

Review of Thomas P. Wheatland, The Frankfurt School in America: A Transatlantic Odyssey from Exile to Acclaim. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009

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It was with great anticipation that I began reading Thomas P. Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in America: A Transatlantic Odyssey from Exile to Acclaim*. This very hefty manuscript purports to undertake in four parts and eight chapters the first systematic historical look at the so-called Frankfurt School's experience in the United States, to puncture some mythologies about the group, and to add details and context to the compelling story of the exile, odyssey, and return to post-war Germany of a fascinating group of German-American scholars. Wheatland's focus is on the institutional history and relations of the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research) after they moved from Frankfurt to New York, settling in with a research Institute at Columbia University. The story continues with detailed examinations of their institutional relations with groups and projects in New York, the return to Germany of key members of the inner circle, and the group's belated political influence on the radical movements of the 1960s.

Drawing on previous sources, Wheatland provides a brief summary of the institutional history of the Institute for Social Research during its origins in Germany and founding in Frankfurt in 1923. Wheatland does not add much to previous accounts here, although he presents a clear narrative of the Marxistische Arbeitwoche convoked by Institute founder and financial supporter Felix Weil; the choice of Kurt Albert Gerlach as the first Institute Director; Gerlach's early death and replacement by Carl Grünberg, who was heavily involved in empirically-oriented histories of the working class movement; and Grünberg's replacement by Max Horkheimer, who privileged social philosophy and interdisciplinary social research to develop a critical theory of the contemporary era.

Wheatland speculates that Horkheimer might have been chosen over someone closer to Grünberg's interests and with a more senior position in the Institut because Horkheimer's broader intellectual interests and less obvious Marxian radicalism might have been a safer choice within the Frankfurt University bureaucratic structure. In any case, with the rise of German fascism in 1933, Horkheimer and his associates first moved their library and resources to a branch office in Geneva Switzerland and then moved to the United States in 1934.

Part I on "Critical Theory on Morningside Heights" discusses how in 1934 the Frankfurt group moved from Europe to the United States and affiliated with Columbia University, located in uptown New York on Morningside Heights, overlooking Harlem. Here Wheatland contributes some interesting material on the history of Columbia University, the composition of its sociology and political science departments, and the Institute's negotiating an affiliation.

In one of his best chapters on "The Frankfurt School's Years at Columbia University" (Chapter 2), Wheatland documents the negotiations between representatives of Horkheimer's Institute with the sociology department at

Columbia University. He notes how Erich Fromm and Julian Gumperz pulled together some of the Frankfurt Institut writings of the early 1930s, developed a brochure describing research projects and history in English, and that these packets were sent to members of U.S. university departments that might be interested in affiliation with the Frankfurt group at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, UCLA, Stanford, and elsewhere (43f). A younger affiliate of the Institute Julian Gumperz, who had been born in the U.S. and spoke native English, was, along with Erich Fromm who spoke English and was known in psychoanalytical circles in the U.S., chosen to negotiate with various U.S. universities in 1933-34, and it appears the Columbia University's sociology department was most receptive to an Institut affiliation.

Wheatland provides an illuminating account of the personalities in Columbia's sociology department and speculates as to why certain of the members would be keen to affiliate with the German-Jewish exiles who made up Horkheimer's group (47ff). Based on internal university documents, correspondence, and interviews Wheatland provides a detailed account of interaction between Institute members and key figures in the Columbia Sociology Department.

Part II on the Frankfurt group's interactions with New York intellectuals contains some new and interesting material on contacts between the Institute and the amorphous groups of radical intellectuals known as the "New York intellectuals." Drawing on a stack of books on the New York intellectuals, Wheatland indicates parallels between their secular Judaism, interest in modernism and the arts, and leftwing politics with the Horkheimer group, and tells the now familiar story of how these groups did not coalesce and remained separated from each other.

The most interesting chapter, "Dewey's Pit Bull: Sidney Hook and the Confrontation between Pragmatism and Critical Theory," deals with attempts to have meetings between Sidney Hook, who represented a synthesis between Marxism and Deweyan pragmatism, and Horkheimer's group to explore their common interests and their conflicting conceptions of positivism, pragmatism, and Marxian dialectics. Wheatland recounts the meetings between Hook, positivist Otto Neurath, and the Horkheimer circle and repeats Han Joas' claim that the Frankfurt School critique of pragmatism was skewed by over-reliance on William James' less rigorous and more spiritualist version of pragmatism (p. 363). This was not the case with Marcuse, however, whose critiques of Dewey, published in the Institute journal, directly critique the form of scientific pragmatism that Hook himself took from Dewey and defended against the Frankfurt School.[1]

The Hook chapter raises a big mystery: why didn't anyone in the Institute ever meet with John Dewey since he was around Columbia University at same time as the Horkheimer-led Institute for Social Research. Members of the Institute were not shrinking violets and met with almost every major figure at Columbia in sociology and other disciplines, got Franz Neumann a position in the Columbia political science department, hung out with Columbia University philosophers Ernst Nagel, Hook and other area philosophers and had meetings with Otto Neurath on logical positivism. Herbert Marcuse's 1940s letters with Leo Löwenthal indicate that he, Horkheimer, and other top members of the Institute met with Rectors and bigwigs at UCLA, Berkeley, University of Chicago, Stanford, and other major universities, and that everywhere they traveled they looked up major professors. So why not Dewey? Was he beneath contempt or too big to get access? Since the Institute members met with positivists, conservatives, and even rightwingers, it remains a mystery why they did not meet with Dewey and whether Dewey ever responded to their critique of his work and pragmatism.[2]

At this point in the narrative covering the Frankfurt School at Columbia in the 1940s, a lacunae appears in Wheatland's account when the group begins to splinter into a California branch, a New York branch, and others who went to Washington to work against German fascism. Wheatland discusses in detail the financial crisis of the Institute, due to bad stock market and real estate investments in failing markets. He indicates how the Institute could no longer afford to pay salaries of all of their affiliated members, forcing the Institute to dismiss Fromm, Neumann, Marcuse, and others, but Wheatland does not discuss the important publications of Erich Fromm which included *Escape From Freedom* (1941), Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, or Neumann's *Behemoth*, and makes only cursory references to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, their major theoretical work of the exile period. Wheatland does not seem to be aware that Marcuse and Neumann were working on a "Theories of Social Change" project,[3] nor does he discuss how significant members of the group left Columbia to join government agencies in the fight against fascism in World War II, a hole partially filled with discussions of Marcuse's war activity in a later chapter.

While Wheatland is interested in tracing the personal interconnections between members of what he calls the Horkheimer group and U.S. colleagues, some of the most significant connections took place in Washington as Marcuse, Neumann, Löwenthal, and others worked for the U.S. government. There are book-length studies on this

episode and a wealth of archival and even published material available in the Marcuse and Lowenthal archives, as well as U.S. government archives, but Wheatland only takes up Institute war activity in Marcuse's case in a later chapter, leaving out a very important episode in the U.S. history of the Frankfurt group.[4]

Part III deals with "Critical Theory and the Rise of Post-War Sociology," but these chapters too do not add much to the Jay and Wiggershaus books.[5] However, Wheatland sets up a strawman myth of the Institute for Social Research which he then claims to destroy, writing:

Most scholarly accounts emphasize the consistent marginality of the Circle and the importance of isolation for the group's subversive and controversial discoveries about late capitalism and the emerging new world of total administration. The Institute for Social Research, according to such accounts, was a collection of lonely critics and radicals bucking the dominant paradigms of their age. Seeing themselves as dissenters and naysayers, they sought neither fame nor notoriety. The gravity and danger of their discoveries were so severe, we are told that they rejected the traditional role of the social scientist (203).

Wheatland does not say who tells these tall tales about the Institute, but it is certainly not Martin Jay or Rolf Wiggershaus, the two major historians of the Institute, nor do I know of any respectable Frankfurt School scholar who overlooks the Institute's serious mediation between theory and social science during their American exile period. Wheatland creates a strawman here to provide the impression that he alone is going to document the serious interventions in contemporary social science during their American exile, a theme well-documented by Jay, Wiggershaus, Helmut Dubiel, myself, and others who have written on the Institute for Social Research.

Wheatland takes up the now familiar theme of how the Institute veered between attempting to mediate between continental German philosophy and social theory with American empirical research methods, and then retreated back into their more theoretical positions before financial crisis forced them to seek research grants for their research into anti-Semitism and Studies in Prejudice project. Wheatland provides a detailed account of the grant applications, reformulations and submissions when early proposals were deemed too theoretical, and conflicts with American researchers affiliated with the American Jewish Committee (AJC) on the book. Typically, there is not much discussion of the content of the Institute's projects, and strangely, Wheatland does not go into Adorno's work with a Berkeley-based group and his collaboration on *The Authoritarian Personality*, which Wheatland admits was the better received and respected book produced by Institute members (257). Nor does he look at Adorno's work on music or with the Hacker foundation, Löwenthal's work with Lazarsfeld's groups on the sociology of communication and literature, or work published in the Institute journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, besides listing some authors and titles. Wheatland's is an institutional history without significant human personalities or texts, providing the impression that the Frankfurt School in exile were mostly seeking academic contacts and affiliations and grants, rather than producing a significant body of work.

Part IV on the Frankfurt School and the New Left and Herbert Marcuse's encounters with the counterculture and New Left is probably the weakest part of the book. While there have been a wealth of studies on the clashes between the Frankfurt School and the New Left upon their return to Germany, a three-volume publication of key documents in Germany, publications by Routledge on *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, one volume of which deals with Marcuse and the New Left, none of this material is really engaged in Wheatland's study.[6] In Chapter 7 "Specters of Marx: The Frankfurt School in the Era of the New Left," there is little that is not in Wiggershaus' excellent study of the contentious relations between the German New Left and the Frankfurt Institut, and in fact Wiggershaus provides a more reliable and detailed narrative of the adventures of the German New Left with Horkheimer and Adorno and the Frankfurt Institut, and Marcuse's remarkable influence in the German Left in his visits in 1967 and 1968.

Chapter 8, "Marcuse's Mentors: The American Counterculture and the Guru of the New Left" misfires almost completely. Wheatland presents Marcuse's status as "guru" and "father" of the New Left in the U.S. as largely a media concoction — and then quotes Marcuse as saying that his alleged status as "guru" and "father" was largely a media invention. Indeed, throughout the era, Marcuse himself constantly made the point.[7] Wheatland persists in alleged myth-busting by claiming that study of early New Left documents and interviews with key figures in early SDS shows that Marcuse's impact on the New Left was exaggerated. While Wheatland is right (439ff) that Marcuse wasn't widely known by sectors of the American New Left until around 1968, he exaggerates the claim by interviewing people in SDS who indeed were not influenced by Marcuse, like Todd Gitlin who remains hostile to Marcuse's work.[8] But Wheatland ignores many groups of Marcuse's students and others who were influenced by Marcuse pre-1968 like his Brandeis students Ron Aronson who wrote widely on Marcuse throughout the 1960s and was involved in New Left groups and publications, or Abbie Hoffman who became infamous as a Yippie, to say nothing of Angela Davis. And

although he discusses Mike Davis's 1965 invitation for Marcuse to join SDS's Radical Education Project (REP) and Marcuse's supportive but critical response (313ff), he fails to note that this very episode testifies to Marcuse's early interest for segments of SDS.[9]

While some New Left publications might have ignored Marcuse before 1968, as Wheatland claims, there were articles in other publications like *New Left Review*, perhaps the most influential leftist journal globally, *Radical America*, and countless alternative journals and papers. There were groups in the mid-1960s who published on Marcuse in the San Diego area where he was teaching, in Madison and Austin where he had influence, and no doubt in many other areas. But the key argument against Wheatland's revisionist take on Marcuse and the New Left is that after 1968 Marcuse did indeed become known to the American New Left, as well as globally. So while he may not have ever had the influence the media ascribed to him and probably wasn't a "guru" to the New Left, especially to SDS in its early years, a role he would reject with a laugh, there is no question concerning his great influence.

Wheatland makes many problematic claims concerning Marcuse's allegedly minimal influence on student radicals and the counterculture, as well as muddling the big picture. He writes: "Because so many accounts emphasize the influence and importance of *One-Dimensional Man*, this single book overshadows Marcuse's other writings from the period" (302). Wheatland himself argues that *Repressive Tolerance* (1965) was highly influential on the New Left and discusses in some detail *An Essay on Liberation* (1967), which was widely discussed and read by the New Left globally. While Wheatland recognizes that the Vietnam war was becoming central to the activities of the New Left in the mid-1960s, he leaves out Marcuse's talks and published essays on Vietnam that connect U.S. involvement to imperialism and signal the growing importance of Marxian and Marcuse's theory to the New Left.[10]

Wheatland's account of SDS's origins also leaves out many influences. While Wheatland is right that C. Wright Mills had a major influence on Tom Hayden and the Port Huron statement, he leaves out the influence of John Dewey on the SDS notion of participatory democracy, who also was a major influence on Mills. And Wheatland tortuously raises questions concerning the influence of the Institute for Social Research on Mills and their connections (306ff), whereas Mills always made the connection quite clear and cited the importance of the Institute for his work.

The conclusion on "The Frankfurt School's American Legacy" maps some key moments of post-1968 publishing events, such as books on Marcuse's influence and the rise of the journal *Telos* which was strongly Marcusean in tone and substance in its early years, as well as Martin Jay's ground-breaking *The Dialectical Imagination*. Wheatland notes that from the 1970s to the present Frankfurt School-inspired critical theory has influenced many different academic disciplines and figures, but does not really cover any new ground here and ends by reducing Frankfurt School influence to three issues of mass culture, totalitarianism, and the role of the intellectual in contemporary society, whereas one could argue that its influence is much broader and no doubt more complex and convoluted. Indeed, Charles Reitz argues in "Marcuse in America – Exile as Educator," included in this issue, that Marcuse had a lasting impact on academia in the United States and, I would argue, elsewhere that continues into the present in far more fields and thematics than Wheatland indicates in his conclusion.[11]

Hence, Wheatland's opus ends with a whimper and while the book adequately covers some of the topics concerning the Institute for Social Research's American adventures, it does not add much of significance to the historical accounts of Jay and Wiggershaus, or other scholarly works on Frankfurt School figures like Horkheimer, Adorno, Lowenthal, Fromm, and Marcuse. Indeed, the Jay and Wiggershaus books are more valuable than the Wheatland text, as they present a livelier and richer presentation of the ideas and figures in the group, more sustained engagement with the key texts, and stronger interpretive theses. In Wheatland's historical survey, by contrast, there are few significant engagements with texts, no new perspectives on the critical theorists work or continuing relevance, and few new insights into the group as a whole. Although the title of the book is *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, there is little reflection on the experience of exile, how the experience of National Socialism impacted on their experiences and perceptions in the United States, how being outsiders to U.S. culture gave them insights into problems of U.S. society and culture unperceived by natives, and how the tools of Germany theory and philosophy helped the Institute members provide original analyses of the United States during their exile experience, a major theme of Jay, Wiggershaus, myself and others. Hence, whereas Wheatland's book can be recommended to those who have thoroughly appropriated Jay and Wiggershaus' histories, it should not be recommended for those seeking initial orientation on the Frankfurt School.

It may be worth noting that advertising blurbs on the back of the book completely misrepresent Wheatland's accomplishment. Morris Dickstein writes: "The Frankfurt School played a major role in the vast intellectual migration to the United States, yet most accounts focus largely on its prewar and postwar activity in Europe, much less on the important years of its American exile." This is utterly and laughably false as both Jay's and Wiggershaus' histories

focus intensely on the years in exile, as do most of the books on critical theory with which I am familiar, including my own *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*. Like Wheatland's claims that most accounts of the Frankfurt School neglect their social science research projects, or that Marcuse's influence on the New Left was much less than believed, Dickstein creates a mythology of alleged misfocused or wrong scholarship on the Frankfurt School and presents Wheatland's book as the antidote. In fact, Wheatland does not fill a major lacunae in Frankfurt School scholarship or correct some prevalent myths, but merely adds some additional detail to standard accounts.[12]

Endnotes

1. See Herbert Marcuse, "Review of John Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*" in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8 (1939-40), pp. 221-28, and Marcuse, "Review of John Dewey's *Theory of Valuation*" in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941) pp. 144-148. These will be published in the forthcoming volume *Herbert Marcuse, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Emancipation. Volume 5, The Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*. New York and London: Routledge.

2. Larry Hickman, editor of the *Dewey Collected Works and Correspondence* e-mailed me that in Dewey's collected works and letters concerning Marcuse and the Frankfurt School there is:

- One passing reference to Marcuse in a letter from 1973. No direct correspondence found with Dewey and no mention of Marcuse by Dewey in the *Collected Works*.
- Frankfurt School: Does not appear in either the *Correspondence* or *CW* as a phrase. The only appearances of Frankfurt are in reference to the location.
- Adorno: no appearance in either *Correspondence* or *CW*.
- Horkheimer: no appearance in *CW* and one appearance in *Correspondence* (e-mail to Douglas Kellner: 5/20/09).

Hickman concurs that it is a mystery that there was no interaction or exchanges between Dewey and the Frankfurt School, except for the meeting with Hook that Wheatland describes; Hickman notes in the above email: "Hook was not only Dewey's Pit Bull, but during the 30s was called 'Dewey's Left Hook.'"

3. See Herbert Marcuse and Franz Neumann, "A History of the Doctrine of Social Change" and "Theories of Social Change," in Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War, and Fascism*, *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume One*, edited by Douglas Kellner. London and New York: Routledge, 1988: 93-138.

4. Compare Barry Kätz, *Foreign Intelligence: Research and Analysis in the Office of Strategic Services 1942-1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press and Douglas Kellner, "Introduction: Technology, War, and Fascism: Marcuse in the 1940s," in *Technology, War, and Fascism*, op. cit.

5. See Martin Jay, "The Dialectical Imagination" Boston. Little, Brown and Company, 1973 (second edition, University of California Press, 1996) and Rolf Wiggershaus, "The Frankfurt School", Cambridge UK and Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press and MIT Press, 1995. This review will suggest that the Jay's and Wiggershaus' books remain the definitive history of the so-called Frankfurt School and that Wheatland does not add much to previous scholarship.

6. See Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung--Von der Flaschenpost zum Molotowcocktail*. Volumes I-III. Hamburg: Rogner & Bernhard, 1998, and Herbert Marcuse: *The New Left and the 1960s*. Volume Three, *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, Vol. 3, edited with Introduction by Douglas Kellner. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

7. See Kellner, in *Herbert Marcuse: The New Left and the 1960s*, op. cit.

8. Gitlin told Wheatland that: "Herbert Marcuse was theoretically so disinclined to find grounds for strategy or action, he was not terribly useful—except to confirm gloom" (316). This is not surprising since Gitlin's bitter hostility toward Marcuse is evident in the opening pages of his highly problematic *Intellectuals and the Flag* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), where Gitlin opens with a snide dismissal of Herbert Marcuse who popularized the phrase "great refusal" and sectors of the New Left that practiced it. For Gitlin, the great refusal's "absolute rejection of the social order" represents a "purity of will" and "more than a little futility" (3). The concept "is the triumph of German romanticism" and "a shout from an ivory tower" (3). In fact, Marcuse always countered the refusal of specific modes of thought and behavior with alternative ones, as when he championed critical and dialectical thought against the conformist modes of one-dimensional thought, or pointed to the aesthetic dimension as a utopian projection of ideals of a freer and happier world in contrast to existing suffering and unfreedom. Gitlin's claim above that "Herbert Marcuse was theoretically so disinclined to find grounds for strategy or action, he was not terribly useful" is ludicrously false. Gitlin goes on to polemicize against critical theory, cultural studies, postmodernism, multiculturalism, and the Academic Left; see my critique of Gitlin's recent

work in "Education and the Academic Left: Critical Reflections on Todd Gitlin," *College Literature* 33/4 [Fall 2006]: 137-154.

9. For a different view of Marcuse's exchange with Mike Davis on the SDS Radical Education Project, see Douglas Kellner, Tyson E. Lewis, and Clayton Pierce, "Introduction" in *Marcuse's Challenge to Education*, co-edited by Douglas Kellner, K. Daniel Cho, Tyson E. Lewis, and Clayton Pierce. Lanham, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009: 13f.

10. Wheatland notes a 1966 article by Marcuse against US imperialist intervention in Vietnam, but not that Marcuse was giving lectures on the topic and publishing articles against the war at the same time in the U.S. See Herbert Marcuse, "The Inner Logic of American Policy in Vietnam," in *Herbert Marcuse*, 38-40. A forthcoming study by Stephen Gennaro & Douglas Kellner, "Under Surveillance: Herbert Marcuse and the FBI" shows that based on FBI surveillance reports Marcuse's activism was more wide-spread and taken more seriously by the U.S. government than was previously known. Wheatland evidently did not inspect Marcuse's readily available FBI files, nor the files of Adorno, Horkheimer or other members of the Institute.

11. On Marcuse's continued intellectual and political influence, see Herbert Marcuse. *A Critical Reader*,

edited by John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb. New York and London: Routledge, 2003; *New Critical Theory. Essays on Liberation*, edited by William S. Wilkerson and Jeffrey Paris. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002: 85-105; Marcuse. *From the New Left to the Next Left*, edited by John Bokina and Timothy J. Lukes. Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1994; and *Marcuse: Critical theory and the Promise of Utopia*, edited by R. Pippin, A. Feenberg, C. Weibel & Contributors. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1988.

12. David Jenemann's blurb on the back cover is also misleading: "No one has made the case that there is such a profound resonance between the Frankfurt School and the New York intellectual scene with the detail and depth that Thomas Wheatland applies to the topic. There really isn't another book in the same ballpark." In fact, the connections between the Horkheimer group and so-called New York intellectuals is only one of eight chapters in the book and although it presents more detail on relationships and affinities, it is not a game-breaker or new ballpark, and the previous histories by Jay and Wiggershaus contain many fewer strike outs and foul balls than in Wheatland's more erratic and problematic account.