



Martin Jay. *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations.* La Vergne: Verso, 2020. 256 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-78873-601-5.

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The Frankfurt School

Martin Jay's latest book on the Frankfurt School for Social Research focuses on its first generation at a time when these theorists have become objects of an increasingly influential conspiracy theory despite the enduring relevance of the school's social and political critique and emancipatory potential. Studies underscoring its Hegelian-Marxist roots, socialist orientation, relationship to revolution, and interest in theory and praxis are multiplying. Recently, the first-generation theorists have been accused by the political Right of exercising a corrosive influence on American and European society, a criticism that *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations* aims to rebut.

Readers who appreciated Jay's previous work on the Frankfurt School, especially his *Reason After its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory* (2017), will find a very different book. This time, the famous specialist who has studied the Frankfurt School for some five decades offers us a collection of essays composed throughout his career. A few build from personal experiences and material gathered while Jay conducted field research on the school's history and theoretical ideas. The diversity of the contributions, which differ in theme, approach, and style and which some readers may find awkward, do not always fit together, a theme

that nonetheless is central to Theodor Adorno's aphorism in *Minima Moralia* (1951), from which the title to Jay's book's is taken. The book's eclectic character reflects the school's history, which was a "splintered reality" (p. xvi), and the peculiarity of its project, made up of a multiplicity of ideas, "styles of argumentation and presentation" (p. xv), and "assumptions, methods, and arguments" (p. xiii). That Jay has left these pieces "in their unintegrated form, with no pretense to be a coherent narrative," cannot hide their uneven theoretical interest, the often loose connections between chapters, and the occasional lack of chronological consistency from one chapter to another (p. xvi). Each piece, nonetheless, brings new contributions to the Frankfurt School's history, theoretical contributions, and reception, be it through biographical insights, discussion of overlooked primary sources, or reassessment of controversies. When one looks closely, a few recurrent themes surface throughout the book—critique, utopia, and Jewishness.

The titles of the first three chapters announce pieces focusing on Max Horkheimer, but they do not deal solely with him. Jay places Horkheimer's ideas and vision at the heart of the Frankfurt School's original project: this is one of the book's

great merits. Many ideas, concepts, and methods were first articulated in Horkheimer's work, but this fact is obscured by his "eclipse" by some of his colleagues—like Adorno—a process that began during his lifetime. In the first chapter, Jay underscores Horkheimer's involvement in the initial plans in 1919 to form a research institute. Its project was intimately connected to socialism, even before it adopted a Marxist agenda under Horkheimer's directorship. Its collaborators, however, rejected the established Marxism of the time, which rooted the critique of the current order either in the adoption of "the partisan standpoint of the proletariat" and support for a vanguard party, as György Lukács did, or in an endorsement of scientific Marxism. Such positions had become increasingly untenable after the post-World War I revolutionary moment failed to fulfill its promises. The school's socialism developed in parallel with and drew inspiration from "Western" Marxism. Its main representatives, Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Antonio Gramsci, elaborated a new, critical brand of Marxism, which dragged the latter away from orthodoxy and determinism. They turned Marxism into a "method grounded in history and needing constant revision,"[1] based on dialectics (by returning to Hegel).[2] They connected social change to the "subjective factor" and to working-class consciousness.[3] Jay reminds us that critical theory, in contrast to "traditional" theory, is rooted in the belief that "the current order should be replaced by a more just and humane alternative" (p. 1). The social problems examined by critical theory "could be dialectically transformed by the evaluative categories of moral judgment and with an eye toward the practical-transformative activity needed for its resolution." [4] The Frankfurt School's members explored many alternative grounds for critique without finding a singular starting point. Still, Jay suggests that "the only viable point d'appui of critique was in the imagination of a possible future" (p. 17).

By the late 1960s, (the period examined in the second chapter), most collaborators had re-

nounced utopianism and developed reservations about their own earlier radical arguments. This attitude fed the hostility of the student movement, especially in Frankfurt, where the school had relocated after World War II. The radical students were inspired by their ideas, but were thoroughly flummoxed when Adorno and others tried to moderate them. On the right, they were confronted with antisemitic denigrations of their work. The nationalist Right also decried the alleged corrosive influence of returning émigrés on postwar culture. In this chapter, Jay focuses on the role of Jewishness in the school's origins and work, even though most members did not connect these phenomena. According to Jay, Jewishness stands behind two "taboos" in the school's production, namely, the refusal to provide either a positive representation of utopia or a "realistic aesthetic form to the experience of the Holocaust" (p. 39). Jay's exchanges and correspondence with Horkheimer, Adorno, Leo Löwenthal, Friedrich Pollock, and Jürgen Habermas during the period when he was writing his history of the Frankfurt School informs this chapter.

The next chapter, "Max Horkheimer and the Family of Man," focuses on postwar reconstruction, denazification, and the Frankfurt School's return to Frankfurt after exile in the United States. It revolves around a speech by Horkheimer introducing Edward Steichen's photographic exhibition, "The Family of Man," in Frankfurt in 1958. The exhibition, which depicted a unified humankind, had been criticized as an "ideological exercise in sentimental humanism in the service of Cold War propaganda" (p. 34). The discrepancy between Horkheimer's speech on this occasion and his usual positions shows that he was eager to endorse "a public mission as reeducator of the Germans" (p. 35). His surprising celebration of the exhibition hid "a challenge to make a different and better future," itself a "utopian impulse" (p. 46). Although Jay's discussion seems hermetical by retelling Horkheimer's involvement, the chapter questions

the oft-mentioned reproach that the school refrained from concrete engagement.

Chapter 4, which explores the role of Freudian psychoanalysis within critical theory, is one of the richest and theoretically most insightful. It focuses on attempts to bring together Freud and Marx, whose compatibility remains controversial. These sources of influence are usually studied separately, but Jay shows that psychoanalysis became a tool to overcome some of the voids within Marxist theory. The latter did not foresee and could hardly explain why the working class moved away from the utopia projected by the proletarian revolution to embrace fascism and sustained economic relations harmful to them. Freudian theory was also “a resource in the philosophical struggle to defend a plausible materialism against idealism” and its “indifference to the sufferings and needs of the creaturely self” (pp. 51-52). It was Horkheimer’s enthusiasm for Freudian theory in the late 1920s as “an indispensable auxiliary science for history” that prompted its inclusion in the school’s theoretical toolbox (p. 53). His collaborators, nonetheless, recrafted the theory according to their own concerns and needs, either as a device to resist a dominant irrationalism or revive utopianism, as in Herbert Marcuse’s work. Discussion of the transformation of Freudian theory and the use of overlooked primary sources shed new light on this crucial intellectual influence.

Jay concentrates next on the role of Jewishness in the Frankfurt School’s project and theory. Chapter 5 retells Löwenthal’s involvement in the “Jewish Renaissance” of the early Weimar Republic. Although Löwenthal had turned away from Judaism by the mid-1920s, Jay believes that his “Jewish impulses and those of [Erich] Fromm, [Walter] Benjamin,” and other colleagues “found their way into Critical Theory” (p. 77). Chapter 6, rich in theoretical insights, explores further the issue of the *Bilderverbot*, the ban on images, which surfaces in Adorno’s and Hans Blumenberg’s understandings of the “non-conceptual.” The discus-

sion is mainly based on Adorno’s oft-cited *Negative Dialectics* (1966), around which Blumenberg organized seminars after its publication. Comparison with the latter’s interpretations of the non-conceptual contributes to a deeper understanding of this crucial aspect of Adorno’s thinking. The “concept” central to traditional philosophy also stands behind attempts to close off contradiction or suppress “the other,” be it as the subjective domination of the “internal other” or the totalitarianism of the “administered world” (pp. 80-81). The non-conceptual opens on an alternative order that is connected to utopia. While both authors appreciated the “performative contradiction entailed by conceptualizing the non-conceptual,” they disagree in many respects. Blumenberg situates the non-conceptual in metaphor and myth, that is, in “linguistic or cultural expedients,” while Adorno understood the non-conceptual “in terms of the material and corporeal limits to cultural constructivism” (p. 93). If concepts are useful for orienting ourselves in the world, their reification must be avoided. To do so, Blumenberg suggests starting with “metaphoric language” and then moving to the conceptual. Adorno, who believed in the “ontological reality of concepts,” instead advocated starting from concepts before moving to “the mere datum” (p. 92).

Images remain at the heart of the two next chapters, which analyze the Frankfurt School’s utopian potential by considering Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on color (chapter 7) and philately (chapter 8). The discussions in these chapters are very specific, but their connection with other contributions in the book is not made explicit. They have the merit, nevertheless, of bringing attention to some of Benjamin’s overlooked texts and fragments of posthumously published papers. His thoughts on color and the painters of the *Blaue Reiter*, especially Wassily Kandinsky—for whom Benjamin developed a fascination that has not been widely appreciated—convey Benjamin’s conviction that “the emancipation of color” could bring about “a more profound emancipation of

human existence” (p. 99). Benjamin contemplated the *Blaue Reiter*’s use of color as promising a “renewal of vision itself,” liberated from the “rationalized vision” that conditions perception (p. 107). His interest in color and vision is connected to his hostility toward the domination of a “general concept” in German idealism and the “fetish of singular objects” in “positivist sensationalism” (p. 107). Regarding color as “something spiritual,” Benjamin, like Kandinsky, celebrated it “as a site of utopian fantasy” (pp. 107-108). The same is true of stamps, as Jay emphasizes in the chapter on philately. According to Benjamin, albums of stamps, which fell out of fashion due to technology, are “magical reference books” full of miniature representations of people, countries, places, allegories, animals that one cannot see with one’s own eyes. Stamps contain “contain generic utopian intimations of a world beyond our own” and trigger “dreams that avoid the commodity fetishism of modern consumerism” (p. 116).

Most Frankfurt School theorists viewed cinema as a privileged locus of this fetishism, a means of social control and repression. In chapter 9, Jay assesses the film theorist and historian Miriam Bratu Hansen’s attempt, in her book *Cinema and Experience* (2011), at overcoming Horkheimer and Adorno’s famous indictment of cinema in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). The chapter does not solely consider the peculiar reception of this aspect of the school’s work. Since Hansen claims that cinema can be an “oppositional public sphere” (p. 124) or a “proletarian public sphere” (p. 127), with reference to Siegfried Kracauer’s work in the 1920s (p. 128), this piece also considers debates from the Frankfurt School’s early history. Jay is not entirely convinced by Hansen’s position that cinema represents a “counter public sphere” (p. 126) with a critical potential (p. 125) that can integrate “the marginalized and disempowered” (p. 127), especially when the argument relies on an unconventional reading of Adorno (p. 131).

Chapter 10, which discusses Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, brings us back to the issue of critique alongside utopia. It is based on a talk Jay gave at a conference dedicated to the book’s fiftieth anniversary, released in 1964. The chapter, which focuses on the issue of irony, articulates a welcome defense of Marcuse’s analysis. In view of the 1968 movements and parallel onset of the structural crisis of capital, the “Guru of the New Left” was often accused of having overestimated capitalism’s stability and capacity to contain the forces that could “subvert it” (p. 137). Temporal distance now allows us to see that Marcuse was not wrong, emphasizes Jay. *One-Dimensional Man* is suffused with irony, a critical tool comparable to “immanent critique”: both confront society’s declared ideals to their deficient realization or unfulfillment (pp. 138-139). Irony and immanent critique, however, are only possible when there is a “yawning gap between ideology and reality” that can “produce the necessary outrage to motivate them” (p. 139). While neither Marcuse nor Adorno believed that irony or immanent critique was still possible in the postwar world, *One-Dimensional Man* sets irony into motion: it “derives its power from his indignant insistence that what claims to be the case is in fact reversed by reality” (p. 139). Marcuse’s irony is that of a “still hopeful materialist who believes the future can redeem the promises of the past, however much they are now thwarted” (p. 145).

The conspiracy theories that have since focused on the Frankfurt School’s first generation can be seen as cynical, an “ironic joke of history” (p. 146). In the last chapter, Jay retraces the origins and ramifications of the unfortunate reception that has found its way into print, television, and the internet. Right-wing critiques are more numerous, but there are also left-oriented ones. The author’s unwilling initial involvement in these controversies exposes some of the strategies behind the manipulations and dubious appropriations of biographical and historical aspects of the school’s work and its ideas. Fidel Castro once en-

dorsed the accusation that its members helped suppress class conflict through the “concoction and dissemination of mass culture” that was designed to “control the masses by diverting attention from civil rights and social injustice” (pp. 152-153). Actually, these accusations invert the positions taken by the school’s members. From the right, however, they have been blamed for “all the ills of American culture, from feminism, affirmative action, sexual liberation and gay rights, to the decay of traditional education and even environmentalism.” These trends brand the Frankfurt School as a type of “cultural Marxism,” one of the worst accusations leveled against them, and one which also feeds the antisemitic attacks (pp. 156-157). Accusations of cultural subversion of American and European cultures are sometimes traced to the involvement of individuals in the American government’s war effort against the Nazis, particularly the role played by Herbert Marcuse. These accusations, for instance, were voiced during Donald Trump’s election campaign in 2016, which was celebrated as “a true counterrevolution against cultural Marxism and the Frankfurt School” (p. 166). Trump was photographed with the co-author of a book which disseminated such ideas. Because fake news and conspiracy theories are widespread and believed by large numbers of people, Jay suggests a multipronged strategy as a counterweight. Appeals to the public’s sense of reason and reality can prove to be fruitless. “Counter-Enlightenment, as well as Enlightenment, has to be grasped dialectically,” writes Jay. One will also need “the application of a critical theory that knows how to ask the right questions” (p. 172).

This book offers a few fresh insights for readers already acquainted with the biography and work of the Frankfurt School, but is not recommended to those who are not or who seek an integrated theoretical study.

Notes

[1]. Stephen Eric Bronner, “Critical Theory and Resistance: On Antiphilosophy and the Philosophy of Praxis,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 18.

[2]. Chad Kautzer, “Marx’s Influence on the Early Frankfurt School,” in *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, 46.

[3]. Michael J. Thompson, “Introduction: What is Critical Theory?,” in *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, 3-4.

[4]. Thompson, “Introduction,” 6.

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