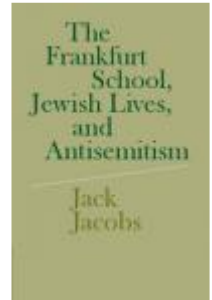


The Frankfurt School and the Jews

July 28, 2015

Jacobs' *The Frankfurt School* is an outstanding piece of scholarship. The relationship of the Frankfurt School to Judaism has, of course, been discussed in several works, for instance by Anson Rabinbach, Martin Jay, Dan Diner, and others, as well as in some articles, for instance by Judith Marcus and Zoltan Tar, but this remarkable book by Jack Jacobs, well known for his research on Jews and socialism, is the first book-long attempt to deal with the issue. He does it in an evenhanded way, without blaming or celebrating, but trying to understand the Jewish roots of the Critical Theorists and the ways in which Jewishness and anti-Semitism impacted on their careers and thoughts. Well documented—with a hundred pages of footnotes and bibliography!—and well argued, it is certainly destined to become the main reference for any future research on the questions involved.



Gershom Scholem once defined the Frankfurt School as “a remarkable Jewish sect.” As Jacobs shows, this is a widely exaggerated claim: Although most of the members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (ISR) were of Jewish origin, “Marxism was a far brighter star in their constellation than Jewishness,” particularly during the Weimar period.

The first chapter of the book deals with “Jewish Life Paths and the ISR in the Weimar Republic.” While Max Horkheimer, Theodor Wisegrund Adorno (whose Jewish father converted to Protestantism, while his mother was Catholic), Henryk Grossmann, and Friedrich Pollock had little interest for Judaism, the same doesn’t apply to two other members of the first core group of the ISR, Leo Löwenthal and Erich Fromm.

Leo Löwenthal—whom I had the chance to meet several times in the 1980s—was both a radical socialist (he had joined the leftist Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany) and an Orthodox Jew, and his early writings, such as “The Demonic. Outline of a Negative Philosophy of History” (1920), were a unique combination of Marxism and mystic Judaism. After joining the ISR in 1926, his thinking became secularized, but his interest in Jewish Messianism remained present throughout his life. The same applies to Erich Fromm, whose dissertation on the Jewish Law (1922) is an apology for Orthodox Judaism as an “anti-capitalist religion,” as opposed to the bourgeois Reform and Liberal Jewish currents. (This radical dimension of the young Fromm seems to have eluded Jacobs’ discussion of his early work.) As did Löwenthal, Fromm, who joined the Frankfurt Institute in 1930, moved away from Orthodoxy but always remained interested in the Jewish tradition.

The second chapter deals with “The Significance of Antisemitism: The Exile Years.” After Hitler’s rise to power, the ISR moved to Switzerland and, soon later, to the United States. Their first reflections on fascist anti-Semitism reveal an incredible blindness. Adorno, who didn’t consider himself as a Jew at that moment, believed he could remain in Nazi Germany and was disposed, as he wrote a friend in 1934, to do so “regardless of cost.” Soon afterward, he was forced to go into exile. Horkheimer, who had emigrated to the United States, wrote a piece in 1938, “The Jews and Europe,” which contains some valuable insights on fascism but has a vulgar economic approach to the Jewish question. According to Horkheimer—supported by Adorno—the economic basis of anti-Semitism is the dying out of the sphere of circulation and the increasing superfluity of trade in the age of monopoly capitalism! This is a double nonsense: How can capitalism exist without circulation and trade, and what has this to do with Nazi anti-Semitism? Jacobs compares Horkheimer’s piece with the crude “Marxism” of a Stalinist piece published in 1931 by a certain Otto Heller, but I would

argue that it is much worse to raise such arguments in 1938, five years after Hitler's rise to power, than in 1931. On the matter of the early "blindness" of members of the ISR, one has to add Franz Neumann, who criticized Horkheimer's essay for overestimating the importance of anti-Semitism for the Nazi regime!

Fortunately, Horkheimer and Adorno's approach began to change in 1939-1940, when they began to develop a vast research project on anti-Semitism, ultimately sponsored by the American Jewish Committee. But the decisive turning point in their intellectual evolution was the arrival in their hands, in June 1941, of Walter Benjamin's philosophical testament, the thesis "On the Concept of History." As Anson Rabinbach very aptly summarizes, this document provided them with "a guiding star" for the constellation of themes—exile, Jewish fate, catastrophe of civilization—that ultimately make up their masterpiece *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. "Elements of Anti-Semitism," a chapter in the form of philosophical fragments, is one of the most important of the book, and it contains some quite radical theses, for instance, that fascism emerges from liberalism and that liberals fail to acknowledge that anti-Semitism cannot be expunged from such a society. The essential idea advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno is that fascist anti-Semitism helps to elucidate the dialectic of enlightenment itself and therefore the history of civilization. This is a very significant argument but unfortunately is not further developed by Jack Jacobs.

In parallel to their philosophical essay, Adorno and Horkheimer organized, as mentioned above, a vast research project on anti-Semitism, which resulted in several books published as a series, "Studies in Prejudice." The best known is *The Authoritarian Personality* (1948), written, in part, by Adorno, which showed that anti-Semitism is intimately associated with certain character structures, such as blind submission to authority, violent aggressive attitude toward the "other," and rigid stereotypical thinking. Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman wrote the second book of the series, *Prophets of Deceit* (1949), dealing with American anti-Semitic agitators such as Father Coughlin, Gerald L. K. Smith, and a few others. Curiously enough, there is hardly a mention, in this context, of the most influential—by far!—American anti-Semite, namely Henry Ford, author of *The International Jew* (1921), who not only had a big impact in the United States, but whose book became a favorite of a German fascist named Adolf Schickelgruber.

As Jack Jacobs persuasively argues, there is significant interaction between these empirical studies and the philosophical reflections of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. This does not apply to the third book of the series, *Rehearsal for Destruction. A Study of Political Antisemitism in Imperial Germany*, by Paul Massing, who was part of the ISR but not of Critical Theory, and applies even less to the two others, by social scientists with no connection to the Frankfurt School (Nathan Ackerman, Marie Jahoda, Bruno Bettelheim, and Morris Janowitz).

The third and last chapter deals with the attitude of the Frankfurt School to Zionism and the State of Israel. Jacobs comes to the surprising conclusion that those members of the ISR who had strong religious and cultural connection to Judaism, such as Erich Fromm, were hostile to Zionism and Israel, considered to be contradictory to the teachings of the Prophets and to the Messianic promise of universal redemption. Fromm supported the movement Ichud, created by Magnes and Buber, who proposed a bi-national solution for Palestine. On the other hand, those who had little relation to Jewish tradition, such as Herbert Marcuse, were supportive of the Israeli state, even if they had strong criticisms of its policies. Löwenthal and Horkheimer fell somewhere in between these two poles.

At the end of this important and insightful book, Jack Jacobs concludes: One cannot explain Critical Theory by reference solely to Judaism, but one cannot explain the lives of the Frankfurt School's key writers without dealing with their Jewish roots.