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The Headquarters of Neo-Marxism

Samuel FreemanMARCH 23, 2017 ISSUE*Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*

by Stuart Jeffries

Verso, 440 pp., \$26.95

Habermas: A Biography

by Stefan Müller-Dooch, translated from the German by Daniel Steuer

Polity, 598 pp., \$39.95

Adorno and Existence

by Peter E. Gordon

Harvard University Press, 256 pp., \$29.95

Marx argued that economic systems have always involved the exploitation of workers for the benefit of a privileged class that owns and controls “the means of production.” As a result, according to Marx, workers are “alienated” from their labor, from the products they make, from other people, and ultimately from their own humanity since their lives and labor are determined not by themselves but by the demands of a privileged class and impersonal market forces.

Workers tolerate this apparent injustice, Marx explains, because exploitation is hidden from everyone’s view by a complex web of illusions he calls “ideology.” Significant obfuscations under capitalism include a wage contract that allegedly gives workers the fair value of their labor, as well as “ideological nonsense about right” such as “free and fair exchange,” “fair distribution,” and the claim that capitalists make a contribution on a par with labor. These and other illusions, along with



Jeremy J. Shapiro

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (in foreground) with Jürgen Habermas (far right), Heidelberg, April 1964

religion and the state, all sustain capitalism as a system of exploitation and alienation.

Marx's account of ideology or "false consciousness" is his most enduring legacy in the West. It provides the intellectual foundations for the work of the Marxists who founded the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and continued developing it until the 1970s. They provided the basis for what is called "critical theory," which, drawing on Marxist and Freudian ideas, emphasizes the underlying, often hidden forces that determine the shape of culture. The three books reviewed here survey the lives and ideas of the most famous members of the Frankfurt School.

The Institute for Social Research, known as the Frankfurt School, opened in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1924 as a neo-Marxist institute devoted to examining and criticizing contemporary capitalist society. It was endowed by the world's largest grain trader, Hermann Weil; his son Felix asked him to fund a multidisciplinary academic institute that would explain why the Communist revolution had failed in Germany and how it might succeed in the future. From 1930 to 1958, the philosopher Max Horkheimer was director of the institute. His tenure included the Frankfurt School's period of exile in the United States from 1934, after the Nazis took power, until the early 1950s.

The leading thinkers of the Frankfurt School were Horkheimer, the philosophers Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, and the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm.¹ The literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, though not officially a member of the institute, was closely associated with it and strongly influenced its thinking. All of these figures, except Fromm, were the children of successful Jewish businessmen. Like Felix Weil, they rejected their capitalist fathers' material success while simultaneously benefiting from it.

Grand Hotel Abyss by Stuart Jeffries, a well-regarded British journalist and cultural critic, is an engaging and accessible history of the lives and main ideas of the leading thinkers of the Frankfurt School, from 1900 through the 1960s. A concluding chapter recounts the school's turn away from Marxism toward left-democratic liberalism under the influence of Jürgen Habermas.

From the outset, the Frankfurt School concentrated on accounting for the failure of the working classes to embrace communism. During the 1930s, it used Freudian psychoanalytical theory to explain why the working classes were captivated by capitalist consumerism and why they rallied to Nazism. Frankfurt School members initially saw fascism as one of the last stages of capitalism, citing as evidence the alliance of capitalist industrial leaders with Hitler. However, except for Marcuse during the 1960s, they later came to doubt that capitalism would give way to communism in the West.

The title of Jeffries's book derives from a dismissive quip by the Hungarian Marxist György Lukács, who charged that Adorno and other Frankfurt School members had taken up

residence in the “Grand Hotel Abyss,” a retreat “equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity.” The Frankfurt School, Lukács suggested, had abandoned Marx’s connection of theory with revolutionary activity (“praxis”). They were comfortably cocooned in the domain of theory, observing the spectacle of monopoly capitalism from afar and ineffectually commenting on its destruction of the human spirit. Bertolt Brecht made similar criticisms, claiming that the Frankfurt School philosophers had betrayed the revolution they affected to espouse. In condemning the Frankfurt School for its aloofness and abandonment of the working class, Lukács and Brecht were also censuring it for elitism.

Frankfurt School members had good reason for pessimism about the effectiveness of Marxist theory in fomenting revolutionary practice. Following the failure of Marxist revolution in Germany in 1919, most of the working class supported a very different kind of revolution. With the rise of totalitarian fascism in the 1930s, the Frankfurt School lost confidence in the ability of workers to mount a revolution against monopoly capitalism and the states sustaining it, as Marx predicted they would. It regarded workers as paralyzed by conformist tendencies and unable to discern the source of their grievances in the capitalist system. One of the Frankfurt School’s tasks during and after the 1930s was to explain the illusions that drove both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie not just to conformity but also to barbarism and the destruction of European civilization. For the next forty years, the Frankfurt School engaged in criticism of nearly every aspect of capitalist society.

Walter Benjamin is regarded by many (including Jeffries) as the most original thinker associated with the Frankfurt School. His literary criticism on Kafka, Proust, Baudelaire, and others has been enormously influential, as have his essays on modern art and on the philosophy of history.² Despite Frankfurt School members’ efforts to help him, he was unable to find an academic position or escape from Europe in the late 1930s. Jeffries describes Benjamin’s tragic life, including his suicide in Port Bou, Spain, near the French border, as he was trying to escape the Gestapo and to embark for America via Portugal.³

Benjamin famously said in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “there is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”⁴ Equally renowned is his metaphor in the same essay that the Angel of History looks backward and witnesses the constantly accumulating wreckage of history as a single catastrophe. This concept of the inseparability of civilization and barbarism, a recurring theme in Benjamin, deeply influenced the Frankfurt School. Jeffries cites the “Theses” as the basis of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the most prominent single work of the Frankfurt School. In that book’s preface, the authors say they set out to do “nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.” They argue that Nazi totalitarianism was not a historical aberration. It was rooted in

capitalism, in the Enlightenment, and in Western civilization.⁵

Horkheimer and Adorno contend that Enlightenment reasoning has become subjective and instrumental, no longer pursuing the discovery of objective universal truths, true human values, or the justice and injustice of actions and institutions. They argue that there is a controlling imperative that capitalist firms maximize profits without regard to the consequences. At the same time, they argue that when rational participants in the economy maximize their satisfactions, they make use of instrumental reason and strategic calculations that show the amoral nature of capitalism and its tendency to promote any arbitrary or even evil purpose, including fascism, for the sake of economic gain.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the modern scientific method also embodies instrumental reasoning, since its purpose is to exploit both nature and humankind. The social and the natural sciences have become tools for use by capitalist oppressors. The economic structure of society now shapes the problems science addresses and the direction of scientific work. Moreover, the scientific picture of the world implicit in “positivism”—which Adorno and Horkheimer saw as dominant in Western philosophy—distorts reality by insisting that truth could only be arrived at through observations of the external world and mathematical or logical operations involving those observations, with no regard for moral or aesthetic values.

In the 1960s Karl Popper defended the scientific method against Horkheimer and Adorno’s attacks, in the so-called “positivism dispute.” He argued that the scientific method rose above class interests; for all its shortcomings when applied to the social sciences, it was the only way to critically engage in a disinterested search for truth. Critical theory falls far short in this regard because of its social and political radicalism.

In the chapter “The Culture Industry—Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” which Adorno wrote, he cites the pervasiveness of capitalist ideology in American mass culture and ruthlessly criticizes what he calls “The Culture Industry.” He depicts popular music, radio, television, Hollywood movies, and advertising as mindless and oppressive. (This condemnation of popular culture and music has promoted charges of elitism and even racism, in Adorno’s attitudes toward jazz.) Mass culture is not the result of self-expression by ordinary people but an artificial concoction imposed from above to distract and deter them from engaging in genuinely valuable and fulfilling activities. Adorno says that within capitalism the alleged freedom to choose that drives mass culture and capitalist consumerism is only an illusion, an ideology, which always reflects economic coercion.

Adorno is generally regarded as the most philosophically complex member of the Frankfurt School.⁶ His critiques of Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger are the focus of *Adorno and Existence*, a perceptive philosophical inquiry by the Harvard intellectual historian Peter Gordon. Adorno condemns the self-focus and subjectivity of the existentialism of Heidegger

and Sartre and the phenomenology of Husserl. As Gordon explains, for Adorno, the “jargon of authenticity” in twentieth-century existentialism was the ultimate exercise in bourgeois narcissism and self-absorption, a refusal to face up to social realities. He considered “authenticity” in Heidegger and other “philosophers of fascism” a façade for anti-Semitism.

Gordon insightfully discusses the critique of Heidegger and existentialist ontology that Adorno presents in his main philosophical work, *Negative Dialectics* (1966). A major theme of this work is the mistaken focus on the subject of self-consciousness that has epitomized modern philosophy since Descartes and that is especially pronounced in the idealism of Kant and Hegel. Their “fallacy of constitutive subjectivity” ignores what Adorno calls “the primacy of the object,” or the crucial part played by material and social reality and historical circumstances in shaping consciousness and self-awareness.

According to Adorno, idealism misconceives the subjectivity of the self and its relationship to the world: it regards the self as ultimately constituting reality—“the absolute I as the world’s source.” The “sovereign mind” refuses to tolerate the idea of the objectivity of nature as prior to and independent of the self’s subjectivity. This is idealism’s “rage against nature,” which aims to conquer and subdue all that is “not-I” or different from itself, and regard it as inferior. Adorno sees existentialism as a failed attempt to break free of idealism’s subjectivity. He conceives that his own philosophical efforts are successful in achieving such freedom.⁷

Adorno and Horkheimer were consummate pessimists. Erich Fromm was more optimistic, as was Herbert Marcuse to a lesser degree. Both remained in the US after Adorno and Horkheimer returned to Frankfurt in 1949. Fromm led the Frankfurt School’s turn toward Freud in the 1930s, but he was dismissed from the institute in 1939 on grounds that his interpretations of Freud were unorthodox.⁸ Defying Marx and Freud, Fromm’s “socialist humanism” maintains that autonomous individuals can free themselves from the determinism of both instinct and society in order to achieve limited self-transformation, freedom, and genuine love, even under capitalist conditions.

Marcuse was a leading theorist of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s. In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964),⁹ he contends that rising standards of living made the working classes too comfortable to revolt against capitalism, while consumerism and pop culture joined religion as opiates of the masses. The working classes, he argued, should feel a need to revolt as a result of prevailing conditions of self-alienation and unfreedom. For Marcuse, members of a capitalist society are estranged from themselves, from their work, and from one another. He argues that we are shackled to the consumption of material goods and to the emptiness of popular culture. The false demands of consumerism drive us to work far more than necessary. Our tastes are manipulated, and we lack the freedom to discern our “true needs.”

Marcuse’s argument in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) is more optimistic. There, against Freud,

he advocates the unleashing of the pleasure principle and sexuality in order to defy bourgeois morality and create a revolutionary consciousness by fusing Reason and Eros: “The striving for lasting gratification makes not only for an enlarged order of libidinal relations (‘community’) but also...Eros redefines reason in its own terms. Reasonable is what sustains the order of gratification.” Marcuse was evidently half right according to his own scheme: “Libidinal relations” have “enlarged,” but revolutionary consciousness has not; capitalism and its ideology are more ascendant than ever.

The Frankfurt School categorizes capitalist society’s idea of freedom as, to use Isaiah Berlin’s term, no more than “negative liberty,” or “freedom from” others’ interference. This leads to the atomization of society. “Positive freedom,” in contrast, permits people to act in ways that realize true human values. This form of liberty becomes possible only with socioeconomic change that ends the alienation of individuals from themselves and others.

Liberalism holds that individuals should be free to decide for themselves what is good and to act on their preferences and choices. Capitalism in principle complements the liberal view of human value, since supply is responsive to demand and the system (allegedly) tends to maximize satisfactions of subjective preferences—those people pay for. Beneath the Frankfurt School’s relentless criticism of capitalism and its culture lies a rejection of liberalism and subjective value, motivated by a kind of ethical perfectionism.

These thinkers do not care about the satisfaction of desire or consumer preference for its own sake. Their writing incorporates an ever-present but never clearly enunciated view that “emancipation” consists in the self-realization of “true human needs and values.” This is to be accomplished through the exercise and development of distinct human capacities as all members of society engage in such rewarding activities as democratic participation in production, politics, and culture. For the Frankfurt School, capitalist consumer culture makes emancipation impossible because it generates false needs that become strong desires. These are not demanded by nature or required by the self-development of human capacities or other forces of production; nor are they necessitated as preconditions for realizing true human values.

Although Frankfurt School members thought Marx exaggerated the importance of labor in his critique of capitalism,¹⁰ they too recognized as a fundamental problem what they took to be



Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Paul Klee: Angelus Novus, 1920. Walter Benjamin owned the drawing and wrote of it, ‘This is how the Angel of History must look. His face is turned toward the past.’

capitalism's encouragement of false pursuits and purposes that prevent the autonomous realization of true human values. They indicted the capitalist system's utilitarian emphasis on maximizing wealth and, therewith, economic satisfactions of desires, as well as its reduction of reason to purely instrumental thinking aimed at controlling nature and humankind. They also condemned capitalism's manipulation, by advertising and other means, of people's preferences for consumer goods and its suppression of human creativity, spontaneity, and freedom of the self.

The Frankfurt School's leading theorists were neither skeptics about truth nor relativists about value.¹¹ The phrase "false consciousness" suggests that people have a misconception of reality and hold false beliefs and values. But the Frankfurt School never articulated an explicit statement of true human values or a theory of society wherein such values could be realized. This was not because they were relativists but rather because they were pessimists about the validity of philosophical and ethical knowledge under capitalism.

Jürgen Habermas is the primary representative of the second generation of the Frankfurt School. He is regarded in the US as the major German philosopher and social theorist of the past forty-five years. Stefan Müller-Doohm's biography is a thorough, detailed chronicle of Habermas's intellectual career.

Habermas came to Frankfurt in 1956 to be Adorno's research assistant. He remained for five years and then accepted academic posts at various German institutions. He eventually returned to the University of Frankfurt in 1983, retiring in 1993. Throughout his career, he has made many substantial contributions to philosophy, sociology, political theory, and cultural criticism. He has also been a committed public intellectual in Germany since the early 1950s, when he publicly challenged Heidegger to explain what he meant by the "inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism—a claim Heidegger had made in 1935 in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, and which he left intact, without alteration or explanation, in the 1953 reissue of the book.

Habermas does not closely identify with the Frankfurt School's main ideas, though he admits to being influenced by them in his early work from the 1960s: "I started from the black-on-black of the older Critical Theory, which had worked through experiences of fascism and Stalinism.... [But] our situation after 1945 was different." Like members of the Frankfurt School, Habermas initially regarded illusions about social and economic relations engendered by late capitalist culture as an impediment to individual and political autonomy. But he rejected Adorno and Horkheimer's argument about Enlightenment reasoning:

I do not share the basic premise of Critical Theory, the premise that instrumental reason has gained such dominance that there is really no way out of a total system of delusion, in which insight is achieved only in flashes by isolated individuals.

In place of the pessimistic “negative dialectic” of the Frankfurt School and its comparisons of capitalism with fascism, Habermas offers reasons for hope. He foresees the possibility of a positive transformation of capitalist society into a democratic society of “domination-free communication” whose members are aware of and can publicly acknowledge and accept the bases of their social relations and democratically decide their own fate. These conditions, he writes, are essential to overcoming the illusions caused by ideology.

For Habermas, the most distinctive feature of our species is not social interaction through labor, as it was for Marx, but social interaction through “discourse” and “communication.” He contends that mutual understanding is the proper end of human discourse and the source of solidarity in society. The task of critical theory is to discern the formal conditions of ideal discourse that make possible communication that is free from domination by any participant or anyone else, enabling individuals to reach understanding of themselves and one another. Only then can emancipation and autonomy be attained.

Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality and ideal discourse is, as Jeffries remarks, more liberal than socialist. He remains critical of capitalism, not because of markets, which he endorses,¹² but rather because of the concentration of ownership of capital and the distorting effects of wealth on political democracy. Unlike the neo-Marxist members of the Frankfurt School, Habermas rejects communism and advocates a liberal democratic constitution, a market economy, and a social democratic welfare state that protects workers’ rights of representation and codetermination in corporate decisions.

A liberal constitutional order is also implicit in Habermas’s account of the conditions of ideal discourse. It is a necessary condition of rational communication and mutual understanding. In order to make effective use of their liberties and engage in deliberative democratic discourse, democratic citizens must be guaranteed equal basic rights and liberties and have adequate resources.

As Jeffries observes, Habermas has developed the most elaborate and systematic philosophical and social theory since Kant and Hegel. And as John Rawls said to me, he is also the first major German philosopher since Kant to endorse and conscientiously defend liberalism and constitutional democracy. Therein lies much of Habermas’s historical significance, especially in view of the rejection of democratic liberalism by Hegel, Schopenhauer, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and most of the Frankfurt School.

Before returning to Germany from California in 1949, Adorno and others conducted a study published as *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Its purpose was to identify a “new anthropological type” that was inclined to identify with authoritarian leaders. A questionnaire designed to measure and rank people by their fascist potential—the “F-scale”—was developed and administered to 2,099 people. All were white, gentile, middle-class Americans.

Adorno describes the authoritarian personality by referring to nine personality traits:

- Rigid adherence to conventional, middle-class values.
- Submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealised moral authorities of the in-group.
- Opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded.
- Tendency to...condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values.
- The belief in mystical determinants of the individual's fate....
- Preoccupation with the dominance- submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension; identification with power figures....
- Generalised hostility, vilification of the human.
- The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses.
- Exaggerated concern with sexual "goings-on."

The F-scale was widely criticized for many shortcomings, including its presumption that conservatism and authoritarianism were closely related. Critics wondered why authoritarianism was not linked to communism and suggested that a clearer contrast exists between liberal democracy and totalitarianism on both the left and right. Though the Frankfurt School strongly condemned Soviet totalitarianism, it did not do so to the same degree as it condemned Nazism. This was partly because of members' personal experiences as German Jews whose world had been obliterated by fascism.

Jeffries adds that the Frankfurt School refused to lump together Soviet totalitarianism and fascism and condemn both because they saw domination of some form in all societies, including liberal capitalist ones. It is this tendency of Adorno's, Horkheimer's, and Marcuse's work to criticize as fascist what we now consider ordinary—shopping and consumer society, popular music and culture, radio and TV, advertising—that makes the Frankfurt School seem most distant from modern liberal sensibilities. We may sometimes lament capitalist excesses and be bothered by the emptiness of consumerism, but few of us condemn capitalism as a moral corruption of the self that prevents us from realizing true human values or from knowing the truth about ourselves and our social relations.

Recent developments suggest, however, that the Frankfurt School's critique may have a new timeliness. The recent presidential election used authoritarian tactics of misrepresentation and

manipulation of belief addressed to people who were particularly susceptible to such methods; it resulted in the near-complete victory of a political party that now combines a libertarian program of the privatization (if not elimination) of many public functions and dominance by concentrated capitalist wealth; and it put into office a president who is deliberately divisive and has authoritarian inclinations, no apparent respect for truth or for democratic institutions, and little comprehension of or concern for the public good. However distant the Frankfurt School's indictment of capitalism's alliance with authoritarianism once seemed, its criticisms are not irrelevant now as we face increasing nativism, unthinking trust in a demagogue and in economic power, as well as antipathy to science and reasoned argument, and eagerness to embrace a regime of disinformation and manipulation.

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- 1 Other important members were Friedrich Pollock, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, the Marxist economist Henryk Grossman, and Leo Löwenthal, who taught sociology at Berkeley until the late 1980s and was the last member of the first generation of the Frankfurt School to die, in 1993. ↵
 - 2 These were published in English in 1968 in a volume of Benjamin's essays entitled *Illuminations*, edited with a notable introduction by Hannah Arendt. See also Mark Lilla's "The Riddle of Walter Benjamin" in these pages, May 25, 1995, which reviews Benjamin's collected correspondence. Lilla regrets Benjamin's influence among postmodernists and argues that they distort his real concerns. See also Charles Rosen's review of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in these pages, November 10, 1977. ↵
 - 3 There is some speculation, which Jeffries finds dubious, that Benjamin was murdered by Stalin's agents. See Edward Rothstein, "Connections: A Daring Theory That Stalin Had Walter Benjamin Murdered," *The New York Times*, June 30, 2001. ↵
 - 4 The sentence is inscribed on Benjamin's gravestone in Port Bou. ↵
 - 5 Adorno later spoke of "the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz." ↵
 - 6 Adorno also was a classical pianist, studied composition with Alban Berg, composed atonal music, and wrote numerous essays on modernism in art and music. Some of these (on Mahler, Schoenberg, and Zemlinsky, among other subjects) make major contributions to the understanding of modern music. See "Why Read Adorno?" by Roger Scruton in *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* (Continuum, 2009). But Adorno also notoriously argued that jazz was suitable for fascism and "simply glorifies oppression." ↵
 - 7 Gordon also explains how Adorno dismissed Sartre and the French existentialists for their reliance on "the old idealist category of the free act of the subject." They allegedly ignore the cultural conditions of "unfreedom" imposed on ostensibly free choice and the fact that we are hopelessly immersed in false beliefs and values. Existentialists' spontaneous acts of "unconditional freedom" are illusory. See *Negative Dialectics*, p. 50. ↵
 - 8 He denied the Oedipal complex and rejected Freud's suggestion that there can be no harmony between self and society. ↵
 - 9 See George Lichtheim's review in these pages, February 20, 1964, and an exchange of letters between Georg H. Fromm, William Leiss, John David Ober, Arno Waserman, Edward J. Wilkins, et al., and Lichtheim, March 19, 1964. ↵
 - 10 Jeffries writes that "scepticism about humans defining and liberating themselves through work was to become a hallmark of critical theory as it evolved from the 1930s onward." Adorno remarked, he notes, that Marx wanted to turn the world into "a gigantic workhouse." And Benjamin said that the "vulgar-Marxist" conception of labor "already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism." ↵
 - 11 Adorno said, "bourgeois skepticism, of which relativism is the doctrinal embodiment, is obtuse." Moreover, "relativism...has at all times been linked with moments of reaction, beginning with the sophists' availability to the more powerful interests." *Negative Dialectics*, p. 37. ↵
 - 12 In his 1990 article "What Does Socialism Mean Today?," Habermas says, "the revolutionary changes taking place before our eyes teach us an unambiguous lesson: complex societies are unable to reproduce themselves if they do not leave the logic of an economy that regulates itself through the market intact." See *New Left Review* Vol. 183, No. 1 (September–October 1990). ↵

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