

Introduction

Rethinking the Frankfurt School

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The essays in this volume “rethink” the relationship between the Frankfurt School and theoretical scholarship on contemporary culture, asking what consequences such a rethinking might have for study of the Frankfurt School on its own terms. This question arises because of the paradoxical situation of the Frankfurt School in relation to the humanistic interdiscipline known as “Theory.” On the one hand, in the humanities, the Frankfurt School is often taught as an approach that can and is studied alongside other “approaches” (such as poststructuralism, feminism, deconstruction, and cultural studies). On the other hand, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School is also treated as a somewhat dated, slightly ossified predecessor to theory *per se*. As both contemporary and antecedent to theoretical approaches to culture, then, the Frankfurt School as a topic urges a retrospective reconsideration of the pedigree and genealogy of Theory itself.

In recent literature devoted to the Frankfurt School, such a retrospective view is prominent, and in this project three major trends emerge. First, we find numerous commentators situating the Frankfurt School in relation to problems or themes that have preoccupied the American academy generally. Postmodernism, feminism, sexuality: these and other topics are addressed generally with the sense that they have emerged “after” the Frankfurt School’s heyday and thus introduce concerns addressed only partially or as latent issues. It is not uncommon to find essays that look back to the Frankfurt School with a desire to make use of underappreciated resources. For instance, Randall Halle locates tensions between Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse’s theories of sexuality, locating in the latter means for dissociating the former’s metaphorical linkage of homosexuality and fascism.

A second major trend in recent Frankfurt School scholarship involves reading the school internally whether by means of biographical or textual criticism on individual figures, rescuing the reputations of minor contributors, revisiting debates or theses of major figures, or identifying various heirs to the first generation of critical theorists. The first two of these tasks have been, of course, greatly facilitated by the republication and translation into English of major works of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Marcuse. For instance, a significant number of pieces reconsidering critical theories of technology have recently appeared perhaps in response to massive technological transformations in cybernetics over the past twenty-odd years. On the question of heirs, an enormous body of scholarship has of course been devoted to discussion of Jürgen Habermas’s work, and a smaller body to the work of Axel Honneth and Alexander Kluge; but a major reevaluation of Adorno and Adornian-influenced scholars also seems to be underway. With substantial recent works on Adorno from Martin Jay, Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Fredric Jameson, Shierry

Weber Nicholson, and Lambert Zuidervaart, Adorno's centrality to any culturalist interpretation of the Frankfurt School seems assured. It might even be said that reconsiderations of Adorno have proceeded at such a pace that a renovated, re-published, and poststructuralist-friendly Adorno (as opposed to the cranky modernist of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) has become the leading figure of the second-generation Frankfurt School.

The third major trend in recent treatments of the Frankfurt School complements these "internal" approaches with "external" ones. Perhaps the liveliest area of scholarship during the 1990s (after explications of individual figures' major works) was populated by efforts to consider the Frankfurt School as a whole in relation to other schools or approaches. Comparative and/or historical work has situated the Frankfurt School in relation to Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, pragmatism, Michel Foucault, Paul Tillich, Wilhelm von Humboldt, rational choice theory, pre-fascist social thought, Thorstein Veblen, liberal democratic theory, Jerzy Kmita, existentialism, and poststructuralism generally. In addition to illustrating the tendency to see critical theory as offering a distinctive and relatively coherent "approach," this body of work also usefully draws attention to the historically situated character of the Frankfurt School (see especially Agger, Dallmayr, and Wolin). Once critical theory acquires a definite set of parameters, then it can be read symptomatically in relation to specific cultural situations. In the spirit of a dialectical intellectual history, then, we find a number of scholars reading the Frankfurt School theses "externally" in relation to the politics of exile, the "decay of experience," transformations in national culture industries, and the rise of mass media (see Israel 1997, Jay 1999, and Koepnick 1996). Complementing this trend toward sealing the Frankfurt School off from the present—by means of the tactic of situating—are various efforts to "extend" specific theses of critical theory to institutions, subjects, or themes not initially or entirely addressed by the first generation. Work on law, nature, education, and science appears in this vein.

If we understand cultural studies as an effort to identify determinate links between the "internal" and "external" elements of a cultural form, then clearly the impact of contemporary Theory on study of the Frankfurt School is likely to encourage and build upon work in the both of the latter two trends. Understanding Theory as a new articulation of the particular in its social situations and a willful defamiliarization of those particularizing theses by extending them to situations for which they were not developed—we might propose these activities as the hallmarks of a meeting of contemporary work on culture and the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School is Theory now, in part because it appears as the result of Theory's rereadings. Results of the theoretical reading of the Frankfurt School often involve reading the writings of the school architecturally (as a synchronic assembly of motifs, concepts, intellectual styles), rather than biographically or institutionally. Yet, broadly sketched historical approaches still appear. As essays in this collection illustrate, reconsidering the Frankfurt School in the light of contemporary, cross-disciplinary Theory will often, though not always, lead toward a renewed emphasis on Adorno and on the problems of the relationship of critical theory to poststructuralism, the American media industry, and

the social determination of subjectivity and/or experience. Theory helps make the themes and methods of the Frankfurt School legible again.

The Frankfurt School and Cultural Studies

The Frankfurt School has had a particularly difficult relation to the myriad discourses and methodologies of contemporary Theory that travel under the name “Cultural Studies.” On many accounts, in fact, Cultural Studies gets off the ground precisely by rejecting the Frankfurt School and its style of critical analysis. The litany of charges leveled against the Frankfurt School is almost too familiar to bear repeating: Frankfurt School theorists put forth a totalizing view of culture as somehow controlled by capitalist masters; they are far too sober, serious, and dire in their condemnations of everyday life and its pleasures; and the most serious and universal charge, Frankfurt School theorists are painted as cultural elitists who evidence little faith in the agency of the common person, and show no interest whatsoever in uncovering the hidden subversive codes seemingly buried in the rituals and products of popular culture. Adorno’s work on jazz is routinely cited in this context as proof positive of the Frankfurt School’s mandarin elitism.

Simon During’s massively influential 1993 Routledge anthology *The Cultural Studies Reader* stands as a representative and powerful example of the Frankfurt School’s traditional role within Cultural Studies. In During’s collection, the Frankfurt School remains important to Cultural Studies primarily as a kind of negative or naïve moment, as that which has to be overcome for Cultural Studies to properly exist at all. An excerpt from Adorno and Horkheimer’s “Culture Industry” essay opens the collection, but During’s headnote carefully establishes the negative thesis that the essay is intended to convey for the collection’s (largely student) audience: “Adorno and Horkheimer neglect what was to become central to cultural studies: the ways in which the culture industry, while in the service of organized capital, also provides the opportunities for all kinds of individual and collective creativity and decoding” (30). The Frankfurt School’s dire determinism concerning “mass deception” has to be overcome, During argues, if Cultural Studies is to take up and valorize the central role of the subject and the subversive agency—the “creativity and decoding”—that she performs every day in the face of capital. On this reading, the Frankfurt School is dismissed for remaining territorialized on economic questions about unification or mass production, rather than exploring diversification or subversive consumption.

From its inception in England to its present configurations in North American and Australia, much (but certainly not all) English-language Cultural Studies has maintained a skeptical distance from the Frankfurt School, locating its genealogies and critical concepts elsewhere in modern Europe. From its engagement with theorists like Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser through Foucault and de Certeau, Cultural Studies has predominantly focused its intellectual and political energies on unleashing subjective resistance and “agency,” the subversive multiple potentialities of the individual in his or her everyday life. And if Cultural Studies in the future is to

remain territorialized on the insurgent agency of the consuming subject and the secretly transgressive qualities of cultural commodities, then the Frankfurt School will just as likely remain a merely negative or archaic moment in the ongoing study of the present.

Recently, however, Cultural Studies has been undergoing something of a crisis, as the “transgression” model has come increasingly under fire. As Tom Frank points out, after reading article after article about the hidden transgressive qualities of pornography or outlet shopping or soap operas, “one finds the cult-stud’s particular species of transgression transgresses a lot less than all their talk of a ‘radical politics of difference’ would imply” (8). Frank continues his critique by pointing out the snug fit between notions of transgression in Cultural Studies and the contemporary right-wing ideology of consumer choice and niche marketing: “To an undeniable degree, the official narratives of American business—expressed in advertising, in management theory, in probusiness political and journalistic circles—largely share the cult-studs’ oft-expressed desire to take on hierarchies, their tendency to find ‘elitism’ lurking behind any criticism of mass culture, and their pious esteem for audience agency. . . . It is a surprisingly short walk from the cult-studs’ active-audience theorizing to the most undiluted sort of free-market orthodoxy” (8–9).

Given this unhappy state of affairs (where Cultural Theory finds itself in bed with the “Man” that it ostensibly wants to transgress or resist), scholars have recently been turning away from celebrations of subjective transgression and back toward trying to understand how subjects are produced by the canalization of desire on a “mass” scale. For many, this has entailed a rethinking of the Frankfurt School. Read in a certain way, the Frankfurt School shows you how the culture industry doesn’t really produce products at all; rather it produces subjects. Adorno and Horkheimer’s “Culture Industry,” for example, argues that modern capitalist society is a kind of Fordist factory, but the assembly line finally yields only one product: consumers. And more specifically, this brand of cultural capitalism produces consumers who ideologically understand (or misunderstand) their own consumption practices as transgressive or authentic. “Something is provided for all,” they intone, “so that none may escape” (During 34).

Historically, it is just such an emphasis on Fordist subject production—a very hard version of “interpellation”—that has caused many contemporary theorists to hesitate before Frankfurt School analyses. If “everyone, however powerful, is an object” (37)—as Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*—then there would seem to be very little room for the individual or collective subject to resist this social reduction of us all to inert passivity. Cultural construction, in the world of the Frankfurt School, can all too often seem like cultural determination. But recent and continuing work on interpellation and subjection—work as diversified as Judith Butler’s and Emmanuel Levinas’s—has opened up new ways to conceptualize thoroughgoing cultural construction as other than ham-fisted cultural determination, and thereby has sent many thinkers back to the Frankfurt School with a fresh set of conceptual apparatuses and questions. Of course, one could easily argue that the Frankfurt School was there all along, informing contemporary work on subjectivity and interpellation; and perhaps

only now can it be reexamined and affirmed as a crucial component in the toolkit for studying contemporary life.

There seems at least one other obvious historical reason for reemerging interest in the Frankfurt School. The “transgression” thesis in Cultural Studies was based on a parallel historical thesis about diversification in the culture industry’s modes of production. As the argument goes, the Frankfurt School theorized in a much more hierarchized world of cultural products; their theses may have some relevance in the middle of the twentieth century, but at the dawning of the twenty-first, their analyses seem clumsily based on an outdated, paranoid, and totalizing model of increasing corporate control.

Looking again at the *Cultural Studies Reader*, During highlights this supposedly antiquated quality of Frankfurt School analysis, specifically referring to Adorno and Horkheimer’s work on the culture industry: “when this essay was written,” he argues, “the cultural industry was less variegated than it was to become, during the 1960s in particular. Hollywood, for instance, was still ‘vertically integrated’ so that the five major studios owned the production, distribution, and exhibition arms of the film business between them; television was still in its infancy; the LP and the single were unknown; the cultural market had not broken into various demographics sectors—of which, in the 1950s, the youth segment was to become the most energetic” (29–30). Ironically, During’s 1993 charge that the Frankfurt School’s moment is over (and his rather rosy version of diversification in the culture industry) seems itself rather dated less than a decade later: in the late 1990s, there was an unprecedented consolidation within the multinational “infotainment” industry—topped off at the end of the decade by the largest media merger in history, the AOL–Time Warner monopoly. And it seems like there are plenty of such megamergers yet to come. Mass media is, it seems, no longer just a convenient catch phrase.

Indeed, Frankfurt School attitudes toward cultural leveling (the dreaded “totalization” for which the Frankfurt School is commonly reproached) seem again to make very good sense in the twenty-first century—in the Disnified world where the corporate orthodoxy is local diversification, while the corporate reality is global consolidation. The Frankfurt School’s theses on totalization and massification seem to have a new (or perhaps an enduring) relevance in the present economic climate of global corporatization—where not only individual cultures and indigenous practices, but public spheres on a global scale seem in danger of collapsing into a kind of corporate monoculture.

Indeed, as studies of the contemporary moment turn to concern themselves more with economic questions about production and multinational circulation, and less with subjective questions about transgression and recognition, the Frankfurt School is reemerging as a key site of historical and theoretical tools for today. Ironically, contemporary theorists find themselves turning back toward another reading of the Frankfurt School—that is, rethinking the Frankfurt School—precisely for the reasons it was once scorned: for notions of interpellated subjectivities whose desires are less liberated and multiplied than they are produced and canalized by a far-reaching, very nearly totalizing global culture industry. Indeed, as new questions

concerning globalization and economic redistribution emerge, while analyses of identity politics and transgression become less central to contemporary theory, the future of the Frankfurt School looks at least as promising and productive as its past has proven to be. At least this is the theory and practice informing our collection, *Rethinking the Frankfurt School*.

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