The Adventures and Misadventures of a Festschrift

It is no small secret to scholars across the disciplines that the festschrift is a dying enterprise. Increasingly, trade presses are following university presses in setting strict policies against them, which makes the appearance of The Modernist Imagination: Intellectual History and Critical Theory: Essays in Honor of Martin Jay, edited by five of Jay’s former students (Warren Breckman, Peter E. Gordon, A. Dirk Moses, Samuel Moyn, and Elliot Neaman) all the more surprising.

The Modernist Imagination commits the expected cardinal sins of the festschrift. The essays are, at times, a bit self-gratifying and too indebted to the critical methodologies and theoretical lenses of the scholar they attempt to praise. They also often fail to engage the work of Jay critically in ways that others who were not bound to produce an essay in his honor might, and, like many a festschrift before it, this one fails to find cohesion and unity, or speak a direct critical narrative. But for all of its weaknesses, the authors here align with the possibilities of the genre to present compelling essays that challenge us to think (once again) about grand theory, or “big theory,” often thought to be mutually exclusive, have much to say to each other, and in ways we seldom imagine them to speak.

The collection begins with Lloyd Kramer’s synoptic introductory essay on Jay’s work, “Martin Jay and the Dialectics of Intellectual History.” However, Kramer wants to remind his readers not so much about Jay’s work, but about his critical methodology—an even-handed dialectical treatment of diverse, and often shunned, historical interests. This commitment to this even-handed dialectical approach (post-Enlightenment positivism, on the one hand, and poststructuralist linguistic theory, on the other) finds its way into the intellectual fabric of this collection.

Part 1 is a series of seven essays devoted to “Intellectual History,” which Kramer describes in his introduction as the “sub-discipline of historical studies that describes and interprets the creative work of past thinkers and artists” (p. xi). As he argues, “[t]he best intellectual historians resemble the creative thinkers they write about because they often see unexpected connections among apparently diverse ideas.” Kramer explains why Jay’s work often demonstrates how “past intellectual debates can still provide theoretical resources for ongoing debates in our own culture” (p. xi). Part 1’s focus on the “theoretical resources for ongoing debates in our own culture” is evident from the very beginning as David Sorkin sets out to contextualize an “obscure incident of
the French Revolution” recently made widely known by Robert Darnton: the famous “Kiss of Lamourette.” Following in Jay’s dialectical footsteps, Sorkin resituates our understanding of the historical circumstances leading to the Legislative Assembly’s radical displays of brotherly love on July 7, 1792. He uses a dialectical approach to contextualize the historically extant middle ground between a Catholic France and a free France: “Lamourette’s attempt to defend the middle ground of the Civil Constitution and constitutional monarchy was the background to his ‘kiss.’ His proposal was not a curiosity, but part and parcel of his highly informed theological and political agenda” (p. 12). Hence, Sorkin reminds us that the description of the Enlightenment as an epoch best defined by the dichotomy of reason versus revelation can no longer stand in light of the mounting historical evidence. Sorkin’s essay emerges as a timely discussion of religion and reason in the midst of what we might term the “postsecular” scholarly movement in the humanities.

Jerrold Seigel considers the dialectical contours not of reason and revelation, but of another timely site of scholarly debate—post-Enlightenment speculation regarding subjectivity. While Seigel concedes that Robert Musil and Marcel Duchamp both advocated a “fluid and unsettled manner of individual existence” (p. 24) that is highly palatable to recent poststructuralist concepts of subjectivity, the similarity of their positions, upon closer scrutiny, gives way to a more intriguing narrative of two men “in search of very different kinds of selves” (p. 25). Seigel contends, however, that this difference is only palpable by way of supplement—a third conversation that stands strictly apart from Musil and Duchamp’s historical period and remains embedded in the theoretical substratum of our own contemporary critical concerns. Thus, he turns to Dror Wahrman’s recent book, The Making of the Modern Self (2004), in order to elicit the acute differences between Musil and Duchamp’s vision of subjectivity.[1] He concludes by proclaiming a paradox that sustains the poststructuralist fantasy of the fluid and malleable subject: “To regard a self conceived in terms of fluidity and malleability as excluding one understood as constant and stable is to line up with Duchamp rather than Musil” (p. 50). Thus, Seigel suggests that although the historians and theorists who champion Duchamp’s “kind of aesthetic utopia” may “not aspire to live” within the confines of that utopia, that is ultimately precisely where they find themselves, because “the temptation to imagine a human nature so malleable that it can only appear inside successive and antithetical regimes of the self lands them in a position that shares much with it” (p. 50).

The rest of the essays in part 1 follow similar trajectories, defining topics of interest in dire need of proper historical contextualization that speak directly to some of the most pressing theoretical concerns of our current times. Gregory B. Moynahan challenges Jürgen Habermas’s apolitical reading of Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy by looking at the theological and political undertones of Cassirer’s earlier work. In turn, Moynahan is able to carve out an appropriate distinction between Cassirer’s secularized and structuralist vision of the law and Hans Kelsen’s “purely functionalist understanding of law” during the Weimar period (p. 68). In “The Artwork Beyond Itself: Adorno, Beethoven, and Late Style,” Peter E. Gordon investigates Theodor Adorno’s unfinished great study of Beethoven, and further suggests that Jay was among the first readers to “appreciate the significance of Adorno’s musicological work as a privileged laboratory for the development of theoretical principles, and not as an application of a prior theory” (p. 80). Specifically, Adorno used Beethoven’s music to develop a theory of “late-style,” an essential feature of which is aesthetic fragmentation. Samuel Moyn investigates Claude Lefort’s (re-)visionary treatment of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s break with Marxism. Ever the intellectual historian, Moyn proposes “that Lefort’s reading [of Merleau-Ponty] flows, in the first instance, out of a personal and political conjuncture”—a break from communism after the Korean War (p. 108). However, Moyn expresses a cautious apprehension that breaks down along disciplinary lines about this reading: “Unlike philosophers, however, intellectual historians care a great deal about distinguishing anticipation from achievement and telling retroactive attribution from real contribution” (p. 112). In “The Return of the King: Hegelianism and Post-Marxism in Žižek and Nancy,” Warren Breckman weaves his way through two distinct responses to G. W. F. Hegel’s concept of monarchy (Slavoj Žižek’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s), while tying this discussion to Jay’s influential Marxism and Totality (1984). The final essay in the first section, “Paradigm Shift: The Speculation of Downcast Eyes,” by Rosalind Krauss, seems to be the most responsive of the essays in this section to Jay’s work. Krauss questions Jay’s argument in Downcast Eyes (1993); that is, that we are witness to an anti-ocular paradigm shift in the (post-)modern world. However, Krauss never directly dispenses with Jay’s thesis. In fact, she often broadens, refines, qualifies, and, only when appropriate, takes exception to it.

Part 2, “Violence, Memory, Identity,” broadens the methodological scope of the collection, moving it from
the praxis of intellectual history proper to a more distanced consideration of the meaning of history. Andreas Huyssen, looking back to Jay’s insightful essay, “When Did the Holocaust End? Reflections on Historical Objectivity” (2003), argues that “memory culture” can come to an impasse when “memorialization and forgetting” enter into “an unholy alliance that betrays both past and present” (p. 152). Carolyn J. Dean builds upon this logic by looking at recent critiques of victim culture and Jewish memory surrounding the Holocaust. Always even-handed, Dean finds a way to give voice to the critics of false victims, while asking more probing questions regarding such culture and its relationship with memory and history: How does this culture affect memory? How does it affect history? And, perhaps even more importantly, what is the relationship between memory and history in the first place? In “Paris, Capital of Anti-Fascism,” Anson Rabinbach returns to the same problematic relationship between memory and history. Here, Rabinbach suggests that archival material now allows one to move from memorial to historical treatments of anti-fascism in France during the 1930s. Dominick LaCapra’s “Toward a Critique of Violence” makes a similar move. Critiquing the dimension “wherein critical distance drops to a minimum or disappears” from treatments of violence, LaCapra uses the detached view of history to unveil how sacralized visions of violence gather being and go unnoticed (p. 214). The last two essays of the second part examine the birth of democracy in West Germany after the Second World War, and ask important questions about identity. Rita Chin investigates the role immigrant (in this case, Turkish) laborers played in developing the capitalist Federal Republic after the war, while A. Dirk Moses and Elliot Neaman examine the tensions between two distinct generations of postwar West Germany, the “forty-fivers” and “sixty-eighters.”

Part 3, “Critical Theory and Global Politics,” also expands the scope of the collection. Seyla Benhabib scrutinizes the relationship between two different types of universalistic modes of considering antisemitism—Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s “theoretical utilization of political economy and psychoanalysis” and Hannah Arendt’s “idiographic historical narrative and culturally more holistic sociology” (p. 301). In “The Anti-Totalitarian Left between Morality and Politics,” Dick Howard identifies the different historical legacies of post-1968 European leftists and U.S. New Leftists, and subsequently calls for a clear Kantian distinction between morality and politics, while recognizing that such a distinction cannot truly bring radical politics to its desired ends. Jean L. Cohen turns to the notion of the “new world order,” demarcating how the “cosmopolitan liberal” approach (the evocation of “human rights” supported by “a fundamental revision of the principles of international law and politics”) is “normatively flawed and politically dangerous” (p. 347). Detlev Claussen and Michael Werz conclude the section by arguing that the notion of modern identity is tied to collective identity. In their words, the collective “becomes identical with the illusion of self-realization” (p. 381). Thus, modern identity is an ersatz ideology. The last section, “Coda,” presents us with a short interview with Jay (“Ten Questions for Martin Jay”) as well as a bibliography of all of Jay’s publications and a list of the students whose dissertations he has advised.

After reading this collection, I am left feeling, as I expect most readers of this collection might feel, somewhat befuddled. It shows the best and worst of the festschrift. Each essay, in its own right, is accomplished, well written, and highly engaging (even when one disagrees with its claims). However, the tenuous relationship between the majority of the essays makes one question what kind of audience the text is suited for. I can imagine endless amounts of readers finding one essay, perhaps even a few essays, indispensable for their own research agendas. I find it hard to believe that any reader out there besides Martin Jay and his students—will find each of the essays equally important. I can imagine this text being an integral part of a library’s collection, but, regrettably, I cannot see it being an indispensable part of one’s personal library. In that sense, as well, The Modernist Imagination shoulders the burden of both the adventures and misadventures of the threatened festschrift.

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