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AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN JAY

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Historians do not live in the past. This may seem to be a platitude, and yet all too often we tend to forget that while the historian's object is in the past, he himself lives in the present. This means that the reasons (conscious or unconscious) for investigating certain topics in the past are located in the present. Furthermore, the historian's audience lives in the present: the historian wants to complement or alter the historical consciousness of today's public. He deals with what one could call the *afterlife* of historical phenomena, and his aim is to prolong or intervene in this afterlife.

Few historians are more aware of this fact than Martin Jay (born 1944). Martin Jay is Professor at the Department of History of the University of Berkeley, where he teaches European Intellectual History, Visual Culture and Critical Theory. He has written numerous books on the history of continental philosophy and Western Marxism, the most famous being his PhD-thesis from Harvard University, *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973). This is a book on the history of the Frankfurt School from 1923 to 1950 and has been translated into over ten languages including Dutch. For his PhD-research, Jay interviewed many of the (former) members of the Insti-

tute for Social Research. In the United States, he met with Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Leo Löwenthal. The latter gave him access to his personal correspondence, and he and Jay began a friendship that lasted till Löwenthal's death in 1993. Jay also travelled to Germany and Switzerland and spoke to Adorno, Horkheimer, and Pollock.

'Much will be preserved which would be forgotten without your description', Horkheimer wrote in the foreword. The reception of the Frankfurt School's thought in the United States is indeed unimaginable without Jay's groundbreaking work, which introduced many of these thinkers to the American public for the first time, even though they had been living among them for some years during and after the Second World War. But European reception also benefited greatly from his research, which included quotations from many unpublished or inaccessible letters and manuscripts. It formed an open invitation for further research, which indeed soon followed. There are hardly any books on the Frankfurt School or any of its members which do not contain references to Jay's work.

However, Jay's historical studies are not merely historically relevant: each of them resonates with questions in the present. *The Dialectical Imagination* was written in a period of student uprisings at many American universities. Marcuse was somewhat of a cult figure, although his intellectual context was obscure to many in the Anglo-Saxon world. Likewise, his second great study, *Marxism and Totality* (1984) dealt with Western Marxism from Lukács to French thinkers such as Althusser, a tradition which was at that moment under the heavy fire of poststructuralism. While endorsing the theoretical objections against the Marxist notion of totality, Jay modestly remarked that there may still be a practical need for some concept of totality, considering the global scale of contemporary problems – in the year of publication of *Marxism and Totality*, nuclear war was hardly an improbable possibility. His research in the eighties also resulted in a monograph on Adorno and a collection of essays titled *Permanent Exiles*.

Downcast Eyes (1993) was the result of a shift in attention from Germany to France. In this impressive study, Jay investigates 'the denigration of

vision in twentieth-century French thought'. He discusses how the Western preoccupation with vision – as a metaphor in language, as a cultural trope and as the privileged medium of knowledge – has been criticized by French thinkers from Bergson to Lyotard, who identified postmodernism as the 'sublime foreclosure of the visual'. Again, this history of 'antiocularcentrism' was embedded in and functioned as a theoretical background of the 'modernism-postmodernism' debates of the last decade of the twentieth century.

Jay further broadened his scope in his *Songs of Experience* (2005), discussing not only his by now 'usual suspects' of twentieth century German and French thought, but also British empiricism, German idealism and romanticism, and American pragmatism. This learned work maps the history of the concept of 'experience', from being a source of knowledge in Enlightenment thought to its crisis in today's commodified society.

Jay once characterized his method as 'mapping the uncertain terrain'. Although he acknowledges the impossibility of being a 'detached observer', and though he does not hide his allegiance to the project of enlightenment, he does not have a hidden agenda and always does full justice to his subjects. He is, above all, curious. The historian, Jay argues, provides us not with a certain position within contemporary debates, but urges us to make informed choices. He has, as Walter Benjamin once remarked, 'nothing to say, only to show'.

In December 2009, Martin Jay visited the conference *The Meaning of Historicism for our Time* in Groningen, organized by Frank Ankersmit and Reinbert Krol. This was the perfect opportunity for *Krisis* – which he still remembered from an interview in 1987 – to ask him some questions on the relations between history, experience and politics, as well as on the legacy of the Frankfurt School, his enduring field of research and source of inspiration.

You teach at the department of history in Berkeley, but your work is mostly on philosophy. In Groningen, you will speak at a conference of historians, but you are interviewed by a philosophical journal. Do you

consider yourself mostly a historian or a philosopher? Or do you consider this a false distinction?

My training is as an intellectual historian. But at a certain moment in my career I was prodded by people who were really philosophers into doing more than just think about the ideas of earlier historical figures and begin to formulate my own answers to the questions they were asking. This has always had a slight illegitimate feel; since my own (de)formation was not that of a philosopher, I always felt like I was poaching on somebody else's territory. Having said that, over the years I felt emboldened to think about things in ways some philosophers might, but always with a great deal of well-deserved humility about my real strengths.

It really depends on the context: in the US there is really no doubt that I am a historian, not a philosopher. Outside of the US, in Europe and elsewhere, philosophy is more capacious and the type of work that I do is often included in a philosophy department. At times, when I am outside the US, people are surprised to find out that I have any roots whatsoever in history and they can't imagine that something I do *could* be done in a history department, historians being more empirical, more archive-based, more interested in non-theoretical questions. But in the US, intellectual history has been a bridge for people like Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Mark Poster, John Toews, Samuel Moyn, or Peter Gordon who have philosophical inclinations, to move fairly easily between both camps. So I think the categories begin to lose their rigidity. One of the great virtues of intellectual history is that it has that capacity to grant a certain permission to stray into the disciplines, such as philosophy, whose history one is studying.

Of course, many of the figures you wrote about have that same – should we say problem or virtue? – that they can't be easily categorized, and are sometimes considered philosophers and other times sociologists or historians.

Yes, indeed. You can think of many figures like Siegfried Kracauer or Michel Foucault who are not in any obvious sense philosophers; they may have had serious philosophical training, and may contribute at times to

philosophy, but they also did a lot of work that most ‘normal’ philosophers would feel uncomfortable doing. They engaged in the sort of hybrid, interdisciplinary thinking to which some of us today feel attracted.

The next question is about your latest book, Songs of Experience. By the way, is it still your latest book?

I have a book in press now, it will come out in April, called *The Virtues of Mendacity. On Lying in Politics*. But technically you are still right that *Songs of Experience* is my most recent book.

In Songs of Experience you discuss the development in the philosophical concept of experience. What do you think is a ‘historical experience’?

I think you would have to come up with two different perspectives, the first being that of the participants of history, who are experiencing, either passively, or actively ‘making’ history, and may or may not understand what they’re doing as having historical significance. Most of our lives is, of course, justly forgotten and consigned to oblivion, but there are occasional moments when something that we do or something we’re involved in has the extraordinary quality of having an impact that will make it meaningful for subsequent generations. And as actors in history we may realize that our experiences have historical significance.

Then there is the other perspective of later generations or posterity looking back at the past. The experience that we of those later generations then have is as historians, trying to make sense of somebody else’s past, which is different from our own memory and past.

Both of those are versions of ‘historical experience.’ Of course, we have to find out what each of those means, and if and how they are in any way related.

Do you also think that a historian is a priori dependent on historical experience?

To the extent that historians *have* experiences of the past that is true. Frank Ankersmit has written some interesting things on the ways in which contact with artifacts of the past create a sense of temporal distance and strangeness leading to the loss of ‘self-centeredness’. To that extent the historians themselves have experiences that give them an awareness of the radical otherness of the past. That’s definitively part of the process.

What they then will discover and write about, analyze and narrativize may or not be those experiences of the people in the past. Instead, their accounts may be of structures or trends, or large-scale movements in history, which are not reducible to the felt experiences of the individual who was subjected to them. There is a very famous cartoon which captures this distinction nicely: a medieval peasant running through the street of some city in England or France yelling: ‘The Hundred Years War has broken out!’ Of course, only the historian knows that this war will last for a hundred years, while the actual participant is in the dark about what the outcome will be. So there is always that significant gap between what the participant thinks – both in terms of his or her individual experiences and of the larger meaning of the events – and what posterity will make of them. Or what later *posterities* will make of them, since there is no endpoint, no final historian, no way to say: ‘This is how the story finally has come out’.

And do you think there is perhaps a risk in the idea that the historian is dependent on the historical experience? Does it not threaten to turn the historian into a mystic or prophet, who, through contact with certain objects, has this vision or epiphany of history?

I think you’re right. I think it is necessary to have that moment of intuition – what you call an epiphany, or at least a sense of contact that moves you away from your initial understanding (i.e. before you had that contact). But then after that, there is the process of communicating the results, and the persuading of the people, who have not had that contact, that the results are plausible, that what you are telling them is not simply a fantasy, not your own personal ‘mystical’ (for lack of a better word) contact with something they themselves did not experience directly.

Insofar history as a practice involves a professional, credentialed guild of people, who judge, interpret, accept or reject, there has to be something that makes your intuition persuasive. And that normally involves weighing alternatives: not saying ‘this is how it was’, but ‘this is why it is not the way that people thought it was.’ It involves creating a kind of plausibility, whatever we mean by that. Some people, like Collingwood, thought this meant ‘rational reconstruction’; sometimes it involves a comparison between what we construe as plausible with a reconstruction of what seems to have been plausible in the past, which raises the issue of reducing the unfamiliar to the familiar, making a mysterious past meaningful in our terms.

Of course the danger in that is that we remake the world of the past entirely in terms of the present, and then we lose the otherness, difference and strangeness, the implausibility of the past. Sometimes we just have to surrender to the fact that it doesn’t make sense, it’s just not going to be plausible in our terms. These are of course very sensitive issues with which the guild of historians is constantly wrestling: the standards of plausibility change, what counts as evidence or what counts as a theory is not absolute. So there is a lot of contestation about which intuitions will count as plausible and which will not.

Do you think that historical experience is – besides the initial impetus of historiography – also the goal in mind? In other words: should the reader of a historical study have, as a result, a historical experience?

I think writing history has two basic functions. One is to tell us how we came to be who we are. It is *our* past, *our* development, with all kinds of contingencies and turning-points in which it could also have gone in a different direction. This gives us a sense of the openness of history, since we got where we are through different forces, choices and events that were by no means foreordained. This also makes possible the vision of another future, since we see ourselves as part of history (instead of part of nature, or some sort of eternal order).

The second function is not to show where *we* are or where *we* ended up, but tell us about other peoples who have very different narratives, that

don’t culminate in our own present. This gives us a sense of the variety of human experience and the ways in which history is extraordinarily motley, varied, heterogeneous, non-unified. In that sense, the experience of strangeness, of otherness – asking ourselves ‘how could anybody have ever made, thought or done that?’ – is very sobering, alerting us to the limitations of our own experience, the narrative of our own tribe. It is a cliché, but history in that sense is broadening. At least it should be, in making you realize how contingent our current position in the world is.

In addition to that: do you think that the historian has a kind of moral or political responsibility or obligation? For instance in the sense of Walter Benjamin, who considered politics the impulse of writing history, or more recently Avashai Margalit, who speaks of an ‘ethics of memory’?

There are two obligations that you’ve suggested. One is the creation of a history which is a *useable* past for current political purposes; fashioning a history that leads up to choices to be made in the present and forms those choices – for instance, knowing the mistakes we made in the past helps us avoid certain choices, or in cases of success, encourages us to emulate them. That’s one option, in which we use history as a guide to current policy.

The second is a different obligation, not to ourselves, but to our ancestors, or to the forgotten in history, or to the people whose voices need to be heard – there is a lot of metaphorizing about people who were silenced and should finally be allowed to speak.

The latter is very suggestive, but not fully convincing, in the sense that we have to make choices, and we can’t let everybody in the past speak, we can’t let every voice be heard, we can’t remember everything. There are people, stories, events that, even if we had access to them, are not worth remembering. As Nietzsche pointed out, a certain amount of active forgetting is healthy, allowing us to avoid an antiquarian fascination with all the details of the past. Indeed, it may be a presupposition of a robust life, enabling us to live in the present and the future. You can’t constantly remember and live in the past, nostalgically or otherwise. So a certain amount of selection is crucial: whose voice will be remembered, whose

story will be told, involves the necessity of forgetting others. We might agree that certain people whose story should be told have not yet been heard and justify rescuing from oblivion, but it is clear that, no matter what choice we make, somebody will be excluded. There is always a loss, which is inevitable, and which is in some sense healthy.

As for whether historians should be political in the present, I would say they should be as citizens, just as everybody, whatever his or her profession, has the obligation to think seriously about political and other pressing issues. Professional historians and intellectuals in general have the privileged leisure to think and write, and may have access to the means of communication that allow their voices to be heard more than others, but they don't have any superiority in terms of what they think or say. Habermas once remarked that in the process of enlightenment we are all participants; there are no people who are tutors while others are students. To that extent historians, as citizens, should be involved in debates, and if necessary, can bring their research findings to bear. But they often make foolish choices in the present; I don't think that historians have been wiser or more politically adept than anybody else. In that sense I don't have much confidence in the idea that, because we have better knowledge of the past, we'll act better in the future.

What do we exactly 'experience' in the historical experience, i.e. what is the object of experience? In other words: does the concept of the historical experience not presuppose an ontology of history?

As I said earlier, this question concerns one aspect of what we're looking at, but not the only one: there are trends and structures that are not reducible to the experiences of the participants in them. In that sense the idea of history being just the re-experiencing of past experiences, a la Dilthey, is problematic. Having said that, when we ask the question 'what were the experiences of the past like?', we are asking a different kind of question, which is worth asking. We then focus on the 'thick texture' of everyday life, the way people live through mentalities they don't fully articulate, beneath a level of fully formed ideas or systems of thought, that is indirectly available through traces they've left behind, which we have to interpret hermeneutically. And if there is any truth to the

Diltheyan position, it is that we have in our own life experienced things, we've made sense of them, we've made meaning and order out of chaos and noise, so in some sense we can empathize with people of the past who have also struggled with similar challenges.

The great pitfall of too much identification, too much empathizing, too much retranslation, is the presupposition of a transcendental human nature or consciousness – which would imply that I can fully understand what Caesar felt and meant when he crossed the Rubicon, because I know what it would feel like to make a big decision like that. But then what I am forgetting is that the Rome of that period was a foreign country for me, both temporally and spatially, so I can't fully inhabit the mental universe of Caesar. That is what history is all about: the awareness of the gap as well as the possibility of some similarity.

Then the question is, and that was what the whole book was trying to grapple with, what does it mean to simply have an experience, in the present as well as the past? If we are trying to re-experience the experience of somebody in the past, what does this mean? What was this original experience like? Was it an *Erlebnis*, or an *Erfahrung* – to use the distinction the Germans have struggled with? Was it an experience that could be narrativized, or was it shock-like, was it a traumatic experience? The question of re-experiencing begs these questions of what the experience was like; it might not have been a fully meaningful, rational, and therefore recoverable experience.

In the lecture you will give in Groningen, you analyze the relation between historicism and the concept of 'the Event', using the events of May '68 in France as a starting point. Do you consider the theories of the event (Lyotard, Heidegger, Badiou) primarily as conceptualizations on historiography or on political action?

I am still trying to find out what these different and very difficult thinkers have tried to say when they evoke the idea of the Event. I was quite struck about the way in which that word had gained a sort of talismanic power, which takes it well beyond what historians or historicists have understood by it. Lyotard, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Nancy and Badiou imbue it

with an almost metaphysical meaning, quite different from the ordinary way in which historians would employ it. But at the same time these thinkers look at history: Badiou for instance is fascinated by the dawn of Christianity, and the French and Russian Revolutions. There are others who have focused on unique Events like May 1968 in France, which of course came to be known by that very name. In our own day, 9/11 was an Event, which was a surprise, came out of nowhere, had meanings we are still struggling to find out, and had a traumatic effect.

Now whether an Event is inherently political, I don't know: you would have to define politics, which is not so easy. I think it can have, but may not always have a strong political impact. There may be events in the history of religion, or of philosophy, or the economy, that are by no means directly political. So I would not argue for the primacy of the political under all circumstances. Certainly somebody like Badiou would claim a true event is inherently political, but if you look at an essay by Lyotard, written in 1968, he says that the events of that episode were in fact anti-political because they destroyed traditional institutions and allowed libidinal energy to be unbound. So in this case he described the relation between the political and the Event as a negative relation.

Some thinkers (Žižek, Badiou) seem to suggest that we can and should enforce an Event in the guise of a political revolution. What is your opinion on this notion of the Event?

You mean the neo-Leninism in both Badiou (at least until recently) and Žižek. How to take that is hard to figure out. Do they really believe that a vanguard party is going to win adherence and be politically effective? I just don't understand where it comes from, and it sometimes seems to be more provocation for the sake of provocation, at least in the case of Žižek, who I find sometimes stimulating and sometimes infuriating. In this case, his Leninism leaves me very cold. In his debate with Ernesto Laclau, which got very ugly and very personal (although once they were allies), Laclau is more plausible in his support for radical democracy, the critique of the idea of an essential truth, and the refusal to believe that any one party can be the upholder of that truth. In this climate, I can't think of Leninism in

any way to be a meaningful alternative; I just don't understand what they're getting at.

I would now like to discuss some of your earlier research. In the work of many philosophers you have discussed in your work (Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse, Sartre) the work of art, or the aesthetic experience, is an important instrument of social critique. Do you think that this notion of art as social critique is still relevant today?

One has to be very careful with legislating any sort of program for art, and certainly a non-artist such as myself has no right to tell artists what they should do. Many of them are very political, many are involved in one sort of protest or another and are trying to make their work relevant for that protest; I think in some cases successfully and in other cases less so. I am very loath to make any grand pronouncements about art today or the role of art in social and political critique.

Ever since art developed its relative autonomy, say in the eighteenth century, maybe in the art-for-art's-sake era more explicitly, it struggled with a dialectic of disengagement from, and yet involvement in, what is non-aesthetic, with what is outside its boundaries. It tries to become basically pure and autotelic, following its own immanent development, but at the same time it always comes up against the fact that it is an institution among other institutions, and that its works have some complicated referential relationship to the world, maybe directly or indirectly. Art is one of those extraordinary human creations which is out of sync with and yet connected to the larger social totality and as such plays a role – sometimes inadvertent, indirect, or marginal – in dealing with the problems and conflicts of the larger totality. It does this in many different ways, and so there is no simple formula to describe that relationship; people have written long and learned books to figure out how it fits together with the social and political. Obviously we are today not inclined to take didactic works very seriously; works that are deliberately intended to provide some sort of moral or political pay-off. We are more interested in indirect formal criteria or challenging institutions or the interface between art and theory, art and concepts. I think we are not inclined to accept naturalist, realist or dramatic works as being politically very effective.

Whether or not, as Adorno thought, the artwork is the most fundamental category or, as others have claimed, it is the broader institution of art, is an open question. One might say that one of the great lacunae of Adorno's approach was his negligence, maybe even ignorance, of the effect of the work of Marcel Duchamp and the importance of his provocation, which created a whole new discourse of the aesthetic in institutional terms. It has had in the past thirty or forty years far greater importance than was the case during Duchamp's and Adorno's own lifetimes. The Duchampian challenge, we might say, also problematizes the idea of the materiality of the work of art, which emphasized its perceptual reception. Conceptual art was one of its offshoots. It was also a challenge to the primacy of the idea of beauty, which led instead to an awareness of the institutional valorization of being the authority able to designate works of art as such, a capacity that had nothing to do with the skill or talent of the genius art-maker. And it was a challenge to the idea that art is reducible to specific genres like painting, sculpture and music, suggesting instead that there's a meta-category that is art itself, which has a more generic role to play (the very opposite of the search for the essence of the medium fostered by critics like Clement Greenberg). All of this suggests a kind of openness to the question of the aesthetic, which makes it then harder to talk about the aesthetics of politics, because it is not clear what the aesthetic is. It is not clear what a work of art is, whether for example works of art are ephemeral interruptions in daily life or belong to institutions like museums and galleries, where they become objects of permanent conservation. We are still struggling in interesting ways with these questions, and that is why I think it is still very open territory without any simple formulas to decide where we should go.

In the afterword of Marxism and Totality you discuss the question whether or not we are in need of a new concept of totality. One of the reasons why we are in need of this concept, you wrote then, in 1984, is the threat of nuclear holocaust, which obviously is a global problem. This specific threat is now over, but today there are still problems of global scale – economic, humanitarian, and ecological catastrophes – that could give new urgency to the concept of totality. What is your view on this? Are we indeed in need of a concept of totality, and if so, how would it look like?

You're right, it's a good question. That book was written at a time when the Cold War was heating up, there was a great deal of uncertainty whether or not we would be able to avoid an arms-race that might trigger a nuclear holocaust. We're a little bit more relaxed now, although nuclear weapons still exist, and there is still the chance that rogue states or terrorists will get hold of them. But it does seem that we are more concerned with other global issues – climate change obviously, the world economic crisis which shows how interlocked the world is, and other issues which can't be dealt with on local, regional or even national levels. We are more and more connected through the internet with global communication networks, in such a way that it is clear that when you sneeze in Beijing you get a cold in New York. So there is a need to think on at least a fairly ambitious level. Now how do you conceptualize the whole remains an open question – is it a system or a network, is it an open-ended infinity rather than a closed totality (i.e. no boundaries, edges, periphery, centre), is it a disordered totality (like disorganized capitalism rather than organized capitalism)? Is it, to borrow the terms of Zygmunt Baumann, a 'liquid' rather than 'solid' phenomenon? Is there a principle that serves as a goal or *telos*? Is it moving in any kind of direction, towards greater integration, or towards fragmentation, even catastrophe? Today, many people are a lot more pessimistic and nervous than ever before, more convinced of the likelihood of disaster and apocalypse than they are hopeful of achieving what you might call a normatively desirable totalization.

But having said all that, it does seem to me that a 'softer' version of totality, one which at least tries to think about how things are connected, is worth trying to conceptualize. We have to begin to think in those terms, and obviously there are people who are trying to do that. What we don't have is what the Marxist version of expressive totality had, which was the idea that there was a generative center, some sort of group or meta-subject that could be seen as the source of the totality; and could know what it had made, thus giving it an epistemological privilege. That premise seems to be gone. Instead we have the metaphor of the network or the net, but it is like a spider's web without a spider in the middle: it's connected but there's no one who controls it. And as a result of the economic crisis, which virtually nobody seems to have anticipated, the fear that the idea of the totality exists, but is unintelligible, is very powerful.

In the new preface of Dialectical Imagination you describe how you were working on this book in a ‘supercharged environment’, both in Berkeley and in Frankfurt. While you were writing your pioneering work on the history of the Frankfurt School, the New Left declared the Frankfurt School (especially Habermas, Adorno and Horkheimer) dead. How do you look back on the writing of this book and on these student protesters? What do you think they have accomplished?

The origin of the book had two sources. One was the new interest in the intellectual migration from Germany to America. At the time, my supervisor, H. Stuart Hughes at Harvard, was writing a book, *The Sea Change*, which dealt with the migration as a whole. It was the third in the trilogy that began with his most influential work, *Consciousness and Society*. He also knew a number of the émigrés from his service at the OSS during the Second World War. The second stimulus was the work of Marcuse, which in the 1960s was enormously influential for the New Left, and also very mysterious to us: he was clearly coming from a background in German philosophy that we knew nothing about, that we had no background in ourselves. So my book was in part intended to discover where he came from intellectually.

As to the students: obviously there were reasons they were looking at the Frankfurt School for inspiration, going back to the early work in particular – to the chagrin of Horkheimer. These writings were very intransigent and did not shy away from a basic critique of the system, broadly speaking, and seemed to be relevant to the present. The Frankfurt School knew that, at some deep level, its earlier work could provide theoretical license to the more militant students.

It is also clear that their own intervening experiences had taught them the necessity of caution. They had had limited connection with the working class, no political party that they felt comfortable with, and had been exiles, guests in a country where they could easily have been expelled. And of course when several of them returned to Germany, it wasn't clear if they would be fully welcome, being Jews and leftists. They were very nervous about the effective and counter-productive use of their ideas for political purposes. Their judgment – Marcuse's perhaps less than the oth-

ers – was that this was not an objectively revolutionary situation, and that the students were rushing it in a way that was unrealistic. Moreover, they felt that some of the achievements of the Federal Republic were worth preserving, a judgment some students had lost sight of in their eagerness to create a socialist utopia. It was also perhaps a generational issue: the Frankfurt School was more aware of what had been achieved in the aftermath of the war, rather than what might be achieved through militant action to overthrow capitalism.

And then there were some moments of miscommunication. The notorious accusation of Habermas against some of the students of *Linksfaschismus* seemed to them a reductive insult. And there were things that Horkheimer said that showed he had moved even further away from the early Frankfurt School position, for example, his defense of the Vietnam War. Marcuse was of course a very militant figure, and for a while the students took great inspiration from him. He had a lot of difficulty with Adorno and Horkheimer's caution – behind the scenes, there was a lot of tension between them, as we later discovered.

Who was right in the long run? The students didn't create the revolution, but there was some positive effect in opening up German society and forcing it to confront more of its hidden past. But of course terroristic groups, such as the RAF, also emerged from that milieu. So it was a mixed legacy.

The work of Walter Benjamin became very popular in the 1960s, and seems to remain so. But also the work of Adorno gains popularity in the US, with numerous translations and studies of his work. Do you have an explanation for this increasing popularity?

It is indeed surprising. Twenty-five years ago, Adorno was known for a few works – *The Authoritarian Personality*, and some translations, not very good ones, of *Negative Dialectics*, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Each of these has been or will be soon retranslated. *Aesthetic Theory* is a good example. Robert Hullot-Kentor complained about the original translation, and then retranslated this book. And suddenly it became enormously influential, because of this new translation. Also the other retranslations have given these works a second chance. After *Notes*

to *Literature* came out, Adorno was also adopted in literary circles, and many of his works on music were noticed, if not always welcomed, in musicological circles.

Philosophically, Adorno became part of a mix that included deconstruction, post-structuralism and hermeneutics; so he became part of the larger reception of continental thought, in a way that Marcuse, Fromm, and Horkheimer never successfully achieved. That's the main reason.

But also the sheer complexity and difficulty of the work had an impact – it's not easy to exhaust and paraphrase. Adorno is a very difficult thinker who is worth rereading, reading against the grain, reading for all the nuances missed the first time around. Adorno was, like Benjamin, more problematic than the others: you never quite know what it all adds up to in a straightforward way. Marcuse was always a bit simpler – which made him more effective during the 60s. But if one places *The Aesthetic Dimension* by Marcuse next to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, there is no real serious comparison.

It is truly remarkable, this Anglo-American fascination for Adorno compared to a relative decline in Germany. Of course the centenary helped, but we're six years passed that and it doesn't seem to slow down.

In contemporary readings of Adorno, the theory of the 'culture industry' and his denunciation of popular culture remains a point of much discussion. There seem to be three options: 1) one dislikes and rejects Adorno because of this theory; 2) one argues that the theory of culture industry is not an essential, even a relatively unimportant part of his theory, and that other parts are still worth thinking about; 3) one embraces the 'full' Adorno, including his theory of culture industry. What is your opinion on these different options?

I think the initial response, in which Adorno was called elitist, even racist and undemocratic, was simplistic. This critique was based on a certain vulgar populism. Popular culture, since it supposedly came from below, was said to be inherently critical, even utopian, which expressed a reliance on Ernst Bloch as an easy antidote to the pessimism of the Frankfurt

School, finding traces of utopia everywhere, even reading against the grain things that seemed to be reactionary.

Today there is a greater sensitivity and awareness of what Adorno was getting at when he criticized jazz or popular music, or certain kinds of movies. This change is due in part to our now having access to the full range of his writings, which sometimes were more nuanced than the chapter from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As a result we have a less caricatured version of Adorno.

But there's no doubt that he introduced hierarchies of values, hierarchies of critical authenticity, hierarchies of true versus false art. He was willing to make judgments. I have always thought that culture, broadly speaking, involves judgment: what is worth preserving, what is considered beautiful, what's worth supporting. Culture by definition is judgmental, it's not accepting in a promiscuous way that everything is equally good. Adorno's willingness to make judgments and the criteria on which his judgments have been made have persuaded some people to conclude that not all popular culture is inherently progressive or all 'high' culture inevitably elitist. One might also say that the very categories have themselves been called into question by his critique of the often regressive implications of the latter.

What is your opinion, considering the history of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, of the current 'critical theorists', figures such as Žižek, Mouffe, Agamben, Badiou? On which points do you think present-day theory has moved 'beyond' the first generation of the Frankfurt School? And conversely: on which points do you think we could learn something from the early Frankfurters?

To be honest, I have only read these thinkers in a piecemeal way. Because they've changed their position over time, it's also hard to generalize about their work. But I don't feel drawn to them, to be honest. There's too much of a religious moment in them, which I don't find very congenial – I'm just religiously unmusical. I don't find all the recent excitement over Saint Paul, for example, to be compelling. And as I mentioned earlier, I have difficulties with the fascination with Leninism in Žižek and Badiou.

As for Chantal Mouffe, whom I know personally of these thinkers the best, there's a reliance on Carl Schmitt in her work that I resist. Although she has revised the Schmittian notion of friend-foe *antagonism* to a less lethal *agonism* in her more recent discussion of the political, I am not convinced that this is a persuasive account of the essence of the political. I remain enough of a Habermasian (even if my forthcoming book on lying in politics may suggest otherwise), to feel that politics still might involve communicative rationality, the attempt to create order in chaos and reach agreement rather than privilege eternal dissensus. To that extent, I don't feel drawn to their understanding of the world.

As you develop intellectually, I would also have to confess, you are formed by a particular moment and certain attitudes and ideas become part of the furniture of your mind. A later generation might come up with new figures to admire and new ideas, and it is often a little difficult to be fully open to them. And of course, there is the oedipal dynamic in which new intellectual legislators try to dethrone the older ones. If you live long enough, you see the fashions change, while you recognize that you are not so eager to change with them. If you're lucky, the figures you are drawn to in an early age – in my case Adorno, Benjamin, Habermas, Foucault, to a certain extent Derrida – have demonstrated longevity; their work, I am confident, will be taken seriously in the future. I have other friends who have bet on the wrong horse, people excited about, say, Lukács or Marcuse, and now struggle with a sense of being a bit passé. This is perhaps a slightly cynical answer to your question, but it explains in part why I don't feel overwhelmed by the fashionable interest in the thinkers you mentioned.

And the recent work of the new Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt?

I like Axel Honneth quite a bit. His work on recognition is a suggestive supplement to what Habermas has done with communicative rationality. What's remarkable about the Frankfurt School is that its aftermath has been so rich, with many different generations; in contrast to for instance the Althusserians, who lost intellectual momentum a generation ago.

A final question, which brings together the two different subjects of this interview: your own books deal mostly with historical figures and thoughts, but nevertheless seem to be written with a sense of urgency. Somewhat like Benjamin's dialectical image, in the sense that the current affairs shed new light old ideas, and suddenly give them new urgency. Is this something you do deliberately? Do you consider your works interventions in current debates? Has your forthcoming book also this sense of urgency?

It's always a bit of a mystery why you spend ten years writing a book on a certain subject, so whatever answer I give may not be the real explanation. But I think all my works have started with a sense of curiosity about a current issue: subjects that were 'in the air'. The book on lying in politics, for example, grew out of a request from *The London Review of Books* back in 1998 to write a review essay on two books on Bill Clinton. But I didn't do anything immediately with the ideas I began to develop in it, finishing instead my book on experience, which was published in 2004. Then, during the Bush years, there was an immense increase of interest in the issue of lying in politics, largely because of the weapons-of-mass-destruction-fiasco. Bush came to be considered by many as an exemplary political liar. It soon became apparent, however, that such accusations had a very long history indeed. Mendacity in general had been the subject of sustained criticisms at least since Augustine, while defenses of it under certain circumstances go as far back as Plato's brief for the noble lie. As an intellectual historian, I became fascinated by the ur-history of the current debate over political mendacity.

I think intellectual history, to the extent that it has current impact, plays the role of clarification. It shows us how and when certain ideas, ideologies, and belief systems emerge. A good *Begriffsgeschichte* will provide us with tools to think a little more clearly about where we are today. My own work has been very short on solutions, I don't have anything terribly useful to say about where we should go except in the vaguest of terms, but it has, I think, contributed to clarifying the terms of the debate and giving us some help in that respect. But I have always been interested – and this is a Frankfurt School legacy – in the present-as-history, the present as connected to the past and to a different, perhaps better, future. And to

this extent, the work may have that urgency you mention. It is not disinterested, and yet also not programmatic: I have never had an agenda, or a clear-cut program, a line that I'm trying to push. The book on lying and politics is a good example. It goes back and forth on the fundamental issues it raises, providing no clear answer as to whether or not lying in politics is necessary or inevitable. But it tries to make clear the arguments for each position, giving the reader the tools to come to his or her own practical conclusions.

Professor Jay, thank you very much for this interview.

My pleasure.

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