

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL REVISITED

AND OTHER ESSAYS ON
POLITICS AND SOCIETY



RICHARD WOLIN

**THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL
REVISITED**

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For K. L.

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Preface

The Frankfurt School has established itself as an inescapable point of reference for debates in a wide variety of fields in the academy and elsewhere. Its contributions to the study of fascism, cultural studies, philosophy of history, and, more recently, the burgeoning field of democratic theory have become integral components of contemporary scholarly and public discourse. Jürgen Habermas's wide-ranging philosophical work on communicative reason, law, and democratic theory — not to mention his timely, polemical political interventions — have had an immense international impact. His ideas have gone far toward ensuring Critical Theory's continued theoretical and political relevance. To summarize: it would be difficult to imagine the landscape of contemporary thought shorn of the influences of Frankfurt School luminaries such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Habermas, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse.

One of the problems with Critical Theory's reception has been that, whereas its key ideas — Adorno's concept of a “totally administered world,” for example — were formulated during an era of unremitting political dictatorship (the 1940s), the contemporary situation is radically different. We are the distinct beneficiaries of the so-called Third Wave of democratization. Thus, despite the very real problems of “failed states” and massive, neoliberal-induced economic inequality, there also exists an unprecedented international political consensus about the value of human rights, government by consent of the

governed, and popular sovereignty. When viewed in this optic, the Frankfurt School's trademark theoretical pessimism seems distinctly misplaced. From the standpoint of logics of democratization, the Federal Republic of Germany is a remarkable political success story, far exceeding the Critical Theorists' own expectations. This example, along with others such as Eastern Europe during the 1990s, suggests that hope for incremental political betterment is hardly a lost cause. In light of these recent successes, one need not rely exclusively on a quasi-theological "longing for the totally Other" as the later Horkheimer once proposed.

The Frankfurt School's reception in North America has experienced various rhythms. The initial wave during the 1970s followed the waning of the New Left and complemented the widespread influence, a decade earlier, of Herbert Marcuse's writings. Since Frankfurt School thinkers like Adorno, Marcuse, and Benjamin made so many landmark contributions to cultural theory, during the 1980s an attempt arose to amalgamate their perspective with the nascent field of "cultural studies." Their work was assimilated to what Fredric Jameson has labeled "The Cultural Turn." Nevertheless, skeptics appropriately wondered whether the turn toward *cultural* politics represented a flight from *movement* politics. One of the major flaws of "identity politics" — the political corollary of the cultural studies movement — is that it was self-marginalizing and unable to form coalitions with those possessing other identities and political interests.

More recently, representatives of the cultural left have sought to reconcile the Frankfurt School's negative philosophy of history, as developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), with poststructuralism. Both theoretical currents subscribe to the narrative of modernity as a story of decline. In the Frankfurt School perspective, modernity signifies the wholesale triumph of *instrumental reason*: the reduction of persons and things to mere "stuff of domination," a process that culminated in totalitarianism. Among the leading poststructuralist thinkers, Foucault's understanding of modernity as the triumph of the "disciplinary society" purveys a parallel narrative. Reason and autonomy, the purported vehicles of our emancipation, have merely inscribed us more deeply in the infernal machine of "carceralism" — or so the argument goes. It is in this sense that the French philosopher's famous — and controversial — dictum, "*Raison, c'est la torture*," must be understood.

The reception of Habermas's work, which I discuss in Part II, has often proceeded at cross-purposes with that of the first-generation Frankfurters. In 1985, he published *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* in which he articulated his theoretical differences with the poststructuralists as well as with his Frankfurt School mentors, Horkheimer and Adorno. Habermas's concern was that by denigrating

modernity's emancipatory promise, the first-generation Frankfurters, along with their kindred spirits in Paris (Foucault, Derrida, etc.), preempted the possibility of meaningful political intervention. Instead, both groups sought refuge in the realm of "metapolitics": dyspeptic, antimodernist jeremiads that belittled the prospect of progressive social change. After all, from a "totally administered world" — to employ Adorno's pet Kafkaesque epithet — little good can emerge.

Habermas's theory of communicative action, conversely, revolves around the idea of *redeeming* or *fulfilling* modernity's emancipatory potential. He suggests that modernity's egalitarian promise can be discerned in the progression from civil to political to social rights, as outlined in T. H. Marshall's pathbreaking work, *Citizenship and Social Class*. More recently, neoliberalism and globalization have placed the postwar welfare state consensus at risk. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the only way to counteract the depredations of neoliberalism is by extending the logics of democratization, not regressing behind them. Conceptions of global civil society as well as recent developments in the realm of humanitarian international law point hopefully in this direction.

The appearance of this book owes much to the unstinting generosity of colleagues, friends, and associates. Without their support, it is doubtful whether the project would have come to fruition at all.

At the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, President (and former Provost) William Kelly has created a wonderful working environment from which I and other faculty members have benefited greatly. In the history program, Josh Freeman has been an unfailingly understanding and sympathetic department chair. And the encouragement of Ruth O'Brien, chair of political science, has been, at several points, absolutely crucial.

It has been a great pleasure to work with Rob Tempio, my editor at Routledge. Rob's professionalism, dedication, and promptness, at every step of the publishing process, have been extremely welcome. All authors should be so lucky to have an editor like Rob.

In spring 2005 I was fortunate to be invited to teach in the Philosophy Department at the University of Paris-X, Nanterre. I would like to thank my gracious host, Emmanuel Faye, for the wonderful opportunity to teach at Nanterre — a university with a storied political past — and for the nonpareil hospitality that he and Gwenola Sigen lavished upon me throughout my stay. I would additionally like to thank Jean-Pierre and Marie-Odile Faye for a truly memorable dinner on rue de Varennes — in the former apartment of André Gide, no less!

My graduate students — Italia Colabianchi, Brian Fox, Jessica Hammerman, and Edwin Tucker — have always been a source of lively intellectual feedback. Their material and logistical assistance in completing various writing projects has been invaluable. I reserve a

special thanks, however, for Martin Woessner, who read a penultimate version of many of these chapters and unfailingly provided constructive and astute commentary.

Four years ago, Jerrold Seigel and I convened the New York Area Seminar in Intellectual and Cultural History. The seminar has proved a bountiful source of intellectual stimulation. Moreover, I have been the grateful beneficiary of Jerry's magnanimous collegiality and boundless theoretical breadth.

Most of the chapters that comprise *The Frankfurt School Revisited* were presented as invited lectures at various university or public venues. The majority have remained, until now, unpublished. All have been revised for this volume — some quite substantially.

Chapter 1, "Between Proust and the *Zohar*: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*," was presented in February 2003 at a seminar in the Comparative Literature Department at Yale University as part of the Baldwin-Dahl lecture series.

Chapter 2, "The Adorno Centennial: The Apotheosis of Negative Dialectics," is published for the first time.

Chapter 3, "What Is Heideggerian Marxism?", was presented at a Heidegger symposium at the University of Kentucky in November 2003.

Chapter 4, "Critical Reflections on Marcuse's Theory of Revolution," was a lecture delivered at the Marcuse Centennial conference at the University of California, Berkeley in November 1998.

Chapter 5, "The Lion in Winter: Leo Lowenthal and the Integrity of the Intellectual," was presented at an April 2003 conference in honor of Leo Lowenthal, also at University of California, Berkeley.

Chapter 6, "Levinas and Heidegger: The Anxiety of Influence", was presented at a November 2004 University of Illinois, Chicago conference on Heidegger's Jewish students.

Chapter 7, "Karl Jaspers: The Paradoxes of Mandarin Humanism," is published for the first time.

Chapter 8, "What We Can Learn from the Revolutions of 1989," appeared in *Common Knowledge* and is reprinted with permission.

Chapter 9, "From the 'Death of Man' to Human Rights: The Paradigm Change in French Intellectual Life, 1968–86," was presented at a September 2004 conference on "Historicizing Postmodernism" hosted by the Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley.

Chapter 10, "The Republican Revival: Reflections on French Singularity," was presented at an April 2004 conference on "French Liberalism: New French Thought Now" at Columbia University.

"Postscript Hexagon Fever," appeared in the Winter 2004 issue of *Dissent* and is reprinted with permission.

Chapter 12, “What Is Global Democracy?”, was presented at a May 2004 DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) conference on “Democratization” at the University of Minnesota.

Chapter 13, “Religion and Public Reason: A Contemporary Debate,” was presented at a conference on “Religion, Philosophy, and Society” in honor of Jürgen Habermas in Lodz, Poland in April 2005.

Chapter 14, “The Disoriented Left: A Critique of Left Schmittianism,” was presented in May 2005 as a lecture in a symposium on political ideologies at the University of Paris-X, Nanterre.

An earlier version of Chapter 15, “Kant at Ground Zero: Philosophers Respond to September 11,” appeared in *The New Republic* in January 2004. Thanks are due to TNR Literary Editor Leon Wieseltier for some astute suggestions for revision.

Introduction

I

Could it be that the Frankfurt School's North American reception has been the product of a colossal misunderstanding? Unaccountably, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* — written between 1941–1944, published in 1947 — has become Critical Theory's signature text. Yet, if one closely surveys the Frankfurt School's *oeuvre* — an output spanning four decades — one realizes the degree to which the book's themes are at odds with the School's dominant theoretical tendencies.

Conceived in the 1930s, Critical Theory aimed at a balanced integration of philosophy and the social sciences. In the words of *spiritus rector* Max Horkheimer, its goal was the pursuit of “interdisciplinary materialism.” Traditionally, philosophy reasoned about values or ultimate ends. Yet, to its detriment, it neglected the sphere of reality or concrete existence in terms of which alone its ideals might become genuinely meaningful or lived. The social sciences, for their part, squandered their energies in an unreflective pursuit of “facts.” Their antipathy to “values” — a legacy of positivism — meant that frequently the data they produced bore little relationship to genuine human needs. Worse still, their fetishization of expertise was often antidemocratic and abetted the forces of political technocracy.

We now know that, on circumstantial grounds, Horkheimer's original program was prevented from coming to fruition. Hitler's January 1933 seizure of power forced the Frankfurt School thinkers into exile. For a time, Horkheimer and company tried to keep the flame of interdisciplinary materialism alive. Critical Theory's original program had been integrally tied to the goals of progressive politics as defined by the

idea of democratic socialism. But, given the challenges and rigors of exile, this political edge became increasingly difficult to sustain.

In one of his early writings, Marx poetically described philosophy as the “head” of human emancipation and the proletariat as its “heart.” The term Critical Theory itself had been conceived as a euphemism for a reflective, nondogmatic Marxism. But as the 1930s progressed, Critical Theory metamorphosed into a school of social philosophy that was deprived of a political addressee. Its members became radical intellectuals without a following. The Frankfurt School’s political expectations had been kindled by the short-lived wave of “council republics” (*Räterepublik*) that mushroomed throughout Central Europe and Russia following the Great War. But the 1930s — W. H. Auden’s “low, dishonest decade” — demonstrated that a different political reality, *fascism*, had become the order of the day. At this point it seemed that the best one could do was to prevent the worst.

In this way the idea of Critical Theory as a “message-in-a-bottle” (*Flaschenpost*) originated. Although its themes and concerns might be destined to fall on deaf ears for the time being, perhaps an unnamed future generation would seize the baton — as indeed happened during the 1960s, when student radicals honed their criticisms of advanced industrial society with pirate editions of Frankfurt School texts in hand. By the same token, during the 1930s Horkheimer and company did not go into a holding pattern. Instead, they focused their energies on preserving a level of theoretical cogency and insight that would, in the years to come, serve as a beacon for a broad stratum of intellectuals and opinion-leaders.

In programmatic essays such as “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937), Horkheimer concluded that, in lieu of viable progressive politics, emancipatory ideals had sought refuge in the concept of Reason. After all, had not philosophy’s mission been to adumbrate and project humanity’s highest aspirations and goals? Therein lay its utopian dimension. Metaphysics delineated conceptions of “truth,” “beauty,” “justice,” and “goodness” that, at a later point, an informed citizenry would try to realize in practice. Here one can see that Horkheimer’s ideas about the relationship between theory and practice were never far removed from Marx’s youthful notion of philosophy as the “head” and the proletariat as the “heart” of political emancipation.

What alarmed Horkheimer during the 1930s were “anti-intellectual” theoretical currents that rejected metaphysics outright for along with metaphysics, they seemingly renounced all prospects for human betterment.

One formidable opponent was logical positivism, which sought to reduce valid knowledge to what could be specified in so-called “protocol

sentences.” Meaning in general was narrowly reduced to circumstances that could be empirically verified. All the rest — poetry, morality, the *summum bonum* or “highest good” — were dismissed as essentially *meaningless*: the stuff of human reverie on a starry night. As Rudolf Carnap observed in what would become one of logical positivism’s defining claims: “In the domain of metaphysics, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative results that *the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless*.”¹ Since they could not be verified by the procedures of logical analysis, evaluative claims concerning justice and morality bore no relationship to “truth.” In the concluding aphorism to the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein gave consummate expression to this standpoint by declaring that, “*What we cannot speak of, we must pass over in silence*.” The problem was that, by narrowly equating “reason” with scientific procedure, logical positivism deprived human concerns of their truth-relatedness — and, by association, of philosophical seriousness.

The other theoretical current Horkheimer sought to thwart was *Lebensphilosophie* or “philosophy of life” which, since the turn of the century, had made significant inroads in German intellectual life. In certain respects, *Lebensphilosophie* served as a necessary counterweight to the predominant scientific tendencies of the age. It celebrated “life,” intuition, empathy, and mood as possessing an existential superiority that surpassed the capacities of analytical reason. According to this perspective, the unreflected immediacy of “life” contained a plentitude and richness that the intellect merely contaminated. The conceptual opposition at issue was well conveyed by the title of Ludwig Klages’ 1932 opus, *The Intellect as Antagonist of the Soul* (*Geist als Widersacher der Seele*).

Philosophy of life harbored an ideological dimension that, for anyone concerned with contemporary politics, remained impossible to ignore. Many of its representatives openly glorified the forces of instinct, blood, and racial belonging. Moreover, following a precedent set by Plato, philosophers of life generally perceived democracy as a degenerate form of political rule — a form appropriate to the decadent West. Little wonder that many members of the right-wing Weimar intelligentsia who were influenced by *Lebensphilosophie* viewed the Nazi seizure of power sympathetically.

Today, when one thinks of Critical Theory’s animating spirits, the names of Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno leap to mind. The two co-authored *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. And, following Horkheimer’s retirement in 1959, it was Adorno who succeeded him as director of the Institute for Social Research.

By the same token, it is important to realize that Adorno was a relative latecomer to the Institute in its halcyon, prewar period.

Unlike the other Frankfurt School members who, by 1934, had emigrated to the United States, Adorno remained in Germany until 1935. He had hoped — unrealistically, as it turned out — that the political storm unleashed by Nazism might pass quickly. In the mid-1930s, Adorno accepted a fellowship at Oxford University, where he busied himself writing a withering critique of Husserl, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*. Although he had already made several important contributions to Critical Theory's theoretical organ, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, only belatedly, in 1938, did he finally join up with Horkheimer and other members of the Institute for Social Research in New York.

In 1941, Horkheimer, faced with financial constraints and health concerns, summarily dissolved the Institute. This was also the year that the last issue of the *Zeitschrift* appeared, under a new title (*Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*) and, for the first time, in English. Institute members Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Franz Neumann sought jobs with a new intelligence organ, the Organization of Strategic Services (OSS), to help the American government decipher information received from Nazi-dominated Europe and, thereby, to assist in the struggle against fascism.

Horkheimer, for his part, had long contemplated writing a major work on dialectics. He had always chafed under his burdensome administrative responsibilities as the Institute's director, which he believed interfered with his theoretical work. With the Institute's dissolution, he was free of these duties. He had also long been impressed both by Adorno's philosophical brilliance as well as his limitless capacity for work. In this way the idea developed of repairing with Adorno to Pacific Palisades, California and finally setting to work on the dialectics book, whose content was still under discussion.

Since there exist a number of excellent accounts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* main argument, in the context at hand there is little need to recapitulate it in detail. However, it is worth pointing out that Adorno's background differed considerably from the other Institute members. Adorno was philosophically trained, whereas his Institute cohorts were much more favorably disposed toward the social sciences. Unlike Frankfurt School mainstays such as Erich Fromm, Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neumann, and Friedrich Pollock — to say nothing of Horkheimer himself — Adorno was never attracted to the methods and goals of "interdisciplinary materialism." Instead, following Walter Benjamin's lead, his paratactic approach to philosophizing, which he later termed thinking in "constellations," sought to "explode idealism from within" — that is, intra-philosophically.

Dialectic of Enlightenment is a peculiar book. In fact, it is hardly a "book" in the customary sense, as its subtitle, "Philosophical Fragments,"

betrays. It opens with a programmatic discussion of Enlightenment, which states the central thesis: Enlightenment seeks to undermine “myth,” yet, in doing so, Enlightenment itself rigidifies into a new form of myth: the reduction of “reason” to the claims of “positive science.” Two “Excurses” ensue: “The Odyssey or Myth and Enlightenment,” and “Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality.” There follows the path-breaking chapter on “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Realizing how deadly serious was Nazi anti-Semitism (a phenomenon that most thinkers on the Left preferred to ignore), the authors present a suggestive, if sketchy, theoretical explanation in the last chapter, “Elements of Anti-Semitism.” Finally, as almost an afterthought, one finds a series of uncollated and disparate “Notes and Drafts” — thought-provoking material on a wide range of topics that the authors added in rather slapdash fashion.

How precisely the various chapters and excurses are meant to relate to one another is never clearly stated. How one might go about unifying a study that leaps from (1) Homer to (2) the Marquis de Sade to (3) Mickey Mouse (in the “Culture Industry” chapter) to (4) Auschwitz is anybody’s guess. Undoubtedly, over the years the text’s fragmentary nature has, in Benjaminian fashion, enhanced its mystique or aura. As such, the book is something of a Rorschach test: the thematic purview is so wide-ranging that there is seemingly something for everyone. Among Frankfurt School devotees, it continues to enjoy cult status.

Yet, beyond the book’s mesmerizing individual chapters, its basic intellectual demarche implores critical scrutiny. The authors’ starting point is Europe’s “regression to barbarism” during the 1930s and 1940s — National Socialism. But is the strategy of searching for Nazism’s origins in the Age of Enlightenment plausible? Were not in fact Nazism and the Enlightenment *ideological opposites*? As Goebbels remarked following Hitler’s seizure of power: “The year 1789 is hereby effaced from history.”² Whereas the Enlightenment openly embraced cosmopolitanism and kindred values, Nazism was an unregenerate racist dictatorship. Here, it seems, Adorno borrowed too readily from the lexicon and habitudes of 1920s *Kulturkritik*: from the likes of Spengler, Klages, and similar spirits, all of whom displayed a marked antipathy toward “modernity.”

Let there be no mistake: trying to saddle the Enlightenment with responsibility for Nazism is an arch-conservative interpretive strategy. According to this optic, Nazism, like the French Revolution, was a product of the dissolution of the *ancien regime* and the rise of modern “society.” All in all, the *ancien regime* played a positive role insofar as it furnished ruling elites who kept the unwashed masses in their places, at a remove from the corridors of power. Fascism’s origins thus lie in the “revolt of the masses” (Ortega y Gasset): their involvement in political

rule, for which they are constitutionally unsuited. However, one of the genuine shortcomings of this interpretation is that Nazism's German specificity — the persistence of authoritarian patterns of socialization; a pronounced ideological hostility to Western values (democracy, basic rights, and so forth) — fades from view.

As has often been remarked, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* signifies Critical Theory's passage from Marx to Nietzsche. By the same token, the book represents an abandonment of the methods of immanent criticism in favor of the Nietzschean practice of total critique. In the authors' view, the failings of modern society can no longer be remedied from within. Instead, à la Nietzsche, modernity is viewed as a degenerate social form, a manifestation of decline (*Verfallsform*). The authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* unreservedly embrace Nietzsche's "critique of reason." Reason has ceased to be an indispensable ally in the struggle for emancipation. Instead, it has become a mechanism of domination *simpliciter*.

By accepting a Nietzschean view of reason, Horkheimer and Adorno bid adieu prematurely to the project of human self-determination. Ever since Socrates, the idea of human freedom was tied to a *dialectic of insight and emancipation*. This standpoint was expressed in classical Socratic adages such as "The unexamined life is not worth living." In other words: self-knowledge is the key to the "good life" or human flourishing. In the modern age, this skein was taken up by Marx and Freud. Marx perceived "class consciousness," or historical self-awareness, as the prerequisite for working class emancipation. Similarly, Freud viewed self-understanding as the key to individuation or ego autonomy, as in the maxim "Where id was, there ego shall be."

The problem is that once reason is equated with domination as in Nietzsche, one severs the link between insight and emancipation. A radical hermeneutics of suspicion like Nietzsche's or Heidegger's ultimately becomes self-canceling. By denigrating reflexivity and insight, it risks depriving us of the means of our emancipation.

Yet another circumstantial peculiarity of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* bears scrutiny. We have already remarked that, as a collection of disparate philosophical fragments, the work is a torso. But in addition the text in its current form was never meant to stand alone. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was conceived as part one of a projected two-volume study. It presented a *negative* treatment of the Enlightenment that the authors intended to supplement with a book-length examination of Enlightenment's *positive* side. Unfortunately, the second part remained unwritten. Thus, to accept *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* pessimistic conclusions at face value — standing Hegel on his head, the authors interpret modernity as "progress in domination" rather than "progress in the consciousness of freedom" — is misleading. For the authors' ultimate

intentions cannot be discerned unless one simultaneously takes into account the Enlightenment's constructive contributions to human development.

Although *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Part II, was never written, we do have determinate indications as to its likely content and direction. Horkheimer openly discusses his ideas for Part II in letters. In addition, many of these notions found their way into his 1947 book *The Eclipse of Reason* — a work that possesses a number similarities with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but which also contains some crucial differences of emphasis.

The opposition animating *Eclipse of Reason* is one between subjective and objective reason. Subjective or “instrumental” reason is a reason of means. Given a pre-established goal or end, it proceeds to determine the most efficient path of reaching that end. Since subjective reason is agnostic about ends, it is essentially “amoral.” In *Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer's concern is that the dialectic of civilization results in objective reason's displacement at the hands of subjective reason.

Eclipse of Reason differs from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in one significant respect. Whereas *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, following Nietzsche, associates reason with domination, and thus views it in essence as a mechanism of social control, *Eclipse of Reason* limits this association to the case of *subjective reason alone*. For Horkheimer, “objective reason,” or “metaphysics,” possesses indubitable positive value. Unlike subjective reason, it is capable of normatively adjudicating among ends: moral and immoral, just and unjust, and so forth. Were humanity to lose sight of this capacity entirely, the result would be unchecked nihilism — the uncontested reign of instrumental reason.

In Horkheimer's view, objective reason's capacity for strong normative evaluation, as well as its ability to articulate meaningful ideals and goals, played a valuable role in keeping the abyss of technological nihilism at bay. Insofar as Adorno's philosophy, conversely, collapsed subjective and objective reason together, rejecting both as vehicles of oppression, he had immense difficulty seeing beyond that abyss. It was, then, hardly an accident that his diagnosis of the age failed to progress beyond the idea of a “totally administered world.” Despite its manifest brilliance, Adorno's philosophy prematurely abandoned the idea that reason could adequately think through or conceptualize domination. In his view, reason had become an expression of coercion *simpliciter*.

Adorno's social evolutionary pessimism — his anti-Hegelian notion that the dialectic of civilization may be described as a one-way street leading toward enhanced technological oppression — has achieved a glib currency in postmodern circles in which a radical “critique of reason” (*Vernunftkritik*) of dubious Heideggerian provenance has become fashionable. Yet parroting slogans — even clever ones coined by Adorno — can

readily become an act of intellectual self-renunciation: a refusal to think through the parameters of a new historical and political situation. Those who follow unreflectively in Adorno's footsteps risk reproducing his theoretical contradictions and missteps.

II

In Part I of the volume that follows, "The Frankfurt School Revisited," I seek to reflect on and evaluate Critical Theory's contemporary relevance.

In both Germany and North America, the Frankfurt School enjoys a remarkable currency. Its contributions remain a touchstone for debates in a broad array of academic disciplines and public debates. Its influence on postwar political culture — Horkheimer and Adorno's role in the reshaping of postwar German politics; Marcuse's sizeable impact on the international New Left — was in many respects profound. By the same token, it falls due to interpreters to prevent the Frankfurt School's legacy from congealing into a body of received wisdom or *idées fixes*. This means that its doctrines and positions must also be regularly exposed to the critical spirit.

Strangely, Walter Benjamin, whose own life was fraught with so many setbacks and hardships, has been the beneficiary of an uncanny posthumous canonization. Many of his pathbreaking essays were published in the Frankfurt School annual, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Via Adorno's influence, he played a profound, subterranean role in the development of Critical Theory. For example, the change in focus to a "negative" philosophy of history from a progressive, Enlightenment-oriented model may be traced back to Benjamin's historico-philosophical speculations.

As a result of his tragic death fleeing Nazi-dominated Europe, Benjamin has acquired the persona of the prototypical twentieth-century intellectual martyr. His *oeuvre* itself is filled with paradoxes and contradictions. Even today, much of it subsists as unconsummated fragments — above all, his unfinished masterwork, the *Passagenwerk* or *Arcades Project*, which has justly become an object of unending scholarly fascination.

In "Between Proust and the *Zohar*: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*," I pose a series of questions about the *Arcades Project* as it relates to Benjamin's broader developmental tendencies. How might one go about making sense of a work that, in many respects, tries to reconcile Marx with spiritualism? What is one to make of a methodological demarche that, drawing on the Surrealist fascination with dreams, claims that the experience of "awakening from a dream" is a "textbook example of dialectical thinking"? And what about

Benjamin's avowed attraction to right-wing authors such as Ludwig Klages, Carl Schmitt, and C. G. Jung, all of whom opted for Nazism during the 1930s. In his surrealism essay, Benjamin declared that his goal was to "win the energies of intoxication for the revolution" — a remark that seemingly anticipated 1960s-style libidinal politics. Only by carefully pursuing the fault lines and contradictions of his work can we hope to truly do justice to it.

Despite their very real intellectual differences (on the value of mass culture, for example), no one was more faithful to Benjamin's legacy than his ally and interlocutor Theodor Adorno. Three years ago, Adorno's centennial took place. Germany was convulsed with commemorative events. That a former left-wing Jewish exile could become a central figure in the cultural life of the Federal Republic — to the point of meriting his own postage stamp — tells us something important about the expansion of the boundaries of tolerance in postwar German political culture.

"The Adorno Centennial: The Apotheosis of Negative Dialectics" reexamines Adorno's legacy and influence through the prism of the centennial events. Like celebrations and anniversaries in general, the centennial brought out both the worst and best among the participants. Among the German right one still encounters the view that critical thinking, especially as practiced by leftists and Jews — to say nothing of "Jewish leftists" — is responsible for a depletion of national substance. Among the left, there remains considerable resentment that, although Adorno supported the German SDS up to a point, at a later juncture he became highly critical of its senseless provocations. However, when all is said and done, it was Adorno who made the idea of "working through the past" a central leitmotif of postwar German political culture. In the aftermath of Auschwitz, it was Germany's commitment to working through the past that became a sign of its commitment to return to the family of nations. In this respect, it would be impossible to write the history of the Federal Republic apart from Adorno's impact and influence.

Late in life Herbert Marcuse became a type of latter-day Tocqueville: a figure who enjoyed enormous intellectual and political prestige on both sides of the Atlantic. But it is rarely discussed or acknowledged that, at an earlier point, he had been a disciple of Heidegger. In 1928 he traveled to Freiburg to sit at the Master's feet. Two years later, he even wrote a habilitation study under Heidegger's supervision. If, today, the idea of "Heideggerian Marxism" has an oxymoronic ring, for the young Marcuse it represented a plausible solution to the "crisis of Marxism": the fact that, although objective conditions for radical social change seemed to be ripe, the subjective factor or "class consciousness" lagged seriously behind.

In 1933, Heidegger boarded the Nazi juggernaut. That same year, Marcuse joined the Frankfurt School. Thereafter, understandably, their paths rarely crossed. Still, their early alliance represents a fascinating chapter in the history of political ideas — a philosophical interlude that reveals much about the intellectual disposition of both men. In “What is Heideggerian Marxism?” I try to reconstruct a little known chapter in the Frankfurt School’s prehistory: the short-lived alliance between Critical Theory and Heideggerian *Existentenzphilosophie*.

To his credit, Marcuse was never one to rest content with half-measures. He possessed deep insight into the failings of advanced industrial society. His 1955 book, *Eros and Civilization*, speculated as to whether, beyond the “performance principle” of late capitalism, there might be a “libidinal” basis for socialism. Thereby he anticipated with uncanny foresight the Dionysian components of the 1960s “counterculture.”

But Marcuse’s attachment to revolutionary politics also had its costs. In his view the proletariat’s integration within the parameters of the “affluent society” meant that late capitalism was becoming increasingly one-dimensional. Amid the omnipresent growth of a well-adjusted, “happy consciousness,” prospects for critical contestation diminished significantly. If the revolutionary class, whose numbers were shrinking drastically in any event, was essentially content with its lot, who, then, would make the revolution?

In “Critical Reflections on Marcuse’s Theory of Revolution,” I examine the consequences of these developments for Marcuse’s political thought. In a number of postwar texts, he openly flirted with the idea of “Educational Dictatorship” as a type of *deus ex machina* solution. In *What is to Be Done?* Lenin had employed similar reasoning. Since the proletariat was incapable of attaining class consciousness of its own accord, it must be imported from without — the job of a revolutionary avant-garde.

On the one hand, Marcuse was acutely aware of the distasteful historical consequences of the vanguard approach. But that did not prevent him from considering it on a number of occasions as a political option that could preserve the viability of revolutionary politics. As Part II of this book, “Exiting Revolution,” attempts to show, today, as a result of bitter historical experience, we have lost confidence in the capacity of the revolutionary model to facilitate progressive social change.

In the annals of Critical Theory, Leo Lowenthal’s contributions have been seriously underestimated. During the 1930s, he was managing editor of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Its success in soliciting and publishing pathbreaking articles in so many fields is in no small measure due to his foresight and supervision.

The Frankfurt School thinkers were, of course, scholars. But they also excelled in their capacity as critical intellectuals. In this respect, Lowenthal was an extraordinary figure: someone who had a remarkable ability to bring insights from his area of professional expertise, the sociology of literature, to bear on a wide array of contemporary issues and themes. In "The Lion in Winter: Leo Lowenthal and the Integrity of the Intellectual," I reflect on some of his more timely interventions.

Lowenthal's last project, begun when he was well into his eighties, concerned a critique of postmodernism — which, of course, during the 1980s had become a major academic trend. In Lowenthal's view, the radical "critique of reason" that the postmodernists embraced was all too reminiscent of dubious intellectual tendencies he had encountered firsthand during the Weimar Republic's waning years — e.g., *Lebensphilosophie*, whose proximity to fascist intellectual habits had been so disturbing. That Lowenthal continued to write and reflect on these themes until late in life exemplifies the ideal of critical intellectual vigilance.

Karl Jaspers was never especially close to the Frankfurt School. Yet, like the Critical Theorists, his philosophy matured during the cultural and political tumult of the interwar years. Trained in medicine, Jaspers was a relative latecomer to philosophy, although he quickly made up for lost time. Following Jacob Burckhardt, he was enamored of the *Bildung* ideal: the lionization of "great men" who establish a standard of cultural excellence for the rest of humanity to follow. But, following the hecatombs of the Great War, this ideal fell into crisis. Thereafter, *Existenzphilosophie*, as inspired by the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, came into fashion. Jaspers, along with Heidegger, became one of its leading exponents.

Like Heidegger, Jaspers mistrusted democracy. The Weimar Republic's ceaseless ideological turmoil only confirmed him in his well-established, illiberal views.

In 1931, Jaspers wrote a timely book of popular philosophy, *Man in the Modern Age*. Thematically, it stood in close proximity to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Here, Jaspers' conservative revolutionary leanings — his ideological proximity to the likes of Schmitt, Spengler, and Ernst Jünger — are on full display. *Man in the Modern Age* concludes with a plea for an authoritarian resolution of liberal political "chaos." Two years later, Jaspers' wishes came to fruition in the demonic guise of Hitler. Although Jaspers held the Nazis in low esteem (in 1937, he lost his teaching position because of his Jewish wife), in 1933 he made an attempt to collaborate with the regime in the realm of educational policy. Fortunately, Jaspers' efforts in this regard ultimately came to naught, although the episode in question remains troubling and

recasts his early philosophy in a less than charitable light. In "Karl Jaspers: The Paradoxes of Mandarin Humanism," I reassess his legacy with attention to the various positions he took preceding and following the Nazi seizure of power.

The concluding chapter of Part I, "Levinas and Heidegger: The Anxiety of Influence," examines the shock effect that Heidegger's 1933 conversion to Nazism had upon Levinas.

During the waning years of the Weimar Republic, Jaspers and Heidegger stood out as the "titans of existentialism." Although they and the Frankfurt School were miles apart politically, paradoxically, both parties went far toward internalizing the dominant motifs of Weimar-era cultural criticism: above all, a fear that "culture" and "civilization" were mutually exclusive concepts; that civilization's rise went hand-in-hand with cultural decline.

During the last fifteen years, among the partisans of continental philosophy, interest in Emmanuel Levinas's ethical thought has been short of remarkable. In part, the explanation for this phenomenon is simple. Prior eminences in the field, such as Heidegger and Derrida, scorned ethics as an atavism of the Western "metaphysics of subjectivity." However, in the aftermath of the Paul de Man controversy (de Man's exposure as an avid collaborator in Nazi-occupied Belgium), the problem of continental philosophy's ethical deficit could no longer be avoided. Levinas's "ethical foundationalism," based on an awe-inspiring reverence for the "face of the Other," materialized propitiously to fill the void.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Levinas was a devout Heideggerian. Yet, following Heidegger's embrace of National Socialism in 1933, Levinas was caught in a type of intellectual no-man's-land. It became very difficult to square his prior, unguarded enthusiasm for Heidegger's existentialism with the philosopher's totalitarian political allegiances. The problem was not simply that Heidegger had made an odious political choice. What was disconcerting was that the Freiburg sage quite explicitly justified that decision in terms of his own philosophy of existence. Although Heidegger's thought, which was formulated during the 1920s, contained few Nazi elements per se, it was nevertheless seriously compromised by the right-radical spirit of the age: a zealous rejection of democracy and basic rights, and a corresponding attraction to authoritarian political ideals. If one traces Levinas's development as a philosopher, one finds that his own Heideggerian ambivalences persisted until the very end.

III

Part II, “Exiting Revolution,” focuses less on the history of ideas and more on issues bearing on contemporary politics.

The fall of communism opened immense possibilities for political freedom. The September 11 attacks against New York and Washington D.C. may have closed them off. At present, the world seems to be once again polarized between two camps: supporters of fundamentalist Islam and the West. In addition, as a result of the United States’ intemperate unilateralism, the North Atlantic Alliance has unraveled. The democratic coalition that, to its credit, defeated communism exists no more.

Although the handwriting was already on the wall at the time of Moscow’s 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet economic stagnation made systemic change inevitable. Mikhail Gorbachev deserves credit for initiating communism’s change of course — although at a later point he ceased to control its direction and pace.

In “What We Can Learn from the Revolutions of 1989,” I assess communism’s demise as a historical caesura. One of the remarkable aspects of these revolutions pertained to their “moral” nature. It was a moment of the dissident, or antihero, as hero. In November 1989, as the Berlin Wall was breached, the various state socialist authorities were, in essence, shamed into self-abdication. One by one they succumbed to the gentle pressure and moral suasion of so-called Velvet Revolutions. Remarkably, by now a new generation of youth has come of age with no memory of communist authoritarianism nor of cold war nuclear brinkmanship.

Communism was delegitimated in theory before it collapsed in reality. The 1960s generation was enamored of revolution. This was especially true in France where indigenous revolutionary traditions could be readily grafted upon the delusive hopes of “third worldism.” But such expectations died amid the “killing fields” of Cambodia and the lamentations of the Vietnamese “boat people.” The consequences of these developments were not lost among French intellectuals, who belatedly rallied around the cause of “dissidence.” But if human rights were the order of the day, then the ideology of “antihumanism,” as propounded by poststructuralism’s “master thinkers” — Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan — was obviously flawed. Today, historians are still trying to answer the question: how could such a talented group of thinkers have been so politically naïve?³ In “From the ‘Death of Man’ to Human Rights: The Paradigm Change in French Intellectual Life, 1968–86,” I attempt to reconstruct the political itinerary of this influential generation of French intellectuals.

Communism's fall offered new political opportunities. But it also presented new challenges — many of them economic. Revolutionary developments in communications offered the prospect of record-speed, global economic transactions. Throughout the world, governments pursued a hands-off policy vis-à-vis powerful new, transnational economic actors. Many French intellectuals understandably viewed these developments with horror. Since communism had been discredited as a viable option, and since the Socialist Party had openly abandoned socialism, where was one to turn for an antiglobalization political stopgap? For many, "Back to the Republic!" became the response du jour. In "The Republican Revival: Reflections on French Singularity," I examine the rationale and results of these developments.

Yet, the republican revival was beset by memory loss. It selectively recalled the Third Republic's triumphs — over royalism and Catholicism, for example — but conveniently overlooked its failings. Above all, republicanism relied on an assimilationist model of citizenship — the "immigrants into Frenchmen," one-size-fits-all approach — that was radically out of step with the requirements and demands of multiculturalism. Recently the world looked on in astonishment as France's Ministry of Education prevented Islamic girls from wearing headscarves (the foulard) but permitted indigenous French citizens to sport crosses. One of the key questions is whether the republican tradition can be adjusted to accommodate the demands of "difference."

One of globalization theory's analytical deficits is its economic bias. Unquestionably, trends related to the world economy's deregulation merit serious attention. By the same token, we also need to focus on the capacities of global civil society to offset the dislocations and hardships engendered by the free market.

In "What Is Global Democracy?" I seek to highlight globalization's political dimension. With Marxism's demise, democracy has attained a new legitimacy. To his credit, Frankfurt School heir Jürgen Habermas has been in the forefront of this discussion. In the *Postnational Constellation* and other works, Habermas suggests how popular sovereignty and basic rights might offset the "colonization of the lifeworld" by the impersonal forces of economic and administrative rationality. After years of productive struggle, the Left has grudgingly come to accept the inevitability of a regulated market economy. The choice is no longer, as it once seemed, between capitalism and socialism. Instead, everything, hinges on the construction of "capitalism with a human face." Only a vibrant democratic political culture has the capacity to ensure the accountability of managerial elites at the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and elsewhere, who nowadays have so much influence over the wealth of nations. The present-day renaissance of democratic

theory corresponds to the “realism” of an era that has, understandably, wearied of the false promises of political messianism.

In “Religion and Public Reason: A Contemporary Debate,” I examine an important societal trend: the religious revival underway both in the third world (e.g., “political Islam”) and the United States. For years secularization theorists have been prophesying religion’s imminent demise. But the modern age has not brought an end to life’s insecurities — far from it. Thus, in many parts of the world the need for religious consolation, as a cushion against fate’s injustices, remains as strong as ever. In fact, one might go so far as to agree with sociologist Peter Berger, who, gainsaying Max Weber, contends we are experiencing a “resacralization of the world.”

Religion’s return raises important questions for democratic theory. What role should religion play in secular polities? For many persons, religion remains the fount of their most deeply held convictions. To extrude such perspectives from public debate would be both unrealistic and unjust. Instead, a delicate balancing act is required. One must permit the expression of religious conviction within the public sphere, while ensuring one does not offend citizens who pray to a different god — or gods. Taking the “perspective of the other” must work both ways. Not only must those who are religiously inclined understand the importance of secularism; secularists must also learn to understand and tolerate the convictions of believers.⁴ In sum, one must make room for religion in a way that is consistent with the values of tolerance and fairness. John Rawls’ political philosophy, which distinguishes between reasonable and unreasonable “comprehensive views” or ultimate belief systems, makes an important stride in this direction.

In “What is Left Schmittianism?” I examine left-wing intellectuals’ growing fascination with the controversial doctrines of the German jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). The Left has never been impervious to the lures of political sectarianism. Nor has it, in times of uncertainty, avoided assimilating ideas from the political right. One question that arises is: how much might the left borrow from the right while continuing to remain “left”?

Schmitt famously glorified the “state of emergency” and notoriously defined politics as the capacity to distinguish friends from enemies. In a post-9/11 world, Schmitt’s partisans feel themselves confirmed. For, doesn’t America’s aggressive, lone-wolf foreign policy confirm Schmitt’s cynical view that international law merely provides ideological cover for states to realize their selfish interests? Historically, the left has always had an ambiguous relationship to parliamentarism and “rule of law,” two of Schmitt’s *bêtes noires*. The depredations of globalization have made the left skeptical about rule of law, which at times seems like little

more than window dressing for the great powers' own selfish designs. Hence, why not in fact borrow criticisms of these institutions from Schmitt, their foremost twentieth-century detractor?

The problem is that once the Left embraces the Schmittian doctrine of politics as an *amoral sphere* — the idea that politics is a question of ruthlessly realizing one's ends regardless of the means that are employed — it invites all manner of political licentiousness. From a normative perspective, left-wing dictatorships are in no way superior to dictatorships of the Right.

The events of September 11, 2001, altered world politics in ways that many of us are still actively trying to fathom. The Bush administration seized on the attacks as a pretext to formulate an unprecedented, risky, and open-ended foreign policy doctrine of "preventative war." Yet, its main foe, Saddam Hussein, had nothing to do with Al Qaeda, nor with fundamentalist Islam. Certainly, he was a brutal tyrant who deserved to be removed from power. But doing the right thing for the wrong reasons establishes a dangerous precedent.

Jürgen Habermas, who was Adorno's former assistant in Frankfurt am Main, is widely acknowledged as the rightful inheritor of the Frankfurt School's intellectual legacy. He responded to the September 11 events via a number of timely opinion pieces, as well as a lengthy interview that was published, along with a text by Jacques Derrida, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. What concerned Habermas above all was the fact that American foreign policy proceeded in flagrant disregard of established norms of international governance. Whereas during the 1990s, following communism's collapse and the end of the cold war stalemate, a renewed confidence in international law as a method of dispute resolution began to emerge, America's post-9/11 unilateralism altered the situation radically. In "Kant at Ground Zero: Philosophers Respond to September 11," I review philosophical responses to the attacks, focusing on the Habermas-Derrida dialogue in particular.

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Marxism's demise, as well as social democracy's "neoliberal" turn, has thrown the Left into an identity crisis. In times of doubt, it is tempting to grasp at sectarian solutions — to abandon prospects for incremental betterment and flirt with the all-or-nothing mentality of political messianism. The contemporary vogue of the "theological turn" ("negative theology," "religion without God," "God without Being") — apparently, postmodernism's ideology of last resort — attests to this situation. Who would have believed that Derrida, who spent the better part of three decades denouncing the lures of "onto-theology," would in the end openly profess deconstruction's commitment to "the Messianic"?⁵ Yet for

the Left to buy into this vogue would be to succumb to a serious judgmental and strategic error. It would mean leaving the field of contemporary political contestation open to the Right.

By the same token, it is important for the Left not to employ the Frankfurt School's "negative" philosophy of history — one that, contra Hegel and Marx, stresses the inevitability of decline instead of progress — to adorn its own misery cum marginalization. After all, these views were formulated at the twentieth-century's political and moral nadir. Since then, humanity has undergone a difficult and hard-won learning process. A tenuous consensus, codified by precepts of international humanitarian law, has formed against dictatorship and in favor of the values of democratic citizenship. Much of this consensus is reflected by recent developments in global civil society and democratic theory. Here, the contributions of Habermas, the rightful heir to the Frankfurt School legacy, have served as an important bellwether. Any attempt to build constructively on the Critical Theory tradition must take into account the moderately encouraging political and social changes that have ensued since the first generation's demise. Adorno's view of late capitalism as a "totally administered world" is theoretically tempting and seductive. But, in the end, it stands too close to the antidemocratic ethos of those right-wing *Zivilisationskritiker* (critics of civilization) to whom he and his cohorts were nominally so opposed: figures like Spengler, Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt. Critical Theory's precepts should not be turned into a new dogma or treated as articles of faith. The best way to remain faithful to the Frankfurt School legacy is not to follow it mechanically or unreflectively.

