

Show Us the Way to the Next Whiskey Bar

In 1930, Adorno wrote a little review of a new opera.¹ It was a work the Nazis branded as an embodiment of the 'Jewish-Bolshevik threat' and demanded be banned. And indeed, before the decade was out, that demand would be met: all public performances were prohibited and in 1938 the work was confined to a shadow existence as part of an exhibition of degenerate music. The opera was Brecht and Weill's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, whose premiere at the Neues Theater in Leipzig on 4 March 1930 that year was marked by Nazi brownshirts demonstrating outside, audience members trading punches, and a tumult in the third act so noisy that the conductor could scarcely hear the musicians.² Adorno, for his part, was intrigued by the work. 'Just as in Kafka's novels,' he wrote, 'the commonplace bourgeois world appears absurd . . . The present system, with its mores, rights and order, is exposed as anarchy; we ourselves live in Mahagonny, where everything is permitted save one thing: having no money.'

In those respects, *Mahagonny* was nothing if not topical: the opera was performed in Leipzig at a time when Germany was on the brink of anarchy, when the Weimar Republic had committed the ultimate capitalist crime of running out of cash. On Friday October 29 of the previous year, the financial markets in New York had collapsed, provoking a global economic meltdown that was felt most strongly in Germany. In spring 1929, the American-led Young Plan to allow Germany to pay its debt of 112 billion gold marks over fifty-nine years

seemed to offer a lifeline to an economy already ailing owing to the punitive First World War reparations demanded by the allied victors but after the Wall Street Crash the following autumn, the allied victors scrapped and American banks started recalling money and cancelling credit. Germany was economically bankrupt and thrown into political chaos, ruled by emergency presidential decree since coalition parties could not form a ruling coalition.

Only one group seemed able to capitalise on capitalism's crisis: the National Socialist Party, which increased its number of seats in the Reichstag from twelve to 207 in the general election of September 1930. Disastrously for the future of Germany, the two leading left-wing parties – the Social Democrat SPD and the Communist KPD – could not form an alliance to combat the rise of the Nazis. *The Impotence of the German Working Class*, published in 1932, Horkeimer argued that the schism between the two workers' parties was deepened because skilled employed workers voted SPD and unemployed workers KPD. The split in the proletariat seemed to confound Marx's thoughts about its growing unity.

There was even less likelihood of a successful proletarian revolution in Germany than there had been in 1919 – working-class and lower-middle-class Germans were increasingly drawn to the dictatorship promised by Adolf Hitler as an alternative to weak democratic government. In 1929 Horkeimer and Fromm launched a project to carry out empirical research aimed at identifying the conscious and unconscious attitudes of the German working class towards authoritarian figures. Though the study was never completed, this psychoanalytically conceived research concluded that German workers unconsciously desired their own domination.³ They were getting ready, not for socialist revolution, but for the Third Reich.

It was in this situation that Brecht and Weill staged their opera, set in a fictitious city in the American West presented as a modern Sodom and Gomorrah, destroyed by its worship of graft and fraud, whiskey, what it signified as a creative symbol, and Adorno himself wrote an uncompleted opera in the early 1930s called *The Treasure of Indian Joe*, drawing on Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

Mahagonny starts with three crooks on the run. When their lorry breaks down, they decide to establish Mahagonny – a city of pleasure, whoring, gambling and whiskey. One of its founders, Ladybird Begbick, a madam, sets out the city's business model:

Everywhere men must labour and sorrow
Only here it is fun.
For the deepest craving of man is
Not to suffer but to do as he pleases.

Forget the Marxist-Lawrentian notion of defining yourself through productive labour; forget the misery of the nine to five; indeed, forget production. Savour instead the pleasures of consumption. In Mahagonny, it wasn't so much I think therefore I am, still less I work therefore I am, but rather I consume therefore I am. Among the punters lured into town is Jimmy, a lumberjack, who believes he can do whatever he wants there – have sex with prostitutes, go on drinking binges and gamble. When he loses all his money on a boxing match wager and so cannot pay his bar tab, he is arrested and sentenced to death by electric chair. Being broke – a new experience that people from Oklahoma to Oldenburg were getting used to in the Great Depression that followed the Wall Street Crash – was unacceptable. Mahagonny descends into chaos as demonstrators parade Jimmy's corpse around town, with slogans displaying contradictory demands: 'For the natural order of things', 'For the natural disorder of things', 'For the unjust division of earthly goods', 'For the just division of earthly goods'. Brecht hoped this vision of anarchy would help catalyse socialist revolution. His hopes were dashed, at least in Germany, within two years. Instead, and much more in keeping with the vitalist heroes of his 1920s dramas such as *Baal*, a strong man, the authoritarian figure unconsciously desired by German workers, one with the violent temperament of Wagner's Siegfried and the body of Charlie Chaplin, would eliminate the contradictions of German society.

At the Leipzig premiere, the drama spilled from stage to auditorium, as the fourth wall in Brechtian theatre was broken, not for the last time. As brownshirts brawled with their opponents in the Neues

Theater, on stage there was a funeral procession with the chorus singing first 'Nothing can be done to help a dead man', and then the final dismal words of the opera: 'Nothing can be done to help the living'. Like the Weimar Republic (we realise with hindsight), Mahagonny was doomed.

'The city of Mahagonny is a representation of the social world in which we live, projected from the bird's-eye perspective of an already liberated society', wrote Adorno. 'Mahagonny does not present a classless society as a positive standard against which to compare the depraved present; instead, from time to time this society shimmers through just barely – as unclear as a movie projection over which another has been superimposed.'

The opera is important in the history of critical theory because it showed the world as the Frankfurt School saw it, in a high definition that brought the hell of the present into extreme focus. Violence, whose (mostly) unspoken threat is the foundation of capitalism and order, was omnipresent in *Mahagonny*. Everyone could be bought and sold and prostitution provided the model for human interaction, while, as Adorno sourly noted, 'whatever love may exist here can only burst forth from the smoking rubble of adolescent fantasies of sexual power'. It's hard not to read Adorno's review without thinking that we still live in Mahagonny today, no longer just a city but a global economy where in principle anything can be had for money and in practice everything is. 'The anarchy of commodity production which Marxism has analysed is projected as the anarchy of consumption, abbreviated to the point of a gross horror which could not be rendered by an economic analysis', he added. This shift in focus from production to consumption was to prove central in the Frankfurt School's recon-struction of Marxist theory for a new era of monopoly capitalism. In Mahagonny, the pleasure seekers are trapped on a wheel of Ixion which one desire leads to another in a degrading, neurotic repetition echoed in Brecht's lyrics:

Oh, show us the way to the next whiskey bar
Oh don't ask why!
Oh don't ask why

For we must find the next whiskey bar
For if we don't find the next whiskey bar,
I tell you we must die!
I tell you we must die.
I tell you we must die!
I tell you, I tell you, I tell you we must die!

And every commodity is substitutable for another – whiskey, dollars, little girls – the fulfilment of the logic of Marx's exchange principle. In the same year *Mahagonny* was premiered, Samuel Beckett published an essay about Proust in which he wrote: 'Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit'.⁴ It's as if in 1930 Brecht and Beckett were realising how wrong Rousseau was: it's not that man is born free but is everywhere in chains, as the philosopher claimed in *The Social Contract*; rather, man is born chained, remains chained and is everywhere in chains.

Adorno took *Mahagonny* to be an exemplar of what modernist art should be: Art shouldn't play footsie with capitalism, but assault it. Brecht certainly intended the work as an assault. 'One of its functions is to change society', he wrote in an essay accompanying the first performance. 'It brings the culinary principle under discussion.' By 'culinary' he meant that the opera of the day sated jaded bourgeois palates with narcotising entertainment. 'An opera is appreciated by its audience', Brecht wrote, 'precisely because opera is antiquated'.⁵ In noting this hunger for past musical forms as an escape from the modern, from the rationalised, administered, unheroic, functional present, Brecht and Adorno were singing from the same hymn sheet. In his musicological writings of the 1930s for the Institute's journal, Brecht attacked classical music audiences for seeking music that detached them from real social conditions and offered a phoney reconciliation between their cultural education and their property. But as Adorno had argued in his post-doctoral thesis *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, written in the early 1930s, the quest for such inwardness was chimerical, though comprehensible as a reaction among the rich and privileged to an intolerable Neue Sachlichkeit world of machines and functional humans.

In T. S. Eliot's 1915 poem *A Portrait of a Lady*, the lady, whom the callous narrator seeks to reveal in her false inwardness, argues the place in the drawing room rather than the concert hall, so fragile is this precious commodity.⁶ Classical concertgoers, Adorno argued, sought that 'soul' in the concert hall, especially in the figure of the conductor whose imperious gestures were taken as a performance of that soul but really, in their absence of genuine spontaneity, were the musical equivalent of the authoritarian dictator. It's as though, for Adorno, the conductor on the early 1930s concert podium was a prototype for the Führer at the Nuremberg rallies later in the decade.

Marcuse, who also thought about the great soul of twentieth-century culture, distinguished in his essay 'The Affirmative Character of Culture' between the universal man of the Renaissance who sought happiness in worldly action, questing for power and sensuality, and the spiritualised personality of bourgeois culture.⁷ The latter, Marcuse argued, sought higher experience in withdrawing from the world into a more refined spiritual milieu of rarified aesthetic experience. It was as if bourgeois culture had kept the nineteenth-century 'great soul' on life support into the twentieth century, since its continued deployment helped obscure society's antagonisms and contradictions. The great soul, perfumed handkerchief to its nose to repel the stench of the poor, oblivious to the racket of machines and Nazi jackboots, transported itself with Chopin.

But not for long. Monopoly capitalism and the fascist state could not tolerate this autonomous sphere of life that represented a potential threat to the existing order, so they did to rarefied bourgeois culture what they did to the family – invaded it, obliterated its autonomy and co-opted any lingering power it had to uphold the current social order. Such, Marcuse argued, was the 'total mobilisation' through which the individual must be, in all areas of his existence, submitted to the discipline of the authoritarian state.⁸

Adorno was attracted to *Mahagonny* because it displayed society's contradictions. Art that aspired to cheerful harmony or resurrective the great soul of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture was delusive entertainment that failed to do what art should do: expose the lie at

the heart of capitalism, namely that this economic system could deliver freedom and happiness. In 'The Social Situation of Music', an essay he wrote for the Institute's journal in 1932, Adorno opposed two contemporary composers, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, taking them as opposite poles of what music should and shouldn't be under monopoly capitalism.⁹ His bracing notion was that music, purportedly the most abstract and therefore the least socially grounded, most autonomous art form, actually contained social contradictions in its own structure. Schoenberg, in whose second Vienna school's ethos Adorno had been trained while working with the great composer's disciple Alban Berg in the mid 1920s, had evolved during the early years of the twentieth century. He moved from being a composer of expressionist music to one who wrote music that eschewed harmonic resolutions, still less offered hummable tunes, but rather involved a musical twelve-tone system, whereby the repetition of any note in a twelve-tone row was prohibited until all of them had been sounded. The harmonic resolution of, say, Schoenberg's 1899 string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night), was unthinkable for a composer who, in the early 1930s, was so bewitched by the aesthetic purity and logic of his twelve-tone method that for the title of his uncompleted operatic masterpiece *Moses und Aron* of 1932 he dropped one of the As from Aaron's name so that it would have twelve rather than thirteen letters.

Stravinsky, for his part, in the ten years between the premiere of one of the founding texts of musical modernism, *Le Sacre Du Printemps*, to the premiere of his opera *Pulchella*, had mutated from musical revolutionary to conservative revivalist of old forms. In the 1920s Stravinsky disinterred old musical forms – the concerto grosso, the fugue, the symphony – for a new era. Just as Brecht excoriated opera as culinary – a mouthwatering diversion from the realities of modern life – so Adorno accused Stravinsky of composing music that offered false reconciliations, reemploying old forms that served to satisfy his audience's degraded need for escape into a chimerical past. He also detected a connection between Stravinsky's neo-classicism and fascism: the irrationality of the composer's system, Adorno argued, was of a piece with the arbitrary control of a Führer. He was stretching the point, perhaps, but then Adorno was apt to see Nazism

In nearly everything he disliked – understandable given what it was about to do to him, his colleagues and his family.

At the time, Adorno took Schoenberg and his family would be compelled to flee Europe with the rise of Hitler, and who all that was progressive in music. Schoenberg's music was, he noted with approval, not seduction by harmony and melody but the conglomeration of broken shards. But there was, he realised later, a game of chess, detached Schoenberg from the social situation for which it provided a fitting soundtrack. Worse, Schoenberg's twelve-revolutionary form of composition became the only game in town for avant-garde composers and therefore, paradoxically, conservative. A system that had seemed to promise a breakout from bourgeois music was reified in its turn.

How did Weill's music for *Mahagony* map on to this musical taxonomy? Weill once said he would be happy if every taxi driver could whistle his melodies. One might have thought Adorno would have damned Weill's music as part of the culture industry that helped capitalism run more smoothly, but in fact he enjoyed Weill's music for *Mahagony*. He saw in it what Benjamin loved in surrealist art, which often involved creating montages of historical detritus and thereby producing potentially liberating 'constellations'. Adorno called *Mahagony* the first surrealist opera. 'This music,' he wrote of the score, 'pieced together from triads and off notes with the good beat of old music hall songs which we hardly recognise anymore but are nonetheless remembered as an heirloom, is hammered and glued together with the fetid mucklage of a soggy potpourri of operas. This music, made up of the debris of past music, is completely contemporary.'

Brecht's libretto, too, sought to make it clear that the bourgeois world was absurd and anarchic. 'In order to represent this convincingly,' wrote Adorno of the dramatisation of the bourgeois world of absurd and anarchic, 'it is necessary to transcend the closed world of bourgeois consciousness which considers bourgeois social reality to

be immutable. Outside of this framework, however, there is no position to take – at least for the German consciousness, there is no site which is non-capitalist.' This was to become one great theme of critical theory: there is no outside, not in today's utterly rationalised, globally reified, commodity-fetishing world. When Marx wrote *Capital* in the mid nineteenth century, the more primitive capitalist system he was diagnosing made commodity fetishism merely episodic; now it was everywhere, poisoning everything. 'paradoxically, therefore,' Adorno added, 'transcendence must take place within the framework of that which is.' Brecht's assault on capitalist society in *Mahagony* was then paradoxically both from within and from without at the same time, both immanent and transcendent.

In this, it bore similarities to how Adorno conceived of the role of a serious music critic. In his 1929 essay 'Motifs', he wrote that in order for criticism not to collapse into a middlebrow alliance between elitism and smug Olympian expertise, it is 'essential for the critic to extend his immanent listening as far as possible, while at the same time approaching music radically from the outside. To think about twelve-note technique at the same time as of that childhood experience of *Madama Butterfly* on the gramophone – that is the task of every serious attempt to understand music today.'¹⁰ And what Adorno counselled for music criticism was true too of the critical theory that was being born in Frankfurt as Brecht and Weill's opera was being attacked by Nazis: it was to be practised by those who realised that there was no non-capitalist perspective from which to critique capitalism and that its practitioners were implicated in what they critiqued.

Brecht and Weill's opera, similarly, was an inside job, drawing attention to the art form's self-contradictory nature. 'The opera *Mahagony* pays tribute to the senselessness of the operatic form,' wrote Brecht. In this, its techniques parallel those deployed by the Frankfurt School during the 1930s as it developed critical theory in response to a clutch of -isms. Horkheimer would lump together under the heading of traditional theory – positivism, vulgar Marxism, among others. For Horkheimer each of these disciplines was

insufficiently dialectical, and their followers made the error of trying to observe and analyse an objective world of facts. There was no real absurdity Brecht happily embraced in writing *Mohngomy*, 'it all comes to the opera, but it has started (out of absent-mindedness or bad conscience) to saw it through.'

You can almost hear Brecht cackling manically as the branch on which he's sitting plummets to the ground; but there was nothing absent-minded about where he had decided to place his bottom. He wanted musicians, singers and audience to realise that they were part of the culture industry, that the first two groups were pandering to prevailing economic interests and deluding themselves by thinking they were making art that floated free, unswayed by capitalist dictates; they were supplying to the latter group, at a price, opera which obeyed laws of commodity fetishism. He even, incredibly, attacked his musical partner Kurt Weill for posturing as an avant-garde composer who naively thought he was above being in thrall to economic interests. Through attacking the established dramatic form of theatre, Brecht hoped to transform its seated spectators into observers hungering for political and social engagement.

Adorno, though he never became close to Brecht, was a kindred spirit, an Agent Orange-style critic scorching all and sundry. Sometimes even himself. But the philosopher never shared the dramatic artist's nightmarish hopes. Brecht hoped that there would be an abstrusum between the grandeur of the opera house and the harsh message. Instead, it became another culinary treat in the operatic repertoire, aberrantly decoded by its audiences and then happily consumed like whiskey. Thus when *Mohngomy* was staged in Covent Garden in 2015, the British novelist Will Self wrote:

This museum piece – a sort of diorama of failed utopianism – has nothing to teach us. We can enjoy the busyness of Weill's through-composed score; we can thrill to the unvarnished portrayal of human cupidity; we can admire the repurposing of Brecht's epic theatre as

entertainment. But to expect us to be moved to a critical engagement with the fundamental terms of our social being would be – frankly and diplomatically – a bit much.¹¹

SOMETHING SIMILAR may be said of the Institute for Social Research as it evolved in the 1930s. It was Brechtian in its inverse relationship between scabrous critique and changing that which it critiqued. Like Brecht's theatre, critical theory arguably postured otherwise but became another fetishised commodity – the philosopher's more exciting by its brush with fascism, a more or less harmless diversion for the chattering classes. Lukács, in his damning 1962 critique of the German intelligentsia in general and the Frankfurt School in particular, suggested that, like opera-goers in the posh seats watching *Mohngomy*, thinkers like Adorno had taken up comfortable residence in the Grand Hotel Abyss.¹² Brecht even had a name for the residents of the Hotel. He called them Tuis (an acronym deriving from a scrambling of the German word for intellectual, i.e. Tellekt-Vai-In). The Tuis were partisan but not members of a party, independent of official institutions yet experienced in surviving within institutions. Such Tuis, among whom Brecht included the Frankfurt School, could have helped overthrow capitalism by instructing the masses in Marxist doctrine. Instead, by failing to do so they effectively contributed to the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler. For Brecht, the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler affected to Frankfurt School were traitors to the revolution they regarded spouse.¹³ Adorno and Horkheimer returned the abuse: they regarded Brecht as a petit-bourgeois poseur and apologist for Stalinism. One might argue there was something of the Tui about Brecht too: his theatre, like the Frankfurt School's writings, thrived creatively during the escalation of capitalism's contradictions; instead of destroying the bourgeois art form of opera, he extended its lifespan.

While Brecht during the 1930s brought together material for a Tui novel that he never completed but which was conceived as a satire on intellectuals in the German Empire and Weimar Republic, it was during his Californian exile that he adopted the term Tuisimus as his name for the Frankfurt School. By then, he regarded the Frankfurt

scholars as something worse than traitors to the revolution. They had become, he charged, prostitutes in their quest for foundation. They had during their American exile, selling their skills and opinions as commodities in order to support the dominant ideology of oppressive US society.

6

The Power of Negative Thinking

The year after *Mahagonny's* premiere, Max Horkheimer became director of the Institute for Social Research. Carl Grünberg had retired after suffering a stroke in January 1928 to be replaced by Friedrich Pollock. In 1931, Horkheimer replaced his friend, Pollock, who would go on to do much of the largely unsung, administrative work necessary to safeguard the finances and organisation of the Institute in its exile years. It was Pollock, for instance, who had used used his contacts in the International Labour Organisation to establish a branch of the Institute in Geneva, to which he and Horkheimer moved after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933.

Horkheimer changed the direction of the Institute radically. No longer would it be, as it had been under Grünberg, essentially a Marxist research institute studying the history of socialism and the workers' movement, still less one that took economics to be the key determinant in the fate of capitalism. To account for the failure of revolution in Germany and for the rise of fascism, it was necessary to reconfigure Marxism. 'When Marx undertook his critique of the capitalist mode of production', wrote Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production',

this mode was in its infancy. He went back to the basic conditions underlying capitalistic production and through his presentation showed what could be expected of capitalism in the future. The result was that one could expect it not only to exploit the proletariat with

increasing intensity but ultimately to create conditions which would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself!

But capitalism was no longer in self-destruct mode: the rest of Benjamin's essay was about a capitalist mode of production no longer in its infancy, but one that dominated the whole of society and where one key front in the struggle between capitalism and socialism was art and culture.

Capitalism had become not just a mode of production but a system that, through mass culture and communication, technology and various forms of social control, masked the intensity of the exploitation of the proletariat. In 1931, capitalism seemed able to defer its abolition, perhaps even indefinitely. In such circumstances, Horkheimer argued, the Institute must consider not only the economic basis of society but its superstructure. It must develop a critique of the ideological control mechanisms that held capitalism in place. While Lukács, in his 1922 *History and Class Consciousness*, had insisted on the importance of proletarian consciousness for revolution, it seemed to Horkheimer that the chasm Lukács had identified between ascribed and actual consciousness could not be closed – at least not by the proletariat. 'The members of the Frankfurt School grew to see themselves as the only revolutionary subject', wrote Thomas Wheatland, 'because only they had achieved a state of self-conscious reflection that transcended the reified world of the totally administered society.'² It was as if the proletariat had been found wanting and so had to be replaced as revolutionary agent by critical theorists.

Adorno, at least, appreciated the paradox of being an ideology critic while defining ideology as socially necessary false consciousness. He knew that the Frankfurt School, like Brecht, was sitting on the bough even as they sawed through it. In *Minima Moralia*, he wrote of the critical theorist's paradox:

By allowing themselves to still think at all vis-à-vis the naked reproduction of existence, they behave as the privileged: by leaving things in thought, they declare the nullity of their privilege... There is no exit from the entanglement. The only responsible option is to deny oneself

the ideological misuse of one's own existence, and as for the rest, to behave in private as modestly, inconspicuously and unpretentiously as required, not for reasons of good upbringing, but because of the shame that when one is in hell, there is still air to breathe.³

Under Horkheimer and Adorno, the Frankfurt School turned its attention to critical theory calibrated to understand the hell in which they lived. To do so, they had to move beyond the kind of Marxist theory that fetishised economics. In his inaugural lecture, 'The Present Position of Social Philosophy and the Tasks Facing an Institute for Social Research', Horkheimer said that the Institute must address the 'question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychological development of individuals and challenges in the realm of culture in the narrower sense (to which belong not only the so-called intellectual elements such as science, art and religion, but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, leisure activities, lifestyle, etc.)'. Under Horkheimer, the Institute went interdisciplinary. It would, he said, 'organise research projects stimulated by philosophical problems, in which philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians and psychologists were brought together in permanent collaboration'.⁴

The interdisciplinary trend was demonstrated by the new intellectuals who arrived at the Institute: Leo Löwenthal arrived as a literary scholar, Erich Fromm as an analytical social psychologist, Herbert Marcuse was hired as a political philosopher, and Theodor Adorno as a lecturer and writer on philosophy and music. Those thinkers on the fringes of the school – Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer and Wilhelm Reich – encouraged the Institute to do things it would never have done under Grünberg's leadership, such as to consider, for instance, not just the economic and political basis of fascism, but its psychopathology and its aestheticisation of politics.

The Frankfurt School therefore decided to remove the white gloves in which Marxist economist Henryk Grossman delivered his lectures and get its hands dirty. It would study horoscopes, movies, jazz, sexual repression, sadomasochism, the disgusting manifestations of unconscious sexual impulses, take critical notes at the trough of mass culture,

and explore the shabby metaphysical foundations in the basement of rival philosophies. Horkheimer's vision in his inaugural lecture was that philosophy should open up a synoptic, critical view of human life. Critical theory, Martin Jay argues, placed emphasis on the totality of dialectical mediations which had to be grasped in the totality of analysing society.

Karl Korsch argued in *Marxism and History* that Marx's successors had betrayed his vision. 'Later Marxists', wrote Korsch,

came to regard scientific socialism more and more as a set of purely scientific observations, without any immediate connection to the political or other practices of class struggle A unified general theory of social revolution was changed into criticisms of the bourgeois economic order, of the bourgeois state, of the bourgeois state of education, of bourgeois religion, art, science and culture.⁵

Marxism, that is to say, had become subject to the prevailing division of labour and that undermined its critical power. In order to recover that critical power, the Frankfurt School needed to restore the totality of Marxist vision and become multidisciplinary. In doing so incidentally, it served as a standing rebuke to the evolution of universities in the twentieth century. Universities were becoming latter-day towers of Babel, divided increasingly into specialist faculties populated by experts scarcely even speaking the same language.

Almost instantly, however, in a presentation of the tensions that were to come in the Frankfurt School, Adorno went off message. A couple of weeks after Horkheimer's inaugural address, he argued in his first lecture as Privatdozent that this commitment to interdisciplinarity was a waste of time. Although he was as sceptical as his director about the revolutionary potential of the workers' movement in Germany, Adorno thought it futile to strive towards the goal of what Horkheimer called 'a theory of the whole' or the 'totality of the real', given that the social world had collapsed in ruins. Adorno's inaugural lecture thus sounded like a raspberry to his boss's vision of the Institute's research programme.

But what was Adorno's alternative vision? Although to come to a diagnosis of what had gone wrong in society required one to 'construct keys to unlock reality', he didn't accept that philosophy 'is capable', as Horkheimer put it, 'of giving particular studies animating impulses'. Instead, Adorno thought philosophy risked becoming merely purely speculative unless individual disciplines (including presumably philosophy) were in what he called 'dialectical communication'. He argued that thought alone would not enable one to grasp the whole of reality; indeed, he argued that reality itself was an enigma. But it's not clear how one is to understand an enigma. Adorno developed a dialectical method of knowledge that many in his audience found obscure. He argued that 'the function of riddle solving . . . is to illuminate the puzzle in a flash'. Here one thinks of Proust at the start of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, tasting the madeleine and in so doing bringing his whole childhood to life. Adorno, similarly, was envisaging an interpretative mind with an exact imagination because, as his biographer puts it, 'the questions arising in response to the riddles are gradually surrounded by possible answers that propose tentative solutions'. Adorno's theory of knowledge involved models of philosophical interpretations being brought into changing constellations whose truth content emerges in a flash, illuminating what had previously been thought. The truth emerges in evanescent flashes. Baffling, perhaps, but it was a theory of knowledge that set Adorno alongside Benjamin and Proust, and a model to which he would remain faithful.⁶

On the train home after Adorno's lecture, Horkheimer was asked what he thought of what he'd heard. 'His reaction to Adorno's views was: what's the point?' reported Institute assistant Willy Strzelwicz.⁷ Horkheimer carried on regardless. In taking this multidisciplinary turn, he was self-consciously moving his Institute back to the Hegelian roots of Marxism, and away from the kind of scientific Marxism that took proletarian revolution to be inevitable according to iron laws of historical progress. In doing so, he was inspired by reading Marx's recently released *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which had served to confirm what Lukács had written in 1922: yes, worker alienation could produce a revolutionary sense of class consciousness, but it could also produce worker disenchantment and resignation.

This new direction also gave the Frankfurt School the intellectual armoury to attack positivism, which Horkheimer took to be one of the intellectual evils of the age. The true materialism of Marx, he argued, was dialectical, which meant there was an ongoing interaction between subject and object. Everywhere he looked, Horkheimer saw dialectical processes in action. Instead of seeing a world of facts which it was the job of social theory to mirror (this is what he called the positivist illusion), he saw interplay. For instance, while some vulgar Marxists reductively derived superstructural phenomena such as culture and politics from the economic basis of society, Horkheimer argued for the crucial importance of mediation to any social theory that sought the transformation of society. In this he was following Lukács, who wrote: 'Thus the category of mediation is a lever with which to overcome the mere immediacy of the social world.' For Lukács the objects of the empirical world were to be understood in Hegelian terms as the objects of a totality, i.e. 'as the objects of a total historical situation caught up in the process of historical change.' Politics and culture were not simply expressions of class interests or phenomena that could be read off from the socio-economic basis of a society. Rather, they were in multidimensional relations to the material substructure of society, reflecting and contradicting class interests, expressing and contracting that substructure. Think of Balzac: Engels praised this political reactionary of a novelist precisely because his novels portrayed the concrete reality of nineteenth-century France in all its contradictions. His novels didn't just express the author's class interests; indeed, one thing that made them valuable to the left is that they described how those interests were in self-contradiction.

But what did the term dialectic mean to the Frankfurt School? To understand this, we need to go back to Hegel. Hegel's classic example of the dialectical process in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is the relationship between master and slave. The master seems to have everything, the slave nothing; but the master does lack something - the fulfilment of his need for acknowledgment. The acknowledgment of the slave is not enough since the slave is merely a thing to the master, not an independent consciousness at all. Nor does the slave receive acknowledgment from the master because the former is a

thing to the latter. But here's the twist. The slave works, while the master receives the temporary pleasures of consumption. But in working, the slave shapes and fashions material objects and in the process becomes aware of his own consciousness, since he sees it as something objective, namely, as the fruit of his labours.

Clearly, this connects with the Marxist notion of man as essentially a producer, one who defines himself or rises to self-consciousness, even personal fulfilment, through meaningful work. For the slave, Hegel thought, labour, even at the direction of a slave master, makes him realise he has a mind of his own and means that the situation is not stable: its tensions generate a dialectical movement that leads to a higher synthesis. That synthesis leads to another dialectical tension, to another synthesis, and so on, at least in Hegel's conception of history. Forty years after Hegel set out this dialectical process, Marx argued that if the object produced through labour is owned by another (be that other a slave-owner or a capitalist), the worker has lost his own objectified essence. Such is alienated labour.

Hegel took history to be an unfolding of such dialectical processes towards the self-knowledge of what he called the Absolute Spirit. Dispensing with Hegel's mysticism and progressive developmental logic, Horkheimer took up the Hegelian dialectic and pitted it against what he considered to be the baleful, conservative influence of positivism. It was to be an abiding intellectual commitment of the Frankfurt School. Thirty years later, Marcuse would write in the 1960 Preface to his *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*:

Dialectic thought... becomes negative in itself. Its function is to break down the self-assurance and self-contentment, to undermine the sinister confidence in the power and language of facts, to demonstrate that unfreedom is so much at the core of things that the development of their internal contradictions leads necessarily to qualitative change: the explosion and catastrophe of the established state of affairs.⁹

In his inaugural lecture, Horkheimer opposed positivism because it sees only the particular, in the realm of society it sees only the individual and the relations between individuals; for positivism, everything

is exhausted in mere facts;¹⁰ Positivism, an approach to social theory devised in the nineteenth century by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, held that society, like the physical world, operates according to laws. In philosophy, logical positivism holds that all we can reasonably claim to know is based on reports of sensory experience, along with logical and mathematical operations. Propositions not based on such reports or operations are metaphysical and hence nonsense, and even aesthetic or moral judgements, rightly understood, are not genuine judgements but more or less sophisticated grunts of approval or disapproval.

Such a philosophy was developed almost contemporaneously with the Frankfurt School. The so-called Vienna Circle of logical positivism, founded by Moritz Schlick in 1922, consisted of a group of philosophers and scientists who met until 1936 at the University of Vienna. Some former members of the Circle went into exile from Austria around the time of the Nazi Anschluss of 1938, and the Circle went on to greatly influence philosophy departments in Britain and the United States, in part because their intellectual trajectory (they took most of Hegel to be metaphysical and therefore nonsensical) was more amenable to the Anglophone universities.

Horkheimer, for his part, argued that behind positivist social theory's ostensible focus on neutral facts, behind the law's apparent working through of formal procedures, beyond the apparently neutral operations of formal logic, there was another story: while positivists had once been progressive they now upheld the hellish status quo, for instance, Kant's founding of his ethical system on the categorical imperative (the principle that one should 'Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law'), at the birth of the Enlightenment, had developed a disinterested, individualist morality that challenged the ancient *régime's* *droit de seigneur*. Now though, Kantian ethics served to uphold the status quo by means of making bourgeois morality seem not just natural but eternal. Similarly, the German *Rechtsstaat* or rule of law was premised on judicial universality without relating the law's political origins in the defence of private property, and it airbrushed its current function as upholder of the existing capitalist system and

structures of ownership. This wide-ranging attack on positivism would become a lifelong preoccupation for Horkheimer and his colleagues, culminating in the Positivism Dispute that embroiled the Frankfurt School in the the 1960s.

Dialectical thinking, by contrast, dynamited this order. Hegel offered a vision of historical change consisting of dialectical movement, an endlessly shifting interplay of forces and constellations; the positivists – at least those whom Horkheimer characterised thus – suspended facts in aspic and falsely eternalised the status quo. In reality there was, for the Frankfurt School, no end to the eternal process of becoming, no cessation to the wheel of Ixion – Horkheimer had read enough Schopenhauer to realise that metaphysical truth had read enough Schopenhauer to realise that metaphysical truth. But the other impulse of positivism was, the Frankfurt School crucially believed, political: in reducing the world to hypostatized facts, positivism served to conceal an authoritarian, dominating social order. In his 1937 essay 'The Latest Attack on Metaphysics', Horkheimer argued that logical positivism 'holds only to what is, to the guarantee of facts' and thereby serves as a handmaiden to capitalism, since it tries to insulate the individual sciences from broader interpretation.¹¹ This had long been Horkheimer's contention: as early as his 1930 thesis *The Origins of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History*, he had connected the Renaissance view of science and technology to social and political domination.¹²

Throughout the 1930s Horkheimer honed this perspective, formulating it most clearly in his 1937 essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory'.¹³ By traditional, Horkheimer meant those -isms the Frankfurt School disdained – positivism, behaviourism, empiricism and pragmatism. He even gave the traditional theorist a derisive name, the Savant, designating one who does not recognise that the economic (and thus currently capitalist) structure of society shapes scientific work. He attacked this figure of the Savant for their presumptuousness in imagining they had an objective stance before a world of facts: 'bringing hypotheses to bear on facts is an activity that goes on, ultimately, not in the savant's head but in industry,' he wrote. 'The Savant fails to realise that he or she is not a free-floating intellectual but a lackey of capitalism, complex, albeit often unwittingly, in the

...g caused by its exploitative nature. Against traditional theory, Horkheimer pitted critical theory: the latter, he thought, understood final or complete in itself. The Cartesian cogito (I think therefore I am) was an exemplar, in

Horkheimer, of traditional theory's missteps: it seemed fact-based, sensible, self-evident, but was anything but since it smuggled in all kinds of philosophical assumptions. It assumed, for instance, that there is something that can be called 'I' and that it endures in space and time. Worse, Descartes' method took the subject out of any kind of social determination, rendering it a passive observer of reality, rather than one involved (ideally dialectically) in reality's construction. The return to Hegel and the dialectical method involved, for the Frankfurt School, an escape from the intellectual shackles of a scientific Marxism of the kind that one of its number, Henryk Grossman, endorsed but which other members, Horkheimer especially, thought inadequate to the modern era. Appropriating Hegel and the early Hegelian Marx allowed them to think about alienation, consciousness, reification and how those factors thwarted revolution in late capitalist society. Doing so also pushed them to revive Hegel's emphasis on reason. German idealists had distinguished between *Vernunft* (critical reason) and *Verstand* (instrumental reason), and the suggestion in both Kant and Hegel is that *Vernunft* goes beyond mere appearances to the reality beneath. *Vernunft* penetrates to the dialectical relations beneath, while *Verstand*, by contrast, involves structuring the phenomenal world according to common sense. *Vernunft* is concerned with ends, *Verstand* merely with means. For the Frankfurt School's most Hegelian devotee, Herbert Marcuse, *Verstand* had become the tool of capitalism, *Vernunft* the means by which we challenge it.¹⁴

IN THIS HEGELIAN turn taken by the Frankfurt School, the appointment of Marcuse was key. It was Marcuse who realised and theorised even before Adorno, the power of negative thinking. He contrasted such negative thinking, not just with positivism, but with a tradition of empiricist thought which he took to dominate the English-speaking

world in which the Frankfurt School sought refuge after fleeing the Nazis. Empiricism naively accepted things as they are, bent the knee to the existing order of facts and values. Marcuse's Hegelian notion was that critical reason realises the essence of entities. 'Essence' here is a technical philosophical term by which Marcuse meant the fully realised potentiality of an entity. If a society, for instance, lacked the freedom, material well-being and justice that would allow it to fulfil its potential, then the job of the critical theorist, applying his or her critical reason, was to condemn that society as a 'bad form of reality, a realm of limitation and bondage.'¹⁵ Empiricism as a philosophical programme was unable to do this.

What is a little odd is that the Hegelian idealism that Marcuse took to be critical and revolutionary was originally the philosophy of a thinker who was an apologist for the status quo in Prussia. Meanwhile, it was the leading lights of empiricism who were in some respects social radicals. John Locke, for instance, contested the divine right of kings, while David Hume's sceptical assessment of religious faith involved anything but accepting the existing social order. Intriguing too was the fact that empiricism thrived in Britain and America, the very countries where so many German exiles, such as Marcuse, sought refuge from Nazism. This fact made Marcuse's attempt, in *Reason and Revolution*, to rescue Hegel from his unfair reputation in those countries as the progenitor of fascism, to put it mildly, interesting reading.

Marcuse was an expert in Hegel who contributed to the German idealist philosopher's renaissance in Europe during the thirties - his post-doctoral thesis *Hegel's Ontology and Theory of Historicity* was published in 1932. Equally importantly, he published one of the first studies of Marx's rediscovered *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* which, as we have seen, reclaimed from obscurity a Hegelian early Marx for whom alienation, commodity fetishism and reification are important and the necessary collapse of capitalism is not yet proposed according to scientific laws. Marcuse came to the Institute, in part, because he knew that his job prospects were otherwise limited. Because of the political situation, I desperately wanted to join the Institute. At the end of 1932, it was perfectly clear that I would never

be able to qualify for a professorship under the Nazi regime.¹⁶ By the time he started work for the Institute, they had relocated to Geneva in order to elude the Nazi threat to their work and lives.

Marcuse had spent the 1920s studying with Heidegger and was profoundly influenced by his teacher's critique of western philosophy and his attempt to reconfigure it in a world in which technological rationality was taking over everyday life, stripping individuals of freedom. But to develop a critique of this totally administered society he saw arising everywhere, Marcuse turned from Heidegger to Hegel. Heidegger, in any case became a member of the Nazi party in 1933, and so was ill-suited to serve as an intellectual mentor to a socialist thinker like Marcuse. Hegel was more promising. Marcuse took him not to be a conservative philosopher, but rather one who developed a critique of irrational forms of social life. Following Hegel, he took his intellectual role to involve, as Douglas Kellner put it, positing 'norms of criticism, based on rational potentials for human happiness and freedom, which are used to negate existing states of affairs that oppress individuals and restrict human freedom and well-being'.¹⁷ But what happens, Marcuse worried in a 1937 essay 'Philosophy and Critical Theory', 'if the development outlined by the theory does not occur? What if the forces that were to bring about the transformation are suppressed and appear to be defeated?'¹⁸ Very reasonable questions, given that the Frankfurt School was in that year exiled to the other side of the world, the forces of Nazism seemed unstoppable, and Soviet Marxism was in the process of degenerating into Stalinist show trials and gulags. Perhaps surprisingly, Marcuse did not retreat into pessimism.

DURING THE 1930s, though, some of Marcuse's Frankfurt School colleagues lost faith in the power of critical thinking to transform society. Horkheimer, in particular, moved from hope to despair, and one point early in the decade he wrote, 'it is the task of the critical theoretician to reduce the tension between his own insight and oppressed humanity in whose service he thinks'.¹⁹ The problem was that he couldn't reduce that tension, and so couldn't think in such a way as to serve oppressed humanity. By 1937, Horkheimer had come

to the despairing thought that the 'commodity economy' might usher in a period of progress until, 'after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism'.²⁰

What the worries of Horkheimer and Marcuse brought into question was the point of intellectuals like those of the Frankfurt School at a time when socialist revolution had stalled and fascism was on the march. In his *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim, a sociologist working at the University of Frankfurt but not a member of the Institute for Social Research, put forward the notion of the 'free-floating intellectual', arguing that a socially unattached intelligentsia was suited to providing a leadership role. His intellectual was the 'watchman in what otherwise would be a pitch-black night, aloof from the practical concerns of society and so capable of access to a broader perspective on life'.²¹ Brecht and Benjamin opposed Mannheim's vision, arguing that material interests decisively shaped the intelligentsia all the way down the line, not just in what, say, a social scientist chose to research but also in how they researched it. The intelligentsia was either propping up capitalism or detonating its foundations.

There was no neutral observer's position on this battlefield. Earlier Marxists had already effectively exploded the idea that intellectuals were in a class of their own. In the 1920s, the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci, for instance, distinguished between traditional intellectuals who tend to conceive of themselves as an autonomous group very much in the manner of Mannheim's free-floating intellectuals, and organic intellectuals who are defined by their rootedness in a particular social group, giving them experiences which enable them to express the group's collective will and fight for its interests. Henryk Grossman, when he was fighting on the streets for the Jewish Social Democratic Party of Galicia, might well be taken as an exemplar of a Gramscian organic intellectual; it would be harder to find anyone else among the leading lights of the Frankfurt School who might be so described.

Mannheim was a Jew who in 1933 was ousted from his professorship and fled to Britain, where he was appointed as a sociology lecturer at the London School of Economics. Like his fellow Jewish

intellectuals at the Institute for Social Research, Mannheim was blown away by a storm, like them hurled into exile. 'The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed,' wrote Walter Benjamin in his 'Theses in the Philosophy of History' which he completed in the spring of 1940. 'But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that he can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.'²²

Citing Benjamin's famous words here may seem strange: Mannheim was a sociologist of knowledge not an angel of history, and the storm Benjamin writes about was not merely the Third Reich. Moreover, Mannheim was temperamentally different from Benjamin's angel: he turned round and dared to look into the future, and imagined that it would contain a utopia. The power to change present conditions by means of imagining utopias was for him the driving force of history and essential for the well-being of society.

This, in a sense, was not very Jewish. Marxism, a political philosophy devised by a Jew, is notoriously bad at imagining the communist future for which the proletariat is ostensibly striving. Perhaps that is a failure in imagination, if that's what it is, has ancient origins. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future, wrote Benjamin a few pages on from his description of the angel. 'The Jews and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment.' Benjamin's Marxism lent a new twist to the traditional Jewish rituals of mourning and the remembrance of ancestral suffering. That was not all his Marxism amounted to, though. 'This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned from homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the site of a gate through which the Messias might enter.'

For Mannheim, the task of the intellectual was to project into the homogeneous, empty time an inspiring hope, to imagine utopia and thereby take a step towards its realisation. The Frankfurt School, in sharp contrast, disdained that role and, during the 1930s and 1940s, turned away from any idea it may have earlier had about transforming

society. Horkheimer and Adorno devoted themselves increasingly to the philosophical and cultural critique of western civilisation (which would express itself in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) rather than imagining social transformation. Even Marcuse – when he wrote *One Dimensional Man*, the critique of advanced industrial society that would make him the darling of the New Left in the 1960s – drew back from imagining utopia. 'The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative.' But pessimism isn't the same thing as hopelessness. The last words of *One Dimensional Man* are a quotation from Walter Benjamin: 'It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us.'²³

THE OTHER key figure in the development of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s was Erich Fromm, a young psychoanalyst who had trained as a sociologist. Horkheimer appointed Fromm in part because he was attracted to his unified social theory which blended Freud's account of psychosexual development and Marx's insistence that economic and technological developments shaped the individual. 'Typical in this respect is Fromm's 1930 essay 'The Dogma of Christ', which challenged the account of Theodore Reik, one of his teachers at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, who had produced a straightforward Freudian account whereby the dogma of the crucified Jesus was rooted in Oedipal hatred for the father.

In contrast, Fromm argued that this Oedipal conflict was also linked to the underlying economic situation: the lower classes turned Jesus into a revolutionary who could bring them justice. But then, Fromm noted, the counter-revolution in Christianity began – the rich and educated look over the Christian church, deferred the Day of Judgment almost indefinitely, and insisted that Christ's sacrifice on the cross, because it had already taken place, meant that the social transformation for which the downtrodden earlier Christian believers yearned was unnecessary. Fromm wrote: 'The change in the economic situation and in the social composition of the Christian community altered the psychic attitude of the believers.'²⁴ The downtrodden lost hope in the possibility of the social change they hoped Christ the

Messiah would bring them. Instead, they turned their emotional aggression against themselves.

Fromm, whom Horkheimer promoted to a tenured post soon after the publication of this paper, went on to write other articles in which Marx and Freud in the early 1930s. In two papers on the criminal justice system, he argued that the state presented itself as a father and therefore ruled through the fear of paternal punishment; he also contended that it had a class bias and that, by focusing on crime and punishment rather than tackling the oppressive social conditions that led some to commit crime, criminals became the scapegoats for society's unfairness and economic inequality. The image of the punishing father was now projected into the authority of the state. Fromm even contended that the criminal justice system did not reduce the crime rate; rather, its function was to intensify oppression and crush opposition. These thoughts are echoed in our time by the American activist and professor Angela Davis, a one-time socialist of Marcuse. What she and other leftist intellectuals call the 'prison-industrial complex', a tawdry if tacit alliance between capitalism and a structurally racist state, results not in a reduction in the crime rate but in profits for business and a withdrawal of democratic rights for the US's overwhelmingly black and hispanic inmates. She told me that 'The massive over-incarceration of people of colour in general in the US leads to lack of access to democratic practices and liberties. Because prisoners are not able to vote, former prisoners in many states are not able to vote, people are barred from jobs if they have a history of prison.'²⁵ For Davis, the prison-industrial complex is not just a racist American money-making machine, but a means to criminalise, demoralise and profit from the world's most powerless people. Fromm, writing in 1931, had seen the criminal justice system of his native land in structurally similar terms.

The shotgun marriage between Freud and Marx over which Horkheimer and Fromm ostensibly officiated was scandalous to orthodox Marxists in general, and inimical to the Comintern in particular, while for orthodox Freudians the hopes Marxists placed in revolution for the transformation of society were delusive. For instance, in 1930 Freud published *Civilisation and Its Discontents*

passionately arguing that a non-repressive society was impossible. Ultramoral sexual gratification was incompatible with what civilization and progress demanded, namely discipline and social restraint. Work monogamous reproduction, moral rectitude and repressing one's unutilised entailed the sacrifice of pleasure and repressing one's unutilised impulses. Only in 1955, when Marcuse wrote *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, would a Frankfurt scholar challenge this Freudian pessimism, without abandoning Freud's insights or Marx's faith in the attainability of an unrepressed communist society.

Fromm was less Freudian than the foregoing might suggest. For all that Horkheimer cultivated good relations with Freud, Fromm's development of 'social psychology' junked much of the Freudian orthodoxy to which other members of the Institute, in particular Horkheimer and Adorno, adhered. What appeared to be a melding of Freud and Marx - and one that was amenable to Horkheimer as he recast Marxism to account for subjective factors rather than relying solely on objective economic laws - was something stranger. Fromm wasn't uniting Marx and Freud; rather, he was uniting Marx with his own developing psychosocial account of those subjective factors, one that outraged both Freudian orthodoxy and, increasingly, his colleagues at the Frankfurt School. Thus Fromm was doubly heretical. First, he dared to sully Marxism with psychoanalysis. Second, he challenged Freud's view that that libidinal drives were all-important and that individual neuroses were rooted in early childhood experience. In a 1931 paper for the Institute's journal called 'The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology', he wrote that the human instinctual apparatus (including the libidinal structure that was the focus of the Freudian account of psychosexual development) was 'to a high degree modifiable; the economic conditions are the primary modifying factors'. Once modified by the economy these libidinal forces 'cease, as it were, to be cement and instead become dynamic'. Libidinal forces and social forces were not set in stone, not eternal truths, but in a dialectical relationship.²⁶

Consider, for instance, anal eroticism. In the Middle Ages, so Fromm argued in a 1931 paper called 'Psychoanalytic Characterology', people enjoyed the worldly pleasures to be derived from feast days,

Costumes, paintings, beautiful buildings and art? Then came the Reformation, Calvinism and capitalism. Pleasures in the here and now were increasingly deferred, or so Fromm argued, in favour of thrift, discipline, devotion to work and duty; kindness, respect, empathetic unconditional sharing became expendable, even socially questionable, traits.

It's easy to parody Fromm's historical account (you can almost imagine the people removing the bells from their boots and their fancy dress feast-day costumes, before entering the iron cage of capitalism, locking the door and obligingly presenting the key to their masters through the bars), but his point was that an anal social character, one who repressed their feelings, saved rather than spent, and denied themselves pleasure, was useful as a productive force to help sustain capitalism. At this stage in his intellectual development, Fromm wasn't yet clear about the extent to which that valuable and social character was an adaptation to the requirements of the capitalism, and the extent to which an underlying anal eroticism served as a productive force in the development of the capitalist economy. But what is clear is that he was moving away from the Freudian orthodoxy of libidinal drives whose sublimation provided the key to an individual's psychic development, towards a notion of social character types that changed according to historical circumstance – and, also, changed historical circumstances.

Later in his intellectual distancing from Freud, Fromm argued that the socialisation of character began at infancy but was not so much rooted in instincts as in interpersonal relationships. By the time he came to write *Escape from Freedom* in 1941, he thought that instincts were shaped less by the sublimations Freud posited than by social conditions. Initially, Horkheimer took Fromm to be an intellectual ally in his shifting of Marxism from focusing on impersonal economic forces to a negative critique of the culture of modern monopoly capitalism. It was only later in the 1930s that Horkheimer and indeed Adorno would become queasy about Fromm's anti-Freudianism. Earlier in the decade, though, Fromm was important to Horkheimer not only because he brought psychoanalysis into the Marxist academy, but also because he had trained as a sociologist. As a result,

Horkheimer entrusted the young psychoanalyst with the task of investigating the attitudes of German workers since 1918 to work out whether they could be relied on to fight against Hitler.²⁸

The idea for this originated from Felix Weil, who had written to the German Ministry of Science, Art and Education seeking to conduct an empirical investigation into the thoughts and conditions of German workers. Fromm's work on the study actually began in 1929, when the hope was that the questionnaire-based survey would serve to answer positively the burning question as to whether German workers counted on to resist the rise of Nazism. Much of the inspiration for the survey came from a similar study undertaken in 1912 by the sociologist Adolf Lovenstein who, as a former industrial worker, suspected that monotonous industrial labour increases the psychological impoverishment of the workers' sensibilities and capacity for autonomous action. Lovenstein devised three psychological types for the workers surveyed – revolutionary, ambivalent and conservative-deferential. Fromm wanted to find out what correlations there were between these psychological types and their capacity for resisting fascism.

Fromm and his team of field staff sent out 3,300 questionnaires, mostly to workers. They consisted of 271 open-ended questions asking respondents for their views on such issues as the education of children, the likelihood of avoiding a new war, and the rationalisation of industry. By 1931 about 1,100 completed replies had been received. Fromm and his team carried on working on the results even when all hope was lost that the German workers would rise up and destroy fascism. Some 82 per cent of respondents associated themselves with the Social Democrats and the Communists, but only 15 per cent of them possessed the anti-authoritarian character or psychological type, while 25 per cent were either ambiguously or consistently authoritarian. Writing in the late 1930s after the Nazis had come to power, Fromm argued that the results demonstrated a 'discrepancy between leftist conscious political opinions and the underlying personality structure; a discrepancy which may [have been] responsible for the [subsequent] collapse of the German workers' parties'. For him, only 15 per cent of German workers had the courage, readiness for sacrifice and spontaneity needed to rouse the less active and

Overcome the enemy'. He argued that better leadership from the leftist parties could have provided stronger resistance to Hitler.²⁹ Fromm's study was never published by the Institute, although some of its findings appeared in his 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*,³⁰ rather confusingly, also plundered for the Institute's huge stock of authority and the family, which engaged all the leading Frankfurt School scholars except Grossman and Adorno for much of the 1930s and their exile from Germany. In it, they reflected on what had happened to the institution of the family as capitalism mutated from the early form analysed by Marx and Engels into the monopoly form that confronted the Frankfurt School.

The question of whether the family was a site of resistance to the powers that be or a zone in which capitalist values could be installed intrigued the Frankfurt School. For Hegel, the family was the society's central ethical unit and a site of resistance against dehumanisation. For Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, the family was a tool of capitalist oppression, and needed to be abolished. Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists wrote Marx and Engels wryly. But they were undaunted:

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. . . . But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution. The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital.³¹

For the Frankfurt School, the bourgeois family hadn't vanished, but its power in general and the authority of the father in particular was in free fall. It had been the key social institution mediating between material base and ideological superstructure but it was heading towards impotence – not for the revolutionary reasons that Marx and Engels had yearned to see realised, but because other institutions could socialise the populations of capitalist societies more effectively. Horkheimer noted in an essay for *Studies on Authority and Family* that it was chiefly in the era of early capitalism (or bourgeois

liberalism) that paternal power was at its height in the family. That made sense because in Hegelian terms the father was, thanks to his greater physical size and his role as economic provider, the rational head of the household. That paternal power had declined under monopoly capitalism, not to be replaced by what Fromm sought for – a concomitant rise in the traditional maternal ethic of warmth, acceptance and love. Not that Horkheimer was celebrating this transformation.

Rather, the leading members of the Frankfurt School chose solidarity with their parents at the moment of the latter's greatest impotence. Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, spoke of a 'sad, shadowy transformation' in his generation's relationship with their parents.³² He was writing not just about the decline of the family under monopoly capitalism, but of something much more specific: what the Nazis in their shamelessness did to the parents of these German Jewish intellectuals. Adorno certainly tried to care for his parents when they, roughed up and financially ruined by the Nazis in Frankfurt, fled to join him in his American exile at the start of the 1940s. The Frankfurt School, spurred by Hitler, turned away from Marx's contempt for the family towards a bitterly won Hegelian, post-Oedipal conception of that denied institution as a site of resistance to, and mutual consolation amid, what Adorno called the 'rising collectivist order' that the School took to be visible not just in Berlin and Moscow, but in Paris, London and New York.

What the Frankfurt scholars lamented was that as the family weakened alternative agents of socialisation took over its role; and those agents (meaning everything from the Nazi party to the culture industry) were instrumental in creating what Fromm would call the authoritarian personality. The social institutions of late capitalism manufactured such personalities like human equivalents of Model T Fords. They were identikit, fearful, passive, and unable to construct their own identities.

Fromm took the authoritarian personality, in the 1957 book of that name, to describe both ruler and ruled under this collectivist order. Both had this much in common, he wrote: 'the inability to rely on one's self, to be independent, to put it in other words: to endure

freedom . . . He needs to feel a bond, which requires neither love nor reason – and he finds it in the symbiotic relationship, in feeling one with others; not by reserving his own identity, but rather by fusing one's identity against the mature personality which he described as one who does not need to cling to others because he actively embraces and grasps the world, the people, and the things around him.²³

The active embrace of the world, the ability to rely on oneself and thereby endure freedom – these were precisely the character traits that were eliminated under the collectivist order the Frankfurt School saw rising all around them.

In the Crocodile's Jaws

When, in the summer of 1932, Walter Benjamin reached the Tuscan seaside resort of Poveromo, he was the personification of the name of his destination: Poveromo means poor man in Italian.¹ His marriage was over, two subsequent love affairs had ended, his best work remained unpublished, and, in the twilight before Nazism spread its darkness across Europe, his hopes of making a living from literary criticism had dwindled to nothing. Broke and miserable, he homed cigarette money from his friend Wilhelm Speyer and relied on credit from the proprietors of the Villa Irene for his accommodation. It was unclear how he could repay his hosts.

But, lest we get too caught up in sympathy for this poor man, we should reflect that Benjamin had been born into a wealthy family and had spent much of the 1920s travelling, gambling, collecting, and neglecting his wife Dora and son Stefan. After his rancorous divorce from Dora in 1930, the court decided to award her the lion's share of his inheritance as a lump sum in compensation for his mistreatment of her – a ruling that accounted for much of the penury that was to be Benjamin's lot until his death a decade later.

In the summer of 1932, he was roaming Europe as he had done the previous decade, but with much less money. He had deferred his return to Germany in order, as he wrote to his friend the Jewish mystic and Zionist intellectual Gershom Scholem, to avoid the opening ceremonies of the Third Reich.² In the German capital that summer, Hitler's obliging predecessor as chancellor, Franz von Papen, had deposed the Social Democrat-led Prussian government in what

Scholem called 'a sort of coup d'état', and on June 2 had formed a reactionary cabinet. Von Papen revoked the ban on the Sturmabteilung, the Nazis' paramilitary wing, and thereby unleashed a wave of political violence and terror, targeted overwhelmingly at Jews and communists, as well as intellectual repression, thus paving the way for Hitler's assumption of power a year later.

That July Benjamin learned that the directors of the radio stations in Berlin and Frankfurt for whom he had made eighty radio broadcasts from 1927 onwards had been dismissed. This was the result of government policy to bring radio into line with other media, rendering them mouthpieces of right-wing propaganda. Benjamin had depended on these broadcasts for much of his income. They included plays, funny little sketches advising listeners on how to get a party, and even – most improbably – a how-to-guide for aspiring comedy writers from one of Germany's most difficult thinkers.³ Many of these broadcasts had been written for children and devised to equip his young listeners with the critical faculties that the rise of fascism would henceforth strive to deny them. No recordings of these broadcasts were made, so we will never hear what Walter Benjamin sounded like when he spoke on the radio. But the scripts for them were among the papers the Gestapo found during the Second World War when they raided his last apartment in Paris. In 2014, some of those scripts were read by the actor Henry Goodman as part of a BBC programme, *The Benjamin Broadcasts*, made by the children's writer Michael Rosen.⁴

Today, Benjamin's scripts for broadcasts on such subjects as witch hunts, Berlin's demonic side, successful swindles and human disasters are read as allegories of National Socialism, warnings of what was to come. The last time Benjamin broadcast on German radio was on 29 January 1933; the following day, Hitler was appointed chancellor and a Nazi torchlight parade supplied the material for the very first national wide radio broadcast.

These were indeed the opening ceremonies of the Third Reich. The Weimar Republic that had emerged from the rubble of the First World War and the collapse of the German Empire had, through its Bill of Rights, guaranteed every German citizen freedom of speech and

religion, and equality under the law; its elected Reichstag appointed the government. But Weimar's tentative democratic flowering was readily crushed in part, to get dialectical for a moment, by the very structure of its foundation. Weimar's system of proportional representation under which electors voted for parties with no individual elected representatives resulted in tiny parties with no party strong enough to get a majority and no effective government that could ensure the passage of laws in the Reichstag: worse, the constitution's article 48 allowed the president to rule by decree in case of emergency; though – fatally – left the definition of what constituted an emergency unclear, a fact that allowed Hitler to take power by the back door legally.

In *Poems of the Crisis Years 1929–33*, Brecht mediated on the disaster for Marxists such as himself of German workers fighting for fascist against communists rather than finding common cause. His poem 'Article One of the Weimar Constitution' (which stated: 'From the People proceeds the power of the state') conceives of the power of the Weimar State as a force marching through the city streets, wheeling to the right, outraged at those who dare to question its power.⁵ The poem ends with a murder: a shot rings out and the 'power of the State' looks down to identify the corpse:

What's lying in the shirt?
Something's lying in the shirt
– The People, why, that's it.

Hardly one of Brecht's greatest poems, but it does vividly imagine the perversion of this presumed power of the People. And, as we will see, for the Frankfurt School, the people's seduction by National Socialism. The awefully Marxist and overwhelmingly Jewish thinkers of the Frankfurt School now had a new task: not just to work out why the German Revolution had failed, but to understand why the people could be seduced by an ideology that favoured, among other things, murdering Marxists and Jews. In books that appeared over the next decade, such as Fromm's *Escape from Freedom, Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* by the political theorist

symbolic death of the Weimar Republic and the birth of the Reich on March 23, when the Enabling Act became law giving Hitler absolute power to rule and to pass any law without parliament approval. On 10 May 1933, books were burned in most German university cities and the minister of propaganda Joseph Goebbels announced the end of the age of 'overblown Jewish intellectualism'.

Across the decades, then, a very particular tragedy resonates in the midst of a much bigger one: the tragedy that the greatest German critic of the twentieth century, because of anti-Jewish proscriptions, was systematically deprived of the opportunity to share his thoughts in his native language about the opportunity to share his thoughts, as his critical powers reached their maturity. But there is another element to Walter Benjamin's tragedy, beyond the frustrations of the rise of Nazism. In his 1997 novel, *Benjamin's Crossing*, Jay Parini imagined Gershom Scholem standing at his friend's grave ten years after Benjamin's death. 'The death of Benjamin was, for me, the death of the European mind, the end of a way of life,' says Scholem in the novel.¹⁰ This fictionalised tribute chimes with what Brecht wrote of his dead friend:

So the future lies in darkness and the forces of right
Are weak. That was plain to you
When you destroyed a torturable body.¹¹

The idea that Benjamin's tragedy represented the death of the European mind may initially seem to be a pardonable exaggeration, born of love and respect, but there is more to it than that, for what it gets near to is the distinction identified by Hannah Arendt in her introduction to *Illuminations*, a collection of Benjamin's essays.¹² Benjamin was not just a freelance intellectual effectively precluded from making a living in 1930s Europe: he dreamed of being and nearly realised his wish of becoming an *homme de lettres*. But what does that term signify? Arendt (the twentieth century's most astute observer of, as well as best-connected participant in, German Jewish intellectual life) noted that an *homme de lettres* was very different from an intellectual. The former had its origins in pre-revolutionary France, among the landed,

leisured and intellectually voracious; the latter was, at least as Arendt describes it, handmaiden to the technocratic state. 'Unlike the class of intellectuals,' she wrote,

who offer their services either to the state as experts, specialists, and officials, or to society for diversion and instruction, the *homme de lettres* always strove to keep aloof from both the state and society. Their material existence was based on income without work, and their intellectual attitude rested upon their resolute refusal to be integrated politically or socially. On the basis of this dual independence they could afford that attitude of superior disdain which gave rise to La Rochefoucauld's contemptuous insights into human behaviour, the worldly wisdom of Montaigne, the aphoristic trenchancy of Pascal's thought, the boldness and open-mindedness of Montesquieu's political reflections.¹³

Aloof from state and society, Resolute refusal to be integrated politically or socially. Attitude of superior disdain. Aphoristic trenchancy. As one reads this passage's most colourful phrases, it's hard not to be struck by how well they pertain not just to pre-revolutionary French writers, but also to the leaders of the Frankfurt School, and to Walter Benjamin. He dreamed of being 'neither obliged nor willing to write and read professionally, in order to earn a living,'¹⁴ as Arendt put it.

If Arendt is right, Benjamin's dreams of becoming an *homme de lettres* unencumbered by professional duty were catalysed in and constrained by the anti-Semitic nature of the Wilhelmine Germany in which he grew up. In that pre-First World War society, unbaptised Jews were barred from university careers: they could only hold the rank of an unpaid Extraordinarius. As Arendt puts it: 'it was a career which presupposed rather than provided an assured income.'¹⁵ So instead of fruitfully dreaming of what couldn't happen, suggests Arendt convincingly, he dreamed of the best that could be realised: of becoming an independent private scholar – what was at the time called a *Privatgelehrter*, a scholarly German figure which the Francophile Benjamin gave a Gallic spin. He wanted to be an *homme de lettres*, subsidised and independent, free to pursue his own eclectic interests.

What's striking about Benjamin in this context is that he didn't redraft his wishes in the face of changed political realities in the Weimar Republic, thanks to its Bill of Rights, university careers were open to everyone including unbaptised Jews. True, this door was opened, was fast closing: in April 1933 Hitler issued the Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service, requiring the dismissal of Jews and 'politically unreliable persons' (a law that meant the dismissal of Ben as well as painters like Klee, Dix and Beckmann from other German academies). But in the Weimar Republic, it was for a moment possible for Jews to dream of university careers. Why then did Benjamin seek out a career in academia? Arendt's theory is that he had decided what he wanted to be before the war and then strived increasingly hopelessly to realise that dream. The disastrous tensions with his father after the First World War are mostly due to the fact that daddy would not bankroll his son to follow a profession that was premised on not making a living. As his biographers put it: 'His parents pushed for a career with some earning potential and steadfastly refused the kind of support that would enable Benjamin to live independently while continuing to live and write as he wished.'¹⁸ Their son was temperamentally incapable of pursuing a career with earning potential: he was too astute a reader of Kafka for that. Kafka had bent the knee to his father's desires and taken a job in an insurance office. The novelist described what that work meant: 'You have to earn your grave.'¹⁹ Benjamin was not temperamentally capable of following Kafka's abasement.

What's significant for us is how his aspiration was emblematic of the Frankfurt School's determination to remain independent from university system or political party. Partly this was an insistence on intellectual autonomy – rather than becoming what Arendt describes pejoratively as intellectuals, they would live and write independently pursuing their Marxist analysis of society with the financial backing of the Marxist son of a successful and unimpeachably capitalist Argentine grain trader. Partly it was because they were Jews, understandably suspicious of casting their lot into a university system that had only just allowed Jews to make their careers. Certainly, when Benjamin

tried and failed to gain his Habilitation, the German post-doctoral qualification usually sought after because it leads to a university career, he did so only to impress his father into loosening the purse strings so that he could carry on his work independently. He also had a disdain for the work for which he was paid. For instance, he dismissed his radio broadcasts that provided the bulk of his income for the years 1927 to 1932 as unimportant, as if they were 'Theses on his income for the years 1927 to 1932 as unimportant' or his 'Theses on his work (we need not agree – they are preludes to such texts as 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' or his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'; moreover, they're impressive in their own right, fulfillments of what public radio could become but so often hasn't been since). But the fact remains: he was a miniaturist when miniatures didn't pay, and a toiler in Grub Street who regarded hack work as beneath contempt even before his editors started failing to reply to his correspondence. Arendt wrote:

It was as though shortly before its disappearance the figure of the *homme de lettres* was destined to show itself once more in the fullness of its possibilities, although – or possibly because – it had lost its material basis in such a catastrophic way, so that the purely intellectual passion which makes this figure so lovable might unfold in all its most telling and impressive possibilities.¹⁸

This is the tragedy: that Benjamin's writings over the eight years from destitution in Poveromo to death in Port Bou show the fullness of possibilities rather than the fullness of realisation. What he wrote of Kafka – 'an understanding [of Kafka's] production involves, among other things, the simple recognition that he was a failure'¹⁹ – is true too of what Benjamin understood about himself.

In the dying of that European type, then, there was a brief, intense flash of light – the writings of Walter Benjamin. If the Frankfurt School was the last hurrah of German romanticism, then Benjamin was its emblem, revealing the group in all its contradictions – Marxists without party, socialists dependent on capitalist money, beneficiaries of a society they sniffily disdained and without which they would have had nothing to write about.

As he wandered fugitive around the Mediterranean in the summer of 1932, Benjamin was suicidal. Only a month before his arrival in Poveromo, he had stayed in a hotel room in Nice where he had drawn up his will, written farewell notes and planned to take his own life. 'Dear Julia,' he wrote to Julia Radt, the sculptor with whom he had an affair both before and during his marriage to Dora Babbalanza: 'You know that I once loved you very much. And now that I am about to die, my life has no greater gifts in its possession than those conferred on it by moments of suffering over you. So this greeting shall suffice. Yours Walter.'²⁰

According to his friend Gershon Scholem, the immediate reason Benjamin felt impelled to draw up suicide plans was due to the failure of another relationship. Earlier that summer, on Ibiza, he had proposed to Olga Parem, a Russian-German woman he had met in 1928 and who had come to the Mediterranean island to visit him. Parem was charmed by Benjamin: 'He had an enchanting laugh; when he laughed, a whole world opened up, while Scholem reported that she was 'very attractive and vivacious'.²¹ What Benjamin thought of her is unrecorded, though Parem was one of many women with whom Benjamin had fallen hopelessly in love during and after his thirteen-year marriage. As his biographers suggest, he was drawn into love triangles – especially those in which the two other parties were attached. Such erotic geometries which the two other parties were attached. Such erotic geometries Gretel Karplus, wife of his great critic and champion Adorno, so compelling, so tantalising for Benjamin and yet, ultimately conventionally minded persons would have thought, so unsatisfactory for all concerned. Dora wrote to Scholem when her ex-husband sought to marry Asja Lachis:

He is altogether under Asja's influence and does things which I can scarcely bring myself to write about – things which make it unlikely that I shall ever again exchange a word with him in this lifetime. All he is at this point is brains and sex; everything else has ceased to function. And you know or can well imagine that in such cases it's not long before the brains abdicate.²²

Although the arousing (for Benjamin) triangulation of love and jealousy did not apply in the case of Olga Parem, her response to his proposal on Ibiza was certainly unsatisfactory. She rejected him and so days later when Benjamin celebrated his fortieth birthday he could well imagine himself loveless, jobless and very nearly hopeless. For all the gloom of these months spent wandering impecuniously around the Mediterranean deferring the return to Berlin, and the seeming imminence of death, Benjamin was able to write about one incident that summer with the delicate wit that friends emphasised but that all-too-rarely emerges in his writings. Picture the scene: Benjamin is leaving Ibiza, his luggage stowed on the boat that will bear him to Majorca. It is midnight as he arrives at the quay with friends, and he notices that not only has the gangplank been removed but the great German already moving. You don't have to imagine how much the great German Marx or Charlie Chaplin to enjoy the next sentence, but it might help. After calmly shaking hands with my companions, he wrote to Scholem, 'I began to scale the hull of the moving vessel and, aided by curious Ibizaans, managed to clamber over the railing successfully.'²³ Benjamin was many things but not a comic writer, though the superb puntilibus and sang froid of 'calmly' and the understatement of 'curious' make one wonder if he could have had another vocation.

From Majorca he travelled to Nice, checked into a hotel and started dividing up his possessions in preparation for his looming death. He bequeathed his library to his son Stefan, another bequest was made to Dora, while he left precious objects and paintings to friends and former lovers including Julia Radt-Cohn, Asja Lachis and Gretel Karplus. There is a clue to the mood of this man who frequently contemplated taking his own life and would ultimately succeed in doing so in his aphoristic essay 'The Destructive Character', published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* the previous November:

The destructive character has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognise that everything can go wrong . . .

where, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Where others encounter walls, he always stands at a crossroads. Because he sees a way out, but for that of the way leading through it. The destructive character lives from the feeling not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble.²⁴

Benjamin's writings in the last eight years of his life were examples of Joseph Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction, reducing history to rubble the better to find a path through its ruins. What he wrote of Baudelaire, his beloved nineteenth-century French poet – 'the rupture the course of the world – that was Baudelaire's deeper intention' – was also true of the basis of his own messianic Marxist philosophy heretical to the communist party line. That deep, destructive intention made his party line saw history as necessarily unfolding towards the realisation of a communist utopia. When Scholem described Benjamin's writings as 'counter revolutionary', the latter wrote back saying the description was quite correct.²⁵

This eviscerating tendency of Benjamin's, as we will see, extends through his criticism and his messianic vision of revolutionary politics. It was this tendency then, paradoxically, that made him decide against suicide – at least until that moment in 1940 when he could resist its dismal overtures no longer. But if Benjamin was a destructive character was he, too, a self-destructive character? What he had written for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* only refers to suicide to dismiss it sarcastically as not worth the trouble, which in itself is a double shrug at traditional mores – one shrug against a tradition that exorated suicide; the other at the transgressive counter-tradition that found suicide seductive. Certainly suicide has a lively history in Germany. In his essay 'On Suicide', Schopenhauer wrote: 'As far as I can see, it is only the monotheistic, that is to say Jewish religious whose members

regard self-destruction as a crime.'²⁶ Quite so, but to name something as a crime is not just to announce its prohibition, but to confer on that act a libidinal cathexis: transgression is sexy.

In Goethe's Sturm und Drang novel *The Sorrows of the Younger Werther*, first published in 1787, the hero reasons that one member of the love triangle in which he is embroiled must take their own life and so because he is incapable of committing murder, but feels he must act, he shoots himself in the head and dies twelve hours later. Goethe's novel led to a spate of copycat suicides among young people in Germany after its publication. In 1903 the twenty-three-year-old Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger shot himself in the chest in the same room in which Beethoven had died seventy-six years earlier: 'There are three possibilities for me', he had declared. 'The gallows, suicide, or a future so brilliant that I don't dare to think of it.'²⁷ The third of those possibilities, thanks to the cool critical reception of his recently published book *Sex and Character*, seemed unlikely to be realised.

So what prompted Benjamin to contemplate suicide in 1932? The Werther effect borne of a love triangle? The sense that his genius was going unrecognised? Certainly, his biographers suggest, thoughts of suicide had been often on his mind for the best part of two decades, ever since in fact the outbreak of the First World War. In 1914, one of his closest friends, the poet Fritz Heintle along with Rika Seligson had committed suicide. One morning, Benjamin was awoken by the arrival of an express letter that read: 'You will find us lying in the Meeting House.'²⁸ It was there that the couple had gassed themselves. Their tragic end was depicted in the newspapers as the outcome of doomed love, but their friends thought it a protest against war.

For Benjamin, Heintle's suicide was a shadow that extended over the rest of his life. He wrote a cycle of fifty sonnets over the years that followed his friend's death, and read Heintle's poems to friends during the 1920s. The suicide figures in his writings of that decade: 'How much more easily the leave taker is loved!' he wrote in his 1928 book *One-Way Street*. 'For the flame burns more purely for those burning in the distance, fuelled by the fleeting scrap of material waving from the ship or railway window. Separation penetrates the disappearing

Person like a pigment and sleeps him in gentle radiance,²⁹ Benjamin imagined himself steeped in such radiance as he went through the formalities of separating himself from friends and loved ones in the summer of 1932, but he could not then commit the act that would make the separation final.

Suicide, then, was a spectre that stalked Benjamin's adult life. But for all that, he wrote with terrible beauty about what death means to those who remain. In *One-Way Street*, for instance, he wrote: 'If a person very close to us is dying, there is something in the months to come that we dimly apprehend – much has we should have liked to share it with him – could only happen through his absence. We greet him at last in a language that he no longer understands.'³⁰

The fact remains that in 1932 he didn't commit suicide. Why? Perhaps because there was work that remained to be done. The only cogent moral argument against suicide is that it is opposed to the achievement of the highest moral goal, inasmuch as it substitutes for a true redemption of this world of misery a merely apparent one.³¹ It may seem obtuse to quote Schopenhauer here – Benjamin was hardly an avid reader of his writings – but Schopenhauer's mention of the word 'redemption' seems relevant. Adorno wrote at the conclusion of *Minima Moralia*: 'The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption: all knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption; else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.'³²

In thesis IX of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' quoted earlier, Benjamin imagined precisely such a standpoint of redemption, and how perilous it was to occupy it. He did so by contemplating an image that he took from the painting *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in

front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.³³

But if the storm is what we call progress, the angel might be seen as a likeness or symbol of Walter Benjamin in that summer of 1932 in Palermo, as he tried, through the remembrance of writing, to redeem the past, to make whole what had been smashed. The storm was blowing, the wreckage growing, but Benjamin was attempting to stand his ground by doing the only thing he could: writing. Certainly, he had been captivated by Klee's *Angelus Novus* since he first saw the Swiss artist's small watercolour at a Berlin exhibition in 1920. He bought it for 1,000 marks and hung it in every apartment he lived in (today, after a torrid history, it hangs in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem), almost like a lucky charm. In 1921, he edited a journal he named *Angelus Novus*, 'in part because of the attempt to draw a connection between the artistic avant-garde of the period and the Talmudic legend about angels who are being constantly created and find an abode in the fragments of the present.'³⁴ He also cited the painting in his 1931 essay on the Austrian writer and satirist Karl Kraus, according to which the painting makes it possible 'to understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction.'³⁵ And in 1933, the year in which the Nazis came to power and he fled Berlin for the last time, he left the painting behind and wrote in an autobiographical essay called *Agostinus Santander* 'while in exile on Ibiza: "The angel, however, resembles all from which I had to part: persons and above all things."³⁶ In his essay, 'Walter Benjamin and His Angel,' Scholem noted that at the time Benjamin saw in the painting a parallel to his tangled relations with Julia Cohn and Asja Lachis.³⁷ But the angel of history had more than just personal resonances. The insistence that the past can be transformed remains, for Marxists and others, one of Benjamin's most appealing ideas. The critic Terry Eagleton, for instance, wrote: 'In one of his shrewdest sayings, Benjamin remarked that what drives

men and women to revolt against injustice is not dreams of liberated grandchildren, but memories of enslaved ancestors. It is by turning our gaze to the horrors of the past, in the hope that we will not thereby be turned to stone, that we are impelled to move forward.³⁴ Thus, he has become an iconic emblem for the left, whether to Benjamin, he recognised it quite that way is another question.

In any event, by the time he got to Poveromo, Benjamin may not have been convinced that life is worth living, but certainly that it was to be lived – even though, for him, its circumstances were increasingly terrible. A year after he wrote the consoling memoir of his Berlin childhood in the Tuscan seaside resort, he was forced to leave the city of his birth forever to evade the Nazis. He spent the last eight years of his life in perilous exile, wandering an increasingly inhospitable Europe, like so many other Jews and communists of the time. In 1938, he described himself in a letter as ‘something like a man who has made his home in a crocodile’s jaws, which he keeps prised open with iron braces.’³⁵ That, perhaps, was how he lived in his final decade – until the lonely moment in a Spanish hotel room when he decided to take his own life rather than risk being murdered.

It was in those years, though, that Benjamin wrote some of his best work, including, as we will see in the next chapter, a still-great essay on the revolutionary possibilities of art, one filled with hope amid the hopelessness of the times. His friend and fellow exile Theodor Adorno knew that well when he wrote: ‘For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.’³⁶

8

Modernism and All That Jazz

Throughout the 1930s, the Frankfurt School was engaged with working out why socialist revolution had not happened and why Hitler had come to power. Nonetheless, some of its most virtuosic work concerned culture – that new front in the neo-Marxist struggle. In 1936, for instance, the Institute’s journal published two essays to do with modern art. One of them, by Walter Benjamin, has become a classic of twentieth-century writing, endlessly reproduced, mimeographed, downloaded, cited, cut and pasted until its aura suffuses nearly every text written on the theory of art since it appeared. The other, by Theodor Adorno, has become intellectual kryptonite, disdained even by many of his most ardent admirers for its ostensible disdain and for its diagnosis of the art form under discussion as both a kind of premature ejaculation and a more or less sadomasochistic repressive desublimation that was emblematic of the perverse weakness and passivity into which it cast its practitioners and audiences. There are other differences. Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ is almost crazily hopeful for the revolutionary potential of new mass art forms, particularly cinema. ‘Adorno’s ‘On Jazz’, written under the pseudonym Hektor Kottweller, is a vicious savaging of a new kind of music whose social impact he loathed and which he took to be representative of the disaster of commodified art under capitalism.³

But both essays are neo-Marxist critiques of mass culture, and so antidotes to the snobbish conservative jeremiads that prevailed then as now. Both men were cultural iconoclasts by upbringing and

temperament, but you'd be hard pushed to find anything of the nobility of Proust, the contempt for mass cultural production of the modernists, or the disdain for popular entertainment of D. H. Lawrence in either of these essays. Neither sees in the new art forms they are writing about cause for a Spenglerian lament over the decline of the West. Neither seeks to damn the barbarisms of the present by juxtaposition with the glories of the past.

Both essays were written in the limbo of exile – Benjamin was in Paris, Adorno in his third year at Oxford, and the future of both seemed bound up with leaving Europe. As a result, fascism haunted both texts. Adorno's critique of jazz was deranged by hearing military marches in its syncopated rhythms; while for Benjamin, fascism was an urgent threat to which communism responds by politicising art. Benjamin seems to realise that the luxury of despair over the diminishing of human experience by mass culture is improper at a time when fascism needs to be attacked. The despair he expressed in his essay 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' about how human experience was diminished by our 'bungled reception of technology' was set aside in favour of a hopeful reflection on how new technological art forms, in particular cinema, might revolutionise human sensibilities, and perhaps even make them more resistant to fascism. His dreams for cinema were not quite crushed by the onrushing Hollywood machine. He worried about how the cult of the movie star involved the phoney spell of personality and commodity fetishism, but almost parenthetically: most of the rest of his most famous essay ran excitingly against the grain of the proverbial negativity of the Frankfurt School. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' opens with the idea that, at the end of the nineteenth century, there was a tipping point in art's relationship with technology:

Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact on the public; it had also captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. For the study of this standard nothing is more revealing than the nature of

these repercussions that these two different manifestations – the reproduction of works of art and the art of the film – have had on its traditional form.

where Huxley, in words that Benjamin quoted in a footnote, had taken this change as facilitating 'vulgarity' and the 'output of trash; Benjamin imagined its liberating potential. Not that he was naive enough to argue that the output of trash had not also increased thanks to technological change. For him, the new standard of technical reproduction was what alcohol was for fellow dialectician Homer Simpson – the cause of, and remedy for, the impoverishment of human experience.

It's easy to imagine what this impoverishment looks like: D. H. Lawrence imagined it when he wrote about humans

sitting with our tails curled
while the machine amuses us, the radio or film or gramophone.
Monkeys with a bland grin on our faces!

What's much harder to do is what Benjamin did in this essay: to imagine how the changes in mechanical reproduction might liberate us. Benjamin hoped that photography and cinema would blast open the cultural tradition, liquidate the power that the ruling class has exerted over the masses by means of the aura of authenticity, authority and permanence of works of art. His writings around this time were marked by violent images – as if the coming war had begun for him already.

'The ideologies of the rulers are by their nature more changeable than the ideas of the oppressed', wrote Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* around the time of this essay. 'For not only must they, like the but they must glorify that situation as fundamentally harmonious.' The ideologies of the rulers, then, are like what evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins would four decades later call memes – units for carrying ideas and practices that mutate and respond to adaptive pressures. Benjamin's hope was to disrupt that viral spread of the

...creative impulses, but rather had an entirely
...maintaining the ruling class's power. By being allowed
...purposes as the commodities Marx wrote about the same imperialist
...bloody social conflict and glorified a disharmonious situation, a
...fundamentally harmonious. Benjamin wanted to reduce that risk
...tradition to rubble.
Robespierre had reappropriated ancient Rome for the First
...Revolution and thereby had, as Benjamin put it in his "Theses, Historical
...Open the continuum of history. Benjamin put it in his "Theses, Historical
...continuum of cultural heritage, so that the oppressed could see the
...underlay the beauty, shake the masses from their slumber. What
...seems normal must be exposed as perverse and oppressive. Benjamin
...thought he could see how this could be done. 'Mechanical reproduc-
...tion emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on
...ritual', he wrote. The force of this gnomic remark may be difficult to
...grasp, since we don't immediately think of the work of art as being
...involved in ritual. But that's precisely what Benjamin thought had
...been the function of the work of art. 'As we know', he wrote, 'the earli-
...est artworks originated in the service of rituals.' No doubt, but the leap
...from that to this next sentence was at least counterintuitive. 'In other
...words: the unique value of the "authentic" work of art always has its
...basis in ritual.' But that is far from obvious. Perhaps we might see
...ritual in the ancient Greeks' veneration of a statue of Venus, but not in
...a trip to the Louvre to see the Venus de Milo. Benjamin's point, his
...biographers argued, is that if a work of art is reproduced mechanisti-
...cally, the viewer or listener doesn't have to receive it in the space
...consecrated to its cult, such as a museum, concert hall, or church. But
...one might retort, surely sitting in a cinema or listening to a record is
...as much (or as little) about cultic practices and rituals as experiencing
...arts that are not reproduced mechanically.

Benjamin's suggestion - and it's a suggestion that has to be
constructed from the rubble of his thoughts, since the essay is written

in a manner parallel to the montage techniques that he admired - is
that art's ritual basis is maintained even when, as it did during the
Renaissance, it steps down from the sacred altar and joins the profane
cult of beauty. The picture gallery and the concert hall are temples that
don't declare themselves as such. Even in an age when God is dead
and beauty secularised (roughly, the era from the Renaissance to the
start of the twentieth century in Benjamin's view), the work of art still
has its basis in ritual.

But then something remarkable happens. Photography is born.
Around the same time and, Benjamin implied, not coincidentally,
socialism is too. The former, for Benjamin, is the first truly revolution-
ary means of reproduction; the latter the politics that will destroy the
ruling class and all its works. Together they will liquidate art's depend-
ence on ritual. Only one problem: art refuses to be recast in a political
role on the world stage of history. Instead, art spends the nineteenth
century dressing itself up and pretending to be that which, for
Benjamin, it is not: it denies itself any social function. The work of art
affects to be intrinsically valuable, not valuable in part because it helps
uphold the status quo. Thus, perhaps, the insistence in Kant's *Critique
of Judgment* that the aesthetic judgement is necessarily disinterested.
Hence the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement that called for art
for art's sake. In this aesthetic movement, art was making a last stand,
asserting its autonomy and purity when, if Benjamin was right, its
destiny was political. Photography, Benjamin argued, separated art
from its basis in cult and its autonomy disappeared forever. Instead of
art for art's sake, the twentieth century would see art for politics' sake.

And when art became political in the age of mechanical reproduc-
tion, that involved two things: first revolutionising the sensory
apparatuses of the masses so that they could see for the first time how
they have become the handmaidens to the powers that be; and destroy-
ing the aura of the work of art itself.

The aura is a mystifying phenomenon, Benjamin wrote: 'that which
withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work
of art', defining it in terms of nature: 'If, while resting on a summer
afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon
or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura

ruling class's memes. Works of art weren't just beautiful, autonomous expressions of human creative impulses, but rather had an important mental role in maintaining the ruling class's power. By being included in a cultural tradition that conferred status on them and the tradition, works of art became fetishes and served the same purposes as the commodities Marx wrote about: they attributed a bloody social conflict and glorified a disharmonious situation as fundamentally harmonious. Benjamin wanted to reduce that tradition to rubble.

Robespierre had reappropriated ancient Rome for the French Revolution and thereby had, as Benjamin put it in his "Theses," blasted open the continuum of history. Benjamin wanted to blast open the continuum of cultural heritage, so that the oppressed could see the circumstances in which they were living, reveal the barbarism that underlay the beauty, shake the masses from their slumbers. What seems normal must be exposed as perverse and oppressive. Benjamin thought he could see how this could be done. "Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual," he wrote. The force of this gnomic remark may be difficult to grasp, since we don't immediately think of the work of art as being involved in ritual. But that's precisely what Benjamin thought had been the function of the work of art. "As we know," he wrote, "the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals." No doubt, but the leap from that to this next sentence was at least counterintuitive. "In other words: the unique value of the "authentic" work of art always has its basis in ritual." But that is far from obvious. Perhaps we might see ritual in the ancient Greeks' veneration of a statue of Venus, but not in a trip to the Louvre to see the Venus de Milo. Benjamin's point, his biographers argued, is that if a work of art is reproduced mechanically, the viewer or listener doesn't have to receive it in the space consecrated to its cult, such as a museum, concert hall, or church. But one might retort, surely sitting in a cinema or listening to a recording as much (or as little) about cultic practices and rituals as experiencing arts that are not reproduced mechanically.

Benjamin's suggestion – and it's a suggestion that has to be constructed from the rubble of his thoughts, since the essay is written

in a manner parallel to the montage techniques that he admired – is that art's ritual basis is maintained even when, as it did during the Renaissance, it steps down from the sacred altar and joins the profane cult of beauty. The picture gallery and the concert hall are temples that don't declare themselves as such. Even in an age when God is dead and beauty secularised (roughly, the era from the Renaissance to the start of the twentieth century in Benjamin's view), the work of art still has its basis in ritual.

But then something remarkable happens. Photography is born, around the same time and, Benjamin implied, not coincidentally. Socialism is too. The former, for Benjamin, is the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction; the latter the politics that will destroy the ruling class and all its works. Together they will liquidate art's dependence on ritual. Only one problem: art refuses to be recast in a political role on the world stage of history. Instead, art spends the nineteenth century dressing itself up and pretending to be that which, for Benjamin, it is not: it denies itself any social function. The work of art affects to be intrinsically valuable, not valuable in part because it helps uphold the status quo. Thus, perhaps, the insistence in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* that the aesthetic judgement is necessarily disinterested. Hence the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement that called for art for art's sake. In this aesthetic movement, art was making a last stand, asserting its autonomy and purity when, if Benjamin was right, its destiny was political. Photography, Benjamin argued, separated art from its basis in cult and its autonomy disappeared forever. Instead of art for art's sake, the twentieth century would see art for politics' sake. And when art became political in the age of mechanical reproduction, that involved two things: first revolutionising the sensory apparatuses of the masses so that they could see for the first time how they have become the handmaidens to the powers that be; and destroying the aura of the work of art itself.

The aura is a mystifying phenomenon, Benjamin wrote: "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art, defining it in terms of nature." If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura

distance. But the distance, he suggested, involved direct reproduction, he suggested, involved direct need not be physical: rather it's the psychological distance, or rather ritualised peek-a-boo with the spectator. 'Certain sculptures or other Some statues of the Madonna are covered nearly all year round the inner chamber of Greek and Roman temples.

Thus, in various ways, the aura of the work of art is inapproach- the riff-raff are often held at a distance in something like awe, admit have access all areas, confirming their status and the power of the work of art. Of course, all this is equally true of the class-stratified demographics of today's rock festivals or opera houses. At the former, the unfortunates risk trench foot in muddy fields, while the elite have backstage passes and helicopters to whisk them from the horrors of the campsite to their boutique hotels. At the latter, the unfortunates either don't have what it takes to buy tickets or get vertigo in the God, while the privileged few recline in the dress circle plush with erriatic views of the action on stage and the prospect of liquid treats in the crush bar at the interval. All of which only goes to show how mechan- ical reproduction didn't eliminate the cultural heritage of auratic art as Benjamin had hoped. The secular ritual - think Glastonbury, think Bayreuth - survived the liquidation Benjamin yearned for.

The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin thought, abolished this privileged access, and detonated cultural heritage. He saw cultural heritage as the debased glorification of a life of bloody conflict, and that which preened and postured as beautiful wasn't much to be trusted either. But, you might object, surely reproduc- tion has been commonplace in art and literature for centuries and has repeatedly revolutionised not just art and culture, but human society - albeit not in the ways Benjamin wanted? For example, think of scribes. These men laboriously copied by hand the wisdom of the ages from fragile and decaying manuscripts. For generations they

were indispensable in refreshing cultural memory, until in the mid fifteenth century Gutenberg's invention of movable type not only made their skills obsolete, but facilitated the Protestant Reformation. In 1492, the Abbot of Sponheim wrote a tract called *In Defence of* Series urging that the scribal tradition be maintained because the very art of handcopying sacred texts brought spiritual enlightenment. One problem: the abbot had his book set in movable type so his argu- ment could be spread quickly and cheaply.

Benjamin didn't deny any of this. He noted that any work of art is in principle reproducible: since time immemorial, pupils would copy masters' work for practice, and for financial gain. The Greeks knew only two ways of technically reproducing works of art - stamping and founding, so their reproductions were confined to bronzes, terracot- tas and coins. Only with the woodcut would graphic art become reproducible; then during the Middle Ages etching and engraving were added. But, Benjamin argued, it was only with lithography that the reproduction of graphic art caught up with the Gutenberg revolu- tion in printing. But lithography was soon surpassed by photography which, for Benjamin, was the revolutionary form of technological reproduction par excellence, since it freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into the lens.

What was the significance of that? In the past the presence of the original was the prerequisite for the concept of authenticity. The natural reproduction of a work of art confirms the authority of the original; by contrast, mechanical reproduction may subvert that authority - indeed, in some circumstances, it may even mean it doesn't make any sense to speak of an original. 'From a photographic mega- 'authentic' print makes no sense,' wrote Benjamin. Is there an original in the same relation to its reproductions as the original of the *Mona Lisa* stands to any of the billions of reproductions of Da Vinci's paint- ing? There is no original work of art imperiously conferring legitimacy on copies and withholding it from forgers - the king is dead, long live the democracy of things.

But Benjamin couched this death of distance in odd terms, arguing that the 'contemporary masses' desired to bring things 'spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their benighted production'. But where did this desire come from? Here Benjamin, in a charge that Adorno laid at his door more than once during the 1930s, was insufficiently dialectical. More plausibly, we might argue, improvements in reproduction technologies change what is possible for capitalists to sell to those whom Benjamin calls the 'masses'. Desires, that is to say, don't spring from nowhere. They are constructed. They are, perhaps, even in dialectical relationship with technology. Technology changes not only what humans can do, it changes humans, makes them desire things they didn't know existed before. Benjamin realised this, writing: 'One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand that could only be satisfied later.'

Cinema, radio, TV, recorded music, the internet and social media all involve technological innovations that enable capitalists to provide products that change our desires and so change us. Consider the internet. 'The development of the internet has more to do with human beings becoming a reflection of their technologies,' the German post-structuralist philosopher and media theorist Friedrich Kittler once argued. 'After all, it is we who adapt to the machine. The machine does not adapt to us.' Kittler was countering the benign vision of the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who took technological innovations to be human prostheses (hence the subtitle to McLuhan's book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*). On the contrary, Kittler argued, 'media are not pseudopods for extending the human body. They follow the logic of escalation that leaves us and writes history behind it.'

As for Benjamin, he certainly envisaged technology as prosthetic. He noted that a photograph may capture what the eye can't see. As a result, the original would not be a point of comparison, through which we judge the success of the photo as a reproduction. It would make no sense in such a case to speak of a forgery. Benjamin also argued that technical reproduction can put the copy into situations impossible for

the original: 'The cathedral leaves its locale to be studied in the studio or of a lover of art: the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.' He was considering, in the case of the former, a photograph; in the case of the latter, a phonograph. But if photography and other art forms of the era of mechanical reproduction extend human perceptual powers, Benjamin imagined that these have a political purpose, namely to bring the nature of reality into high definition.

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railway stations and our factories appeared to have locked us up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its falling ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. . . . The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

Many years later, in 1962, Alfred Hitchcock, whose films have the logic of dreams as if they are realisations on celluloid of unconscious impulses, echoed Benjamin's insights here when he told François Truffaut what cinema was for: it was, he said, to contract time and to extend it.

Just as Freud placed his hand gently on the back of his patients' heads and pushed them into their dirty linen, acquainting them with the dark forces that underlay their rational selves, so the camera exposes the brutal dissonances of modern life. And just as there is work for the analyst to do, so there is work for the moviegoer too, Benjamin suggested. But the work doesn't involve long periods of concentration of the kind that was characteristic of standing before a painting in a picture gallery and taken to heroic extremes by the philosopher of art Richard Wollheim, who wrote: 'I spent long hours in the Church of San Salvatore in Venice, in the Louvre, in the Guggenheim Museum, coaxing a picture into life. I noticed that I became an object of suspicion to passers-by, and so did the picture

that I was looking at.' Instead, Benjamin called for 'integrated distraction'. He imagined such reception as a revolutionary 'hands-off' hind-sight. Today distraction is more vice than virtue. Indeed, it is you can't get anything done. Technological innovation keeps us from one pointless task after the other, replying to e-mails, updating Facebook status, tweeting, texting, always working at our screens, in victims of a cyberspace Sisyphian curse. This distracted way of living runs counter to the popular theory of the Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi that people are happiest when they are in a state of flow.⁷ But then Benjamin was not a poet bemoaning work, a philosopher of happiness. More likely, he would have regarded sleep, rest, flow, absorption and the cult of fulfilling labour as false pleasures for wholeness, delusions that stop us realising we are in a hole in the world, knee deep in accumulated rubble, downtrodden and exploited.

Absorption and flow are characteristic of the creation and reception of auratic art. The kind of art Benjamin prized and took to be revolutionary potential was otherwise: it involved disruption and estrangement, bursting open the smooth surface of reality. Instead of meditation on delusive harmonies, it meant being discomfited by dissonances, jump-cuts, deranging montages. Absent-mindedness was very nearly a virtue for Benjamin. You might say that cinema, for him, was a Brechtian alienation technique with better technology. Film, as he put it, isn't so much an art form that soothes as one that trains its viewers 'in the vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily'. Here apparatus means the plantain-ripe world of urban commodity capitalism that we take to be real and given, and so accept fatalistically.

But there is more. Think of Greta Garbo or, if you prefer, Greta Clooney. Movie stars seem to be auratic, that is to say, their whole appears to be like that of Greek statues. As a result, the cinema appears to be another temple for the enactment of rituals. Benjamin had an incendiary idea about this which subverts the thought that Catholic Clooney are akin to gods. Film acting, he maintained, is different from earlier forms of acting in that every film performance is a composition of separate takes, each of which has been assembled not by the

actor, but by the director, cinematographer, lighting designer, executive producer, lighting designer. So the actor's performance is broken up and edited back together. As Benjamin's biographers argued:

his insouciant, testable nature of the performance before the apparatus (the camera, editing studio, cinema projection) makes visible to us [i.e. camera, editing studio, cinema projection] and control 'the something otherwise hidden: the self-alienation of the modern, technological subject, the susceptibility to measurement over the actor thus places the apparatus in the services of a triumph over the apparatus, a triumph of humanity.'⁸

Benjamin thought that the cinema held up to us a mirror of our condition - we too are technologised subjects, broken up, studied, refixed in the same way actors' performances are. For him, the new technology of mechanical reproduction meant that the actor's performance was detachable from the person mirrored. While earlier forms of acting, particularly in the theatre, involved performances that were different particularly in the theatre, involved performances that were detachable and so had about them an aura, film acting was different. The film star's performance was 'transportable and subject to a different control - that of the viewers, who confront it en masse'. As a result, we could break up the cult of the movie star by reflecting on how his or her performance has been mechanically assembled. 'During long periods of human history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence', wrote Benjamin, and his hope was that since our mode of sense perception changes thanks to technological innovation, from the enhanced perception that cinema allows us we can see that we have become things.

Benjamin's technological utopianism is beguiling, and one can understand his hopes for it under fascism, but one could also argue the opposite: instead of making self-alienation visible, cinema can extend it. Instead of annulling approachability, cinema can extend auratic distance. The technology may, but needn't, help us realise our alienation. And the training that Benjamin recommended in order to hone the new sensory powers cinema offers us is one that few have undertaken. What he seemed to be arguing for here is a kind of aberrant decoding. But the hope for such decoding involves an active,

informed, politicised role for the cinema audience that, we thought, with hindsight, it didn't have, and is incredibly rare. Cinema, even in the hands of the Hollywood culture industry that Adorno and Horkheimer would excoriate in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, has been an ideological tool for the domination of the masses rather than revealing to them their plight under monopoly capitalism. What Benjamin hoped would be consciousness raising has, quite often, been merely brain numbing.

'Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual', wrote Benjamin. Again, one could just as well argue the opposite: that it tightens the bonds with more sophisticated technology. Our film stars are subjects of cultic veneration. The Italian devotee of Walter Benjamin, Roberto Calasso, wrote in *The Ruin of Kasch* that 'every movie star is a constellation, incorporated into the heavens after being devoured by the gods.' The movie star is thus both a god and a sacrifice to the gods. More precisely, we might say that the movie star becomes a god only after being sacrificed. And what is true of movie stars is true of all celebrities: the culture industry produces gods and sacrificial victims by means of the same technology; indeed, it erases the distinction between them.

WALTER BENJAMIN had a blind spot about music. If he hadn't, he might have written about jazz in the same utopian spirit in which he wrote about cinema. One could map his optimism about cinema's revolutionary potential onto jazz, which, like cinema but more so, liquidates tradition, fractures, telescopes, alters our staid perceptions and has a subversive political potential, challenges ruling-class orthodoxy, and subverts affirmative culture. If the camera introduces us to an optical unconscious so perhaps jazz introduces us to an aural one. Adorno argued that jazz does the opposite of all of these things.

For him it has no revolutionary potential. What he attempts to do in 'On Jazz' is tear off the mask of this music to reveal what lies beneath. Jazz adds improvisation and syncopation to the standardised character of popular music in order to veil its own commodity character. What jazz lovers prize in jazz, then, is the fig leaf that conceals what is: a mass commodity. 'Jazz wants to improve its marketability and veil

its own commodity character which, in keeping with one of the fundamental contradictions of the system, would jeopardise its own success if it were to appear on the market undisguised.'¹⁰ This imputation of criticism seems laughably unfair. Did Miles Davis improvised sax solos disguised expressions of ruling-class orthodoxy? If you know, ask as Louis Armstrong did to the culture industry, to the ideologists: 'Where one might take jazz as a site of resistance, Adorno was writing African-American resistance, Adorno saw nothing of the kind. But these objections are themselves misplaced. Adorno was wrong, not about African-American jazz (indeed there is no indication that he had heard it before his immigration to the United States), but about what he heard in Germany. But even before he heard the music, he was revolted by what he mistakenly thought the word jazz for him meant: 'I remember clearly that I was horrified when I read the word jazz for the first time. It is plausible that my negative association came from the German word *Hatz* [a pack of hounds], which evoked bloodhounds chasing after something slower.'¹¹ Later, when he heard the jazz of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s, his revulsion didn't diminish. The jazz he heard was upper-class entertainment for Germans rather than African-American art form. It was a combination of individual music and march music. 'The former represents an individuality which in truth is none at all, but merely the socially produced illusion of it; the latter is an equally fictive community which formed from nothing other than the alignment of atoms under the force that is exerted upon them.'

The black American roots of jazz served, he thought, as factors that made jazz more appealing to its privileged, white European audiences. 'The skin of the Negro as well as the silver of the saxophone was a coloristic effect' But he heard something else: he heard, in so far as jazz was the authentic African-American expression, not so much rebellion against slavery as resentful submission to it. Jazz, as Adorno understood it, was sadomasochistic. He thought it was suitable for fascism, not just because it mobilised military marches and acted through its collective characters as a corrective to 'the bourgeois

isolation of autonomous art', but also because 'its rebellious gestures are accompanied by the tendency to blind obedience, much like the sadomasochistic type described by analytic psychology'.

Jazz also suggested premature ejaculation. Its synecopation was, for Adorno, very different from Beethoven's. While the latter involved the expression of subjective force which directed itself against authority, that of jazz led nowhere. 'It is plainly a "coming-too-early", just as anti-premature and incomplete orgasm; just as impotence expresses itself through Adorno and Horkheimer would find in Hollywood cinema a similar kind of sexual disappointment: the culture industry, they wrote, endlessly cheats customers out of what it endlessly promises, especially in terms of sexual pleasure. In erotic films, for instance, everything revolves around coitus because it does not take place.'¹² Jazz, similarly, seemed to promise liberation but only delivered ascetic denial.

Jazz, as a result, involved symbolic castration. The weak modern male as performed by Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin, who followed 'too weakly the standard of the collective which has been unproblematically set', found his counterpart in jazz: the ego of the 'hot' variety of jazz, he thought, expresses its impotence, perhaps even reveals in it. By playing, listening or dancing to hot jazz, he argued, one submitted sadomasochistically to an authority while affecting to do the opposite – it was a form of self-alienation masking itself as rebellion.

The decisive intervention of jazz lies in the fact that this subject of weakness takes pleasure precisely in its own weakness. . . . By learning to fear social authority and experiencing it as a threat of castration – and immediately as fear of impotence – it identifies itself with precisely that authority of which it is afraid. . . . the sex appeal of jazz is a command: obey and then you will be allowed to take part. And the dream thought, as contradictory as reality, in which it is dreamt: I will only be potent once I have allowed myself to be castrated.

For Adorno, then, jazz involved a perversion typical of the whole of the culture industry. In embryo in this essay of Adorno's is all that

Marcuse would write about repressive desublimation thirty years later.

When Adorno got to the US he could have immersed himself in American jazz. There is no suggestion, though, that he did go to the West Coast jazz scene in the 1940s, where he might have heard, say, Charlie Parker, Lionel Hampton, Eric Dolphy, Art Pepper and Charles Mingus. He not only didn't, but continued to write anti-jazz jeremiads during his American exile and after. His 1955 book *Prisms* included an essay called 'Perennial Fashions – Jazz', in which he wrote: 'Considered as a whole, the perennial sameness of jazz consists not in a basic organisation of the material within which the imagination can roam freely and without inhabitation, as within an articulate language, but rather in the utilisation of certain well-defined tricks, formulas, and clichés to the exclusion of everything else.'¹³

The deluded technological utopianism of Benjamin's essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction finds its opposite in Adorno's essay on jazz. One could substitute the word 'cinema' for 'jazz' in the above quotation and use it to summarise what Hollywood did to Benjamin's hopes for art: jazz, for Adorno, despite its musical montages, its shock, its technological reproducibility, was a 'phantasmagoria of modernity' and provided only counterfeit freedom. Arguably cinema, on which Benjamin had pinned revolutionary hopes, had become like the image of jazz that Adorno calumnised.

If Walter Benjamin had managed to cross the Atlantic and join the Frankfurt School and his friend Brecht in American exile, it's possible he would have been disabused of his revolutionary hopes for cinema. He might have embraced America with the gusto of Fromm. He might have become a hero to the New Left of the 1960s like Marcuse. He might have got high with Charlie Parker and dug bebop. Charlie Chaplin might have played him in a Benjamin-scripted biopic. He might have been brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee and there outwitted Richard Nixon and lived to a ripe old age as emeritus professor at Harvard. All the lovely American

possibilities we can imagine for the Frankfurt School's greatest critic exist only in a redemptive vision in which what has been smashed is made whole. In reality, a storm was blowing through Europe and Benjamin was about to become one of its millions of victims.

A New World

On 13 March 1933, the swastika flag was raised over Frankfurt town hall. On the same day police closed down the Institute for Social Research. Only two years after Horkheimer's inaugural lecture, which set out the multidisciplinary nature of the Frankfurt School that would become critical theory, he and his Frankfurt School colleagues were compelled to go into exile. Franz Röckle's Neue Sachlichkeit fortress, once known as Café Marx, became first offices for the state police, then a university building used by National Socialist students in 1944; it was destroyed by Allied bombs. Fromm's research into the German working class had been proved correct: German workers could not be counted on to resist the rise of Hitler.

Why had fascism triumphed in Germany? There was no shortage of theories and indeed the question was to divide the Frankfurt School sharply, as we will see later. For Fromm, there were two key factors: German economic backwardness and sadomasochism. Fromm argued that, as Germany had shifted from early to monopoly capitalism, the social character of the lower middle class persisted, outliving its economic function. This class, which was central to the earlier form of capitalism of the nineteenth century, about which Marx had written, should have become economically and politically powerless, and thus obsolete, under monopoly capitalism. But in Germany this had not happened. Even though this class's parsimonious, duty-bound character traits were incompatible with modern forms of capitalist production, they survived in considerable number in Germany. And this German petit bourgeois class proved to be the keenest supporters

of Hitler because, as Fromm put it, 'the desire for authority in a rebelled towards the strong leader, while other specific father figures become the objects of the rebellion?'

That the supporters of Nazism were sadomasochists, the authoritarian father figures were sadomasochists, the Frankfurt School shared. Marcuse in his 1934 essay 'The Struggle Against Injuring Blood, Soil, Racial Purity, Homeland and the Führer, the King and Death for their Country as the Highest Duties. Marcuse had to give to an industrial club in Düsseldorf in 1932. Marcuse had to give the speech highlighted how monopoly capitalism was entering its era, one wherein the totalitarian state and its ideological apparatus would provide a defence of capitalism against the crises to which it had been prone, not least during the German hyperinflation of the 1920s and the global deflationary effects of the 1929 Wall Street Crash.

During the speech in a hotel ballroom to 650 business leaders, Hitler strove to convince his audience that the Nazis were not, as they had feared, socialist and anti-capitalist. He insisted that only he could defend German businesses from capitalist crisis and from the social threat of working-class parties; only he could free Germany from the yoke of war reparations that were stopping Germans from benefiting from the success of its native industry. He refrained from making anti-Semitic remarks. He told them:

The labour resources of our people, the capacities, we have them already: no one can deny that we are industrious. But we must first re-establish the political preconditions: without that, industry and capacity, diligence and economy are in the last resort of no avail: an oppressed nation will not be able to spend on its own welfare even the fruits of its own economy but must sacrifice them on the altar of exactions and of tribute.³

Hitler kept up the charm offensive by suggesting that the noisy rallies and marches by Nazis that may have kept business leaders awake at

night involved the kind of sacrifice necessary for Germany to be great again. He went on:

Remember that it means sacrifice when today many hundreds of thousands of SA and SS men of the National Socialist movement have every day to mount on their lorries, protect meetings, undertake marches of sacrifice themselves night after night and then come back in the grey dawn to workshop and factory, or as unemployed to take the pittance of the dole: it means sacrifice when from the little they possess they have to buy their uniforms, their shirts, their badges, yes and even further to buy their own fares. Relieve me, there is already in all this the force of an ideal - a great ideal!

The speech ended with long and tumultuous applause - Hitler had convinced many of those present he was good for business.

Here, then, in Hitler's words, was the kind of sadomasochism that the Frankfurt School thought Nazism involved - a perversion that was useful to help capitalism function better. 'This ideology', wrote Marcuse, exhibits the status quo, but with a radical transvaluation of values: unhappiness is turned into grace, misery into blessing, poverty into destiny.⁴ Happily for Hitler, duty-bound, pleasure-denying Nazis were temperamentally well suited to bend the knee to that transvaluation.

For Marcuse fascism was not a break with the past, but a continuation of tendencies within liberalism that supported the capitalist economic system. This was the Frankfurt School orthodoxy - fascism wasn't an abolition of capitalism, rather a means of ensuring its continued existence. Horckheimer once wrote 'he who does not wish to speak of capitalism, should also be silent about fascism'.⁵ Perhaps one needed to be German to bow before that injunction. What has long shocked some readers of the Frankfurt School is the apparent blitheness with which they elided Hitlerian fascism, Stalinist communism and Roosevelt's America. But what was most personally important about Hitlerian fascism to the Frankfurt School in 1933 was not so much how it played footsie with business leaders as how it made life impossible for Jewish Marxist intellectuals. Adorno, for instance, was given

an uncomfortable lesson on the impossibility of being a Jewish German intellectual in the 1930s when the president of the British Chamber of Literature, to which he needed to belong if he were to teach non-Aryan pupils, rejected his membership application in 1933 on the grounds that it was restricted to 'reliable members of the faith by which was meant persons who belong to the German nation by profound ties of character and blood. As a non-Aryan you are unable to feel and appreciate such an obligation.'⁶

Adorno, like Horkheimer and Pollock, had his home searched by Nazi paramilitaries. He feared he was being spied on. He wrote from Frankfurt to his friend, the great composer and his former teacher, Alban Berg on 9 September 1933 that he had not been able to give planned lectures the previous semester at Frankfurt University; nor, he feared, would he be able to do so again. His fears were justified: three days later on his thirtieth birthday, September 11, the Nazis withdrew his licence to teach. Life in Germany was becoming impossible and so he, like his Frankfurt School colleagues, was forced to leave.

It's difficult to overstate the pain for these men, not just of exile but of the particular suffering entailed by being uprooted from German intellectual culture and cast into an intellectual milieu where few spoke German, shared their philosophical heritage or cared about their work. Adorno fled first to Oxford where he would spend four years from 1934 to 1938 as an advanced student at Merton College - a demotion from his position as lecturer at Frankfurt. There were worse slights to his self-esteem: at Merton, he was obliged to dine communally. This was 'like having to return to school,' he wrote adding, with pardonable exaggeration, 'in short, an extension of the Third Reich'.⁷ It was there that he composed music, wrote his brilliant essay on Hitler's favourite composer 'In Search of Wagner', and his critique of Husserl's epistemological system, without attracting one invitation to speak at Oxford's intellectual clubs.⁸ Throughout those years he was an outsider whose work was not appreciated. A. J. Ayer, the British exponent of Viennese logical positivism at Oxford, and thus not one sympathetic to Adorno's dialectical thinking, recalled in his autobiography that no one in Oxford took him seriously.⁹

regarded him as a dandy.¹⁰ Deracinated, lonely, struggling to make his philosophy understood in a language that he was just mastering, Adorno took succour in occasional trips to visit Gretel Karplus, whom he would marry in 1937, and Walter Benjamin, who had settled in Paris. Adorno took succour, too, from the fact that that last possibly Jewish German-speaking philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, found English academia out of his depth. In 1929, after other great Jewish German-speaking philosophers, Russell and G. E. Moore, as a result of which he became a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge, Wittgenstein clapped the two examiners on the shoulders and said, 'Don't worry, I know you'll never understand it.'¹¹ Adorno did not feel so much in common - their negative philosophical sensibilities, cultural iconoclasm and pessimism. What's more, given Wittgenstein's temper and Adorno's waspishness, the former's lack of interest in dialectical method and the latter's scorn for what he took as English philosophy's positivism, the results of any meeting between the two would probably not have been pretty. Wittgenstein was charged with having attacked Karl Popper with a poker during a meeting at the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club,¹² what he would have done to Adorno is anybody's guess.

Horkheimer fled first to Geneva. Aided by Friedrich Pollock, he had made preparations to leave Germany soon after the first Nazis took up their seats in the Reichstag, first by transferring assets to Holland and then by establishing a branch office called the Société Internationale de Recherches Sociales in the Swiss city, as well as research centres in Paris, London and New York. It was to Geneva that Horkheimer, Lowenthal, Fromm and Marcuse moved in 1933 to carry on their work. But it became clear that it could only be a temporary home - only Horkheimer had a Swiss residency permit, while his colleagues had to keep renewing their tourist visas. The Frankfurt School considered Paris or London as possible permanent homes, but Horkheimer believed neither was safe from fascism.

New York looked like a more promising refuge. During 1933 and 1934, Reich, Fromm and Julian Gumpert, an American-born

sociologist who had studied in Germany and had become a colleague of Pollock and Horkheimer, negotiated with Columbia University over the possibility of accommodating the exiled Frankfurt School in New York.¹³ Its president, Nicholas Murray Butler, as well as Sociologists Robert S. Lynd and Robert Merton, were impressed with the Institute's research projects and agreed to loan offices at 429 West 117th Street, not far from the Columbia campus. Horkheimer and his colleagues moved in towards the end of 1934.

But wasn't an American university thereby opening its doors to the red menace? Was Columbia suckered into supplying the building for a new branch of the Café Marx franchise? Was the International Institute of Social Research (as the Frankfurt School was called in New York) really a crypto-Marxist entryist outfit that had successfully infiltrated a leading university for nefarious, communistic purposes, while concealing its true identity in order to avoid political scrutiny and, quite possibly, expulsion from the United States? All these questions can be answered positively if you believe the theory rehearsed in 1980 by the American sociologist Lewis Feuer, who pointed out that Horkheimer and his colleagues were happy to criticise bourgeois culture and society, but were suspiciously silent about Stalinist excesses like liquidations, show trials and gulags.¹⁴ Perhaps, Feuer inferred their silence about Stalin's Soviet Union spoke volumes – the Frankfurt scholars were really a bunch of communist infiltrators.

Horkheimer and Pollock, though, hardly had the same genius for duping intellectuals as the Bolshevik Comintern spy-master, Willi Münzenberg, who targeted left-leaning liberal intellectuals (including Ernest Hemingway, Lillian Hellman, André Malraux and André Gide) to run communist front organisations and attempted to seduce them into supporting various causes of the Soviet Union.¹⁵ Feuer's suggestion that Columbia University's negotiators with the Frankfurt School were dupes is implausible. The School, by this time in its evolution, had no party affiliation, still less any solidarity with the Soviet Union. Their brand of multidisciplinary neo-Marxism was heretical to the Kremlin and, unless their development of critical theory was an elaborate smokescreen, its thinkers were unlikely to be soldiers for Stalin.

What the Frankfurt School did have, though, was a long-term commitment to Aesopian language, that is, words or phrases that duped an innocent meaning to an outsider but a hidden meaning to those in the know. Quite possibly it was that commitment that duped Feuer into believing the Frankfurt scholars were a bunch of reds who had infiltrated New York academia. In 1923, for instance, the Institute had abandoned the idea of calling themselves the Institute for Marxism (Institute for Marxism) because it was too provocative, and chose as Martin Jay put it, a more Aesopian alternative.¹⁶ During the 1930s many of the Frankfurt School members felt compelled to use pseudonyms so that they could write without attracting persecution by Nazis or, at least, express themselves with a waspishness fatal to their scholarly identities. Hence, Horkheimer published as Heinrich Reclus, Adorno as Hektor Rotweiler and Benjamin as Detlev Holz. In American exile, Horkheimer ensured that the Frankfurt scholars remained aloof from the society in which they lived. The decision to publish in German precluded the School from having much influence on an overwhelmingly monoglot English-speaking country. Such decisions prevented the Frankfurt School's integration into American society, certainly, but they also gave it the kind of intellectual independence it had sought from its inception. As it must be said, did the fact that it had an independent income (albeit one that was drastically reduced by financial speculations in the US).

During American exile, Horkheimer was also scrupulous in ensuring that the School's journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, where possible, used euphemisms for words that might be read as demonstrating the Institute's political sympathies and result in political harassment by his American hosts.¹⁷ When the *Zeitschrift* published Walter Benjamin's 1936 paper 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', for instance, it changed the final sentences, which might otherwise have been read as a call to communist-supporting artists to resist fascism in their work. Benjamin had written: 'This is the situation which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicising art.' In the *Zeitschrift* version, though, 'the totalitarian doctrine' was substituted for 'Fascism' and 'the construction of the forces of mankind' for 'communism'. Thus, even right-wing



Americans, if they penetrated the German in which Benjamin's essay was published, might be reassured into believing that he was not envisaging communistic arts political role, but the role of any non-Jewish art. This may be read as a grotesque misrepresentation of Benjamin, and it was, but it was one that had the pragmatic purpose of helping the Frankfurt School in the 1930s avoid persecution by American anti-communists. Whether that pragmatism was justified is a different matter. This wasn't yet the time of McCarthyite witchhunts against suspected communists, but Horkheimer wasn't going to take any risks. The pragmatic imperative became more important once, as a result of the financial difficulties the School suffered following disastrous speculation in the US stock market and property, Horkheimer and his colleagues sought research contracts and so needed to promote themselves as sober scholars rather than crypto-Stalinist henchmen.

What is clear is that these German Jewish exiles were uneasy. Given what they had just experienced in the old world, perhaps their compunction about disclosing their identities too much in the new world is understandable. It's striking, for instance, that when, after his four years in Oxford, Adorno joined his Frankfurt School colleagues in New York, he dropped Wieselgrund from his name at Pollock's suggestion because there were too many Jewish-sounding intellectual suggestions on the Institute's roster. If this sounds ridiculous – after all, the United States was a country of exile for many Jews who would otherwise have been murdered in Nazi Germany – consider the remark of Leo Löwenthal: he told Martin Jay that many in the Frankfurt School thought the Germans less anti-Semitic than the Americans they knew during their exile years.¹⁵

It's a remark that needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, since whatever anti-Semitism these exiled Jews experienced in the United States it didn't involve house searches by paramilitaries, revoked teaching licences and the looming threat of the death camps. Rather, they were welcomed to New York and there given the opportunity to think, write, publish and research as they wished. It's significant that when Adorno gave his first impressions of his new home, he stressed how familiar it seemed. As we both expected, he wrote to Benjamin after sailing to New York with his wife Gretel, 'we are not finding it difficult

to adapt to the living conditions here. It is *serious*, which is close as to adapt to the living conditions here. It is *serious*, which is close as European here than in London, and 7th Avenue, Montparnasse to convince is as peacefully reminiscent of the boulevard in this passage to New York by Greenwich village.¹⁶ True, he was trying in this passage to New York by Greenwich village.¹⁶ True, he was trying in this passage to New York by Benjamin, the irredeemable Francophile, to emigrate to New York in the 15th Benjamin, the irredeemable Francophile, to emigrate to New York in the 15th crossing its similarities to the Parisian neighbourhood in the 15th crossing its similarities to the Parisian neighbourhood in the 15th aroundissement where Benjamin and more sympathetic. aroundissement where Benjamin and more sympathetic. aroundissement where Benjamin and more sympathetic.

making the city seem less alien and more advanced as one Compare Adorno's first impressions with those of his wife in a letter to Benjamin from the same time: 'What amazes me most is the fact that things here are by no means all as new and advanced as one would really think; on the contrary: one can observe the contrast between the most modern and the most shabby things wherever one goes. There is no need to search for the surreal here, for one stumbles over it at every step.'¹⁷ Here, Gretel Adorno was jettisoning the stereotypical European idea of America as land of endless newness, but holding on to the sense of its (not necessarily unpleasant) strangeness that her husband couldn't, or didn't want, to feel. He, and indeed the rest of the Frankfurt School, didn't adapt to American life that they make it adapt to them – and those aspects of American life that they instinctively disliked, as we will see, they treated with contempt and ruthlessly rejected, almost as if they were trying to inoculate themselves against infection by a lower life form.

But the old world iconoclasm of the Frankfurt School hardly went unchallenged in New York. Not long after settling at the Columbia University campus on Morningside Heights, overlooking Harlem, Horkheimer and his colleagues found the basis of critical theory challenged by a group called the New York Intellectuals. The Intellectuals dissented from two of the Frankfurt School's articles of faith, namely that the dialectical method was essential in the would-be Marxist's conceptual toolkit and that those who were insufficiently dialectical were doomed to uphold the status quo. At two charged meetings in 1936 and 1937, Horkheimer and his colleagues were confronted by another group of (broadly) Jewish and/or Marxist thinkers who thought that the dialectical method explained little and that the Hegelian distinction between *Vernunft* and *Verstand* was

metaphysical obfuscation.²¹ The New York Intellectuals were back by Sidney Hook, a ferociously argumentative man, heretical Marxist and devotee of American pragmatism, nicknamed John Dewey Pitbull. He was joined by the Trotskyist art historian Meyer Schapiro, and two men who, intellectually at least, represented much that the Frankfurt School despised, the logical positivist philosophers King Nagel and Otto Neurath.

Neurath, in particular, is worth remarking on because he, in his the mathematical cast of his philosophy and the committed application of his logical thinking to real-world problems, was so central to the Frankfurt Schools brand of speculative, often amorphous philosophy. He was an exiled member of the Vienna Circle of logical positivists, as well as an economist and sociologist. Before his untimely death aged sixty-three in 1945, Neurath would establish the League for the Establishment of the New International Institute in Oxford, devoted to his symbolic way of representing qualitative information which he was to deploy to help with stimulus-response planning in the English West Midlands. That was one of the rare moments, with all due respect to the philosophical discipline, in which a logician's skills have helped improve the living conditions of those suffering under capitalism. If Neurath's Isotope Institute was *Verstand* in action, then perhaps it could be usefully construed as a counter to Horkheimer and Marcuse's insistence that formal logic is a tool of oppression.

But what was most striking about the meetings between the two schools was not so much the conflict between Frankfurt and Vienna, but between dialectical method and logical positivism, but rather the clash of two Marxist heresies – both disdained as pervasions of the true creed by the international Communist. Horkheimer and Hook were Marxists, perhaps, but not as Stalin understood the term.

Hook is an intriguing figure, who in the 1920s had studied with Karl Korsch in Berlin and at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, but by 1985 had changed his political views so markedly in light of Stalin's medal of freedom from President Ronald Reagan. By the mid 1930s Hook had broken with the Communist and, while studying with the great American philosopher John Dewey at Columbia, had developed

an intellectual synthesis of Marxism and pragmatism. That synthesis was prompted by the same motives that drove Horkheimer to reconfigure Marxism and develop interdisciplinary critical theory: the revolution hadn't happened and the New York Intellectuals led by Hook both the Frankfurt School and the orthodox Marxist belief in historically respectable were opposed to the orthodox Marxism as offering an intellectually respectable pragmatism that dispensed with the determinism and fitted better with American sensibilities.

Professor Ned Rescher in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* describes pragmatism's characteristic idea as being 'that efficacy in practical application – "What works most effectively in practice" – somehow provides a standard for the determination of truth in the case of statements; rightness in the case of actions and value in the case of appraisals.²² Pragmatism is not, as the Frankfurt School charged positivism and empiricism with being, value-free – a fact that Marcuse conceded in his 1941 review of Dewey's *Theory of Valuation*.²³ Rather, value is built into pragmatism's insistence on efficacy in practical application. As a philosophy, pragmatism has a long tradition in the United States, and it's tempting to suggest its very practical turn made it temperamentally appealing to can-do Americans, certainly if the alternative was the proverbial abstruseness of German idealism. Annoyingly, matters aren't that simple. In fact, pragmatism, as theorised by Dewey, borrowed from German idealism, in particular from Hegel. Dewey was attracted by Hegel's notion of an active mind able to construct reality – a notion that had influenced earlier Transcendentalists in the nineteenth century. As we saw earlier, Hegelian notion of self-actualisation, which Marx had recast in material terms so that for him to be free was to realise one's identity through non-exploited labour, was controversial to the Frankfurt School. And yet Dewey took up this Hegelian heritage and applied it, pragmatically, to science: science was seen as a tool to help humans realise their potential and thus create utopias. Though Dewey was no Marxist (Hook would describe him in his autobiography as an 'honest liberal'), this pragmatic twist to what science might be harnessed to achieve was attractive to Hook. It fitted with his view of Marx as a

scientist-activist and it made him sceptical of the Hegelianism of the Frankfurt School. He suspected the obscurantist German philosophy to conservatism, authoritarianism and elitist pitfalls. As Thomas Wheatland in his history of the Frankfurt School's exile years argues, both Hook and Dewey were influenced by the egalitarian ideas of the greatest pragmatist philosopher of the time, Peirce, who blew a breath of fresh, democratic air through intellectual philosophy. Wheatland writes of Peirce's vision of intellectual culture: 'Any person, like any scientist, was capable of generating new and creative ideas about the world that could be tested and refined according to practical experience. Knowledge and reason could be refined as the discoveries were shared by this scientific community and consensus began to take shape.'²¹

Hook thought Marxism could be revived through a similar pragmatic turn – freely arrived at consensus could prompt collective action that had a democratic course. This pragmatist vision of unconstrained consensus-oriented democratic collective action was hardly appealing to Horkheimer or the rest of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, but it was to prove inspiring to the second generation, in particular to Jürgen Habermas whose development of the notion of communicative action relied to a considerable extent on his reading of American pragmatists, in particular George Herbert Mead.

This championing of science as a tool for liberation rather than a tool of oppression was mimicked by Horkheimer and the rest of the Frankfurt School. For them, Hook was insufficiently dialectical. Hook retorted to these charges by sarcastically asking Horkheimer and Marcuse what doctrines are dialectically true but scientifically false or scientifically true yet dialectically false. For Hook, the Frankfurt School's dystopian perspective on science was unwarranted. We don't have the Frankfurt scholars' replies to Hook's disdainful challenge but what we do know is that, even after these conversations with the New York Intellectuals, Horkheimer carried on loathing pragmatism. He took it as a form of positivism that, like empiricism, facilitated capitalism rather than, as the Hegelianised critical theory he was developing did, critiqued it. In a 1943 letter to Pollock he wrote that

pragmatism and empiricism and the lack of genuine philosophy are some of the foremost reasons which are responsible for the crisis which civilisation would have faced even if the war had not come.²² America was hobbled, he thought, by its lack of a dialectical philosophical heritage, by its dearth of critical thinking that didn't hobble by its commitment to fruitless dialectical thinking that didn't lead to practical results.

ANDRINO DIDN'T TAKE part in these charged debates between the Frankfurt School and the New York Intellectuals. At the time he was still in Oxford, only arriving in New York in 1938. But once he arrived his first work for the School involved a clash with the new world that was even more bruising than the one Horkheimer had endured with John Dewey's Pinball. It was a confrontation that would serve to deepen his old world iconoclasm and his scepticism about American mass culture, and lead to many of the devastating criticisms of what he and Horkheimer later called the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

His first job in America began in 1938 when he joined the Princeton Radio Research Project. This was a project to study the effects that new forms of mass media could have on American society, made possible by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to Princeton University. It was led by the exiled Viennese sociologist Paul Lazarfeld, who years before had worked as a research associate for the Frankfurt School in its studies on authority and family.²³ Before Andrino got involved, Lazarfeld's researchers had studied the social effects of Orson Welles's notorious radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, which was broadcast on CBS Radio to six million listeners on Halloween 1938. The broadcast was taken by many listeners as suggesting that a Martian invasion was currently in progress and, so legend has it, spread panic across the United States. But while Welles's broadcast is often cited as an example of the power of new forms of mass media and the gullibility of the public, it also serves to demonstrate how supposedly passive consumers of mass media are aberrant decoders of its messages. Indeed, according to *Invasion from Mars*: A

... it was indeed a dramatic adaptation), and a major part of the previous month.²⁷

Adorno was hired by Lazarfeld as the project's musical director because he was thought to have a stimulating mind and because his musicological expertise might be useful. But once inside the dining headquarters in Newark, New Jersey, where the project had its analytical framework that he had never done before and using an Get to the heart of why they liked or disliked of programme material, how many listeners like classical music, how many classical or would most likely turn out to be incapable of quantification,²⁸ he was especially scandalised by a device called the programme analyser that Lazarfeld developed with psychologist Frank Stanton. This was a kind of forerunner of the Nielsen audiometer used by TV and radio networks today. Listeners studied by the project were supposed to use it to register their likes or dislikes by pressing a button. It reflected that culture was simply the condition that precluded a mentality that tried to measure it, Adorno recalled.²⁹ It's just as well, you might think, that he didn't live to see how Facebook users sit encouraged to like things – be they each others' cakes or Beethoven symphonies – thereby submitting everything to the same scale of judgement.

Adorno's alienation from the project stemmed in part from his insistence on asking interpretive questions beyond the remit of its empirical study. What's more, he baulked at sociological work being

useful for commercial purposes, in this case by supplying data that helped programme makers decide what kinds of shows would maximise ratings. This kind of capitalist spirit was inimical to Adorno's Marxist-inflected sensibility. Instead, he wrote four papers for the project that undermined his distance from Lazarfeld's conception of social research and of how sociology could function as handmaiden to business. In his long essay 'Music in Radio, for example, he developed a concept he called fetish making in music. He wrote: 'By musical fetish making, we mean that instead of any direct relationship between the listener and the music itself, there exists only a relationship between the listener and some sort of social or economic value which has been attributed either to the music or to the performers.'³⁰ In short, music had become a commodity and/or a means of encouraging the purchase of other commodities.

Lazarfeld, when he read this 160-page paper, furiously annotated it with marginal comments like 'idiotic', 'you never know what he's talking about' and – in words that might have struck a chord with Sidney Hook – 'Dialectics as excuse not to have to think in a disciplined way'. Lazarfeld also wrote directly to Adorno, damning his essay: 'You pride yourself in attacking other people because they are renegade and fetishists, but it doesn't occur to you how open you are yourself to such attacks. ... Don't you think it is a perfect fetishism the way you used Latin words all through your text?'

Adorno carried on writing for Lazarfeld's project regardless, developing his ideas about music as fetishism and about listening to music on the radio as a pseudo-activity, before quitting the project in 1941. He regarded American commercial radio as akin to the totalitarian radio he had heard in Nazi Germany, which, he reflected, had been assigned the task 'of providing good entertainment and diversion to control the masses. He came to believe that the function of American commercial radio was to distract listeners from political reality while making them passive consumers who chose what was offered to them.

In his 1939 essay 'Plugging Study', for instance, Adorno suggested that music was used in jingles and standardised hit parade tunes in order to produce an emotional reaction in what he called the victim,

Study in the Psychology of Panic, by Lazarusfeld's research, a theme of those who heard the show did not realise it was a drama. Listening through the broadcast had been prefaced with an announcer telling those listeners it was indeed a dramatic adaptation, and a tragedy, but an attack from Germany – a deluded belief possibly explained by the Munich Crisis over Hitler's annexation of parts of Czechoslovakia the previous month.²⁷

Adorno was hired by Lazarusfeld as the project's musical director because he was thought to have a stimulating mind and because his musicological expertise might be useful. But once inside the broadcast brewery building in Newark, New Jersey, where the project had its headquarters, Adorno was in an alien intellectual environment, one involving empirical research he had never done before and using an analytical framework that he distrusted. He was doubtful that message to the heart of why they listened to particular broadcasts. He wrote to Lazarusfeld: 'You may be able to measure in percentage terms how many listeners like classical music, how many classical or romantic music and how many prefer verismo opera and so on. But if you wish to include the reasons they give for their preferences, it would most likely turn out to be incapable of quantification.'²⁸ He was especially scandalised by a device called the programme analyzer that Lazarusfeld developed with psychologist Frank Stanton. This was a kind of forerunner of the Nielsen audiometer used by TV and radio networks today. Listeners studied by the project were supposed to use it to register their likes or dislikes by pressing a button. It reflected that culture was simply the condition that precluded a mentality that tried to measure it, Adorno recalled.²⁹ It's just as well you might think that he didn't live to see how Facebook users are encouraged to like things – be they each others' cakes or Beethoven symphonies – thereby submitting everything to the same scale of judgement.

Adorno's alienation from the project stemmed in part from his insistence on asking interpretive questions beyond the remit of its empirical study. What's more, he balked at sociological work being

social for commercial purposes, in this case by supplying data that helped programme makers decide what kinds of shows would maximise ratings. This kind of capitalistic spirit was inimical to Adorno's Marxist-influenced sensibility. Instead, he wrote four papers for the project that undermined his distance from Lazarusfeld's conception of social research and of how sociology could function as handmaid to business. In his long essay 'Music in Radio', for example, he developed a concept he called fetish making in music. He wrote: 'By musical fetish making, we mean that, instead of any direct relationship between the listener and some sort of social or economic value which has been attributed either to the music or to the performers.'³⁰ In short, music had become a commodity and/or a means of encouraging the purchase of other commodities.

Lazarusfeld, when he read this 160-page paper, furiously annotated it with marginal comments like 'idiotic', 'you never know what he's talking about and – in words that might have struck a chord with Sidney Hook – 'Platitudes as excuse not to have to think in a disciplined way'. Lazarusfeld also wrote directly to Adorno, damning his essay: 'You pride yourself in attacking other people because they are neurotic and fetishists, but it doesn't occur to you how open you are yourself to such attacks... Don't you think it is a perfect fetishism the way you used Latin words all through your text?''³¹

Adorno carried on writing for Lazarusfeld's project regardless, developing his ideas about music as fetishism and about listening to music on the radio as a pseudo-activity, before quitting the project in 1941. He regarded American commercial radio as akin to the totalitarian radio he had heard in Nazi Germany, which, he reflected, had been assigned the task of providing good entertainment and diversion to control the masses. He came to believe that the function of American commercial radio was to distract listeners from political reality while making them passive consumers who chose what was offered to them.

In his 1939 essay 'Plugging Study', for instance, Adorno suggested that music was used in jingles and standardised hit parade tunes in order to produce an emotional reaction in what he called 'the victim,'

'Like the sound of dropping dog food in a bowl, the dog comes running.' Such music wasn't music any more but a formulaic system of climaxes and repetition. This was a devastating critique not only of how popular music was written, but of the way music was used to sell products. Once a formula was successful, the industry plugged the same thing over and over again. The result was to make music into a kind of social cement operating through distraction, displaced wish-fulfilment, and the intensification of passivity.²² In this, you might well think, Adorno was prescient: he recognised early the developments that would dominate television, film, commercial theatre, book publishing and the internet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, how the endless repetition of successful formulas, such as in sequels or online retailer recommendations based on past consumption patterns, keeps us in a kind of Sisyphian hell, buying and consuming minimally different cultural products.

His biographer Stefan Müller-Doohm suggests that by the end of his association with the project, Adorno had become convinced that the stereotypical production mechanisms of popular culture moulded the expectations of consumers to maximise profits for its shareholders. There was what he called a pre-established harmony between the culture industry and its audiences, such that the latter demand what they are given. True, that pre-established harmony helped capitalism function more efficiently, but the price was that its victims, as Adorno called them, were locked into a degrading relationship of dependency with commodities, consuming things that they did not need, becoming passive, stupid and – no small matter this to the German composer – increasingly unable to properly hear music deserving of the name.²³

Such was Adorno's first gift to his American hosts – an eviscerating attack on the capitalistic values and the commodified, customised culture he took to dominate the new world in which he lived. More incendiary yet was his suggestion that the United States was not dissimilar in its techniques of mass control to the Germany he had fled into exile to avoid. The idea that there was a parallel between the mass media of Roosevelt's America and Hitler's Germany may have

seemed scandalous at the time and may seem so now, but the Frankfurt School was not to abandon that conviction during its exile years in the United States. On the contrary, it was to deepen once they experienced more of the new world.