

Review article

Marxism and the Critical School

A Review of *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and The Institute of Social Research*, by Martin Jay, Little Brown (Boston and Toronto) 1973.

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If reality did not exist, Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination: A History OF the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* could be reviewed briefly: it is a serious, accurate, and academic presentation of the thought of the Frankfurt School from its origins till 1950. Since its synthesis is coherent and cogent, and the texts on which it is based are either not available in English, or are now only becoming so, it will hopefully contribute to the resurgence of a critical Marxism – though this is hardly its intent. A report along these lines would suffice, not because this is a bad book, but a good one, even though it argues very little, presents nothing very original, raises no important questions. Even Jay's remarks at the beginning that the "historical moment" of the Frankfurt School has "irrevocably passed" (p.vii) could be chalked up as the I.O.U. the academy exacts from a practicing historian as a guarantee the subject at hand is dead and gone.

Yet reality intrudes and obtrudes. In short, this book must not be abstracted from an Anglo-American audience that knows precious little about 'critical theory,' the Frankfurt School, or Marxism. Such an audience not only reads but misreads. Jay's own comments, arguments and observations, which both qualitatively and quantitatively form an extremely minor aspect of the book, will not be considered as such. Rather an authoritativeness will be as-

cribed to these which is strictly parasitical; the confidence gained by the scholarly presentation of the thought of the Frankfurt School will be conferred on the comments and analyses. Yet if anything marks this book and others in its genre, it is the disjuncture between its presentation of the thought of others – its scholarship – and its own contribution to thinking. Precisely because it deals with an intellectual world which while it wants to know something about critical theory and Marxism, also wishes to write them off, this disjuncture will be minimized. The result will be that the commentary will tend to displace, neutralize, and obscure the original and living thought. The history of commentaries itself has yet to be written, but it should be recalled that often enough the commentaries oppress the works they are presenting. Only relatively recently has Marx emerged from the writings on Marx; and Freud, of late, has been going in the reverse direction, lost to view as some antique from the 19th century.

An examination of a book cannot be indifferent to its fate; inasmuch as the incidental observations, decisions, and conclusions of Jay's book will be read as main theses and arguments, they must be scrutinized as such. Hence, what might have at first seemed a legitimate decision, or at least an inconsequential one, to treat the Frankfurt School only through 1950 and its return to Germany, assumes a crucial importance. For if the Frankfurt School has straddled an American and German world, its critical reception in the 1960s through to the present has been essentially German, and to a lesser extent Italian and French. Jay, of course, is not writing for this audience, but an Anglo-American one that knows little of the Frankfurt School, and nothing about the German debates over it. It is difficult in

any case simultaneously to introduce material – to, so to speak, translate it – and contribute to debates within and over it; but Jay does less than try. The cut off date of 1950 has the lethal effect of an autopsy on the living: it kills. For those who have pursued any of the debates either about the Frankfurt School or spurred by it, such as the relationship between spontaneity and anarchism, science and productive forces, nature of the working class, and so on, little will be found that contributes to these issues. And more importantly, those just encountering the Frankfurt School will be left with the distinct impression that it exited from history, rather than re-entered it in the 1960s. Jay makes good his I.O.U.

The general drift of Jay's comments seeks, at first, to belittle the relationship of Marxism to the 'critical theory' of the Frankfurt School, and secondly, and emphatically, to declare them utterly separate; he wants to make the Frankfurt School safe for democrats and historians by attesting it free of Marxism. He does this by confirming the unwritten law that radicals become conservatives, and Marxists, liberals. So fundamentally does Jay believe this 'law' – at least as it applies to the Frankfurt School – that he does not bother to argue it; more the reverse: he only qualifies it, and in so doing confirms it. That is: the proposition – accusation or hope – that implicitly (and in the final chapter, explicitly) informs this book is that the Frankfurt School over the years has totally and thoroughly purged itself of its Marxist origins. Jay on occasion seeks to qualify the extreme formulation of this proposition, and in so doing appears as if he were defending the Marxism of the Frankfurt School – which he is not. Rather, he wants to certify its distance from Marxism by detecting only some remnants.

To illustrate: it has often been charged that the Frankfurt School betrayed its critical

and Marxist roots in its various American empirical projects of the 1940s, most notably the "Studies in Prejudice" series of which *THE Authoritarian Personality* was a part. Jay at first seems to accept this judgment. "On the surface it appears as if the *Studies* [*IN Prejudice*] were a radical departure from some of the basic tenets of the Critical Theory. In certain ways this was true." (p.226) The questions involved here are substantial; in brief, it is difficult to maintain that empirical work was utterly new to the Frankfurt School, in theory or fact Horkheimer as early as his 1931 opening address to the Institute called for the incorporation of empirical research and survey methods. "For the design of these questionnaires, American social research has performed important preparations, which we want to adopt and further develop for our goals."¹ And the early volumes of the periodical of the School, *Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung*, contain a good number of empirical studies. A contribution to the 1934 volume on "Differentiation of Delinquent and Non-Delinquent Boys" is footnoted by Horkheimer: "With this contribution we begin a series of short reports on important inquiries, their methods and conclusions."²

Secondly, the combination of tactical, financial, and political reasons that would cause a group of German emigrés in the USA during the 1940s to mute a Marxist critique is evident. While not necessarily evidence of capitulation, it does raise a problem of interpretation. In the forward to the first issue of the *Zeitschrift* published in English (July, 1940), Horkheimer explained the reason for switching to English. "Philosophy, art and science have lost their home in most of Europe . . . America, especially the United States, is the only continent in which the continuation of scientific life is possible. Within the framework of this country's democratic institutions, culture still enjoys the freedom without which, we believe, it is

unable to exist.”³ Note that in just the previous issue Horkheimer had written, in German: “Today to invoke against Fascism the liberal thought of the 19th century is to appeal to the court through which it conquered.”⁴ Such a change is not simply a contradiction nor a retreat, but a deliberate political choice. It should also be mentioned that Alfred Sohn-Rethel, a friend of the Frankfurt School, has asserted that the term “critical theory” itself was a code word for Marxism.⁵

None of this is news to Jay; and he in fact argues against the ‘surface’ reading which maintains that the Frankfurt School radically departed from Marxism in its American and empirical work. But his language concedes even as it qualifies. “In general, however, the situation was considerably more complicated than a cursory reading of the *Studies in Prejudice* suggested. First of all, the Institute’s Marxist origins . . . were not obliterated entirely. Evidence of their persistence appeared in a number of ways . . .” (p.228) That the Marxism was not “obliterated entirely” may be solace for the archivist, but not for the Marxist. What is important here is that the tone swallows the argument; the tone and language suggest the Frankfurt School did junk Marxism – or retained only vestiges – while in fact Jay argues the reverse. This would hardly matter except for the place of this chapter in the book; it precedes the final chapter which then argues explicitly that the Frankfurt School blots out Marxism. If this concluding argument convinces, it does so by grounding itself in the case made in the previous chapters. But this was well-grounded because the sole place where the relationship of the Frankfurt School to Marxism is previously discussed is the chapter on the empirical work, and this, again, is an argument of tone not substance.

It is only in the final chapter that Jay begins to make the case at which he has so long hinted: the extinction of the Frank-

furt School’s Marxism. He discovers that in the 1940s a “critical shift” takes place in the Frankfurt School which “makes a fitting conclusion to our study . . .” (p.255) The conclusion that fits, of course, is that the Frankfurt School takes leave of Marxism; it “travelled the last leg of its long march away from orthodox Marxism.” (p.256) Again it must be emphasized that nothing has been said about the first leg of this long march. That Jay occasionally identifies Marxism with Stalinism lends some credence to his argument that the Frankfurt School was on a long march. “Disillusioned with the Soviet Union, no longer even marginally sanguine about the working classes of the West, appalled by the integrative power of mass culture, the Frankfurt School travelled the last leg of its long march away from orthodox Marxism.” If Marxism necessitates enthusiasm about the Western working class, satisfaction with mass culture, and illusions about the Soviet Union, then Jay is right, and both Marcuse and Mao are non-Marxists. Jay, however, is wrong.

The two specifics that Jay marshals as evidence of the last leg of the trip are based on misreadings and misinterpretations. “The clearest expression of this change was the Institute’s replacement of class conflict, that foundation stone of any truly Marxist theory, with a new motor of history (. . .)the larger conflict between man and nature . . .” (p.256) This is wrong, all wrong. First, as Jay himself indicates, this is not a new theme in the Frankfurt School work; and secondly, and more importantly, the theme of the domination of nature does not dislodge class conflict. One does not supplant but supplements the other; it is not a question of class conflict or man/nature conflict but both.⁶ “All production is the appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society.”⁷ The Frankfurt School has pursued this dialectic: history as a continuum of dominated nature and history as

a particular and capitalist form of domination. The 'timeless' struggle of humanity against nature is itself historical; it both predates capitalism and possesses a distinct form within it. Neither excludes the other. History that has congealed into an unconscious 'second-nature' – one of the most important concepts of critical theory, and one Jay does not discuss – is not natural, but nature and history under conditions of unfreedom.⁸ Some of the most important writings of the Frankfurt School are structured around this dialectic, including its interpretation of Freud. Class conflict is not stilled; another dimension of it is uncovered. "That one cannot speak of a proletariat class consciousness in the leading capitalist countries," wrote Adorno in 1968, "does not in itself – in contradiction to *communis opinio* – refute the existence of classes; class is determined by the relationship to the means of production, and not through the consciousness of its members."⁹

Jay's categories are too lazy to follow dialectical thought; against the unfolding of Marxist concepts which is the strength of critical theory, Jay appeals to their worn and conventional form as evidence of the weakness of critical theory. To Jay one category cannot be mediated by another, but can only replace it; hence, according to his interpretation, nature dislodges history, and to this he adds that the notion of enlightenment replaces ideology. His mode of argument is the same: a fictional earlier state of the Frankfurt School is inferred and then fictionally transcended. "Before the war," we are told, the Frankfurt School used the traditional Marxist notion of ideology; "this type of connection between substructure and superstructure was a frequent feature of the Frankfurt School's work." (p.258) With the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and later works, the Frankfurt School left "the vestiges of an orthodox Marxist theory of ideology behind." (p.259) Jay appends a damaging non-sequitur: "Thus although Horkheimer

and Adorno still used language reminiscent of Marxism – such terms as the 'exchange principle' played a key role in their analysis – they no longer sought answers to cultural questions in the material substructure of society." (p.258-9) Nothing is adduced to show this.

The cutting edge of critical theory is founded in its reconstruction of the relationship between nature and history, thought and ideology. It has resisted the neutralization of the concept of ideology, be it in Mannheim, the sociology of knowledge, or Official Marxism. That this project, which has spanned all their work,¹⁰ has led them to pursue the archaic and primal mystification that persists in all enlightened thought does not in itself violate Marxism; nor does the admixture of pre-capitalist and capitalist forms of ideology and domination make domination any less historical – or remove it from the material substructure. For Jay to hold up against critical theory the very reified concepts that it from the beginning repudiated – ideology as the relationship of substructure to superstructure – as proof that they betrayed their origins, is proof of their loyalty to a critical Marxism – and of Jay's distance. Vulgar liberalism bails out vulgar Marxism.

The second "subtle, but crucial transformation of the Institute's theoretical intentions in the forties" (p.279) that Jay finds is as flimsy as the first. Here again an earlier stage of critical theory is imputed so as to contrast it with a later more conservative stage. According to Jay, with the shift to the man/nature conflict ". . . that imperative for *praxis* so much a part of what some might call the Institute's heroic period, was no longer an integral part of its thought." (p.279) Jay custom tailors the material to fit his fitting conclusion; the notion that the writings of the "heroic period" of the Frankfurt School breathed of revolutionary *praxis* and fervor is fantasy. Which? Horkheimer's *Anfänge der*

bürgerlichen Geschichtsphilosophie (1930)? or his 'Antrittsvorlesung' on the tasks of the Frankfurt School (1931)? or Adorno's *Kierkegaard* (1933)? or Marcuse's *Hegels Ontologie* (1932)? In fact, the most political and revolutionary writings of the Frankfurt School, excluding the later Marcuse, are some of Horkheimer's essays from around 1940: "Autoritärer Staat,"¹¹ "Die Juden und Europa" and "Vernunft und Selbsterhaltung." The point is not that the Frankfurt School, early and late, was resigned, but that neither earlier or later did their writings possess an immediate relation to praxis; if they had a practical impact it was by way of theory itself. As Adorno wrote not long before he died, "... where I have intervened in the narrow sense, immediately, with noticeable practical effect, it has occurred through theory alone . . ." ¹²

The charge that the Frankfurt School scorned praxis seems to be irresistible, with an appeal especially to those who, in identifying revolutionary praxis with heaving explosives at the ruling class, conclude with relief that all others are liberals or conservatives. The notion that the Frankfurt School "jettisoned that central premise of Marx's work, the unity of theory and *praxis*" is based on jettisoning a major part of critical theory. It misses their unyielding insistence that this unity is also a disunity; it is to be attained, not decreed. Critical theory does not set forth an action program — but neither do the three volumes of *Capital*. "On the identity of theory and praxis," wrote Horkheimer, "is not to be forgotten their difference."¹³

In any case, if one is to bring up the charge of the flight from praxis, it is incumbent to outline the real possibilities and alternatives from which the Frankfurt School supposedly fled: what, in short, should they have been doing? Jay, as always, states but hardly overstates his point. "It is however at least arguable that Critical Theory would have been enriched if the

members of the Institute had been more intimately involved in practical politics." (p.36) The example of Gramsci that Jay uses to indicate this enriching process is lame, as Gramsci's work, and the possibilities within the Communist Party in general, close before the Frankfurt School begins. Given the realities of exile politics,¹⁴ one could more argue the reverse: critical theory would have been impoverished by practical politics. How enriching would it be if Adorno and Horkheimer left us not with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but with "The United Front and Organizing the German Exile Community"?

Jay's cutt off date of 1950 is again unfortunate, as it permits him to allude to, without discussing, the later friction between the Frankfurt School and its students as if this indisputably confirmed his argument. "The clashes its members had with the German New Left in the 1960s were merely the working out of this earlier transformation." (p.296) This "merely working out" is hardly the whole story. One could as well refer to Marcuse's differences with the student movement — his refusal to endorse the "smash the university" slogan — as proof of his decline and retreat, which it was not. To be sure, there is a story to be told, not only of Marcuse's increasingly political writings, but Horkheimer's increasingly reactionary ones, to say nothing of Habermas or his relation to the Frankfurt School or to the student movement. But Jay cautiously avoids these complexities by mentioning, not discussing them.

The conclusion that Jay draws from all of this is more projection and hope than fact; it fits the argument and violates the material. "... in the end, the Institute presented a revision of Marxism so substantial that it forfeited the right to be included among its many offshoots." (p.296) For Jay at this point to summon Lukács as the referee, shows an unusual knowledge of the offshoots of Marxism; "in 1962 Lukács

voiced his and other Marxists' disdain for the Frankfurt School." There was no love lost between the Frankfurt School and the later Lukács: Adorno once dubbed Lukács' *Destruction of Reason* as the destruction of Lukács' own reason. On the Marxism of the Frankfurt School one could do well to ponder what the dying Horkheimer wrote in his letter-forward to Jay's own book: "After our emigration to America via Geneva, the Marxist interpretation of social events remained, to be sure, dominant, which did not mean in any way, however, that a dogmatic materialism had become the decisive theme of our position."¹⁶

The corollary of Jay's surgical separation of Marxism from the Frankfurt School is his belittling the objective nature of dialectical and critical thought. Again this functions on the level of observations and comments which are tacked onto presentations or texts. Hence, he first presents the Fromm/Marcuse dispute, and then cannot resist reducing and losing it. "As is often the case with intellectual controversies between former friends and colleagues . . . minor points of difference assume greater importance than the larger areas of agreement . . . Marcuse's interpretation of the Nirvana principle was really not that far from the sentiment Fromm had expressed . . ." "Thus despite both men's insistence that their positions were miles apart, they seemed to converge on at least the one question of the strength and durability of an instinct to die." (pp.111-12) In order to round out the chapter with agreements, Jay leaves out the antagonisms that made for the disagreements. If Fromm and Marcuse converge on this "one question," which they do not, it is incidental to what separates them: questions of negativity, sexuality, theory and therapy, love in an unfree world; and so on. The works that Marcuse and Fromm published at about the same time, *Eros and Civilization* and *The Art of Loving* illustrate the gap between critical theory and 'how to do it'

manuals; with Fromm's later works this distance has only increased.

In his presentation of the Fromm/Marcuse dispute, Jay broaches another reason for their differences which is more insidious since it not only dissolves the objective content of critical theory, but recurs throughout the book. This is Jay's tendency to degrade dialectical thought into a mere subjective mannerism. "From his writings alone it seems evident that Fromm's sensibility was less ironic than that of the other members of the inner circle [of the Frankfurt School], his approach to life less colored by the aesthetic nuances shared by both Horkheimer and Adorno." (p.101) The notion here, that critical theory is aesthetic and ironic, too ephemeral for the real world, is the favorite bravado of the pseudo-toughness of rugged empiricism and crude Marxism. Elsewhere we are also told of the "dark ironies" of the Frankfurt School (p.112), or of its "cosmic irony." (p.67) The title of the book itself suggests that dialectical thought is mere fantasy of the mind; and in fact the only places where the title occurs in the text are in references to Adorno's subjective qualities. "This distance from the subject allowed his [Adorno's] dialectical imagination full sway." (p.186) Or, music was a "particularly rich field for the play of his dialectical imagination." (p.182)

One final instance of Jay's neutralization of critical theory can be mentioned. He argues that the Frankfurt School failed to develop an "autonomous theory of politics" as it apparently did for culture. "Although the Frankfurt School had already begun to question the derivative nature of culture assumed by mechanistic Marxists, it was slower to do the same for politics." (p.118) They shared an "underestimation of the political sphere . . ." (p.118) Such an argument rests on a host of misconceptions, not the least is that critical theory developed a "discrete" theory of culture,

art, psychology, and so on. They re-conceived the relationship of political economy and culture, but hardly rendered them into two distinct units. But Jay is happy only with an evolution away from Marxism, and laments where critical theory remains too Marxist to be misinterpreted. His logic points to the pluralistic academic universe of separate disciplines and friendly experts. He closes his argument with this statement: "One of the ironies of the Institute's slowness to acknowledge the new primacy of politics was that at this very time, the orthodoxy in the Soviet Union itself had shifted in that direction, stressing political voluntarism rather than objective conditions. Stalin, who was responsible for the theoretical change, was merely ratifying the reality of Soviet practice." (p.118-19) That critical theory lags behind the ratification of Stalinism is an "irony" that perhaps only Jay can enjoy.

If this book were not destined to become important and widely read, one could dismiss Jay's comments and conclusions as the failings of a liberal and conscientious chronicler occasionally departing from his otherwise neutral account; although praise can be freely accorded to the scholarship and wealth of materials, this in itself is not sufficient for an important and definitive work. Leaving the story as if it ended in 1950, rather than exploding with *One Dimensional Man*, the rediscovery and republication of the older essays of Adorno and Horkheimer, and the renewal of the Left and a whole series of questions within and on Marxism, is to do an injustice to critical theory that resists any form of reification.

This injustice is compounded by Jay's analysis which, if benign, works to suppress the Marxist and revolutionary core of critical theory. The failure of this successful book is in its distance from the very concepts it is presenting; their living core remains closed to Jay. The flaw is not that

this is an intellectual history, but that it is a history of intellectuals; its weakness is not that it abstracts concepts from a socio-economic reality and gives them a life of their own, but it gives them no life, reducing them to functions of particular people. Adorno, in his Hegel book, wrote of the necessity to, as it were, experience concepts; and Hegel himself wrote that "the living spirit, embedded in a philosophy, demands in order to be revealed, to be so by a kindred spirit."¹⁷ Jay, if a kindred spirit and friend of critical theory and Marxism, is also a stranger.

Notes

¹ M. Horkheimer, "Die gegenwärtige Lage der Sozialphilosophie und die Aufgaben eines Instituts für Sozialforschung," (1931) in Horkheimer, Grünberg, *Anfänge der KRITISCHE Theorie* (n.p., n.d.), p.28-9.

² *Zeitschrift FÜR Sozialforschung*, III(1934), p.79.

³ M. Horkheimer, "Forward," *Zeitschrift FÜR Sozialforschung*, VIII (1939-40), p.321.

⁴ M. Horkheimer, "Die Juden und Europa," *Zeitschrift FÜR Sozialforschung*, VIII (1939-40), p.132.

⁵ A. Sohn-Rethel in *Die Frankfurt Schulf IM Licht DES Marxismus*, hrsg. J.H. von Heiseler, et al. (Frankfurt, 1970), p.132.

⁶ For a recent exploration of this relationship, grounded in critical theory, see William Leiss, *The Domination OF Nature* (New York, 1972).

⁷ K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (Penguin Books, 1973), p.87.

⁸ For a discussion of 'second-nature' and history, see R. Jacoby, "Towards a Critique of Automatic Marxism: The Politics of Philosophy from Lukács to the Frankfurt School," *Telos* 10 (Winter, 1971), esp. pp.141-44.

⁹ T.W. Adorno, "Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft?" in Adorno, *Aufsätze ZUR Gesellschafts Theorie UND Methodologie* (Frankfurt, 1970), p.153.

A lecture of Adorno's from the early 1930s that has recently been published – since Jay's book – can further correct his argument. Adorno's lecture, "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte" shows that

the theme of nature and second-nature was already programmatically set forth in 1932, and was not simply, as Jay states, a "secondary" or late concern. Moreover, the lecture specifically takes up the objection that a dialectic of second-nature means the replacement of the historical dialectic. Addressing himself to the "relation of these things to historical materialism," Adorno declared that it was not a question of "the replacement of one theory by another, but of the immanent drawing out of a theory . . . a drawing out of certain of the fundamentals of the materialist dialectic]" "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte," in Adorno *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I (Philosophische Frühschriften) (Frankfurt a/Main, 1973), p.365

¹⁰ For example, Horkheimer, "Ein neuer Ideologiebegriff?" (1930) in Horkheimer, *Sozialphilosophische Studien* (Frankfurt, 1972): Adorno, "Sociology of Knowledge and its Consciousness," (1937) *Prisms* (London, 1967): and "Ideology," (1956) in Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, *Aspects OF Sociology* (Boston, 1973).

¹¹ This is now in English, in *Telos*, 15 (Spring, 1973).

¹² T.W. Adorno, "Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis," *Stichtworte* (Frankfurt, 1969), p.191.

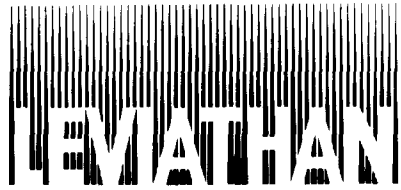
¹³ M. Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," in *Kritische Theorie DER Gesellschaft*, I. (Frankfurt, 1968), p.256.

¹⁴ For one glimpse of this reality see L.J. Edinger, *German Exilf Politics* (Berkeley, Calif., 1956).

¹⁵ T.W. Adorno, "Erpresste Versöhnung," in Adorno, *Noten ZUR Literatur*, II (Frankfurt, 1961), p.153.

¹⁶ See also his essay from 1968, "Marx heute," in Horkheimer, *Gesellschaft IM Übergang* (Frankfurt, 1972).

¹⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Schriften: Werke*, 2 (Frankfurt, 1970), p.16.



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