

REVIEW ARTICLE

Thomas Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*
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Anyone keen to learn about the history of the Frankfurt School is spoiled for choice. If *The Dialectical Imagination*—Martin Jay’s classic—fails to satisfy, there is always Rolf Wiggershaus’s comprehensive *The Frankfurt School*. On the face of it, the reading no less than the writing of Thomas Wheatland’s new book—yet another history of the Frankfurt School—might seem a rather needless exercise. Yet this is not the case. For the success of books like *The Dialectical Imagination* has created its own set of problems. Through repeated telling from a single perspective, certain aspects of the Frankfurt School’s history have hardened into myth; our familiarity with the object has become a barrier to our knowing it. This is especially true of the Frankfurt School’s American years. Of that period, we are typically told one thing: that in the United States the Institute for Social Research may have found a safe haven from fascism, but it failed—at least until the rise of the New Left—to find an audience for its work; that during their stay on Morningside Heights, Horkheimer and Co had very little contact with, or impact upon, American intellectual life. That such a view should have come to prevail is in many ways understandable. It is certainly true, for example, that for various reasons—mainly political—Horkheimer sought for the group a degree of isolation, almost anonymity, in the US. But as *The Frankfurt School in Exile* makes clear, this is only half the story, and the less interesting half at that.

Wheatland’s thesis is straightforward enough: far from having little impact on the intellectual culture of its adopted homeland, the Frankfurt School’s migration “produced broad boulevards of interaction, thoroughfares on which cross-cultural encounters could result in cooperation, as well as conflict...assimilation, as well as misunderstanding” (xvi). Throughout the book, he makes good this claim by tracing the Institute’s various, and often complex, relationships with a number of academic institutions, networks and intellectual communities in the US, including Columbia University, the institution that agreed to house the émigrés. Though the Frankfurt School’s reasons for seeking affiliation with Columbia are well known—they needed a respectable, non-European base, and fast—almost nothing has been written about Columbia’s motives. Wheatland helpfully fills in the gaps. The result is a fascinating pair of chapters on the events before, during, and after the Institute’s

arrival, but also on the inner workings of Columbia's sociology department through the 1930s and 1940s.

Perhaps the most interesting and telling connection Wheatland documents is that between members of the Horkheimer Circle (as Wheatland sometimes calls them) and the group of American writers and literary critics known as the New York Intellectuals. The Institute for Social Research arrived in New York City in 1934. At first, its relatively secure and independent financial situation meant its members were more or less free to work in isolation on projects of their choosing. This suited Horkheimer who, half out of respect for his new home and half out of fear of persecution, thought it wise for the Institute to keep its radical views to itself. This all changed when in the late 1930s, owing largely to a series of disastrous property deals, the Institute fell on hard times and isolation was no longer an option. If it was to attract funding, the Institute would have to raise its public profile. As the group participated more actively in the intellectual and cultural life of its new home, it began to attract the attention of young, precocious radicals like Philip Rahv, Dwight Macdonald, and William Phillips, key figures behind publications such as *Partisan Review* and *Politics*. Here, Wheatland, argues, the influence of the Frankfurt School on its adopted homeland cannot be overestimated:

[w]hether acknowledged or not, the work of the Horkheimer Circle...lurked behind the profusion of ink that the New York Intellectuals devoted to making sense of the new world that was taking shape during and after the Second World War. Even the most casual perusal of *Partisan Review*, *Politics*, *Commentary*, and *Dissent* discloses a continuous fascination with the basic set of interrelated topics that the Horkheimer Circle helped many of the New York writers to comprehend and interconnect (186-87).

The influence is especially clear, writes Wheatland, in the critique of mass culture which began to surface in the late 1930s. Before their contact with the Frankfurt School, the writers of *Partisan Review* only "had a general sense of what mass culture was", they only "dimly perceived connections between the propaganda in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union" (170-71). What they lacked were fully developed theories of mass culture, Modernism and totalitarianism. It was this that the Horkheimer Circle provided them with. According to Wheatland, however, in the end the encounter was really one of missed opportunities: "[the] collision [of the two groups] could have led to so much more than it did...[but by] the time that the Horkheimer Circle had overcome its timidity, the New Yorkers had already moved beyond it..." (187).

Missed opportunity also dogged the Frankfurt School's encounter with Sidney Hook—the foremost authority on Marx in America during the 1930s. The Frankfurt School and Hook had much in common. Hook's Pragmatic Marxism and Horkheimer's critical theory both sought to identify "social and natural problems that blocked human actions and potentials" as well as ideas that could overcome these obstacles (105). But there were key differences as well and before long the two were engaged in a hostile debate. As with most intellectual disagreements involving the Frankfurt School, the nature of the dispute was methodological. The Horkheimer Circle would have no truck with the positivistic aspects of Hook's Pragmatism while for Hook, it was the Frankfurt School's apparent lapse into metaphysics, its residual Hegelianism, that was the problem. In Wheatland's judgment, by attacking each other in this way, both parties, but especially the Frankfurt School, missed a unique chance at collaboration. The Frankfurt School, he suggests, ought to have been more accommodating, less dogmatic. Shadowing Habermas's critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory, Wheatland argues that "the members of the Institute for Social Research would have benefited immeasurably from engaging in a more serious confrontation with the democratic communication theory inherent within Pragmatism" (188).

The Frankfurt School's money troubles not only meant a more public profile, it meant a change in the very nature of their research. If there was an American organization willing to fund *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer could not find it. The Institute needed a more suitable project, one that would fit with the world of empirically-driven, Anglo-American sociology and eventually they found one. With funding from the American Jewish Committee, the Frankfurt School through the 1940s worked on its *Studies in Prejudice*. Published in the first

months of 1950, the response from the scholarly community to this expansive project was extremely positive: “as a collective series of projects, the set of five monographs was praised for its scientific and intellectual rigor” (255). Wheatland delights in the irony here: “after several years of struggling to gain recognition in the United States, the work that garnered the Institute the spotlight was not a truly representative piece of Critical Theory” but a project pursued first and foremost for financial reasons (243). Given the compromise involved, it is tempting to view the success of *Studies in Prejudice* in a negative light but Wheatland goes the other way. Although it involved a great deal of compromise, the *Studies in Prejudice* must be seen as a boon; it helped unite Anglo-American empiricism and Continental social theory. As a result of the *Studies*, “American sociology generally became more accepting of...Freudian psychoanalysis and other theoretical tools that had been fashioned on the Continent” (xx).

No account of the Frankfurt School in exile would be complete without a chapter or two devoted to Herbert Marcuse, who, after the war, having made the US his permanent home, continued to have an impact on American society and culture. Wheatland does not disappoint. Only here his book takes an interesting turn. What he discovers is not a figure whose influence has been understated but vastly overstated. Marcuse, the so-called ‘guru’ of the New Left was, according to Wheatland, nothing of the sort. After interviewing leaders of the student movement and examining the writings of the New Left from that period, Wheatland has his suspicions confirmed: Marcuse’s name comes up far less than one might expect. *One-Dimensional Man* might have sold well but there is little evidence to suggest that he played anything like the role attributed to him by the media. His work was not as widely discussed as the popular image would have us believe: “[t]he typical undergraduates of the late 1960s who flocked to SDS and considered themselves countercultural were not the protégés of Herbert Marcuse” (297-98).

Wheatland’s commitment to uncovering the truth about the Frankfurt School’s American years is admirable. Anyone interested in the intellectual history of the twentieth century, especially *transatlantic* intellectual history, will want to read it. Wheatland’s weakness is not so much the history of the Frankfurt School, but its theory. Ordinarily, this might not be a serious problem for a specifically historical study, but at key points, Wheatland’s historical narrative clearly rests on a particular interpretation of the Frankfurt School’s theoretical work. In his account of the Frankfurt School’s encounter with Sidney Hook, Wheatland views the missed opportunity as one for which the Frankfurt School was largely to blame. In drawing this conclusion, Wheatland relies on an old, yet still widely accepted, view about the Frankfurt School: that sometime in the late 1930s under Horkheimer’s direction, the Institute underwent a radical theoretical revision. Its members abandoned reason, science and Marxism in favour of a totalizing and transhistorical critique of Western civilization based around the concept of the domination of nature. If only they had not succumbed to such a radical revision, they might have seen the positive aspects of Hook’s Pragmatism; they might have avoided the error of their “highly antiliberal [*sic*]” and “Mandarin” ways (188). Yet it is not at all clear that the Frankfurt School’s radical new theory of society, which Wheatland clearly views as an aberration, was all that new, nor all that much of an aberration. The most cursory glance at Adorno’s theoretical work shows that as early as “The Actuality of Philosophy” (1931) and “The Idea of Natural History” (1932) the critique of instrumental reason and of the domination of nature were already in place; they were already central to his philosophical project. This might seem like a trivial point but it shows that the Frankfurt School’s anti-liberalism, its critique of the domination of nature, and of Hook’s Pragmatic Marxism, were not mere aberrations; nor were they born of some temporary overwhelming pessimism, as many historians of the Frankfurt School would have us believe. They were essential to the School’s identity. Had members such as Horkheimer and Adorno abandoned them, much of what is unique and valuable about the Institute for Social Research would have vanished, too. In the end, it was their critique *of*, and not their conformity *to*, American ideas, practices and methods that made the Frankfurt School such an important part of our intellectual history.