

**John Abromeit**

*Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School.*

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John Abromeit's *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* is the most thorough study yet of Horkheimer's life and work up to 1941. The book discusses the early development of Horkheimer's thought within the European political context of the 1920s, making useful reference to the attempt of the German left to regroup and rethink Marxism after the Russian revolution. It also provides a valuable assessment of Horkheimer's interaction with the academic movements of the period.

In contrast with the view of some contemporaries, like Fredric Jameson, who view the later work of first-generation Critical Theory as more fruitful ground for critical theory under conditions in which capital has become a nearly all-encompassing global system, Abromeit argues that it is Horkheimer's early work that can best contribute to a renewal of Critical Theory today (2). Like Habermas, and less like Jameson, he appears optimistic that a form of Critical Theory can be developed that will make use of liberal political structures and lead to an increase in freedom.

The book is divided into nine chapters plus an introduction, two excurses, and an epilogue. It covers Horkheimer's youth and student years, then depicts his further development into an incipient philosopher and the head of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Chapters three through five examine the early development of Critical Theory. Chapters six through nine each focus on a particular concept that is key to Horkheimer's views from 1931 to 1941: the concept of historical materialism (chapter 6); the anthropology of the bourgeois epoch (chapter 7); the dialectical logic (chapter 8); and state capitalism (chapter 9). The excurses focus on his relationships with Erich Fromm and Theodor Adorno, respectively.

The study of Horkheimer's work from the 1920s stands out as one unique contribution of the book. Kant, Hegel, and Marx all had an impact on Horkheimer during the period in which he studied with the Neo-Kantian Hans Cornelius. Horkheimer views Kant's philosophy as legitimately critical in that it seeks to understand the preconditions for thought. Yet because Kant fails to analyze the conditions in the world that influence subjective consciousness, Kant shows himself not quite critical enough (119). Horkheimer thus turns to Hegel for a superior understanding of the effect of historical conditions on subjective thought. However, even in this early work Horkheimer is already critical of Hegel for failing to give due emphasis to determinate thinking persons and for positing a fictitious 'subject-object' totality instead (122ff.). Consequently, Horkheimer draws on Marx as he develops a materialist interpretation of the history of modern philosophy (90ff.).

While most of the existing literature discussing Horkheimer's early work focuses exclusively on a few key essays such as 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research' and 'Traditional and Critical Theory', Abromeit's

work provides a much richer background. Chapter four examines Horkheimer's stance toward Mannheim and the sociology of knowledge and Lenin's materialism and empiricism. It discusses the place of *Dämmerung* in Horkheimer's thought and examines his understanding of the Soviet Union. Horkheimer is critical of Mannheim's philosophy for what he refers to as a 'free-floating' intellectualism; simultaneously he is critical of Lenin's views, along with those of Lukács, for their claimed rootedness in the universal interests of the working class (150). Instead of these alternatives, Horkheimer begins to refine his position, which seeks a rational, value-based critique of capitalist society, yet does not presume the universality of working class interests.

Abromeit argues that Horkheimer's integration of psychoanalysis into Marxist theory was his single greatest contribution to Marxist theory (255). The book includes a very useful account of Fromm's early influence on Horkheimer and offers helpful discussions of both Fromm's and Horkheimer's work on psychology. One emphasis in the book is on 'Egoism and Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Epoch', an article that Horkheimer thought was foundational for further work at the institute and that Marcuse said was 'nearest to the paradigmatic ideal of early Critical Theory' (262), but which has not been treated in much recent secondary research. The focus is on how the existing 'socio-psychological constellation' gave rise to a ruthlessly individualist 'bourgeois character' (270).

Reflections on this bourgeois character are seen in the main intellectual tendencies of the epoch. In particular, Horkheimer emphasizes how it is theoretically reflected in Freud's work, which increasingly emphasizes the biological origin of various phenomena such as the 'destruction drive' and fails to appreciate the effects of external socio-historical factors on character and the plasticity in the libidinal drives (275). The works of Horkheimer, Fromm, and others at the institute take these social factors into purview. In doing so, Horkheimer and his associates not only update Marx with Freud: they also update Freud with Marx.

Throughout the 1930s Horkheimer also builds reflections on dialectic into his work, viewing both the *Lebensphilosophie* and positivist tradition as having fallen behind the level of philosophical sophistication in Hegel's thought (313). In Horkheimer's view, philosophical knowledge needs to integrate the empirical orientation emphasized by the positivist school, but it also needs to recognize the historical and social contextualization of the categories of thought being used, as the *Lebensphilosophen* did. Yet – similar to how Freud failed to see the effects of socio-historical conditions on our psychic lives – the positivists failed to see their effect on science more generally. Positivist science, therefore, lacking the type of dialectical reflexivity that looks to the social dynamic involved in the production of knowledge, unwittingly serves the prevailing interests of its time (316), while *Lebensphilosophie* falls into a dogmatic mysticism. In Horkheimer's view it is necessary to take note of the dialectical interaction between the empirical sciences and their historical and social conditions. This shatters the illusion that the ideas of empirical science would be free from historical and social interests.

Though the view of dialectic employed by Horkheimer is strongly influenced by Marx, Horkheimer rejects the Orthodox Marxist notion that there would be a determined historical trajectory (321) and that Marx's own categories have ahistorical validity (323). Horkheimer's Critical Theory, rather, engages in a critique of knowledge and society with a view to improving the lives of individuals within a given society while accepting that history remains fundamentally

open-ended, without any guarantees (331). His Critical Theory attempts to think the social whole but recognizes, as Adorno later expresses it, that ‘the whole is the untrue’ (334). Whatever is grasped will always be incomplete. In Abromeit’s view, this thought is one of Horkheimer’s ‘most important contributions to socialist theory in the twentieth century’ (334).

Two trends reshape Horkheimer’s later work. For one, he moves away from a historically local critique of a particular epoch to a more general critique of instrumental reason in the Western tradition (410ff.). For another, he becomes increasingly pessimistic about the chances of any of form of state intervention that will lead to greater freedoms (401). The rise of Fascism clearly affected this shift; and he came to view this rise as a non-coincidental result of the main trajectory of Western reason.

Abromeit views the focus in the later work on a ‘transhistorical notion of the domination of nature’ (427) as resulting in a lack of ‘historical mediation’ that prevents the work from being truly dialectical (427). He also shows sympathy with Habermas’s criticism that Horkheimer’s work of the period of the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* threatens to undermine the critical potential of bourgeois culture more generally. The path Abromeit chooses, however, is not to turn away from first generation Critical Theory altogether but to argue that the early work he has described is not susceptible to the same criticism. That early work thus serves as ‘a more promising point of departure for contemporary efforts to renew Critical Theory’ (425). It preserves ‘the traditions of historical materialism and psychoanalysis’ that are lost in Habermas’s work after his Kantian turn (430). This, along with the type of sensitivity to the value of the enlightenment ideals of bourgeois society that Habermas has emphasized, will be helpful in a fruitful Critical Theory for the 21st century. A model of this type, Abromeit argues, should be appealing to those who do not think knowledge aims at ‘the establishment of timeless truths’ but instead at ‘the improvement of the lives of finite human beings’ (432).

Abromeit has written an excellent intellectual biography of Horkheimer that will be necessary reading for scholars of the Frankfurt School for some time to come. The work will be instructive for those hoping to revive a form of Critical Theory that takes on board the social sciences yet is more Hegelian and less Kantian than Habermas’s later work. Those with less faith in liberal political institutions, as well as those who entertain more a conflict than a consensus model of political life, can learn much from the book, but they will find it a less helpful point of departure.

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