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The power of negative thinking

Grand Hotel Abyss: the lives of the Frankfurt School, by Stuart Jeffries, London, Verso, 2016, 448 pp., £10.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1784785680. Reviewed by John Mackessy, Psychotherapist

The Frankfurt School (FS), the subject of Stuart Jeffries' impressive history, has been regarded by many on the left as a group of passive, self-indulgent, hyper-intellectuals. According to Lukács, the sort who might reside in the *Grand Hotel Abyss*. They gaze upon benighted humanity, sigh deeply and return to the Alban Berg violin concerto. Another of their contemporaries, Brecht, wasn't fond of them either.

If one thing is made abundantly clear in Jeffries' account, it is that if, as Lukács, Brecht and others assert, the Frankfurt School had an aversion to revolutionary action, they had an even stronger commitment to revolutionary thinking.

The members of the Institute for Social Research, to give the FS its proper name, likely to be familiar include Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas were other leading lights. Notably, Walter Benjamin, though not formally a member, was intimately connected with the School. Theirs was an ambitious trans-disciplinary enterprise, and their writings range across politics, political economy, social theory, psychology, psychoanalysis and what has come to be known as cultural theory, which they pretty much founded. Thankfully, Jeffries presents the results of his extensive research in a very readable, though not excessively simplified manner. Repressive desublimation … is not shirked, but not made impenetrable either.

The first two generations of the FS were mostly Jewish, frequently from wealthy 'capitalist' families, and indeed this initially Marxist institute was itself established on funds from a wealthy Jewish industrialist. However, if of somewhat bourgeois origin, these Frankfurt scholars also suffered at first hand Hitler's Germany, the failures and inhumanities of revolutionary communism and the impact of authoritarianism, both of the left and right. They knew the meaning of destruction, disillusionment and dreams betrayed.

While reading, I was frequently put in mind of Gramsci, who wrote of the need for 'an optimism of the will' and 'pessimism of the intellect', and who saw 'the challenge of modernity' as being 'to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.'

Well, on those grounds, the FS must be counted largely as a failure. Apart from the rare flare-up of transgressive optimism, such as in Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, they were a pretty

pessimistic and disillusioned bunch; as Marxists who give up on the historical role of 'the proletariat' are likely to be. It has to be said, though, that Gramsci does set the bar rather high.

For me, however, their yearning disillusionment, however, is part of their allure. They occupy a corner of my heart with that fellow nay-sayer, Schopenhauer. Aptly, a chapter in this book is wryly entitled 'The Power of Negative Thinking'. A suitable antidote in our times to *The Power of Now* or *You Can Heal Your Life*.

They were, though, a strange blend of hope and pessimism – drawing upon Marx and Hegel, on the one side (with these philosophers' historical 'optimism' for the freedom of humanity); and, on the other, upon Freud with his tones of Schopenhauerian pessimism regarding our driven nature and the inevitability of disappointment and loss. The tensions – I won't say contradictions – produced through such seemingly ill-matched bedfellows are absolutely fascinating. While Jeffries doesn't depict these origins in the way that I have, he traces the historical fallout of such tensions in fascinating detail.

For me, on one level, Jeffries' book reads like a classic *noir*, in which the flawed underdog of an anti-hero (yes, definitely a bloke) captivates your attention throughout; and despite his gnarled psyche, something keeps you hoping that he'll perform a final *redemptive* act. The world may have gone to shit, I may have sold out, *but* 'we'll always have Paris'. Jeffries' account, I believe, supports the idea that the FS had a similarly 'Bogartian' hope for the redemption of humanity, even amidst the ruin of hope itself. Zyklon B, as they were aware, he tells us, was manufactured in Frankfurt.

The Marxian/Freudian tensions of the School are, of course, there in the characters of its protagonists too, and Jeffries shares a lovely anecdote about Walter Benjamin, the revered theorist and creative genius, who till his dying day blamed his mother for his inability to make coffee! Two spoons of Oedipus with the revolution, please.

Herbert Marcuse was 'accused' of reading Marx into Freud in *Eros and Civilization*, where he extolled the liberational force of Eros. Adorno, however, maintained a darker hue with his 'negative dialectics', which gives up on the idea of dialectical 'progress' in history. This, psychoanalytically, to my mind, much resembles the narcissistic loss entailed in realizing the non-omnipotence of the father. One of my regrets about this book is that Jeffries spends little time looking at such themes through the lens of narcissism, but then this *is* a history.

Loss, hope, narcissism and narcissistic rage: a question the FS repeatedly asked was can we redeem ourselves, or must we create another Auschwitz?

The German idealism that saw history teleologically, as the unfolding of freedom, was not for men who had been forced from their homeland and whose relatives died in the death camps. Importantly, they did not want the suffering of the camps and what this implied about our humanity to be forgotten, or to be explained away as a necessary 'phase' in history.

There are fascinating connections, not explored here by Jeffries, between the FS, Lacan and later with deconstruction. Primarily, this is a shared fascination, common to continental philosophy and psychoanalysis, with what is 'missing' in particular narratives and schema. What is it, they all ask, that is not thinkable here? What is it that the culture, the ontology or the semiotic system 'forgets' or excludes?

If, in deconstruction, meaning and 'truth' are only capable of existing in relation to what is missing or deferred, we find clear precursors of this in Adorno. In a wonderful phrase, Jeffries encapsulates this idea, writing that for Adorno 'dissonance is the truth of harmony' (p. 244). Truth, here, is inherently a dialectical/relational business, and, I believe, because of the relational work that we do, this insight is likely to find a more welcoming home among psychotherapists than elsewhere.

Obviously, we can understand why a culture might wish to forget its own fascism. However, the FS found unconscious authoritarianism hidden in plain sight all around us. I sense here a

parallel with, or influence upon, Michel Foucault, who held that much of our thinking, including our theories, is authoritarian. 'Fascism in the head' is what he called it. Interviewed by Duccio Trombadori in 1978, Foucault said that he only seriously explored the FS later in life and that had he studied them earlier he 'would have been seduced to the point of doing nothing else in life but the job of commenting on them' (Foucault, 2013).

This critique of the 'missing', the unconscious and its relations to structures of power, for me as a therapist, highlights one of the most fascinating and insightful themes in the work of the FS, which is lucidly explored by Jeffries. It concerns 'the culture industry' and Marcuse's notion of 'affirmative culture'.

What is it that you must not acknowledge to continue enjoying your lunch and to maintain a healthy appetite? The culture industry creates a lovely narcissistic bubble in our own homes, where we can consume a variety of narratives via our 'smart' TVs. It doesn't even have to be 'opiate of the people' or life-affirming stuff. The thing that truly affirms the culture is the consumption itself. The culture industry can sell you pretty much anything you want, including armchair cynicism, nihilistic chic and art house movies about alienation. That's not to disparage such movies, but simply to point out that for the most part they are absorbed by the culture, without threatening any change whatsoever. I can watch my Ingmar Bergman, rub balm on my alienated soul and then crack on with a bit of opera and my biodynamic Sauvignon Blanc.

The idea of such an industry, which the FS began to theorize from the 1920s onwards, was a radical one in that it described a realm of 'exchange' in which not only are products created, but consumers and the function of consumption too. As Žižek puts it, the culture industry not only tells us what to desire, but how to desire. It seizes desire itself, and frames the human subject in relation to desires that it invokes. In essence, through commodity fetishism it turns us into objects, or at least alienated subjects. From this perspective, *our* contemporary freedom today is, in the main, freedom to consume; a freedom bolstered by the rhetoric of pseudo-individualism and its injunction to 'enjoy'. The cardinal sin would be to spoil the party or to put others off their dinners.

In his 1955 book, *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm (1955/2012) posed the question as to what constitutes a sane person in an insane society. In such a society, Marcuse might add, it is our very satisfactions that enslave us, and what is more, enslave those who provide these products. Fromm also explores the existential disquiet that comes over us in the still moments when there is nothing to fill the void; when we are forced to encounter our own alienation.

The fear for Fromm, Adorno, Marcuse et al. is that this type of 'freedom' threatens to turn us into *automata*, affirming the culture of our own enslavement and simply wanting more. And what is missing here is the space for a genuine negation or, to use Adorno's term, a 'thinking against' such cultural forces and indeed our own appetites. This is what Marcuse believes is foreclosed in an 'affirmative culture', through what Schopenhauer once called 'obligatory optimism' (2004, p. 78).

These ideas are, of course, quite mainstream now but still open up interesting questions for us as psychotherapists in relation to the cultures and norms within which we work. Does anyone ever get treated for 'cognitive distortions' if these distortions contribute to their being happily ambitious in their marketing career? Perhaps more importantly, many of us will have clients presenting with social, familial or economic problems for which they are urged to seek individual psychological help. Perhaps mindfulness will help you to hate your job and your life less. The problem *must* be with the individual and their failure to be fulfilled, rather than in relation to the frames in which we exist.

Interestingly, Adorno was reviled by German students during the uprisings of the late 1960s. He saw in the vehemence of the students' actions a compulsiveness and fear of introspection, and he associated these with the desperate clarity and aggression of those drawn to

authoritarianism. Jeffries covers this period of the FS in some detail, including the falling-out between Adorno and Marcuse, who largely supported the student protests. "For Adorno", Jeffries writes, "thinking rather than sit-ins and barricades was the true radical act". He goes on to quote Adorno: "Whoever thinks, offers resistance; it is more comfortable to swim with the current, even when one declares oneself to be against the current" (p. 4).

So Adorno's 'thinking against' includes the counter-culture, the Marxist tradition he had worked within, and even the nature of thinking itself. This type of thinking is not a socially comfortable activity. The purpose of such thinking is not to enthrone 'a truth', but to dissolve stereotypes. It is, in Adorno's terms, 'thinking against the concept'. As such, it has the potential to militate against existing relational structures, even to estrange one among friends and fellow travellers.

Were the students, then, as radical, free-thinking and liberated as they thought, or had they found new dogmas and new gods to worship in 'Marx, Mao and Marcuse', and new drugs and new cultural products to consume?

Interesting questions all, and one of the things I most admired about Jeffries' book was that he lays questions out, delineates the context, problematizes how we might consider them and then apparently does a neat disappearing act. I can't tell you whether he favours Marcuse or Adorno, although I got a slight sense that he was less impressed with the latter-day 'optimism' of a FS scholar such as Habermas. His depiction of Habermas's hope for 'rationally achieved consensus' (p. 370) is clear, to the point and well contextualized. Maybe it's actually my own lack of fervour for neo-rationalism that I detect here and my preference for the older, darker gods.

Finally, we might say that FS has not given us much at all, except a sense of disquiet as we settle down to be entertained or well fed. A bunch of lefties who gave up on Marxist dialectics, the revolutionary potential of the proletariat and most of whom didn't even get behind the students in 1968.

But they gave us 'negative dialectics', which portrays us stumbling forward not towards progress but potentially to calamity; and what has this negation to offer us other than bad dreams, and destroyed dreams?

Well of course I can't speak for Jeffries, but what I will take away from this outstanding history is encapsulated in a quotation from Walter Benjamin, on the nature of the destructive character: 'What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of rubble, but for the way leading through it' (p. 170). And it would be grand to leave it there with a sense of potential and possibility, but it is precisely human potentiality, Jeffries explains, that the FS saw being everywhere betrayed and reduced to dross. So, Benjamin shortly before his own death completes the statement above with this: 'The destructive character lives from the feeling not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble' (ibid.).

We finish where we started, with a struggle between a sense of potentiality and an overpowering air of pessimism. Essentially, with a sense of loss and perhaps even bereft in the face of the Frankfurt School's 'passivity' towards advanced capitalism. And such a critique hits home. It hits home, however, because the FS were acutely sensitive to the fact that each revolution produces another tyranny and because they saw the ineluctable problem faced by those who wish to oppose capitalism and authoritarianism: how can one oppose without, in turn, contributing to the authoritarian objectification and brutalization of the human subject? How can we act without denying people's choices and their freedom to 'think against' us?

Now, where did I put that Sauvignon Blanc? It's never over until the fat lady sings.

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Psychotherapy as experiment

Nietzsche and the clinic: psychoanalysis, philosophy, metaphysics, by Jared Russell, London, Karnac, 2017, 165 pp., £23.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-7822048-9-3. Reviewed by Manu Bazzano

Nietzsche's exciting philosophical adventure was always meant as an experiment. Too imaginative for the greenhouses of academia, he was unceremoniously ejected, as a young gifted philologist, for having produced a rhapsodic account of the Greek tragedians that flew in the face of the self-appointed objectivity of so much insipid scholarship. His first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche, 2000), flirted with ecstasies and intensities that to this day frighten muzzled horses in their evidence-based stables. Despite slating the book years later for its 'Hegelian smell' and reproaching himself for his youthful infatuation with Wagner, with that particular work Nietzsche managed to pluck from thin air the now universally acknowledged (if seldom understood) categories of the *Dionysian* and the *Apollonian*. This and other ideas found their way eventually into academia, i.e. into a world where the adventures of philosophy turn into so many plastic gadgets in the bazaar of fetishized knowledge. A central point the author makes in this stimulating book is that there is an evident parallel between Nietzsche's philosophy and psychotherapy. Russell, a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York and managing editor of the Journal *The Undecidable Unconscious*, does not refer to psychotherapy as a whole but only to psychoanalysis. Sadly, this is common practice among analysts, a stand-offish refusal perhaps to recognize some common ground with practitioners from other orientations, but the significant point for all therapists is that psychoanalysis was born *outside academia*. Not only was Freud denied access to a university position because of the anti-Semitism of *fin de siècle* Austria, which regarded psychoanalysis with disdain as a 'Jewish art'. The very art of psychotherapy, like Nietzsche's philosophy, is, the author rightly says, an *experiment* and as such cannot be easily translated into the recyclable knowledge of universities, least of all 'integrated' into a pseudo-discourse ruled by PowerPoint and data-ridden clichés that demand tiresome recitations in essays and case studies. What tends to happen through this soul-destroying process is that the art of psychotherapy becomes a commodity. Instead of the transmission of a living *culture*, this is a route to *acculturation*. Russell writes:

> Academic institutions operate according to a logic in which what is accepted is not esteemed, and in which what is esteemed is not to be accepted … Nietzsche had perceived and suffered the effects of this logic. His vision of philosophy as a practice beyond mere scholarship led him to embrace experimentalism in style, and to practice textually in ways that would indicate the fault lines in all claims to universality. (p. 124)