

Introduction

The Frankfurt School's relationship to Judaism and Jewish thought has typically been considered accidental. Beyond the history of exile from and return to Frankfurt, and their scholarly efforts to understand the origins of anti-Semitism, no essential – or as they would say, “immanent” – correlation seems to exist between the project of Critical Theory and the Jewish background of its protagonists. In the Marxist tradition, moreover, Critical Theory is an objective, materialist undertaking, free of any theological, religious, spiritual influence or affiliation. The “critical theory of society”, as Max Horkheimer defines it already in 1937 in his seminal essay “Tradition and Critical Theory” says that,

the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.¹

This encapsulates not only the intentions of Critical Theory – to analyze and explain the “tensions of the modern era” and its “new barbarism” according to developments in capitalist society, in the “commodity economy” – but also their approach to the “Jewish question” as an inevitable expression of these developments. Such an external – that is, objective, materialist, historical – approach was exactly the one taken by Horkheimer two years later, in another important and disputed essay entitled “The Jews and Europe.”² Horkheimer refers there to the historical and economic situation of Jews in Europe without inquiring into any dimension of Jewish thinking or Jewish life itself. A similar approach was taken a few years later in Adorno and Horkheimer's essay “Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Since Adorno and Horkheimer explain Anti-Semitism in a materialistic-psychological perspective as a projection, any reference to Jewish thought and life remains irrelevant. Although the research and analysis of Anti-Semitism was a central aspect

of the project of Critical Theory, its relation to Jewish thought and life was never considered a part of either their own work or of most scholarship about their work.³ Or, at least, so it would appear. This double issue of *Bamidbar* is dedicated to exploring the other alternative: namely, that the relationship between Critical Theory and Jewish thought is not only an external one, but rather that there are important and immanent thematic connections between them, however tacit and inconspicuous.

The contributors to this double issue suggest new approaches to the relationship between Critical Theory and Jewish thought. Going beyond mere conjunction, they inquire into the hidden Jewish dimensions of Critical Theory. As such, these approaches remain faithful to a guiding principle of Critical Theory: exploring and exposing those motives that lie hidden beneath the surface of things – be they consequences of the ‘commodity economy,’ or of psychologically suppressed drives. Although these contributions do not, by any means, suggest a theological reading of the Frankfurt School, they call attention to some elements from Jewish thought, tradition, and life that seem to lie hidden in the background of the Frankfurt School’s work. By pointing out these elements, the essays in these issues propose an understanding of the relationship between Critical Theory and Jewish thought that can, in some cases, suggest an understanding of Critical Theory *as* Jewish thought. The method of critique, the implied assumptions and premises, the socio-political goals and objectives, when seen in the right light, may resonate with aspects taken from the Jewish tradition, even if not always consistent with predominant understandings of Judaism, but with alternative, unconventional and heretical currents thereof.

Setting the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory in a Jewish context means addressing those questions that have been troubling Jewish thought and history in modernity: repression and emancipation, profanation and secularization, law and antinomianism, and the two most notorious movements in modern Jewish history – Sabbatianism and Frankism. It is significant that some Frankfurt School thinkers, such as Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, felt an affinity with these movements, or were suspected of such an affinity by their friends, most notably Gershom Scholem; and it is no less significant that other thinkers, such as Max Horkheimer, became increasingly interested in Jewish themes. By discussing the Frankfurt School from these different perspectives, this double issue aims to illuminate the interrelations between social and theological thinking, between the religious and the profane, and between critique and rejection of authority.

The first issue, *Critical Afterlives*, includes contributions by Willi Goetschel, Orietta Ombrosi and Adam Lipszyc, each adopting a different approach to the question of the correlation between Judaism and Critical Theory. Goetschel's article, "Theory-Praxis: Spinoza, Hess, Marx, and Adorno," takes a genealogical approach, which calls into question the mainstream view of Critical Theory as deriving its concepts and categories from a Hegelianized Marxism. Complicating this picture, Goetschel traces Marx's idea of praxis back to Moses Hess's reading of Spinoza. The key concept that Marx took from Hess is that of praxis (the praxis of theory included) as *life activity*. Hess also brings out the inherently social significance of life activity, which is ultimately realizable only in the *interaction* of individuals. Goetschel hints that this reading of Spinoza may have been a source for the dialogical turn in subsequent German-Jewish thought. His genealogical approach is one way of looking at Critical Theory's hidden Jewish dimension, but the purpose of retrieving a Spinozist trace is not simply to demonstrate Critical Theory's Judaism – a task that on its own would be 'insignificant,' writes Goetschel; it is in the service, rather, of philosophy's *self-reflection* about its own activity. As part of Critical Theory's commitment to rigorous self-reflection, Jewish experiences of modernity have surely nourished our understanding of what is affectively and practically involved in thinking. In Goetschel's words: "Contextualized in this way, Jewish modernity comes into focus as a critical moment in the formation of the modern experience that might carry illuminating relevance for the project of rethinking the theory-praxis problem."

Ombrosi's article, "Lamentation and Resistance: the Non-Resignation of Philosophy and Adorno's 'Melancholy Science' in the Face of the Catastrophe," takes its point of departure from the historical event of Auschwitz and the troubling question, posed by Adorno's project of negative dialectic, of how to philosophize 'after'. As is clear from Adorno's question, he does not regard Auschwitz from within an objective, historical, materialist framework (of the sort alluded to above); the mass destruction of human life transformed Adorno's understanding of philosophy's inherent sense: Thinking discovers its sense, not in questions of meaning and significance, which are offensive to the victims of senseless violence, but in expressing the *affect* of – and for – their suffering. The expression of suffering recasts philosophy as *lament*, but this is not mere despair, since Adorno's philosophy is also a form of *resistance*. Ombrosi focuses on the ethical dimension contained in philosophy as both lament and resistance, relating

it to the Jewish ethical tradition that she identifies in Adorno's negative approach. She shows that, for philosophy, a reorientation after Auschwitz is only possible through such ethics: of resistance or non-resignation. In her reading of Adorno, she claims that philosophy after Auschwitz is and must be primarily an ethical resistance to evil; not only to absolute evil, but also to the more sinister and hidden evils implied in "the incessant identity of everything" or the "relentless course of things." Adorno's ethics, free of precepts but sustained by *minima moralia* is an ethics of minimal and negative acts that go against the current, that are moral precisely because of their act of opposition, interruption, or refusal; because of their specific way of saying "no" and resisting.

Although Goetschel and Ombrosi take markedly different approaches to the question of Critical Theory's Judaism, it is noteworthy that both highlight the importance of *affect* for thinking. In light of his Spinozist interpretation of Critical Theory, Goetschel re-reads Adorno's dialectic of theory and praxis, emphasizing the significance of affect in Adorno's late work. According to Goetschel, Adorno regards the affect of happiness involved in the activity of thinking as a form of resistance to oppression. Ombrosi likewise argues that the expression of suffering in Adorno's philosophy is never mere despair but is an act of resistance that negates the distorted given order so as to illuminate another possible world.

Reflecting on another interpretation of the reorientation of philosophy from the metaphysical 'all' to singularity is Adam Lipszyc's "The Remnants of Grandmother, or In Search of a Materialist Theology of Photography and Film." Focusing less on the affective and political register of resistance highlighted by Goetschel and Ombrosi, Lipszyc brings to the fore the theological – particularly *redemptive* – character of the Frankfurt circle's effort to save the phenomena. Lipszyc traces this redemptive framework to Walter Benjamin's idea of restoring things to their singular *names*, but he detects its imprint in Siegfried Kracauer's work on photography and film. Redemption, so understood, implies a practical agenda, since the present state of affairs is portrayed as unredeemed and action is called for to bring about a redeemed world. This connection between redemption and politics is explored in Asaf Angermann's article in the second issue. But for his part, Lipszyc focuses on the *aesthetic* meaning of saving the phenomena, which could be understood as an intensification of the material, or 'materialist theology.'

At the heart of Lipszyc's article is an analysis of Kracauer's argument

that the work of art strives to capture what is unforgettable – the *unique* truth and history of its subject – and it does so through the “selective and modifying” work of memory, whereas the photographic image can be compared to the historicist endeavor of recording the past *completely*. Hence, the work of art captures what could be referred to as the *name* (the singular ‘truth content’) of what it depicts, while the photographic image records only the surface elements, or ‘material remnants’ of its subject. Lipszyc interrogates Kracauer’s suggestion that what is captured in the photograph is pure materiality, or ‘the husk’ of things.

At stake in each of the articles in this first issue are questions of history and memory, from Lipszyc’s discussion of how the past is recorded in photographic images, to Ombrosi’s idea of negative dialectics as lament, to Goetschel’s idea of critical self-reflection as genealogical excavation. While there is nothing overtly Jewish about questioning how memory weighs on the present, or how alternative futures are harbored in missed possibilities of the past, these contributions prompt us to recall a past that *lives on*, in defiance of the secular paradigm of historicism. In the second issue, articles from Michael Fagenblat and Agata Bielik-Robson explicitly thematize this resistance to historicism, connecting it to Jewish messianism and the proposed ‘post-secularism’ of the Frankfurt thinkers.

Also included in the second issue, *Antinomian Figures*, are contributions from Asaf Angermann and Daniel Weiss. This volume interrogates the intersections of politics and theology and looks into the legacy of secularization and profanation, the status of law in heretical and rabbinic Judaism, and the heterodox appeal to messianism in thinkers like Adorno, Bloch, Benjamin and Scholem.

Several of the articles in this issue discuss the anti-authoritarian character of Critical Theory. While one might regard this as a radicalization of Enlightenment autonomy, the authors of these essays highlight the Frankfurt School’s antinomianism, bringing it into correlation with the heretical sects of Frankism and Sabbateanism, which Gershom Scholem brought to the forefront of his study of Jewish mysticism. Both Fagenblat and Angermann draw on Scholem’s work as a lens for interpreting the Frankfurt School and the thinkers affiliated with it; moreover, both draw our attention to the *profanation* of theology in Scholem’s work. While Fagenblat interprets profanation as a neutralization of rabbinic law for the sake of a more original *mystical* experience (a mystical experience of *life* as opposed to the ossification of law), Angermann discovers a profane

meaning of redemption in the agenda for *political* emancipation at work in the Frankfurt School.

Fagenblat draws the helpful distinction between profanation and secularization: whereas secularization displaces the theological, leaving its structure of authority in tact within a worldly configuration (i.e., in a political rather than theocratic regime), profanation involves the un-working of this authority, its neutralization or suspension. But the persistence of the sacral within secular modernity is also at stake for the Frankfurt School, and this is reflected in the contributions of Bielik-Robson and Weiss. Bielik-Robson reads Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a post-secular work, which uncovers the repressed sacral horizons within the seemingly secular rationalism of modernity. Weiss turns to rabbinic law in order to interpret the antinomianism of Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence.'

In "Redemption *ex negativo*: Critical Theory and the History of Mystical Heresy," Angermann takes seriously Scholem's claim that he considered the Institute for Social Research to be one of the most 'remarkable Jewish sects' that German-Judaism ever produced. Focusing on Adorno and Marcuse, the two Institute members who were least explicit about their indebtedness to a Jewish tradition, Angermann finds support for Scholem's intuition of a tacit affinity between these members of the Frankfurt School and the sects of Sabbateanism and Frankism, finding striking similarities in their understandings of redemption. First, they view redemption as exclusively negative: it is the negation of the deformity and damage of this world rather than the projection of a positive image of the world to come. Second, they do not allow redemption a theological significance, but understand it solely in terms of social and political liberation. Angermann then turns the Frankfurt School's method of immanent critique back on Scholem himself, finding a resonance between the Frankfurt School and Scholem's own endeavor to expose an inner-worldly, historical relevance behind the esoteric, theological face of Jewish mysticism.

Fagenblat's "Frankism and Frankfurtism: historical heresies for a metaphysics of our most human experiences" interprets Scholem's work on Sabbateanism and Frankism as an anachronistic struggle to redeem the most excoriated elements of the past so as to liberate another possible future. Two models help Fagenblat to think about this anachronistic continuity – "across the messianic interruptions of history" – between Frankism and 'Frankfurtism.' The first is Ernst Bloch's invocation of the Protestant

revolutionary theologian, Thomas Müntzer, as a ‘concrete fable,’ to be verified in its realization in the present. The second is Benjamin’s idea of finding redemptive potential in the fragments of the past. Fagenblat discerns the substance of what Scholem adopted from Frankism in the idea of *profaning* religious structures of authority. While the Frankists profaned Jewish theology – neutralizing the authority of the rabbinic laws so as to redeem a new source of *life* – Scholem’s research into the metaphysics of the Kabbalah profanes the *secular absolute* of historicism, allowing these ruins of the past to breathe new life into a Judaism weakened by assimilation and Westernization.

Offering a counterpoint to the previous two articles, which trace affinities between heretical sects of Judaism and the characteristic antinomianism of the Frankfurt School and its affiliates, Weiss’s article, “Walter Benjamin and the antinomianism of classical rabbinic law,” sheds light from the unlikely source of rabbinic Judaism on Benjamin’s critique of the law in his famous essay on violence. Weiss’s approach is surprising, since the rabbinic tradition has not only one, but two kinds of law (written and oral), whereas Benjamin argues for a *suspension* of law-making and law-preserving violence. But Weiss argues that both the Benjaminian and the rabbinical conceptions of the law share two moments: an *affirmation* of divine violence, which can only be operative in messianic times (or while the temple stands) and a *delegitimizing* of the non-divine enactment of law, such that the merely human law-making and law-preserving violence is effectively suspended. Weiss argues that this complex treatment of the law may be a more effective critique of violence than an abstract negation of the law, or mere antinomianism.

Rounding out the second issue is Bielik-Robson’s article, “Enlightenment as Exodus: Jewish Ulysses.” Bielik-Robson understands post-secularism as a *Traumdeutung* of the dreams of Western culture, which have been repressed by the Enlightenment’s fanatical pursuit of reason. Her interpretation, born out by a reading of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, gives centrality to the idea of dreaming, which Adorno regarded as a less repressive type of thinking than the domination of the concept. Dreaming does double work in Bielik-Robson’s piece: First, she maintains that the Frankfurt School, much like Freud, learned to decipher the “repressed horizons” of modern thought. Along this vein, she regards the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a post-secular work, which reveals not only one, but two sacral sensibilities repressed (or *tacitly* expressed) within

the seemingly solid massif of modern rationalism: the ‘Greco-mythological’ sensibility of enlightenment as (escape from) myth, and the more hidden Judeo-messianic sensibility of enlightenment as Exodus. Second, she suggests that dreaming is an intimation of the messianic, regarding the achievement of post-secular thought as creating an opening in which it is possible to dream the *messianic* dream of emancipation.

We have tried in this brief introduction to give an overview of how the articles in this collection interpret Critical Theory as Jewish thought *undercover* – a term expressed by Horkheimer himself, in a later interview to the German radio, as Agata Bielik-Robson notes in her text. The contributors explore *what* such an undercover Judaism might involve and *why* Judaism has assumed a concealed form in the thinkers affiliated with the Frankfurt School. What emerges in the pages to follow suggests that Critical Theory does not aim to preserve Judaism *as a religion* or to defend theology against the secularizing agenda of the Enlightenment. The alternative suggestion is that Critical Theory should be read as ‘post-secular’ (Bielik-Robson) since it attends to the ways in which the theological has been repressed – or tacitly expressed – within modernity. Although the Frankfurt School theorists rejected the authority of tradition in the name of critical thought, elements of the Jewish tradition have been taken up in a transfigured form – *profaned* (Fagenblat) – and harnessed to an agenda of political emancipation (Angermann). The very manner in which Critical Theory relates to Judaism is therefore modern: by quoting elements of the tradition, out of context, it displaces and subverts religious authority. The contributors look at how the Frankfurt School appropriates and transforms the theological concepts of redemption and the messianic (Lipszyc, Angermann, Bielik-Robson); they look at tensions between rabbinic law and antinomianism (Weiss, Fagenblatt); they look at lament and its ethical core as resistance (Ombrosi); and they question the historicist idea of time in order to redeem the missed possibilities of the past (Goetschel, Lipszyc, Fagenblat). From these displaced quotations, we not only learn to see a neglected Jewish dimension of the Frankfurt School, but we also learn to read the texts of the Frankfurt School against the grain, as remarkable documents of tradition’s un-working and re-working in modernity.

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Notes

- 1 Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in: Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory – Selected Essays*, New York: Continuum, [1972] 2002, 227.
- 2 Max Horkheimer, “The Jews and Europe,” in: Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society. A Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, 77–94.
- 3 For a most recent historical account of the Frankfurt School’s relation to Judaism, and for an extensive survey of the relevant literature, cfr. Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.