

Book Review: Revisiting the Frankfurt School: Essays on Culture, Media and Theory

by Blog Admin

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*What has become known as the Frankfurt School is often reduced to a small number of theorists in media communication and cultural studies. Challenging this limitation, **Revisiting The Frankfurt School** aims to expand our understanding by addressing the writings of intellectuals who were either members of the school, or were closely associated with it, but often neglected. **Burcu Baykurt** finds much of interest for students of media studies and history.*



Revisiting the Frankfurt School: Essays on Culture, Media and Theory. Edited by David Berry. Ashgate. April 2012.

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David Berry's edited volume is a project of re-reading the work of the Frankfurt School with clear eyes, open minds, and the wisdom of contemporary media studies, in order to identify writers associated with the school that have until now been neglected from discussion. We all know of the Frankfurt School greats – Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas amongst others – but to whom else from this period of great social, political and economic unrest should we look?

Gripped by European fascism and the capitalist economy of the United States, those at the Frankfurt School focused upon the critical study of mass-mediated cultural texts in the context of their political and economic production and distribution. Horkheimer and Adorno's seminal work on the [culture industries](#), Habermas's study of [the mass media and the public sphere](#), and Marcuse's "[one-dimensional man](#)" all show how media and culture, under the shadow of liberal capitalism, could process and tamper with social conflict, throwing its traditional role of critique out of the window. These authors argued that the commercial imperatives that drove cultural production validated the values of market societies and at the same time integrated social and political life into the capitalist framework. Berry's book provides an opportunity to view the School "in a wider rather than narrowly defined context", aiming to look beyond the well-trodden ground of the "Magic Bullet" and hypodermic syringe models.

The authors draw attention to the contributions of those that are rarely-associated with or stand on the periphery of the Frankfurt School's output, such as Siegfried Kraceur, a mentor to Adorno and one of the first intellectuals to study the masses, and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who was first to use the term 'consciousness industry'. Both the neglected ideas of Leo Lowenthal in relation to media studies, and Erich Fromm's work concerning culture and consumerism find themselves a well-deserved place in this book. The inclusion of these lesser well known academics is certainly a most refreshing aspect of the book, and cross readings and comparisons offer a stimulating account of understanding what constitutes Frankfurt School thinking, opening up new lines of inquiry in studying both critical theory and the sociology of intellectuals.

In “Walter Benjamin in the Intellectual Field,” [Alan O’Connor](#) traces the background and intellectual environment of Walter Benjamin, a literary critic and essayist whose writings provide an unprecedented philosophical depth and cultural breadth. Merging literature with philosophy, German idealism with historical materialism, and critical theory with Jewish mysticism, Benjamin’s writing cut across many disciplines and forms, and have been an enduring inspiration for media studies, critical theory, and philosophy. Through a highly original inquiry, O’Connor identifies the connections between Benjamin’s highly rich work and Bourdieu’s habitus – his famous conception for, in broad strokes, socialized subjectivity. Benjamin’s work is constitutive of the contradictions among his class position, political commitments, and intellectual conversations with diverse authors, argues O’Connor. In tandem with what Bourdieu would expect to see, Benjamin is quite reflexive about those ambiguities in his intellectual life as well as works. O’Connor’s analysis of Benjamin’s habitus and reflexivity reflects nicely on the examples of his writings presented in the chapter.

In “Max Horkheimer: Issues Concerning Liberalism and Culture,” [David Berry](#) presents an analysis of Horkheimer’s own thoughts concerning culture in a liberal context, which are much neglected in the larger literature. Berry cogently traces Horkheimer’s writings, and other scholars’ works on Horkheimer, to show the foundations of his theories on social justice in relation to liberalism and mass culture. Opening up how a critical Marxist perspective meets Schopenhauer’s concept of pessimism in Horkheimer’s work, he demonstrates how his idea of freedom became to be possible “out of human suffering and critical thinking”. Bringing his thoughts to life, Berry presents a profound picture of this theory and does not refrain from pointing out Horkheimer’s often-contradictory statements. While Horkheimer convincingly argues that mass culture governed by liberalism discredits suffering as a basis for social change by creating a strong sense of individuality and reason, he also finds himself in changing positions on his own pessimism regarding emancipation and oppression.

[Robert E. Babe](#) compares Theodor Adorno with Dallas Smythe, a leading figure in political economy of communications, with respect to their methods of and approaches to studying the media. Although both were coming from a Marxist tradition, the authors reflected on different “conceptions of evil”, for Adorno was focusing on fascism and Smythe on monopoly capitalism. They both believed the media, or culture industry, were the enablers of those evils, but they employed different methods to unravel that. Rather than normatively judging their differences, however, Babe convincingly walks the reader through the minds of those authors and, in a way, puts them in conversation only to show the various ways, and goals, of studying the control of the media, which, both Adorno and Smythe would agree as an important basis of political power.

Perhaps channeling the contradictions, inconsistencies, and the diversity of the School, some chapters seem to be in disharmony with the rest of the volume. Almost every author, in his or her own way, tries to connect the Frankfurt School of thought to the contemporary media and communication studies – and very interestingly so. However, in some cases, their ambitious projects coupled with the scope of their topics are larger than what a chapter can cover, thereby failing to satisfy the reader and leaving her asking for more. Nonetheless, this book is a valuable contribution to critical theory and media and communication studies from thoughtful scholars who perceptively revive the Frankfurt School tradition to make sense of the technologically assisted cultural processes and politics of our times.

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