

## REVIEWS:

Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School: A Marxist Perspective*. London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977.

The proletariat of the 1970s will be stunned by the news that the Frankfurt School was short on practice. Yet if the immediate impact of this report is shock, the long range can only be sobering and salutary: the less illusions the better. For this discovery we are indebted to Phil Slater. Slater joins a number of other stalwart academics who are risking their careers to spread the word that the Frankfurt School were also academics. Through an intense and revolutionary sifting of the documents Professor Slater has concluded that Professor Horkheimer was a professor.

This book is bad, a real lemon. Slater has nothing to say and says it poorly. The book contains neither new facts, new thoughts, nor an accurate presentation of familiar ones. A volume in the "International Library of Sociology" founded by Karl Mannheim, it marks the nadir of that series. Thrown-together, it is best thrown away. Slater toots the single note on his life without cease: the failure of the Frankfurt School to enlist in the practical and proletarian struggle. By page five we have gotten the message; by page ten the note is grating; by page twenty-five we are gasping.

Slater generously and often concedes that the Frankfurt School made at least a contribution of "a large number of highly pertinent observations." Then the indictment is lowered: they failed to "relate concretely to the praxis and theory of the class struggles in Germany" (63); and the corollary: their critique was "largely superstructural" (47). No empty assertion, Slater's "Marxist perspective" enables him to draw a large number of not-so-highly pertinent observations. With no nonsense, and little sense, Slater outlines the groups and individuals who were active in the class struggle. His purpose in this outline is to demonstrate conclusively that attractive and practical options existed, but the Frankfurt School chose to avoid them. The force of his argument is somewhat weakened by the grudging and regular admission that each of the possibilities suffered from some basic, if not lethal, flaw. For example, Slater has also discovered that the German Communist Party was Stalinist; but this is incidental.

Bracketing the main argument, it might be supposed that Slater has something to add to existing accounts of the "origin and significance of the Frankfurt School." This would be a parochial hope. Slater extracts a fact or two from an interview with Felix Weil, which he accepts without question, about the inception of the Frankfurt School; that does it. Moreover Slater is some five years behind the secondary literature; this mars an appraisal of the significance of the Frankfurt School. While such distance from the literature might testify to an independence of spirit and orientation, it is in no way compensated by an original and serious reading of the primary materials. Slater is distant from these, too.

In a work that touts itself as Marxist, one might also expect some evaluation of other Marxist writings on the Frankfurt School. After all there have been some. Slater makes a weak gesture in this direction. Out of a fairly substantial literature, Slater only handles, or rather mangles, Albrecht Wellmer. He cites Hans-Jürgen Krahl and Alfred Schmidt several times. The book begins with a pot-shot at Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* for ignoring the "theory-praxis nexus" and lacking a "scientifically defined notion of 'propaganda,' " — whatever that is — and he calls upon one kindred soul who has also denounced the Frankfurt School as intellectual snobs.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The kindred soul is Douglas Kellner in his review of Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* in *New German Critique*, 4 (Winter 1975). "... Horkheimer and Adorno developed

That sums it up. Recent Marxist works on the relationship of critical theory to Korsch and Lukács, political economy, fascism, sociology of knowledge, psychoanalysis, positivism, and so on, are passed by in silence—and take their revenge. The book is not a contribution to an on-going discussion, but a documentation of the falling rate of intelligence. All that Slater manages to illuminate is his own insular intellectual world: this he does with genius and finesse. Again a confrontation with other Marxists, or even a comprehensive bibliography, would hardly be necessary if the book's merits lay elsewhere.

Slater wastes no time in demonstrating his fealty to texts and contexts. Carl Grünberg, the first director of the Institute, is denounced for—guess what?—failing to promote the “Marxian notion of scientific socialism as a class weapon of the proletariat” (4). Not bad enough, his work consisted of “collecting, sorting, checking and presenting documents. . . Grünberg never featured a theoretical work from his own pen” (7). Not true; Grünberg contributed extensive essays to a left encyclopedia, *Wörterbuch der Volkswirtschaft*. There has even been a recent edition of his entries.<sup>2</sup> These same pages discuss “the work” of Karl Wittfogel as a precursor to the Frankfurt School. Out of Wittfogel's many publications, a single one is mentioned. Ignored is Lukács' critique of Wittfogel, which in this context is relevant.<sup>3</sup>

The sloppy and uninformed approach persists. It can be stated with assurance that nothing in this book is comprehensive or authoratative, and little is accurate. The next section takes up Franz Borkenau's *Der Uebergang vom feudalen zum bürgerlichen Weltbild*. The lengthy reply by Grossmann is unnoticed.<sup>4</sup> Adorno's early philosophical works, collected since 1973, might shed some light on the “origin” of the Frankfurt School; they are not mentioned.<sup>5</sup> Max Adler is presented as the practical fulfillment of critical theory whom the Frankfurt School refused to confront. Slater refuses to confront Marcuse's critique of Adler in “Transzendentaler Marxismus?”<sup>6</sup> or Adler's response.<sup>7</sup>

So it goes from important omissions and errors that enfeeble the argument to less important ones that suggest Slater's mind was on other matters. He likes to be emphatic about trifles because he rightly suspects he has nothing to say about substance. Luxemburg is identified as having “founded the [German Communist]

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an increasingly rarified elitist style. Their audience was clearly a small group of intellectuals that had the culture to follow *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. . . Surely, there is little excuse for Marxist intellectuals to write in such an involuted, in-group manner. . .” Surely. One of the oddities of this popular review is that its rebuttal of Jay is exactly Jay's argument: the retreat of the Frankfurt School from Marxism. Oh well. See my review “Marxism and the Critical School,” *Theory and Society*, 1 (1974), pp. 231ff, and Martin Jay, Russell Jacoby “Marxism and Critical Theory” *Theory and Society*, 2 (1975), p. 257ff.

2. Henryk Grossmann, Carl Grünberg, *Anarchismus, Bolschewismus, Sozialismus. Aufsätze aus dem 'Wörterbuch der Volkswirtschaft,'* hrsg. C. Pozzoli (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1971).

3. G. Lukács, “Wittfogel: *The Science of Bourgeois Society*” (1925) in *Political Writings* (London: NLB, 1972), pp. 143ff. On Wittfogel see G.L. Ulmen, “Wittfogel's Science of Society” *Telos*, 24 (Summer, 1975).

4. H. Grossmann, “Die gesellschaftlichen Grundlagen der mechanistischen Philosophie und die Manufaktur,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, IV, 2 (1935), pp. 161ff.

5. T.W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 1: Philosophische Frühschriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

6. H. Marcuse, “Transzendentaler Marxismus?” *Die Gesellschaft*, VII (1950), p. 304ff.

7. See P. Heintel, *System und Ideologie. Der Austromarxismus im Spiegel der Philosophie Max Adlers* (Wein: Oldenbourg, 1967), p. 35ff.

Party" when she was a reluctant participant.<sup>8</sup> Bernstein is called the "father of reformism." Siegfried Kracauer's 1929 *Die Angestellten* is called "indubitably the first serious study of the modern white-collar workers" when indubitably it is not. Kracauer himself refers to an earlier one.<sup>9</sup> "Indubitably" recurs in various forms throughout. Slater finds it difficult to write without using "clearly," "significantly," or "actually" when nothing is either clear, significant or actual.

To return to the main thesis: the Frankfurt School failed "to establish links to the working class movement in the 1930s, and, subsequently..." (xv). For the novice Slater gives advice on how to spot a real revolutionary. "A real revolutionary theory involves a theory of *organization* and *political action*. What is needed is a *practical-critical* theory. And precisely this is lacking in the Frankfurt School's conception" (28). Of course precisely this is lacking in Slater's book, which he half admits. With no embarrassment he tells us that his concern is a "metacritique," which he vaguely claims is "not 'purely' theoretical." Why it is not "purely" theoretical is difficult to fathom. He charges, for example, that the Frankfurt School "failed to evolve a *practical* critique of the USSR" (63). He gives us no clue as to the nature of a practical critique of the USSR.

The "thesis," stripped of its stupidities, suffers from the flaw that few, including the Frankfurt School, would controvert it. Even in Slater's muddled account it is evident that the Frankfurt School from its inception, by its members' own account, was distant from practical politics. Not one to lose a thesis by lack of opposition, Slater makes half a case that Horkheimer's 1937 "Traditional and Critical Theory," which he dubs "the Manifesto," was a "radical advance" towards concrete politics. He then argues that the Frankfurt School drew back from this advance post. That essay in fact is a justification for the isolation of intellectuals: "Today, when the whole weight of the existing state of affairs is pushing mankind towards... barbarism, the circle of solidarity is narrow enough... truth may reside with numerically small groups of men."<sup>10</sup> Apart from this, Horkheimer, then living in New York City, was hardly in a position to articulate a practical politics; nothing would be more metaphysical in that situation. These sorts of banal facts do not cloud the clarity of Slater's "metacritique."

Rather Slater is casual with the simplest of facts. Horkheimer's inaugural lecture at the Institute is in 1931; the first issue of the *Zeitschrift* is in 1932; and exile comes in 1933. One might imagine that a practical critique would pay some attention to these years; but who would want to indict the Frankfurt School on the basis of three slim years? Much better to work with some vague conception of the twenties and thirties in which the Frankfurt School was in full flight from praxis. So Slater finds all kinds of groups and individuals that were involved with the working class and which the Frankfurt School kept at arm's length: Luxemburg, the German Communist Party, Trotsky, Branklerites, Austrian Social Democrats, and so on. That these as viable options either predate the Frankfurt School or suffer from their own flaws becomes secondary.

Slater discusses these alternatives, supposing that each was the practical fulfillment of critical theory; this is to convincingly show that the Frankfurt School's political inactivity was a matter of sin and fear. Slater is not entirely witless, and he usually

8. See *Die Gründungspartei der KPD*, hrsg. H. Weber (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969).

9. Emil Lederer's *Die Privatangestellten in der modernen Wirtschaftsentwicklung* is from 1912. Kracauer himself cites Lederer and Marschaks' "Der neue Mittelstand" from 1926.

10. M. Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury, 1972), p. 241.

confesses that by the early 1930s the options may not have been especially compelling. For example, it has not escaped Slater that Rosa Luxemburg was in fact dead. He is equally thorough when discussing some of the other oppositional groups.

After a quick once over, Trotsky gets a clean bill of health; here is the “*practical* exponent” of the Frankfurt School (68). But no, Slater belatedly discovers, Trotsky and the Frankfurt School differed on the role of the party. Moreover Trotskyism never “generated a significant political movement” in Germany, and so it was not “inexcusable” for the Frankfurt School to avoid him. But not so with the next group, the so-called “right” opposition or KPD-O (or KPO). The reasoning here is sterling. By some mysticism “one is justified in expecting to find in the KPO a concretised form of some of the Frankfurt School’s principles” and presumably more proof of the fear and trembling of critical theory. But Slater stumbles upon Stalinism in the KPO; and so the lame conclusion: “Despite its serious concern to preserve the concrete dialectical unity of theory, party and class the KPO cannot be regarded as any real embodiment of the Frankfurt School’s ideas. . .” (71). But at least—give ‘em credit!—they affirmed a “strict Marxism-Leninism” unlike Horkheimer’s “abstract hope.”

In principle one could make the best case for council communism, that is, if one stays within the terms of Slater’s “metacritique” and ignores dates, countries and the socio-economic situation. In Slater’s elegant language: “One is not without some justification in asking whether Council Communism could perhaps be a concrete embodiment of many of the principles of the Frankfurt School” (73). His argument here is a neat summary of the entire book: illogic, sloppy scholarship and phony conclusions. His case rests with Pannekoek. Of Pannekoek’s works, Slater appears to be familiar with exactly two: a lecture from 1919 and his 1938 *Lenin as Philosopher*. This latter work Slater considers the unity of theory and practice.

Now Slater gets down to business. By some arduous archival work Slater discovers a letter of Korsch’s to Mattick “where Korsch said he intended to try to interest Horkheimer and the Institute in Pannekoek’s book; either he, Korsch, would write a review for the *Zeitschrift*, or else, at the Director’s request, he would leave this to Horkheimer himself. Surely,” Slater continues, “Korsch was justified in expecting some response from the Frankfurt School.” Yes, indeed, but what happens? Here the facts or archives fail Slater. “Yet, no such review appeared, by Korsch or anybody else, in the *Zeitschrift*. And this failure reveals *more than anything else*, the break in the theory-praxis nexus: Horkheimer’s team steered clear of any debate which had direct political implications” (74, italics added). This is a honey. Slater does not even know why a review did not appear; yet this failure is the most emphatic expression of the break in the “theory-praxis nexus.” Perhaps Korsch failed to write one. At least two reviews by Korsch appeared in the *Zeitschrift* during this period.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, it is possible that Horkheimer did reject a review. Korsch bemoaned that Horkheimer was editing the political life out of his contributions. Perhaps Horkheimer cut it. But Slater tells us nothing about this particular review nor, obviously what it contained. Nor would a single review seem to matter one way or the other. Furthermore Korsch hardly considered the Pannekoek book the quintessence of theory and practice. He complained to Mattick that Pannekoek had written the book under a pseudonym. This was “new proof,” he wrote, that Pannekoek was discarding what little influence he might have because of “his naive belief in the possibility of an unprejudiced factual discussion.”<sup>12</sup>

11. Two of Korsch’s reviews can be found in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, VII (1938), p. 469ff. and its successor *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, IX (1941), p. 358ff.

12. K. Korsch, “Briefe,” in *Marxistische Revolutionstheorie. Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung 2*, hrsg. C. Pozzoli (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1974), p. 200.

Other chapters of the book steamroll through psychology and aesthetics. Slater drags out the Marxist-Leninist Guide to Critical Theory and finds that the Frankfurt School's interpretation of Freud lacked "not only all relation to concrete praxis, but, in addition, all notion of ideological struggle. . ." (112). This is due to the absence of "an economically founded class analysis." Reich is billed as the perfect unity of theory and practice. If Slater was only dimly aware of Luxemburg's death, he does not seem to have any notion of Reich's life: no mention is made of Reich's thoughts after 1934. One might not suppose that Reich's theories, at least after 1934, were deficient or that his own links to the working class left something to be desired.

Slater's instant Marxist perspective serves once more in the discussion of aesthetics. The Frankfurt School is accused of lacking a concept of "art as 'struggle'." Adorno is indicted for an "elitist and pessimistic" aesthetics and Marcuse for renouncing all "communication to a revolutionary class." The antidote to this "practical sterility" is the down-to-earth aesthetics of Brecht and Benjamin; each had a direct line to the working class. Needless to say, the discussion here is as tight and informed as elsewhere.

For positive and upbeat thinkers a single virtue of the book may be noted: there is a complete unity of form and content. Slater's relation to English, like his relation to thought, is strictly accidental. The book is not so much badly written, as not written; it is assembled out of jottings on 3 by 5 cards. Moreover Slater has an unerring knack for the awkward phrase and word. He likes to call the Frankfurt School Horkheimer's "team." He uses the antiquated "sublate" for the Hegelian negation, and he regularly trots out "problematise." He tells us that the Hegelian legacy was "fully rationalised by Marx" or that the German Communist Party was "the issue of the Spartacists." What remains are the overworked "clearlys" and "actuallys" sweating to carry the book to the finish; here Slater has wisely omitted a conclusion.

Russell Jacoby

Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone, eds., *History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci*. Translated by Pierluigi Molajoni, Mary Ann Aiello-Peabody, Paul Piccone, and Jon Thiem. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975.

Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*. Translated with Introduction by Gwyn A. Williams. London: Pluto Press, 1975.

Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy, 1911-1921*. London: Pluto Press, 1975.

The *Biennio Rosso* of post-World War I Italy—that "Red Two Years" of popular upsurge which began with radical dreams and collapsed in exhausted despair—stands as a great political landmark. Part of the great wave of popular and working-class upheavals that swept across Europe in the aftermath of the war and the Bolshevik Revolution, a movement constituting the first political threat to capitalism in Italy, it contained all the elements of a rapidly-unfolding, tense, at times amusing, and ultimately tragic, historical drama. There was the unremitting cycle of political and economic warfare, from lockouts and mass strikes to demonstrations, public