access

Reason, Truth and Technology in Modern Societies in the Context of The Frankfurt School

Frankfurt Okulu Bağlamında Modern Toplumlarda Akıl, Hakikat ve Teknoloji

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Abstract This article discusses the perception of truth that emerges from the existence of reason in modern societies as a result of industrialization in the context of Frankfurt School criticism. There have been many important developments in modern societies. The most important of these are technological progress and industrialization. These two situations not only brought modern societies to an advanced level, but also constructed a new reality in the economic, social and political spheres. New reality always means a new truth. However, in modern societies, this new truth has been placed at the center of all discussions with the criticisms of technological progress and industrialization. In this sense, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School accused modern societies of losing their truth in these debates and enabled us to reconstruct the existence of truth in the 20th century. According to them, as a result of industrialization, people in modern societies exhibit a way of thinking, comprehension and behavior that we can express as total sameness. Looking at such a situation from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, it can be seen that truth loses its meaning and a "truthless" situation emerges. However, in response to this claim of the Frankfurt School, this article aims to show that even when every new situation is negated, the truth does not depend on the existing established conditions but has an ontology that acts independently.

Öz Bu makale Frankfurt Okulu eleştirileri bağlamında modern toplumlardaki aklın varlığının endüstrileşmenin yaratmış olduğu sonuçlar itibariyle ortaya çıkardığı hakikat algısını tartışmaya açmaktadır. Modern toplumlarla birlikte birçok önemli gelişmeler yaşanmıştır. Bunların en önemlileri teknolojik ilerleme ve endüstrileşme olduğunu söylenebilir. Bu iki durum modern toplumları ileri bir seviyeye taşıdığı gibi aynı zamanda ekonomik, toplumsal ve politik alanda da yeni bir gerçekliği de inşa etmiştir. Yeni gerçeklik daima yeni bir hakikat anlamına gelmektedir. Fakat Modern toplumlarda bu yeni hakikat, teknolojik ilerleme ve endüstrileşmeye getirilen eleştirilerle birlikte tüm tartışmaların odağına oturtulmuştur. Bu anlamda Frankfurt Okulu düşünürleri bu tartışmalar içerisinde modern toplumları hakikatini yitirmekle suçlayarak 20. Yüzyılda hakikatin varlığını yeniden kurgulamamızı sağlamışlardır. Onlara göre modern toplumlarda insanlar endüstrileşmenin yaratmış olduğu durumun bir sonuç olarak bütünüyle aynılık diye ifade edebileceğimiz düşünüş, kavrayış ve davranış biçimi sergilemektedirler. Böylesi bir duruma Frankfurt okulu açısından bakıldığında hakikatin anlam yitirip "hakikatsiz" bir durumu ortaya çıkarttığı görülebilir. Ancak bu makale Frankfurt Okulu'nun bu iddiasına karşılık her yeni durum olumsuzlandığında bile esasında hakikatin mevcut yerleşik koşullara bağlı kalmayıp bağımsız hareket eden bir ontolojiye sahip olduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Keywords Modern Societies · Frankfurt School · reason · truth · technology

Anahtar Kelimeler Modern Toplumlar · Frankfurt Okulu · akıl · hakikat · teknoloji

Citation: Çağmar, Mehmet Şirin. "Reason, truth and technology in modern societies in the context of The Frankfurt School". *Felsefe Arkivi–Archives of Philosophy*. Advance Online Publication https://doi.org/10.26650/arcp.1579505

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Introduction

The 20th century has been the period in which the perception of truth has been discussed the most in modern societies along with technological developments. It is possible to list many reasons for this. However, when it comes to the 20th century, taking into consideration the social and political conditions of that period will help us to understand questions such as how truth is defined in the current period and whether it will still remain as truth when it comes to a truth.

With their critique of the Enlightenment, the Frankfurt School not only made important criticisms of reason, but also emphasized the reflections of such reason in the social sphere, leading to the emergence of a new understanding of truth. Their definition of truth is a reality of modern society that can be grasped with a bourgeois understanding. When this reality is read together with the Frankfurt School's criticism of Enlightenment reason, it reveals a non-truth understanding of truth that has become a tool for certain hegemonic purposes by losing its own reality.

This article argues that despite its untruthfulness, this reason, together with technological advances, has given a new appearance to truth in modern societies, and that it has become imperative for us to construct a reality through this new appearance of truth, which has inevitably become part of a natural process. For this purpose, he first emphasizes what appearances reason has in modern societies. Then, it reveals what kind of truth function reason has in modern societies. Finally, it will be tried to express that the advancement of technology, which we can accept as a necessity of the modern world, presents a new reality for us and that we construct a social truth by referring to this reality.

Appearances of the Reason

In the Frankfurt School, the criticism of reason has become a problem that can be handled in parallel with truth in many discussions. Especially within the School, thanks to Horkheimer, this situation has become a serious subject of discussion, and his criticism of the Enlightenment, which he and Adorno discussed together, has ensured that these discussions remain a current and ongoing problem in various aspects. However, within the School, answering questions such as what a thing is or how it should be handled while it is often made a subject of criticism provides us with the opportunity to address the truth itself from a broader perspective.[1]

Horkheimer offers us a remarkable distinction regarding the appearances of reason. According to him, when we ask an ordinary person what reason is, the answer we get is that it is something that benefits us. However, this benefit is not a functioning of reason itself, but rather the results it produces through the mediation of what we are dealing with. To put this in a simple way, it is possible to say that anything that is in accordance with reason enables us to reach a truth that is also beneficial and will benefit us as long as we act accordingly. While this is one aspect of reason, it also has aspects such as “classification” and “inference”.

In light of all this, it is also important for us how reason becomes socially mediated. This mediation plays a central role in the discussions of the Frankfurt School, reflecting a social truth. Horkheimer draws attention to an important distinction here. According to him, reason has two aspects, which we can call subjective and objective. The subjective aspect can be understood in terms of “ends” and “means”. These determine our relationship with the truth. We can say that this intellect, which we call the subjective intellect, has certain goals that it sets for itself or wants to achieve. But here the ends are first and foremost determined by truths outside of itself. It only tries to determine the means to achieve these goals. However, the most

[1] Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, (New York: Continuum Press, 2004), 3.

important thing to pay attention to here is to leave aside whether the ends are rational or not. According to Horkheimer, the ends are accepted as rational from the very beginning as a presupposition and are made to serve something that enables the individual to survive in a social sense.[2]

In many cases we use reason not only as something that applies to individuals. We also use it in the social sphere for institutions and their realities. For example, we can rationally regulate a decision made by an institution.[3] This regulation is filtered through the logical and calculative understanding of the human mind, which is organized in its full functionality.[4] According to Horkheimer, this situation, which gives rise to objective reason, has prevailed throughout the entire history of philosophy, from Plato to German idealism. Objective reason is above individual human beings and has a position that includes them. Moreover, it is in a position to both determine and direct the existing truth over all social and political conditions of human beings. Therefore, from the point of view of the Enlightenment tradition, reason, in these two aspects, is both a process in which they collectively participate and a "courage" through which they can individually assert themselves.[5]

Undoubtedly, such objectivity of reason will have various consequences. The first of these can be expressed as the criterion of human behavior or thought being tied to an objectivity outside of itself and no longer being in this relationship. What is important for objective reason is the harmony of individuality with the whole truth. Because in objective reason, "the emphasis was on ends rather than on means. The supreme endeavor of this kind of thinking was to reconcile the objective order of the 'reasonable' as philosophy conceived it, with human existence, including self-interest and self-preservation"[6].

Reason in Modern Society

The results of such a reason, which we can express both theoretically and practically, have, as the Frankfurt School thinkers put it, led to the formalization of reason into an idealized thought. This means that all our moral and political values and all our decisions that we can consider important in our lives are determined by a truth outside of reason, rendering it completely "meaningless". The idea that all kinds of truths we define in social life are rendered meaningless and manipulated under the name of rationality remains an important problematic situation for all Frankfurt School thinkers, especially Adorno and Marcuse. As Rabinow and Sullivan put it, "critical theorists have concentrated on the study of certain types of fragmentation and mystification that have emerged as a result of the increasing rationalization of the relations of social life"[7].

According to Adorno, who focuses on the concept of society, the logical bond of truth that society has formed within itself is its relational structure. This bond itself can be understood in two ways. The first is that each individual within the society has a function due to his/her position and function through sociality. The other is that the individual's belonging is determined by the sociality to which he or she belongs. However, all this relationship within the configuration of society and the individual has provided itself with the possibility of a conceptual reality through a legal regulation. This reality, as Foucault puts it, operates through a wide range of relations. According to him, societies basically have discourse types that they can

[2] Martin Jay, *Reason after its Eclipse on Late Critical Theory*, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 99-100.

[3] The fact that something is reasonable in the social sphere may mean that people have arranged it in a reasonable way.

[4] Jay, *Reason after its Eclipse on Late Critical Theory*, 100.

[5] Michael Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext Press, 2007), 100-101.

[6] Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 4.

[7] Paul Rabinow, P. and William M. Sullivan, The Interpretive Turn: Emergence of an Approach, *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, Paul Rabinow, William M. Sullivan(Editor), 1-24, (London: University Of California, 1979), 15.

operate within themselves. Each of these types of discourse has a determination in reaching the truth by distinguishing right from wrong through the mediation they contain.[8]

Adorno rationalized the whole logical order in Modern Society and justified a truth on the realization of the sovereignty of a power. Within this sovereignty, each individual is positioned in a certain division of labor with the social reality to which they correspond. However, in the division of labor, sovereignty helps to preserve the "self-existence of the dominated whole". As a result, "the operation of the whole as a whole and of the reason immanent to it necessarily turns into the fulfillment of the particular's own interests. Sovereignty appears before the individual as generalizations, in other words, as reason in reality."[9] According to Horkheimer, reason is the means of rationalizing the sovereignty of power. Because the first thing to be used in the manipulation of any intellectual structure will be "impotent reason". Therefore, from Horkheimer's point of view, reason "can be used by both defenders and opponents of the values of traditional belief. As in the case of O'Conor, it can give ideology to exploitation and reaction as well as to progress and revolution."[10] Therefore, as a corollary, "by rationalization Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse mean the following phenomena: Managerial and political domination, developed by institutions such as the factory, the army, the bureaucracy, the school and the culture industry, and extended to all spheres of social life by means of organizational techniques that are always effective and efficient"[11]. In Foucault, this domination is seen as a kind of disciplining power. According to him, the disciplinary power that tries to dominate is twofold. On the one hand, it exercises its disciplinary power through its invisibility. On the other hand, it makes this power concretely visible in the people it subjects through various relations.[12] Therefore "In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection."[13]

According to all Frankfurt School thinkers, especially Adorno and Marcuse, everything has been rationalized in modern societies. According to Marcuse, through the technological developments that have developed with the idea of "progress", reason itself has turned into a fundamental problem and has become a tool of truth that imposes exploitation and control.[14] Because in modern societies, reason stands as a sovereignty against the individual. The power it imposes on each of the individuals in society manifests itself over and over again through the division of labor. However, since individuals cannot find a way out of this circle, they are forced to submit to this exponentially increasing rationality. This is because excessive rationalization has led to the loss of the social bonds of individuals, the development of a holistic personality, and has enabled them to act on random impulses, thereby negatively affecting the nature of the freedom that exists here.[15] This means, according to Adorno, the subjugation of individuals by the truth to be revealed by a multiplicity.[16]

Although the increasing rationalization of life in its entirety is seen as a problematic situation for many thinkers of the Frankfurt school, from the point of view of Horkheimer, we will have to consider this situation

[8] Michael Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 197.

[9] Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung Philosophische Fragmente*, (Frankfurt: Fischher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2017), 28.

[10] Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason,* 17.

[11] Seyla Benhabib, "Modernity and the Aporias of Critical Theory," *Telos 49* (1981), 41.

[12] Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 187.

[13] Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison*, 187.

[14] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 18.

[15] Paweł Pieniążek, *Late Modern Individualization in Light of Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School): An Essay*, (pp. 78-101), PSJ Tom XX Numer 1, 2024, 81.

[16] Adorno, and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung Philosophische Fragmente*, 28.

as a situation of truth that continues in some aspect in vital necessities. Because according to him, there is an increasing degree of rationalization in all modern societies. The individual himself has to be in harmony with the conditions of the rationalized society in order to maintain his vital existence. Although these conditions are not within the framework of what the individual wants, but impose themselves as a necessity, the individual has to ensure compliance with the truth of the conditions and requirements imposed by the social system.[17]

The mode of production in Modern Societies imposes a state of greater flexibility than ever before, requiring individuals to be better able to adapt themselves to new circumstances as conditions change in modern life. In this sense, the increasing homogeneity of technical processes in modern environments makes it easier for people to change jobs. But the ease of changing jobs does not mean that there is more time for speculation or for departing from established models. To the extent that each of the means that people develop to dominate increases, the obligation to serve those means as a condition of survival directly increases. However, when we look at the means that individuals use to achieve a certain goal in modern societies, it is an undeniable fact that they are becoming increasingly "meaningless". Because according to Horkheimer, the modern individual, freed from all remnants of mythologies, has turned into something that reacts automatically with the general model of adaptation.[18] Therefore, the survival of the "average individual" in a modern society has depended on how fast he or she is reflexively. Reason is identified with truth in this speed of adaptation.

According to Adorno, the functionality of the reactions of the "average individual" in modern societies is related to whether or not he/she behaves in accordance with the behavior expected of him/her; appropriate behavior is considered a success and inappropriate behavior is considered a failure. Therefore, the pressure of social power not only creates certain patterns of behavior, but also exposes the individual who exhibits an inappropriate behavior to the pressure of the collectivity of society. According to Adorno, who considers this situation as a collective violence, the individual is faced with this pressure that operates secretly in the background in all areas of society (at school, at work, in trade unions, etc.).[19] Because all the products that are presented to us in this way in modern societies actually express a pressure that we can call a change in behaviour with social rules, social norms, rather than the product itself.[20] Social norms, according to Foucault, are a standardisation. This standardisation is first and foremost a principle of coercion. It plays an important role in determining truth as a force, especially in industrial products and processes.[21]

Repression is not something that operates very openly in modern societies. On the one hand it imposes power, which operates in a hidden way, and on the other hand it offers the individual a "freedom of choice" within society. Comparing freedom in modern societies with freedom in non-modern societies, it is partly true. Because in modern societies, first of all, with the development of productive forces, the freedom that the individual has achieved has increased in this sense. The quantity of the product that an individual obtains/reaches in modern society has increased. This is something that is accepted. However, while increasing quantity and pressure, which is an inseparable dimension of this quantity, also brings us increased freedom of choice, it also leads us to a truth that questions the value of quality. Horkheimer expresses this situation, which he refers to as the replacement of quality by quantity, as follows:

[17] Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 65-66.

[18] Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 66.

[19] Adorno, and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung Philosophische Fragmente*, 35.

[20] Etzioni-Halevy, *The Advent and Maturation of Modern Society*, (London: Routledge Press, 2024), 257.

[21] Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison*, 184.

"Quite different degrees of freedom are involved in driving a horse and in driving a modern automobile. Aside from the fact that the automobile is available to a much larger percentage of the population than the carriage was, the automobile is faster and more efficient, requires less care, and is perhaps more manageable. However, the accretion of freedom has brought about a change in the character of freedom. It is as if the innumerable laws, regulations, and directions with which we must comply were driving the car, not we. There are speed limits, warnings to drive slowly, to stop, to stay within certain lanes, and even diagrams showing the shape of the curve ahead. We must keep our eyes on the road and be ready at each instant to react with the right motion. Our spontaneity has been replaced by a frame of mind which compels us to discard every emotion or idea that might impair our alertness to the impersonal demands assailing us."[22]

Thus, in modern societies, there is a realization of the "annihilation" or "erasure" of the individual by social structures. The framework offered for the individual is as much truth as social rationality allows. In any case, the mission that the individual has set for himself is not a truth that can transcend this society. Therefore, the "annihilation" or "erasure" of the individual "rationalizes the means and renders human life irrational at the same time"[23].

Reason through Technology and Society

The transformation of rationality into irrationality in modern society is dealt with in a different way by Marcuse in his book *One Dimensional Man*: *A Treatise on the Ideology of the Transactional Society*, Marcuse deals with this transformation of rationality into irrationality in modern society from a different perspective. According to him, in modern societies the development of the freedom of human needs and faculties has been destroyed by production itself. "Peace is maintained by the constant intimidation of war, its growth is based on the suppression of the real possibilities of reconciling the struggle for existence - individual, national and international." Unlike the pre-modern period, today everything operates from a position of strength rather than natural and technological "immaturity". Mental and material elements have a much greater influence in modern societies than before. This leads to the control of the individual by society being incomparably greater than ever before.

According to Marcuse, we have come a long way in terms of technological developments in the modern era. This has not only made us superior to nature, but has also made our lives easier in many ways. Under these conditions, it is not difficult for the mass media to sell certain special interests as if they were the common interests of all the people living in that society. Thus, "the political needs of society become industrial needs and aspirations, their satisfaction develops mobility (Geschäft) and the common good (Gemeinwohl), and the whole is seen as the embodiment of reason itself"[24].

In modern societies, technology is an essential part of our daily lives. There is not a moment when we are not related to technology. We are always engaged in some way in some way with what technology has to offer us. This is because technology as a general container is not just something that functions in modern society on its own. It is somehow involved in all the existential relations of society, such as economy, politics, religion and cultural values. Thus, as Feenberg emphasizes, in modern societies technology and social relations are inextricably intertwined.[25]

In his important work *Some Social Implications of Modern Technology*, Marcuse addresses the relationship between technology and society. According to him, the techniques that technology uses to make itself

[22] Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 67.

[23] Tyrus Miller, *Modernism and the Frankfurt School*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 83-84.

[24] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), xli.

[25] Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, (New York: Routledge Press, 1999), vii.

operational (industrial and communication devices) are things that can be considered together with social processes. It is widely recognized that technology has an impact on people's vital relations. However, the point Marcuse wants to make here is that human beings are not only involved in the creation or invention of technology, but are also subjected to the influence of technological developments through the manipulation of various social groups.

"Technology is treated as a social process in which techniques (i.e. the technical apparatus of industry, transportation and communication) are only a partial factor. We are not here investigating the effects and consequences of technology on human individuals. This is because what happens (effects and consequences) are themselves not only the people who invent or work with the machines, but also the integral part of technology as social groups that direct their application."[26]

According to Marcuse, a totalitarian tendency has always existed in modern societies.[27] Claiming that these tendencies are realized through various industrial processes, Marcuse thinks that technology stands at an important point in this regard. According to him, man has an external control. It is technology that provides this control. However, technology itself is also shaped by the determination of political structures. Because, as Dickson points out, technological issues have always been a part of the political process. For Marcuse, therefore, "technology, as the totality of mechanisms, tools and instruments that characterize the machine age and as the mode of production, is at the same time a mode of organizing and maintaining (changing) social relations; it is a means of domination and control, a manifestation of patterns of behavior and common thought"[28]. In this manifestation, everything is processed according to predetermined purposes as part of such a mechanism and people are expected to comply. The problem here, however, is not fundamentally one of predetermination. Rather, it is the disappearance of human values in such a determination.[29]

The sovereignty and control that has developed in modern societies thanks to technology has suppressed the individual. This situation, which Marcuse always refers to as "one-dimensionality", has caused the individual to lose the ability to think critically and made him/her dependent on the system to be directed by technology.[30] Therefore, technological orientation has also become the determinant of the individual's own orientation, leading to the transformation of a "one-dimensional society". According to Marcuse, with the new standards of individuality that emerged with the technological process, the new rationality spreads throughout the whole of society and technological rationality becomes what stands out in society.[31] This is because, in Marcuse's words, technological rationality has spread throughout society, encompassing it and becoming a dominant force.

However, although rationality has spread throughout society, according to Horkheimer, "the power that governs social reality has never really been reason; but today, the purification of reason from any specific tendency or preference has led it to a point where it has even turned its back on the task of judging human actions and lifestyles. Reason has handed over this task to conflicting interests that seem to have effectively taken over our world"[32]. Because, according to Marcuse, technological rationality has the following two

[26] Herbert Marcuse, Some Social Implications of Modern Technology, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader,* (New York: The Continuum Publishing, 1998), 138.

[27] Calvin J. Larson, *Sociological Theory From the Enlightenment to the Present*, (New York: General Hall Press, 1986), 83.

[28] Marcuse, *Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,* 138-139.

[29] Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Technical politics Andrew Feenberg's Critical Theory of Technology*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 56-57.

[30] Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, IX.

[31] Marcuse, *Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,* 138.

[32] Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 7.

characteristics in modern society: first, a tendency towards the completion of technological rationality. The other is active attempts to stop this tendency within established institutions.[33] According to him, although there is a contradiction between these two situations, it should not be difficult to make sense of it: "the irrationalization of rationality."[34] In other words, the relationship between reason and irrationality has changed in modern society. Therefore, according to Marcuse, "in contrast to the fantastic and insane aspects of rationality, the realm of irrationality is now the home of the truly rational"[35].

Conclusion

This article examines how truth is positioned in the Frankfurt School's discussions of modern society. First, it focuses on the context in which truth is discussed in the School's critiques of reason. Then, it focuses on how this truth has taken on a new appearance in modern societies with technological advances.

The greatest criticism of modern societies in the Frankfurt School has been the results of reason becoming something irrational. However, this situation has brought about a new social and political ground, and at the same time, it has brought about the possibility that we need to reconsider truth together with this ground. In modern societies, truth is considered intertwined with the current reality of reason. This truth is criticized by the Frankfurt School. Because, according to them, reason has become irrational in the modern period. Such a situation has spread to the whole of society, and at the same time, it has created the necessity of reinterpreting what we call truth. When we look at the necessity of reinterpreting the truth here from the perspective of the Frankfurt School thinkers, it seems possible that a situation similar to the reason becoming irrational will emerge.

However, the fundamental difference between reason and truth here can be expressed as reason can construct a truth on its own under social conditions, while truth needs the existing reality for a new truth. This situation allows the truth to be reconstructed within the conditions it is in, and we can say that each new situation that emerges essentially presents a chain of reconstructed truths within itself, which we cannot express as untruth.

Peer Review Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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[33] Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 3.

[34] Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, xl.

[35] Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 251.

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