

"Displacement, Abstraction and Historical Specificity:
Comments on the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory"

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In this paper, I argue that a defining feature of the Frankfurt School's critical theory of society was the displacement of proper nouns referring to particular times and places with abstractions that had no geographical and only vague temporal referents. I argue that though displacement and abstraction were a component of the Marxist tradition before World War I, the radical leftist, that is, Leninist response to the war was a key factor in its intensification. Georg Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* was a more philosophically elaborated version of a displacement and abstraction presented in simpler in Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* and in the manifestos issued by the radical left (including Lenin) in the midst of World War I from its conferences in Kienthal and Zimmerwald. One defining feature of the radical left during the war, and in Germany during the Weimar Republic, was the view that nothing of significance had distinguished the competing sides in the Great War. As all were variations of capitalist imperialism which was held to be responsible for the slaughter of Verdun and the Somme, the response of the radical left was to turn the war into the opportunity for revolution in all of the contending states. The habit of referring to capitalism, imperialism and later modernity and the enlightenment without regard to national distinctiveness persisted into the Weimar era and exerted an enduring impact on 20th century European and

then international social theory.

The consensus of historians who have examined the causes of World War I and its horrific extension in time have long concluded that Lenin's analysis of imperialism was mistaken. Among the war's main causes, I would say that a majority of diplomatic historians have concluded the capitalist system or imperialist rivalry were irritants but not the most important. However, the advantage of Lenin's theory over the historian's complexities lay precisely in its simplicity, in its abstraction away from national peculiarities and its focus on one thing and one thing only—capitalist imperialism—as the cause of the great catastrophe. The now standard works on the young Lukacs' path from cultural critic to Communist commissar have drawn attention to the importance of the war. Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* was an ideal typical example of the displacement of the crisis of post World War I Central Europe with its myriad and complex proper names and places into the abstractions of reflections on the dialectic of subject and object. In the Frankfurt School's critical theory, a similar displacement and abstraction, rooted in a Weimar moment, became an enduring component of 20th century social theorizing.

Many, perhaps most historians of the period believe that both Lenin's *Imperialism* and the Frankfurt School's critical theory were wrong about fundamental matters. Yet error has not stood in the way of impact. There is

a plausible case to be made that the very absence of proper nouns and historical details contributed to their impact and popularity. That is, Lenin's theory of imperialism had a broad impact in part because it offered a single, clear explanation which was easy to understand. While it may seem odd to say so regarding the dense texts of the Frankfurt School, the same thing was true of their texts as well. For once a reader had mastered a finite number of theoretical terms—reification, instrumental rationality, subject-object dialectic, etc—he/she could dispense with the mundane facts about the political and economic structures of the Weimar Republic. They were a bothersome nuisance compared to theory's profundities. Rather than have to decipher the complexities of Weimar coalition politics, its constitutional peculiarities, or economic policy in the midst of the Depression, or understanding the contingent blunders that made it possible for Hitler to enter power, the Frankfurt School's critical theory offered much simpler analyses that required little knowledge or no knowledge of German history and politics. Indeed, too much attention to these historical details became devalued and appeared to be a sign of a positivist immersion in the welter of details of a reified and totally administered modern world.

The Frankfurt School's tendency to hypostatize Weimar's peculiarities as somehow emblematic of modernity in general was one they shared with their intellectual and political adversaries, such as Carl Schmitt, Hans Freyer

and Martin Heidegger. Though the Weimar Republic collapsed in 1933, and democracy was extinct in Europe by 1940s, the Frankfurt theorists never asked why democracy was intact in Britain and the United States. The comparative questions never interested them because they thought that the universalizing tendencies of capitalism, modernity, the Enlightenment or instrumental reason would obliterate local differences. As a result their critique of capitalism and fascism without a national referent, left them unable to explain why the bastions of global capitalism in the 1940s, the United States and Great Britain waged and helped to win World War II against the equally capitalistically inclined German dictatorship. Their work of the 1920s to the 1940s diverted attention from the long and short term particularities of German history that would explain Germany's divergence from the core institutions and ideas of liberal modernity as they emerged and then remained intact in Great Britain and the United States before and during World War II.

Tendencies to flee from specificity to abstraction existed in the traditions of Weimar's right as well as the left. The texts of Ernst Juenger, Carl Schmitt, Hans Freyer, and Martin Heidegger that I examined in *Reactionary Modernism* all spoke with confidence about tendencies in something called "modernity."¹ They too had few words to spare about mundane nouns such as "Germany" or "the Weimar Republic." Such

disinterest in historical peculiarities was hardly a mark of German, French or British conservative thinking in general. On the contrary, disdain for the abstractions of intellectuals became a defining component of conservative complaint for Burke and of Tocqueville conservative liberalism, among others. Yet abstraction came more readily to Weimar's German conservative thinkers. It is a constant temptation of nationalist thinking everywhere for this displacement from one's own history into the realms of universalizing categories helps to block a potentially painful examination of the national past. In the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, evident for example in Albert Speer's statement at the Nuremberg war crimes trial, reference to the evils of modern technology played a significant role in apologetic reflections on the recent past.²

The displacement of abstractions with historical specificity occupies a central role in the traditions of the left. Marx's critique of "bourgeois ideology," indeed the very placement of the famous adjective "bourgeois" before the noun, was intended to historicize and situate ideas and institutions thought to be independent of time in place. A central theme of Marx's writings on ideology in the 1840s was that phenomena previously thought to be eternal or ordained by God or nature were, instead the product of human practices of human beings in particular times and places. Because this was so, change, even revolutionary change, was conceivable.

Abstraction away from these origins in time and place enveloped the products of human beings in an aura of a second nature beyond history. In the Weimar years, Karl Korsch in *Marxism and Philosophy*, argued that the revolutionary, subjectivist current in Marxism was inseparable from the principle of historical specificity. The purpose of ideology critique, from Korsch's perspective was to restore historical specificity and thus changeability to institutions which sought to surround themselves with an aura of permanence.

In more elaborated philosophical terms, George Lukacs made a similar point in *History and Class Consciousness* when he criticized Max Weber for separating the phenomenon of reification from what Lukacs argued was its roots in the capitalist system. Weber's theory of rationalization, in Lukacs' view, endowed the historically transient institutions of capitalism with an aura of "second nature" which was as permanent and unchangeable as the first. The purpose of the Marxist critique of reification was to restore historically specific origins of the ideas and institutions of capitalism and their roots in specific human action or praxis. Like Korsch, Lukacs argued that establishment of historical specificity of the capitalist system was thus inseparable from the activist component of revolutionary communism and the radical left in the era of Lenin and of the Weimar left as well.

Yet there were limits to Marxism's search for specificity. The specificity to which it referred was that of capitalism in general in contrast to its feudal predecessor and its hoped for communist successor. Neither Lukacs, Korsch, nor Lenin for that matter had anything of note to say about how capitalism differed as a result of its national contexts. Their writings tell us nothing about British, French, German, Russian or American capitalism. Indeed, the whole point of Lenin's *Imperialism*, and of the passionate statements of the European radical left in the midst of World War I was that it made no difference which of the contending capitalists nations won the war. Indeed, a refusal to find distinctions between them, and the willingness to declare a pox on all your houses was a defining feature of left-wing radicalism and a point of differentiation between it and Social Democracy during and after the war. Elimination of British, French, German or Russian as adjectives in favor of a universal imperialism became one identifying feature of radicalism in social theory and in politics. The displacement of proper nouns was helpful to the radical left in another way. It proposed deep insight into a massive crisis that dispensed with the need to accumulate a great deal of knowledge about local circumstances.

These trends continued in their essays of the 1940s. I explore them in some of Herbert Marcuse's essay. In "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology" (1941), he criticized what he saw as a tendency of modern

technology to erode individual autonomy under existing, that is, capitalist, circumstances and suggested that under a different, that is, socialist or communist, organization of society this very same technology would usher in an era of flowering individuality and uniqueness. If society were organized differently, individuals would have greater free time "beyond the realm of necessity" in which "the essential differences between men could unfold themselves; everyone could think and act by himself, speak his own language, have his own emotions and follow his own passions." This juxtaposition of a pessimistic description of threats to the individual and an optimistic assessment of the possibilities of ameliorating those threats if the current economic organization of society, that is, capitalism, could be overcome, would remain a constant of Marcuse's thinking.

In his 1942 essay, "State and Individual Under National Socialism" Marcuse evoked the language of *The Communist Manifesto* when he described Nazism as "the executive organ of the imperialist economic interests." Consistent with the Marxist aspects of his argument, he granted Nazi ideology scant autonomous causal significance. "The present rulers of Germany do not believe in ideologies and in the mysterious power of the race, but they will follow their leader as long as he remains what he has hitherto been, the living symbol of efficiency." Given the Frankfurt School's interest in the problem of consciousness and the role of the subjective

dimension in politics, Marcuse's dismissal of the autonomous, causal significance of Nazi ideology was remarkable. Amidst the criticisms of Marxist orthodoxy for which it became famous, critical theory retained enough of the Marxist residue to assign such factors to dependent variable called the superstructure.

Some of Marcuse's empirical observations about events in Nazi Germany have proved more enduring than his theoretical speculations. They are evident in essays of the 1940s such as "State and Individual under National Socialism" and "The New German Mentality."³ Marcuse was one of the first observers to draw a connection between "the emancipation of sexual life" and Nazi population policy. He was right to observe that Nazi culture did not rest on sexual repression but on the "abolition of highly sanctioned taboos," which "serves to intensify the 'integration' of individuals into the National Socialist system." Pointing to an end to discrimination against illegitimate mothers and children, and to the encouragement of extramarital relations between the sexes, and to a new cult of nudity in the arts and entertainment, Marcuse argued that the eradication of Western civilization's sexual taboos defending the family was leading to greater repression rather than greater liberty. Sexual release now served to reinforce the Nazi system:

The relations between the sexes belonged to that realm of protected

privacy that granted the individual a considerable degree of freedom from a society and a state incapable of fulfilling his innermost potentialities and desires. This privacy naturally became a haven for opposition and the image of a possible happiness. The National Socialist regime has set out to conquer this haven for the state... The political utilization of sex has transformed it from a sphere of protective privacy in which a recalcitrant freedom could endure to a sphere of acquiescent license. The individuals whose most intimate enjoyment is urged and sanctioned by the state are apt to become its obedient followers.⁴

Marcuse went on to link sexual release to Nazi racism. Those members of "the master race" who enjoyed the new sexual license were imbued with a feeling of superiority that made the various outsiders objects of contempt and oppression. "The individuals can be released only insofar as they are at the same time elevated above social groups which are intimately more fettered, helpless and unhappy than they are." The protest and the frustration generated in modern society are channeled into established pageants and mass demonstrations.

Later, in *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*, his well known works of the 1950s and 1960s, Marcuse would write of "repressive

desublimation." He had in mind the commercial exploitation of sexual liberation. But it was in his analysis of Nazism that he first examined the links between ersatz sexual "freedom" and political domination. Perhaps because the connection between Nazism and sexual repression seems so intuitively obvious, historians of German society and culture under the Nazis, who have examined such matters as the cult of the naked Aryan body and the links between racism and policies regarding reproduction, had not noticed these trends. Recent work by Dagmar Herzog on sexuality in the Nazi era has effectively addressed these issues.⁵

In "The New German Mentality," written in June 1942 and circulated in the U.S. Government's Office of War Information in 1942 and 1943, Marcuse distinguished between two aspects of the new mentality in Nazi Germany. One was pragmatic and matter-of-fact, and focused on efficiency, mechanization, and rationalization; the other kindled to myth, paganism, racism, and social naturalism. Matter-of-factness was "the very center of the National Socialist mentality and the psychological ferment of the National Socialist system" and constituted part of a "revolt against the basic principles of Christian civilization," namely, humanism, democracy, and Christian socialism. "The revolt against Christian civilization appears in various forms: anti-Semitism, terrorism, social Darwinism, anti-intellectualism, naturalism. Common to all of them is the rebellion against the restraining and

transcendental principles of Christian morality (the liberty and equality of man qua man, the subordination of might to right, the idea of universal ethics)." Here Marcuse's assessment is reasonable yet its connection to a theoretical perspective is hard to discern. Again, it is his skill as an observer that is striking.

Along with Adorno, Horkheimer, Ernst Bloch, and Walter Benjamin, Marcuse pointed to the simultaneity of technocracy and neo-paganism and the "rationalization of the irrational" in Nazi Germany.⁶ The Frankfurt School's singular grasped the coexistence of the modern and anti-modern, rationality and myth, within European fascism, a mixture I later called "reactionary modernism." In doing so, they were hardly alone. In his examination of the new German mentality, Marcuse came closest to examining the German dimensions of National Socialism. He interpreted Nazism as a distinctively German adaptation of society to the requirements of large-scale industry and imperialist conquest. He viewed it as indicative of a particular phase in the development of capitalism, but he also reiterated familiar arguments about the peculiar German antagonism to the West owing to the relative weakness of liberalism and the persistence of authoritarian institutions and values. Although the impact of Freud is evident in such interpretations, they draw more on Marcuse's fine eye for cultural developments than on the results of a critical theory of society in general.

Again, one wonders what insights were due to a distinctive critical theory of society and what resulted from simply paying close attention to the words and images produced by the Nazi regime.

Franz Neumann, Marcuse's close friend and Frankfurt School colleague, was the head of the office in the Office of Strategic Analysis' (OSS) Research and Analysis Branch working on Nazi Germany. He played a major role in the understanding of the regime's policies in American intelligence agencies. Neumann did not join in Marcuse's enthusiasm for the radical left. Yet he shared another element of Weimar's Marxist moment, namely its rationalist bias about ideology, in particular radical anti-Semitic ideology. In *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944* published in 1942 and in a revised edition in 1944, Neumann advocated what he called "the spearhead theory of anti-Semitism."⁷ In 1944, when information about the Holocaust had been a matter of public record for two years, he wrote that "in this anti-Semitic ideology and practice the extermination of the Jews is only the means to the attainment of the ultimate objective, namely the destruction of free institutions, beliefs and groups."⁸ Anti-Semitism was thus an ideological instrument deployed to achieve other aims.

"...racism and anti-Semitism are substitutes for the class struggle. The officially established peoples community superseding the class struggle

needs an integrating element. Carl Schmitt has maintained that politics is a struggle against a foe who must be exterminated. The theory is true if the society is aggressive. The new enemy is the Jew. By heaping all hatred, all resentment, all misery upon one enemy who can easily be exterminated and who cannot resist, Aryan society can be integrated into a whole. The internal value of anti-Semitism will, therefore, never allow a complete extermination of the Jews. That foe cannot and must not disappear; he must always be held in readiness as a scapegoat for all the evils in the socio-political system.

Second, anti-Semitism provides a justification for eastern expansion."⁹

As Shlomo Aronson has recently documented in greater detail, Neumann's interpretation led to a misunderstanding of the centrality of radical anti-Semitism in Nazi policy. It was an intelligence failure that he advocated even the face of dissent from others who disagreed in the Research and Analysis Branch, notably Charles Dwork.¹⁰ This underestimation of the causal importance, consequences nature of Nazi anti-Semitism, was inseparable from Neumann's Marxist theoretical assumptions about the relative causal importance of ideas and class interests in the Nazi regime. Based both on Marcuse's wartime essays and Neumann's *Behemoth*, it is fair to say that

though both contributed to the American war effort and did, of course care deeply about the issue of anti-Semitism, neither Neumann or Marcuse placed the Holocaust as the center of their wartime analyses. The spearhead theory was a direct consequence of the theoretical legacies of their Marxism with its roots in the Weimar era.

No text of the Frankfurt School's critical theory exemplifies the issue of displacement of German history and flight to abstraction more than Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹¹ It is a work that bristles with insights to which I and many other historians are indebted. It is one of the most important and influential texts of 20th century Europe's intellectual history. As such it underscores the extent to which displacement and abstraction became an important component of the traditions of Europe's and the world's intellectuals. Its second sentence expresses a shocking sentiment. In 1944, when the Allies were not only at war with Nazi Germany but had turned the tide against it and when Allied victory was a distinct possibility, they wrote from the safety of emigration in Los Angeles that "the fully enlightened world radiates disaster triumphant."¹² If the reader did not know that a horrific war was taking place at that very moment, he would have no indication that this was case from the text of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. He would not know that much of "the enlightened world" was doing all it could to defeat the Axis powers from continuing to

make disaster triumphant. Horkheimer and Adorno mentioned the United States primarily in the context of their attack on the culture industry and mass culture. The reader could assume that they did not see a qualitative difference between American or British modernity, on the one hand, and German, Italian or Japanese variations. In its silences about the fact of World War II and the names of the contending powers, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offered a muted echo of the mood of the Kienthal and Zimmerwald conferences during World War I. It was a document of anti-fascism that was oddly silent about its partisanship for the actual states at war with the fascist regimes. A reader could be excused for concluding that the authors did not think it mattered who won World War II because it was the entire modern world, that is, the United States and Britain, no less than Nazi Germany and its Japanese and Italian allies, that "radiated disaster triumphant." This refusal to clearly distinguish between the powers and to hypostatize German realities as those of modernity in general was another consequence of the displacement of historical specificity for abstraction.

Even in their discussion of anti-Semitism, Horkheimer and Adorno focused on the tendencies within the market economy that led to the misidentification of the Jews with finance and commercialism. Their discussion points to no peculiarities of German, or for that matter, even European history. As a theory, the dialect of enlightenment offered no account of why

it was in Germany in this period that a plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe was proposed and implemented. The danger of its repetition in their view lay more in the pervasiveness of modernity but not in the bundle of causes linked to German and European history following World War I.

By contrast, historical specificity pervades the view of Nazism and its causes offered by Thomas Mann in his wartime reflections, both in his writing from wartime Los Angeles in his novel *Dr. Faustus*, and his wartime speeches broadcast on radio to Germany and in "Germany and the Germans," his speech of spring 1945 in the Library of Congress in Washington.¹³ Mann offered an interpretation of the distinctive features of German cultural and intellectual history that had contributed to the rise of and support for Nazism in Germany. In his radio addresses, "*Deutsche Hörer*," (*German Listeners*) he left no doubt about his partisanship for the democracies at war with the Axis powers. Of course, Horkheimer and Adorno did not think there was a moral equivalence between the United States and Great Britain, on the one hand, and Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, on the other. But one will read their famous book in vain for a clear statement that this indeed was the case. They stopped well short both of the pox on all your houses of the radical left in World War I as well as Mann's unambiguous moral and political clarity about what was at stake in World War II. In their essays and political engagement of the postwar decades in West Germany,

both Horkheimer and Adorno became more comfortable making the distinctions they had eschewed in the works of the war years. In the decades following World War II and the Holocaust, Horkheimer and Adorno made important contributions to West German democracy and distanced themselves from the "Weimar moment" themes of their work in the 1930s and 1940s.

The global renown of Marcuse's 1964 work, *One Dimensional Man* made clear that his radicalism was undiminished. (By the late 1960s, it was an important book for the Madison left-wing intellectual scene, of which I was then an undergraduate member). As some of his writings of the immediate post-1945 years make remarkably clear, Marcuse's experience of working in the OSS and in the U.S. State Department had not led to a moderation of the left-wing radicalism he drew from the Weimar years. In February 1947, he wrote "33 Theses" about the contemporary political scene. After the war, he wrote, "the world was divided into a neo-fascist and a Soviet camp. What still remains of democratic-liberal forms will be crushed between the two camps or absorbed by them." Western states "will become fascistized in the foreseeable future, while the others will enter the Soviet camp." Revolutionary theory must "ruthlessly and openly criticize both systems and uphold without compromise orthodox Marxist theory against both." Given the "integration of opposition" in the Western capitalist

societies, "the only possible way to successfully oppose the massive military-political apparatus of capital is to construct and implement an at least equally powerful military and political counter-apparatus, to which the traditional revolutionary strategy is subordinated. The Soviet Union will be seen as this kind of counter-apparatus... The common opposition against capital would be the basis for a future reunification of revolution and Sovietism--just as the current alliance of capitalism and Sovietism is the basis for the separation of revolution and Sovietism."¹⁴

The post-1945 revival of European social democracy (which, in Marcuse's view, had facilitated fascism's rise to power in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany) signified the "economic and political integration of the working class into the system of capital" and was thus merely "a change in the structure of exploitation."¹⁵ In view of the integration of Social Democracy into the existing system,

the communist parties are and remain the only anti-fascist power. Their denunciation must be purely theoretical. It knows that the realization of theory is possible only through the communist parties and that it needs the help of the Soviet Union. This consciousness must be contained in all of its concepts. More: in all of its concepts the denunciation of neo-fascism and social democracy must outweigh that

of communist politics. The bourgeois freedom of democracy is better than total regimentation, but it has been literally purchased with decades of prolonged exploitation and delayed socialist freedom."¹⁶

Here Marcuse gave voice to an undiminished radicalism reminiscent of the German radical left of the 1920s and early 1930s, in which denunciation of Social Democracy--or "social fascism," as the Communists put it--prevented an alliance in the face of the shared Nazi foe. In contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse drew Leninist conclusions from critical theory's pessimism about the revolutionary potential of the working classes. Working-class integration in the era of "monopoly capitalism" thus had

confirmed the correctness of the Leninist conception of the vanguard party as the subject of revolution. It is true that the communist parties of today are not this subject, but it is just as true that only they can become it. Only in the theory of the communist parties is the memory of the revolution alive, which can become the memory of the revolutionary goal once again; only its situation is so far outside the capitalist society that it can become a revolutionary situation again.¹⁷

While Marcuse conceded that the task of reconstructing revolutionary theory within the Communist parties seemed impossible, he speculated wistfully that " perhaps relative independence from Soviet dictates, which this task

demands, is present as a possibility in Western Europe's and West Germany's communist parties."

Marcuse, and we in the new left who were drawn to his arguments, remained stuck in a time capsule rooted in an erroneous analysis of the destruction of the democratic institutions of the Weimar Republic. Marcuse's reflections after World War II are remarkable for the undiminished anger they express towards Social Democracy and the no less undiminished enthusiasm for Leninism. In a bizarre twist of the meaning of words, Marcuse and we in the new left were called an "anti-authoritarian left" when in fact that left had long preceded the Frankfurt School and the new left. It was called Social Democracy and it, whatever its other shortcomings were, had never advocated authoritarian, that is, undemocratic, politics of any sort. In his attacks on Social Democracy and support for Leninism, Marcuse remained firmly embedded in his Weimar moment. His comments about the coming neo-fascist character of "the Western states" was equally reminiscent of Weimar's left-wing radicals who denounced supporters of democracy as fascists. In light of the role of Britain and the United States in the defeat of fascism, it was particularly bizarre, unfounded, and reprehensible. It was also a result of the displacement of German peculiarities, the flight to abstraction and the blurring of distinctions between national states and their political histories that made Lenin's analysis of imperialism so famous and

appealing to several generations of the radical left.

Marcuse's provisional belief in the potential of the Communist parties and his view of the Soviet Union as necessary for prospects of revolution in the West are more than intriguing footnotes to his intellectual biography. They also offer an important insight into the political movement that can be most accurately described as "Marcusian," that is, the New Left of the 1960s. Everywhere, the New Left imploded in less than a decade into a mixture of political withdrawal and a variety of Marxist- Leninist organizations, including, of course the terrorist organization called Weatherman. Everywhere the apparent Marcusian moment of anti-authoritarian leftism gave way to Communist orthodoxy. So it is interesting to learn, from his unpublished "33 Theses" of 1947, that Marcuse had stressed that some variant of Leninism must indeed be the result of his version of critical theory. If the overwhelming majority of the members of a society could not grasp their real interests, were blinded by false needs and led by organizations of the democratic left which serve the interests of the capitalist status quo, then a Communist party willing and able to act in opposition to existing mass consciousness must be a logical conclusion of such radical pessimism. As the New Left in the 1960s, universally certain of the correctness of its political program, faced an apparently solid bloc of counter-revolution that appeared to enjoy the support of the people, there were precincts of the movement

that drew the same conclusions which Marcuse had drawn from his own private reflections two decades earlier concerning "the correctness of the Leninist conception of the vanguard party as the subject of revolution." Yet in SDS in 1969, that conception took the form of Weatherman, an organization which was one, perfectly plausible and logical implication of the Marcuse's left-wing variant of the Frankfurt School's analysis of modern capitalist society.

The classic perplexities of the Frankfurt School's first generation of critical theory--individual autonomy in mass society; the power of the media to dull sense and sensibility; the erosion of privacy; the perils and the promises of modern technology; the spread of market culture to all aspects of life; the links between individual psychology and mass politics; the disdain for the trashiness of mass culture and the refusal to accept that society and politics should be subject to the whims and the demands of private capital--remain important. Once they are separated from the dangerous and now fortunately discredited notions of revolution and the vanguardist contempt for the political opinions of the non- revolutionary Western working classes, ideas that were still a central aspect of Western intellectual life in the 1940s and then briefly revived in the 1960s, these aspects of the legacy of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School may continue to serve as a valuable provocation for American liberalism.

But they are not more that. To the extent to which the Frankfurt School still speaks to our political perplexities, it speaks less in the utopian themes of Marcuse than in those of the sober and chastened Horkheimer and Adorno whose postwar shift to liberalism did not endear him to the New Left of 1968 and 1969. There are important insights to be gleaned from the texts of the Frankfurt School. But their classic works, the ones most closely associated with the radical left-wing of the Weimar years suffer from the displacement and abstraction I have discussed. Of course, historians too abstract away from the infinitude of detail. We focus on some things and neglect others. As another of Weimar's luminaries, Max Weber pointed out, we do so because we have more and less explicit theoretical presuppositions that make part of reality of great interest to us. Theory in history is both indispensable but also a risky temptation that carries with it the danger of obliterating the crucial causal connections and contingencies of events. That Lukacs, and his successors in the Frankfurt School paid so little attention to actual human beings in particular situations who engaged in specific actions comprised a central paradox of a theory which repeatedly claimed to be restoring the role of human subjectivity in politics and in the intellectual examination of society and history.

Endnotes

1. For my examination of these issues see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
2. On this see, Jeffrey Herf, "Belated Pessimism: Technology and Twentieth Century German Conservative Intellectuals," in Yaron Ezrahi, Everett Mendelsohn and Howard Segal, eds., *Technology, Pessimism and Postmodernism* (Klewer Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 115-36.
3. Herbert Marcuse, "State and Individual Under National Socialism" and "The New German Mentality" in Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Vol. I*, ed. by Douglas Kellner (New York: London and New York: Routledge 1998), pp., 67-92, 139-190.
4. Herbert Marcuse, "State and Individual Under National Socialism," op. cit., pp. 84-85.
5. Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality and Fascism* (New York: Berghahn, 2004); and *Sex after fascism : memory and morality in twentieth-century Germany*, (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2005)
6. Marcuse, "The New German Mentality," op. cit., p. 162.
7. Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944* 2nd revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 551.
8. Ibid., p. 551.
9. Ibid., p. 125.
10. See Shlomo Aronson, *Hitler, the Allies and the Jews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
11. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972; orig. 1944).
12. Ibid., p. 3.
13. Thomas Mann, "Deutschland und die Deutschen," in *Thomas Mann: Essays, Band 5: Deutschland und die Deutschen*, ed. Herman Kurzke and Stephan Stachorski, (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 1996), pp. 260-281; and *Doctor Faustus*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (London and New York: Penguin, 1976; orig., 1947).

14. Herbert Marcuse, "33 Theses," in Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Vol. 1.*, op. cit., pp. 217-219.
15. Ibid., , p. 220.
16. Ibid., p. 223.
17. Ibid., p. 227.