# 50 Years after *The Dialectical Imagination*

## - Interview with Martin Jay by his Translator

**Notes:** After 50 years of the publication of *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, Martin Jay is interviewed by his Chinese translator SUN Yizhou (孙一洲), discussing the book, generational and globalized critical theories and methodology of intellectual history. The 2nd Chinese edition of the book will be published by Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House (上海文艺出版社) in 2023, the year marks the 100th anniversary of the Institute for Social Research. The recording of this interview is uploading to *New Books Network Podcast*, whereas the transcript will also serve as the preface of the new edition and published in *Shanghai Review of Books*.

**SUN Yizhou:** Dear listeners, welcome to the New Book of Critical Theory, a channel on New Book Network. This is SUN Yizhou, your host, and today we have the pleasure of speaking with Professor Martin Jay, Ehrman Professor of European History Emeritus at UC Berkeley. Today, we'll be discussing his monograph *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, a relatively new book just published 50 years ago. Before I explain why we raise this topic, Professor Jay, welcome back to New Book Network.

**Martin Jay:** Thanks! It's always a pleasure to speak to your audience.

**SUN Yizhou:** The reason why we invited Professor Jay today is because, as some of the listeners might notice, this year marks the 100th anniversary of the Institute of Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*), which served as the institutional embodiment of the Frankfurt School from the 1920s. To commemorate this occasion, there will be several events held in German academia this year. Additionally, this year also marks the 50th year after the publication of vicissitudes of this legendary school by Professor Jay. As a coincidence, the second edition of the book's Chinese translation will also be published by Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House, and I am its translator. Professor Jay, your fruitful career in intellectual history starts with this seminal book. But before we dive into details of the book, I have to ask: did you choose to publish this monograph on the 50th anniversary of the Institute back in 1973, or it’s just a happy coincidence?

**Martin Jay:** I think the stars were aligned. I had absolutely no awareness when I did my dissertation in 1971 and then submitted the book for publication with Little Brown. The press had published it that it would appear the fiftieth anniversary of the family of the Institute and now, halfway to the hundredth. So, it really was a happy coincidence and it's been a great good fortune for me because the celebrations in Frankfurt and also there's one at Harvard where I'm going a month later and several others around the world have allowed the book to be in a way absorbed into the much larger acknowledgment of the importance of the hundredth anniversary of the institute itself.

**SUN Yizhou:** I’d like to begin by asking about contexts and perspectives unique to your contribution. One thing I noticed in your book is the mention of your former teacher, Stuart Hughes. Apart from your acknowledgment, his name also appears once in the content. According to the book, he was a colleague of three critical theorists in the US Office of Strategic Services during World

War II. The reason I bring up this detail is that, writing critical theory seems to be a normal choice today, but prior to the 1960s, critical theorists remained a generally unknown to American audiences despite having spent almost two decades in the country. So, before the Frankfurt School achieved its canonical status in contemporary academic life, what initially intrigued you about the topic? Did Professor Hughes offer his impression of his co-workers from Germany?

**Martin Jay:** This has been a question I've often been asked. I think there were two basic contexts in which my interest was sparked. The first was the larger reception of the German migration to the United States. In other words, in the late 1960s many of the emigres still alive but they recognized that their careers and perhaps their lives were nearing an end. For the first time they were an object of historical interest as a group and a number of them were available to be interviewed and to share if they were willing some of their materials and so there was at that time a great deal of interest in the migration. And H Stuart Hughes, my dissertation advisor, was in fact, writing the third volume of a trilogy that he began with consciousness in society on the migration itself, so he was very much interested in that as a historical topic. The book he wrote was called the *Sea Change* came out about ten years after I began my work.

The second stimulus was, in a way, mystery of Herbert Marcuse's origins. Marcuse was a very very important figure on the New Left. He was our Western Marxist, our connection to a tradition which is only then being discovered in the Anglophone world. It was a book of essays to which I contributed edited by Dick Howard and Karl Clare called *the Unknown Dimension*, this included work on other Marxists like Lukács, Sartre, Althusser, a number of others who were just beginning to be received in the United States. but Marcuse was important as a figure of the New Left, not always fully understood but he was active politically, he was much celebrated or attacked in the press as the Guru of the New Left. But no one really understood where he came from, no one understood the background in critical theory, the background in a certain version of Hegelian Marxism, so I was in a way intrigued by the possibility of combining these two stimuli, the migration as a whole and the Frankfurt School within it, and the origins of Herbert Marcuse. Now Happily, H Stewart Hughes had not only been writing this book on the migration but was also personally friendly with Marcuse. They knew each other from the 1940s. Marcuse taught for a long time at Brandeis which was very close to Harvard, and they were friends enough that doors were open for me. Stewart was also knowing other former figures in the Frankfurt School's history. For example, Paul Lazarsfeld who was, you know in some ways, an adversary a critical theory but also collaborated with them. And Stuart was able to write to Lazarsfeld and open an important door there. He had met Leo Löwenthal. So, Stuart Hughes was a great enabler in a way and also quite enthusiastic about the topic. It was a really happy coincidence that allowed me to pursue this.

At the same time, there were a few other scholars, Gian Ruscon in Italy, several in the United States, a man in Germany, who was working on Horkheimer's legacy, were also beginning to do work on the Frankfurt School. In most cases for one reason or another, they did not complete their projects and so I was left pretty much alone until, of course, later works like Rolf Wiggershaus's mammoth study of the Frankfurt School to be the first historian to try to put it all together, but there was clearly a larger interest. There's a new book just come out in German which deals with the Frankfurt School's reception, reception of critical theory in the United States by Robert Zwarg. He puts it in

the context of several journals *Telos*, *the New German Critique* which were also in the 1960s and early 70s, very interested in probing the history of Western Marxism, the history of the Frankfurt School and also then applying it in the American context. Although I was not a founding member of that group, I was friendly with many of them, wrote a number of articles in *Telos* and they were also, we might say, a nurture and context for the larger interest in which my book was situated.

**SUN Yizhou:** For me, your book still serves as the best introduction to the Frankfurt School today. Here let me quote a remark by Professor Peter Gordon (What is Intellectual History?) to those audience who are unfamiliar with your book:

> This book was a landmark in scholarship on the so-called "Frankfurt School," established in the early 1920s in Frankfurt, Germany. The book is chiefly about a core group of social philosophers - Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Leo Löwenthal, and Herbert Marcuse… Most of the book provides a lucid introduction to critical theory itself. But these intellectuals were also leading lights of a new institution officially founded in Frankfurt under the name, "The Institute for Social Research." Jay's book therefore spends considerable time discussing the institutional history of the school, e.g., its funding, its membership, its relocation from Germany to North America, and so forth. The result is a book, which combines several different approaches at once: it is a collective biography, an institutional history, and also an expository study of ideas.

Why did you choose to focus on an institution as the subject of your research in the beginning, and how do you see the institutional history presented in the book, considering that intellectual works are typically seen as individualistic?

**Martin Jay:** It's a difficult issue to deal with, because obviously there has to be some sort of balance between context and ideas, between putting the figures as actual human beings in their own life histories and you're taking the ideas seriously enough to see them as more than just reflections of their personal and limited experiences. What I tried to do in the book was to be fair to what we might call the larger context of Weimar republic, the crisis of Marxism, the role of Jewish intellectuals at a time, when antisemitism was increasing. That (is the) larger context and then, let's say, the more proximate context of the extraordinary creation in the early 1920s of an institution that was not associated with a political party… That was not afraid to be associated nonetheless with Marxism and which created a kind of collaborative enterprise, which was not simply something they followed but created a route and changed as they created it. To pay attention to those contexts, but then also to try to make some sense of the ways in which the work hung together, the work made some sort of sense as a group project with enough coherence to allow us to talk about the idea of a school.

I mean that was, of course, not my coinage. It was something that came into play in Germany after World War II when they had returned, but the idea of Frankfurt School emerged in the larger context of the Institute, something I was very fascinated with. Now, my original ambition was to do a history that took it up to the present, but I soon realized that there was an enormous material I had to cover that would just allow me to move to 1950 then leave the subsequent history to others. And I've written a bit about that subsequent history in later work. But I had bitten off far more than I was

able to chew, in a, I would say, fully successful way.

One of the things that, if I look back in retrospect, I would have to say about the book, is that I was lucky that there was a lot of new material, a lot of material that no one had seen before, for example, the letters between Horkheimer and Löwenthal. I also was able to speak to many people and get their responses to my questions. But luckily, I was not able to see the amount of material that now is available to a scholar working on the Frankfurt School because if I had been inundated if I'd been swamped, if I'd been overwhelmed with all that material, I would still be writing my dissertation today. So it was a kind of happy point, a sort of sweet point, we might say, sweet spot in between - knowing a lot that had not been known before but not yet knowing what we now have access to, which is absolutely overwhelming and which has created an international, if you dislike it, let's call it industry in critical theory, in Frankfurt School studies, which now can produce large scale works on the seemingly smallest aspects of the history of the school. I've just finished a remarkable biography of Felix Weil by Hans-Peter Gruber, which is something like 600 pages in German. And you know, the ability to write about Felix Weil in that amount of space would have been impossible in 1970. When I was doing my work, no one knew anything about Felix Weil, he had not written his own autobiography yet and so forth. The amount of material now was amazing, and I was lucky that I got there. That's a point when I did.

**SUN Yizhou:** Since you mentioned, let’s start our discussion with the Weimar Republic, a period of innovation and chaos that had a special linkage with America in the 1920s, and which has been extensively researched by American scholars, including yourself. In your book, you describe the Frankfurt School as 'one survivor of Weimar culture,' which struck me as somewhat contradictory. While it's true that the school originated from the Weimar years, the specifics of their cultural attitudes are highly debatable. While many staffs actively participated in Weimar politics, the inner circle, especially Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock, remained indifferent to those struggles. Erich Fromm and Löwenthal were involved in the Jewish Renaissance, but their writings for the institute show limited evidence of this. Walter Benjamin certainly had a role of critics, but he only associated with the institute after the Nazi takeover. And apparently, the Second Viennese School, which Adorno admired, did not belong to the Weimar culture. Psychoanalytic movement might be the one exception they truly inherited. Most importantly, with their later critiques of primitive arts, New Objectivity, and the film industry, they were, in some ways, opposed to the zeitgeist of Weimar culture. How would you locate the Frankfurt School within the broader scope of Weimar thought and culture?

**Martin Jay:** Oh, it's an excellent question. I mean the very concept of Weimar Culture was first floated by Peter Gay in a book with that name that was published first in 1969. Peter Gay was interested in what he called the outsider as insider, the people who had been marginalized, who were now given an opportunity to have a more prominent role in German culture. In the Wilhelmine period they had been marginalized, maybe they were Jews, maybe they were leftists, but for whatever reason they were not at the center of the culture. After the fall of the Wilhelmine regime, after the fall of the Kaiser and the creation of the new republic, outsiders gained positions of increasing prominence and members of the nascent Frankfurt School members, they're still very young, were part of that, I would say, mobilization of talent from the margins and people who

became significant players in Weimar and then, of course, in the emigration afterwards, if they were lucky enough to survive the Nazi takeover. But Weimar Culture as a whole, was far, as you like correctly pointed out, far less coherent, far less unified than one might assume, when we talk about it in the singular, and there were many different movements or subcurrents or countercurrents within it. Obviously, say a figure like Heidegger and before him, Husserl, the phenomenologists, had a complicated relationship to figures who were moving towards a more social-scientific position in the wake of Max Weber interested in the application of empirical research to theoretical questions and so forth.

The Frankfurt School emerged both as an outgrowth of Weimar Culture and, as you correctly say, in contestation with it. First of all, it grew out that strange moment, which Michael Löwy has called a moment of utopia and redemption, in which a certain overheated version of political possibility, which occurred in the early years of republic, after the Russian Revolution after the - to some extent - failed German revolution on the one hand. And a certain apocalyptic messianic religious libertarian thought which infused this political utopianism with a kind of redemptive energy, which was in some ways problematic, but at least meant that the stakes were very high indeed. The dialogue between politics and theology - you think of the political theology that of course we associate with figures on the right like Carl Schmitt - meant that this was a period of great hope of intensity, anxiety, creativity. Some of the Frankfurt School members were more associated with this than others. Obviously, Felix Weil, for example, had no use for it whatsoever. You wouldn't find it in later figures like say Franz Neumann, not very clear in someone like Friedrich Pollack, but to make sense of obviously Walter Benjamin perhaps Adorno and the early Löwenthal. Clearly there was something going on that they took from that atmosphere.

In addition, Weimar Culture also meant the reception, we might say, and the experimentation in new aesthetic forms, so modernism makes inroad first with expressionism, then with the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. There are other forms of surrealism, less important, but other dimensions of modernism play a role and, although the Vienna School was situated outside of Germany, properly speaking, the music did play a role in Germany. Adorno was one of those figures who went back and forth between Frankfurt and Vienna.

In addition, there was also what might be called the new both fascination with and anxiety about popular culture. Weimar Culture was not simply elitist from the top down. It also was in dialogue with the new cinematic and other forms of technologically enhanced modern popular culture, which a figure like Siegfried Kracauer in particular investigated, which could be understood as ideologically suspect, as the culture industry chapter of *Dialect of Enlightenment* later pointed out, but also as potentially containing emancipatory opportunities. Sometimes there were figures like Ernst Bloch who emphasized the ways in which that also occurred. So Weimar Culture was, we might say, broadly speaking, experimental, intense politically charged, still having some sort of theological energy, and also filled with anxiety, which was absolutely born out, or you know, given itself a kind of confirmation in 1933 that the retrospective shadow of Nazism was felt certainly as the Weimar Republic descended into chaos in the last three or four years, when the depression and the suspension of democratic formal government helped to create the terminal crisis of the Republic.

So, the Frankfurt School was born in that context, but as you say, (was) also critical of things like the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, critical of aspects of mass culture, critical of certain philosophical trends such as existential philosophy of Heidegger or Martin Buber or Karl Jaspers. It was certainly a part of it, but not simply an expression of it.

**SUN Yizhou:** Thanks for the answer. To balance the praise by your former student, I would like to bring up a methodological debate. In the 1980s, your book was cited in Dominick LaCapra's essay "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts" as an example of what he called "synoptic content analysis." Despite his underestimating attitude, his description of your approach seems fitting to me, and synoptic content analysis and intellectual biography are frequent patterns of dissertation in certain disciplines. Your work was certainly comprehensive in the 1970s, but if someone today is still writing a thesis claiming that Walter Benjamin is an underestimated figure, I might share LaCapra's dissatisfaction. You also mentioned in the preface to your second edition that certain politically invested reviewers were impatient with the "elegiac" tone of your book. After all these years, do you still hold to your approach and standpoint? Has any criticism of your book truly affected your later writing?

**Martin Jay:** It's an excellent question. Dominick and I are good friends. He was also a student of H Stuart; he was a couple of years before. He was one of the first early adopters of post-structuralist theory in the United States, especially in the historical profession and was critical of what might be called business as usual, so I was trained by Stuart Hughes to do a kind of synoptic content analysis. We didn't use that term, but I think basically that's what he did in his works like *Consciousness and Society*. And many other intellectual historians followed that course, people like George Mossey for example, or Peter Gay. What Dominick brought to the table was an awareness of what we might call the complexity of texts that could not be reduced to their content, which could simply be paraphrased, simply be rendered, as if it were coherent and without internal tensions contradictions, unintended implications and so forth.

Now this was something that I later took very seriously. I did a piece once called “Two Cheers for Paraphrase”, which tried to answer Dominick's point and made a case I thought for the value of paraphrastic duplication as a kind of communicative act, in which you read a thinker over to a larger group of people, and you redescribe what they're trying to say in your own terms. It's a dialogue, you're not simply repeating their text, but you're also trying to create a kind of coherence or order or meaningfulness for you. A work like *Dialectal Imagination* was a work of translation into my own idiom, of the difficult texts that I was reading. And many of them reading in a foreign language. I'm not a native German speaker, my German then was by no means fluent. It still is in need of serious help at times. So, it was a process really of trying to make sense of what was often highly difficult obscure and to a certain extent impenetrable ideas. Now, Dominic's position is one which emphasized what, we might say, making simple ideas complex, whereas what I was doing was trying to make complex ideas not simple, but at least intelligible. And it's my belief that there's a place for both of these endeavors, that sometimes you have to really work to show that what seems to be coherent in fact is far less so than is intended, at other times you have to labor to create a kind of meaningfulness, which then can be later deconstructed. I see Dominic's position as a kind of dialectical one with my own, not an oppositional one.

Now as to the issue of elegiac, post facto rather than practical application of the ideas, that charge was made. I think Douglas Kellner made it, some of the other people around *Telos* made it, Russell Jacoby for example. The idea there was that I treated the Frankfurt School as if somehow these ideas were ideas that no longer quite had the same impact that they might have had during the period when the Frankfurt School members were at the height of their powers and that I wrote from the historian's perspective, not an activist perspective. Now in the long run, it turned out that it was far more difficult to apply the ideas than some of these New Leftists in the 1960s had hoped. So this is not to say that I was vindicated, but that we all recognize that sometimes ideas need to be, you know, in some ways, understood to no longer have quite the same power they might have once had. But also, and this is I think one of the functions of intellectual history, also to remain available for future applications. One of the strange functions of intellectual history is to act as a kind of preserver of critical ideas which may at a moment not have practical implications, but which perhaps later generations can find an inspiration for their own work. This is true, for example of psychoanalysis, I mean in the 1960s and 70s psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice was very much on the defensive and now it's practically disappeared. Not entirely, but it's very much marginalized. And in a psychology department, no one treats Freud, no one teaches Freud anymore, either clinical therapies have gone different directions, or the types of work done in laboratories psychoanalysis plays no role. But for intellectual historians, Freud's ideas still have a kind of power than the ideas of Carl Jung or others no longer have. And so perhaps we're keeping those ideas still alive for potential use in other contexts. So, I think that's the way in which the elegy didn't mean burial but meant a kind of hibernation to use a phrase that Habermas used to describe the politics of the Frankfurt School, a hibernation that allowed the medal and the bottles with messages thrown into the sea to use, the famous metaphor of Adorno, to be potentially opened by later generations.

**SUN Yizhou:** The book originated from your dissertation, as is the case with many scholars. As someone currently struggling with my own dissertation, I can appreciate both the potential and difficulty of your project in hindsight. The bulk of the book covers their time in America, so it is not entirely irrelevant to your local context. You wrote the history roughly 20 years after the events, allowing you to interview most of the main characters and even access first-hand archives. Despite all these ingredients, one thing I admired the most was the book's structure. Your writing was in chronological order, yet each chapter revolved around a single theme. This was particularly noticeable when compared to biographical style on same issue by Dr. Wiggershaus, or the scattered style of many German philosophers, including some critical theorists. How did you manage to shape such a structure while dealing with various sources? How did you balance materials for the sake of clarity and completeness?

**Martin Jay:** I've of course directed many dissertations over the years as well and so this is a practical question I've had to deal with students. I mean I don't know exactly if there's a formula, that is to say, I don't recall having. This is a book written over fifty years ago, having decisions that I took about how to organize the themes of the book. For example, there's one chapter on the reception of psychoanalysis, another one on mass culture, another one on the response to Nazism and so forth. These seem to come, I don't know, I guess organically out of the focus of the work of the figures themselves. The opening substantive chapter of course deals with the development of

something called critical theory, which moved away from, but not entirely abandoned Marxism. So that was sort of stage-setting chapter. You know, Germans have a word *Fingerspitzengefühl*, which means a kind of ability at your fingertips to have a sensitivity that's not reducible to abstract a general rule.

You have to create, I've always used this idea, a series of questions. A dissertation should be the answer to a big question with lots of little questions that sometimes fit under it, sometimes by the margins. The question obviously is, in the Frankfurt School's case, how does it emerge from the institutional context, which you raised before, and then, the idea of what a critical theory is. What constitutes a critical as oppose traditional theory, how does critical theory grow out of, but yet differentiate itself from traditional Marxism and so forth. How does it then apply itself to the burning issues of the day, so obviously Nazism obviously, antisemitism, obviously the question of exile. All of these are questions that they themselves raised and then in dialogue with the figures. I became aware of what might be called sensitive points of contest within the School. So how do you make sense of the relation between Marx and Freud. And Eric Fromm had a very different position on that than Adorno and I'm only still really discovering all the implications of that.

I would say that if you're writing a dissertation, you have to understand what your big question is. You have to understand what tools you can use to answer it, and then also what little questions, and then end up not with completely successful answers. Because a book should not be the endpoint of an intellectual process for you or for people reading it, but a new series of questions, questions that are more finely honed more finely articulated, questions which lead to new directions, questions which later scholars and perhaps you yourself in later work will try to address. Books are part of the stations, are part of a chain of inquiry, which allow you to have a certain humility about how you're basically only part of something, which you can contribute to but not hopefully end. I mean nothing worse than a book that is the definitive history of something which stops all future history because no one wants to challenge it. And luckily, I mean my book not to be falsely minded, but it had a lot of impact but instead of stopping the conversation. It stimulated that. And it's been surpassed in a thousand ways by the scholarship of many, many different people in the past fifty years and that's a great satisfaction to me. It would have been awful if that were the last book on the Frankfurt School.

**SUN Yizhou:** Ok, a chain of inquiries, sounds very Lovejoy. Another important tradition of the Frankfurt School is Western Marxism. In the first paragraph of your content, you describe the dilemma faced by Western leftists between moderate socialists and Moscow's leadership. It's fair to say that from its very beginning, Western Marxism was premised on and overshadowed by Eastern Marxism. Although the first generation of critical theorists of Frankfurt School certainly belonged to Western Marxism, the same subordination may not hold true for its later developments up to the present day. For instance, critical theories of race or gender do not necessarily draw from Marxist legacy. How would you evaluate these three categories, Marxism, Western Marxism and critical theory?

Martin Jay: Western Marxism is a term that was not really invented until after World War II, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and then there were several books, Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism*, my own book on *Marxism and Totality*, which was a book that dealt with Western

Marxism. And there were debates about who were the Western Marxists, were they only the people who were basically descended from Lukács and Korsch and Gramsci, the Hegelian Marxists, or do they include others like Della Volpe and Colletti in Italy, or Louis Althusser and the school around him in France. I took what might be called broad church position and included ah the anti-Hegelians as well as did Perry Anderson. But there were people at *Telos* who wanted to restrict it to a smaller group growing out of Lukács, Korsch, Gramsci, Bloch and the Frankfurt School.

Basically, what Western Marxism was, we might say, a self-generated distancing from two traditions which were dominant in. Let's say the end of the Wilhelmine or the end of the pre-war period and into the Weimar period, one is what we might call the orthodox tradition of social democratic Marxism, which we associate with people like Karl Kautsky and revisionists, as they were called, by such as Edward Bernstein, or even more radical figures like Ross Luxemerg. That on the one hand and secondly, the tradition of Leninism or Bolshevism which of course was successful in the Soviet Union but had trouble elsewhere, but which created the common turn and was a powerful force until the late twentieth century. So Western Marxism was in a way in contrast to both of these, it was less connected to parties, although some of the members were in one form or another associated with the communist party. It was more philosophical, less scientific. It understood that theory needed to be connected to practice but could never figure out a way exactly to make the connection. It was more eclectic. It did not have the idea that Marxism needed to be a fortress, but rather needed to be, we might say, in dialogue with other traditions. And it also had the capacity for self-critique that the more dogmatic versions of Marxism-Leninism never had. But what's important to recognize is that it was not a radical break, certainly in the early 1920s.

If you look at the history of the Institute of Social Research, people like Felix Weil were surrounded by members of the communists, the early nascent not yet Bolshevised, not yet Sovietnized communist party in Germany. And a number of figures around the Institute in the early years were close to members of the communist party. People like Karl August Wittfogel, Henry K Grossmann or Richard Sorge, Eduard Fuchs. They were associated of course as well with the Marx-Engels institute in Moscow and David Riazanov, where they helped to write or help to put together the famous *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, the collected works of Marx and Engels until perhaps the mid 20s or maybe the late 20s, when they realized the Soviet Union was not quite operating according to the hopes that they had invested in it. They were not yet distinct from the fluid version of more radical Marxism that had emerged in the early period after 1917.

By the time they came to the United States, however, that connection was pretty much severed. In the 1930s, especially in the American exile, the gap between Eastern and Western Marxism became much more explicit, and the idea of critical theory which was introduced rather casually in 1937. Some saw as a code word for Marxism, was basically a way to say “No, we're not simply Marxists”. We're doing something that was broader more general, more open-ended. And then of course French, Italian, maybe some English and American versions of it also began to emerge. And by the post-war era, it was possible to talk of an explicit tradition which was distinct from both the social democratic tradition of Kautsky and the more orthodox tradition of the Stalinist Bolsheviks, and I should add was also different from Trotskyism. It's quite fascinating. The Trotskyism had a very important role to play even in the United States. There were a number of important Trotskyists. But the Frankfurt

School had very little to do with Trotskyism, so there were lots of alternatives, but they went in a way their own, their own direction in dialogue with but not fully in accord with other Western Marxists such as Bloch, Gramsci certainly Lukács and perhaps even Korsch.

**SUN Yizhou:** This question is highly relevant to the Chinese translation of your book, so please allow me to provide some more transnational context. In the preface to the second edition, you mentioned that despite the passage of time, Frankfurt School enjoys an upsurge of interest since the first publication. but Western Marxism has receded in importance. This reflects the different timelines of the theoretical perspectives in China. After the reform age, China has imported a large number of Western works. As a socialist country, “Western Marxism” is relatively politically correct research within the institutional framework. Therefore, scholars with left-wing backgrounds are often introduced and studied under the banner of 'Western Marxism,' including historians like yourself. Reading only the research of Chinese scholars could give one the impression that Western Marxism is thriving ever. This kind of displacement may also be one of the contexts in which critical theory, including your introduction, has been widely disseminated in some countries and regions. You career witnessed many shifts in academical interests. Would you share one thing or two on that? And how would you feel be counted as a Western-Marxism historian?

**Martin Jay:** Western Marxism as a brand travels. There's a thing called traveling theory that Edward Said talked about. And the importance of the traveling is that in the journey, there is a process of translation, but also of what we might call creative misreading. And also, what we might call, advantages of late comer. Considering that after the period of genesis and the period of flourishing in one context, ideas are picked up later in a different context and given a new life or given at least a new eclectic meaningfulness in the context which allows those ideas to play a role that were not anticipated originally by the people who created the ideas. So, the idea of Western Marxism, as far as I can tell, correctly say in the Chinese context plays a role that it no longer plays say in the United States or probably in Europe, where it played a great role in the late twentieth century. But even by the 1990s, maybe even the 80s, it had begun to be challenged by a certain kind of post-Marxist thought which took some of the transgressive energy of Marxism but combined it with a kind of a political defeatism, in which it was no longer possible to talk about the agency of revolution, it was no longer possible to have the same hopes that say the generation of 1968 had.

Now in the Chinese context, there are so many new opportunities for combinations that, I hesitate as an outsider to make any sort of serious claims, what seems to me an opportunity. I mean I've been there many times, most recently I think 2019, and I'm always in a way puzzled by the relation between the official Marxist theory and the actual changes that have made China such an extraordinary story in the past 40 or 50 years. I mean China in the Post-Mao Era is totally unexpected before it went through the changes that has now made it such a dominant world power. So, it's very hard for me to really understand the theoretical practical landscape of China in which there are official ideas, there are unofficial challenges to them. There are coded ways in which things function that an outsider can only guess at. So Western Marxism may function as a source of some, let's call it dissident or at least alternative positions to the mainstream official position and may function in a way that no longer functions in the western world, and this seems to me perfectly normal. That is to say, ideas travel, and they gain a new life in different contexts.

What I would hope Chinese intellectuals who find western ideas, Western Marxist ideas in particular, stimulating will do is, to see them as useful in a critical way without creating a new dogma, without creating a new canonization of texts or a new heroization of figures, but use the ideas in creative dialogue with the conditions in China with the possibilities for, let's call it, emancipatory or liberatory practice. When I was there in 2019, I came away with a kind of funny sense that although the ideas were taken very seriously, there was a little bit of reluctance to apply them to contemporary China. And I wrote a piece about the authoritarian personality and wondered whether or not there had been a serious attempt to say did it apply in China and then I came home and discovered there was, in fact, a literature that dealt with the usefulness of the authoritarian personality argument, which made some very important distinctions between Chinese versions of authoritarianism going back to Confucian religion and the western version of authoritarianism, and discovered that. There had been some work that had been done but obviously, there's more that can be attempted, the same with the critique of mass culture or the culture industry, how does that function in China and so forth. So, I would hope that the rubric of Western Marxism is not simply a museum piece that simply gives you some reference point in the West that's now no longer applicable but allows you in China to be open to fresh new creative ways of using the large and very disparate tradition of Marxism not to stifle but to stimulate new ideas, to help China make sense of this remarkable transformation that it's undergone in the past half-century.

**SUN Yizhou:** An interesting observation is that in Peter Gordon's previous remark, he mentioned Adorno before Horkheimer. However, if one were to select a central figure in the history recounted in your book, it would have to be Horkheimer, the director of the Institute of Social Research who not only took the helm of the institute, but also played a central role in creating the theoretical paradigm of the critical theory in the 1930s. But his reputation has clearly suffered a relative eclipse since the 1970s. In contrast, Adorno's status has only grown since the war and is now unquestionably fixed in the pantheon of greatest German philosophers. The level of interest in individual scholars has waxed and wane. How do you view the writing of academic history and its impact on the status of thinkers?

**Martin Jay:** The question of Adono's prominence is obviously very real. Adorno and Benjamin are the 2 figures who ah have generated the most interest, Marcuse, also like Horkheimer, has fallen a bit by the wayside. Löwenthal has come back because of his very important work on *Prophets of Deceit*, which seems so applicable today in the period of populist demagoguery. And other members of the school have had their moments. People have looked at Franz Neumann or Otto Kirchheimer. There's been some interests in what is called "the other Frankfurt School." So, it's not been entirely Adorno 24/7 as we say, but it is true that Adorno has become like Heidegger or Wittgenstein, one of the master thinkers who emerged out of the twentieth century with still a great deal of power in the twenty first century to make us think about things from a different perspective. And I must say that I myself often find returning to Adorno refreshingly stimulating. That is say, I always find something new, something challenging, something I didn't understand. It's partly because he wrote so much. It's partly because there are 20 plus volumes of his collected works, and we have many lecture courses that are published as well. They're often on a wide variety of subjects: music, literature, sociology, politics, religion. He wrote about virtually everything and wrote with a kind of, I would

say, condensed power which is best shown in the aphorisms and *Minima Moralia*. I once was at a conference in Denmark, many years ago, in which we were asked to write essays on one of the Aphorisms on *Minima Moralia*. One book, a hundred and thirty whatever number of aphorisms, each was picked a single one. I wrote on the gold assay aphorism which dealt with inauthenticity. And it was amazing how rich each one was, aphorisms are condensed thought experiments, and they often have lots of hidden suppositions or presuppositions which you have to tease out. Horkheimer also wrote aphoristic works, but they didn't have quite the same impact.

It's quite clear that although Horkheimer was the center of gravity for the Institute during the time he was director, the actual publish work has had far later of far less impact than Adorno's or Benjamin's. And this may be something that will be permanent, but you never know when people have rediscoveries of earlier figures and sometimes certain of Horkheimer's works may come back into avow. The same diminution of influence, for example of Eric Fromm, who is very important in the United States at a certain moment but now is not completely forgotten, but certainly marginalized and not taken seriously, by say Lacanian or other analysts today. What has to be aware of the fact that reputations go up and down, and it's rare that someone like Adorno was able to have the impact. It's now been 55 years or something since he died 54 years able to have the impact that he's had and continues to have throughout the world.

**SUN Yizhou:** You already mentioned “the other Frankfurt School”. I am particularly interested in Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer, as the school is often associated with political critique, yet these scholars, who had political practice and legal training, were never fully integrated into the inner circle of the school. This is especially notable given the abundance of historical narratives on the Frankfurt School that have emerged since your book's publication, many of which emphasize politics even more than your work, yet they give these scholars far less attention. In 2019, an essays collection titled *Kritische Theorie der Politik*, which mentions the phrase of “critical theory of politics” is rarely used. This is somehow counter-intuitive and related to Horkheimer and Adorno's dislike for the primacy of politics.

Personally, I believe that there is no such thing as strict separation between politics and society. However, to say that political or any other issues are completely subordinated to the social realm is far more grand theory. And because they don't like conceptual categorization, society seems like a blanket term for a wide variety of topics and methods addressing everything important for them. Do you think so? Can we achieve a greater potential for transformation by abandoning political viewpoints and embracing social philosophy, as they have inclined towards?

**Martin Jay:** I think this is an historical question, not simply a theoretical one. I mean there are times what might be called redemptive or emancipatory, or radical politics becomes more difficult and a theory which says that the only politics that really counts is one that challenges the system. At its root, that theory has to, in some way, recognize the difficulty of achieving the politics that it wants to achieve and then and this is, as I mentioned earlier, what Habermas must call the strategy of hibernation. It goes into hiding in philosophy and art, some other realm, hoping that they'll one day become a politics that will be potentially system-changing, system-challenging rather than simply politics as usual. Now my own feeling is that we live now, and that politics is important even

if it's not redemptive or radical or system changing. And that figures like Kirchheimer and Neumann were in a way aware of this, partly through their work on the relation between politics and legality, politics and the law. And in the current debate over, for example, the impact of Carl Schmitt, Neumann, Kirchheimer and others who were interested in that aspect of critical theory are useful interlocutors. They're useful figures to turn back to and people like William Scheuerman and a number of others who have been interested in their work have tried to revive the legacy of Neumann and Kirchheimer.

The Frankfurt School, we must remember, also had a second and now has third or fourth new generations. The second generation is best represented of course by Jurgen Habermas and Habermas is extraordinary to the extent, that in many ways extraordinary, but the extent that he reintroduced the political question in post-war Germany. He was as engaged and committed and involved an intellectual, a theoretician, a philosopher in the public sphere as anyone in modern history. He intervened many many different debates. And still in his early 90 is active writing about the war in Ukraine, writing about the impact of unification of Germany Twenty years ago, writing about the EU, writing about contemporary issues. In other words, reintroducing a political note into critical theory. Now one may find that he's too reformist that it's not you know somehow as maximalist as Adorno or Marcuse. There's nothing of the Great Refusal in Habermas, but he is shown at least that it is possible, and Axel Honneth is another figure in the third generation.

It is possible to think about political issues and social issues together, political issues and theoretical issues together. The politics is not a debased realm until it becomes only revolutionary politics. But it's something that we need to deal with, to solve mundane problems and to express democratic dreams that are very much threatened. If one retreats from politics, one basically opens the way for authoritarian politics to take over politics of passivity. So political action takes many different forms, sometimes involves something like the occupy movement, or what happened in the in France with the yellow jackets or what happened in the Arab spring, or if you'll permit me, what happened even in Hongkong, which will not be the same as going to the ballot box and voting for somebody or trying to get elected in the local election, so forth. And I wouldn't presumed to say how politics plays out in China. It seems to us from the distance, it's now more top-down than it once was, but my hope is that politics from the bottom up will once again be revived and that it's possible to have a different spectrum of political action and the Frankfurt School especially the second generation can contribute to that.

**SUN Yizhou:** I must confess that I'm among those people who see Habermas's attitude towards Ukraine War as reformist. Speaking of politics, let's take a step back from the history for a moment. As a book interview, normally I would ask a question like "Do you think it is still relevant for readers to study the subjects you researched?" and you would answer "Yes, their legacy has everything to do with us today." Since the answer for such questions is highly predictable, I'd like to put it in more detailed way. In a podcast interview you gave in 2020, you talked about the rise of fascism and the "racket society" theory by Kirchheimer and linked it to your criticism of Trump administration. This reminds me of Peter Gordon again, who wrote an introduction to the 2019 reissue of Adorno's The Authoritarian Personality, which was clearly aimed at Trump. It seems that the American academic community was using various theoretical resources, including critical theory, to political end. Now

that Trump has left office, do you think that linking critical theory and current events in this way was potent or effective? To be frank, while I appreciate Kirchheimer, I still feel that was a bit of a long shot.

**Martin Jay:** This is a very urgent question. I think you're right that when demagogic authoritarian populism emerged not only with Trump but around the world with people like Bolsonaro or Orbán or, you can list other figures maybe Netanyahu in Israel. Authoritarian populism needs to be explained because of its challenge to liberal democracy and because of some rather problematic and dangerous similarities with fascism. Now I'm very reluctant to say it is fascism. Trump is not a fascist in any obvious way. But I do think there are disturbing similarities and that in the United States although Trump was defeated, the forces that backed him have still maintain the lasts much more power than they should have, and we're still worried about the next election.

Having said that, there are several tools at the Frankfurt School maybe gives us to help make sense, not to explain it all but to help make sense. One is this idea of some characterological susceptibility to authoritarianism, which they tried to measure using the so-called F-scale in the Studies in Prejudice, volume on the *Authoritarian Personality.* Peter Gordon did the introduction to the new Verso edition of it. And it's clear that some people have found the supporters of authoritarian populism like those who support Bolsonaro or Trump or Orbán to have characterological inclinations which allow them to look for a leader who is charismatic, allow them to be distrustful of critical ideas, to be open to conspiracy theories and so forth. Now I'm a little nervous about this because the implication of that is that "I'm sane and you're nuts, I'm rational and you're irrational, I'm normal, you're pathological, I'm politically reasonable you're a member of the lunatic fringe." And once you begin to demonize your opponent, once you begin to pathologize your opponent, once you begin to create a sense of "I'm normal and you're not", you end up with no dialogue at all. All you can do is to try to destroy those people, try to marginalize and keep them out of politics rather than to persuade them. Let's say the Habermasian in me still has some hope that dialogue reason communication and treating people as if they deserve the dignity of being listened to rather than lectured to, means that we should avoid simply saying "oh, they're authoritarian personalities." I mean Hillary Clinton in 2016 rather described Trump supporters as deplorables, a term which meant that they were, you know basically, trash, they were basically people who were not to be given the dignity of being political opponents but people who were to be dismissed as basically fooled by things beyond their understanding. Some of them were and some of these people really are beyond the pale, we might say. But others, perhaps not. And one has to take their grievances not simply as an expression of authoritarian personality dysfunction, but as perhaps grievances against elites, against their being marginalized, against the feeling of losing out in some historical narrative which they are the victims. We have to take that seriously enough to treat them as human beings not as deplorables.

So, the alternative authoritarian personality analysis is the one that I tried to deal with in the piece that I did on Martin Scorsese's film *The Irishman,* which is the idea of the racket society, which the Frankfurt School never fully developed. They toyed with it in 1940s, never wrote what they had hoped would be the full account of it. But the basic argument is this, that unlike a society in which rules and norms and what we might call procedures institutional procedures are dominant, what we

have in a racket society is a personal connection between a protector and the person who gives obedience to the protector. So. It's relationship that is totally transactional, not based on abstract rules, not based on law, but is one in which, there's a kind of power relationship, and a racket is one in which outside the law, someone you know basically gives you a favor in turn for your obedience. And Trump operated this way, loyalty and favors and no principles, no sense of rules, no rule of law, which was a frighteningly, I think new expression of what in the 1940s they saw of as racket society.

One finds us in many different contexts. It's not just in the government but also in corrupt institutions, for example, the Catholic Church, if one takes seriously the extent to which the protection of priests who were pedophiles in the Catholic Church has taken place throughout the world. One has to recognize there is an element in that holy institution of the church, a kind of racket that's going on, which people are protected when they do terrible things and only with a great deal of difficulty does the truth come out. In corrupt oligarchies around the world, obviously Putin's Russia now is a racket society *par excellence,* in which oligarchs gain power and people are loyal to Putin and the rule of law is completely, it seems to me, lost and so forth. So, the racket society gives us some sort of access to what is happening not only in Trump world but in other parts of the world as well. When Netanyahu tries to suspend the power of the justices of the judicial system because he himself is in danger of being convicted of a crime, one sees a kind of racket mentality at work and I think that's a very interesting legacy of the Frankfurt School, that's applicable today.

**SUN Yizhou:** Yes, I remember after Trump's presidency, Bill Maher said similar thing on his HBO show. He said we must embrace citizens in the confronting camp instead of isolating them, and maybe keep our communications with each other.

Anyway, scholars always wish that outstanding research will not be outdated by time, but this is not always the case, such as some of Fromm's theories in chapter three. He believed that democratic society corresponds to heterosexual, genital sexuality, and referred to pre-genital sexuality as polymorphous perversity. Correct me if I'm wrong as I am an amateur in psychoanalysis but reading such analogies in the context of LGBT today, can be perceived as far-fetched. Additionally, he also praised matriarchal culture, but as a historian, you must be aware that such theory had been already refuted in *The History of Human Marriage*. French anthropologists of his time had also clearly demonstrated that those societies were mostly ruled by maternal uncles. By the way, his theories were popular in mainland China before and after 1990s but are no longer mentioned today. Do you think my feeling is appropriate, and in general, which hypotheses of critical theory have been validated by history, and which ones have not?

**Martin Jay:** This is an enormous question and I think you're absolutely right. Overly ambitious attempts to talk about, say, matriarchal versus patriarchal society are difficult to maintain when we do empirical studies of the complexities of different societies. What's also crucial is the recognize the importance of historical change. No society is frozen. We ourselves in the 21st century, this began earlier but it’s still an ongoing struggle, are in a process of questioning traditional gender roles, questioning traditional gender identities. (In) the United States now we have this absolutely fierce debate about trans-sexuality or gender affirmation of people who have tried to, in some ways, alter what seemed to be biologically set. And we're very confused about this. I think everybody is

grappling with it and it's not an easy question. There are many different, I would say, parameters, religious, traditional, biological. It's very, very hard to get it all straight. So, I think the basic lesson that comes out of this is humility, that we ought not to assume that there's something quite natural, something that is time honored and therefore should be always the case.

But on the other hand, we ought not to be too quick to abandon relationships that have nurtured human development for a very long period of time. For example, the family. I mean families develop; families evolve. But the importance of the family, the Frankfurt School always recognized this, in protecting and nurturing individuals against the influence of larger forces in society. What was sometimes called a haven in a heartless world. For all of its pathological implications of patriarchal authority and so forth. The family is still in many ways an absolutely essential institution and I need not tell someone from China that. So that we have a recognition of the importance of institutions, even as they're being tested, even as they're being challenged.

So psychoanalysis in many ways tried to address this, often with great insight, often with very dubious assumptions which we now find problematic. But the answers are still to be found and whatever my opinion means. All I would counsel is tolerance patience and willingness to listen to the stories that other people tell about their own suffering, their own needs, their own dignity and it's important to maintain that as the bottom line. Not to impose upon people some sort of external constraint that may seem to be normalized or naturalized or biological. But let people find their own way to relieve what obviously is a suffering that no one deserves, and to maintain a dignity which everybody does deserve so that would be the larger lesson of Frankfurt School philosophy, rather than some sort of outmoded notion of maternal society being superior and we should somehow find a way back to that.

**SUN Yizhou:** Yes, I understand you, but I have to ask that. In fact, I have concerns regarding the Chinese readers, some of them might treat these theories seriously. Anyway, the cultural criticisms of Adorno and Benjamin have become increasingly important in Western academia since the 1970s. Apart from their talent, this trend may be partly due to the fact that their domains resonated with the depoliticized atmosphere of the post-1960s West. If so, similar phenomenon can also be observed in China after the high-water mark of the reform era. Additionally, the unnecessary obscurity in their prose styles, may have contributed to cultural elitism among some intellectuals, who enjoy the priorities of expressing. This is why they are popular artsy groups which defend the aura of artworks using mysterious concepts. Some of critical terms can be easily appropriated to target straw men or abstract ideas, rather than directly confronting more pressing issues. The term "instrumental rationality" has been indiscriminately used by overburdened urban youth to signify everything from the most banal of unrequired love to the deepest structural inequities. Metaphysical disputations and popularity increasingly turned critical theory into a victim of its own success. Have you ever been concerned that the critical theory might lose its sharpness and potency over time?

**Martin Jay:** There's no question that there is a constant struggle to maintain complexity, to maintain subtlety on the one hand, and to create accessibility and the democratization of ideas on the other. That you know sometimes we sin on the side of an overly complex and overly nuanced and overly esoteric discourse which only a few people with the energy and the intelligence and the interest can

unpack, and that there is what Arthur Lovejoy once called "the pathos of obscurity." - the idea that somehow if something is hard to understand is profound when in fact, it might just be gibberish, it might just be nonsense. We don't really know until we've unpacked it, we've redescribed it, we've made it our own now. Intellectual history in general is interested in making ideas accessible, we're not interested in keeping the holy secrets for a small elite but to make them accessible.

On the other hand, there is the danger, and I think you point this out of, what might be called the vulgarization and trivialization of ideas. In the history of the Frankfurt School, one of the things that was unexpected in the past - now it's been thirty years even - the Frankfurt School was picked up by right-wing conspiracy theorists and has become a target of people who think it's the source of political correctness, a wokeness of all of the things that the right-wing dislikes in contemporary culture. There's an absolutely crazy attempt to do this which even led at one point to the violence of the mass murderer in Norway. Anders Breivik who killed 90 people. In his manifesto attacked the Frankfurt School. He actually cited my book to great extent as his source of his understanding. So that version of vulgarization is very dangerous.

I wrote an article in my last collection with Verso on the Frankfurt School as a kind of target of this vulgarization, which was not only shared, and this is kind of crazy fact, not only shared by the right, but also expressed by Fidel Castro before his death. I mean Castro actually argued the Frankfurt School is responsible for thwarting the revolution and that this was absolute nonsense, and this has become a worldwide phenomenon. One of the Figures in Brazil who was very important for Bolsonaro men, Olavo de Carvalho, was also a believer in the Frankfurt School conspiracy and even argued as ludicrous as the sounds that Adorno was responsible for writing the Beatles songs which were used in the 1960s to spread cultural decadence. I mean absolutely crazy stuff. This is a version of what we might call the accessibility of Frankfurt School ideas, which vulgarizes them to the point where they become meaningless.

It's obviously a constant battle to try to keep the ideas fresh to, try to argue with the ideas, to try to make them more nuanced and complex to integrate them into other systems of thought and a kind of fruitful way that on the one hand, and yet to make them accessible without vulgarizing them. But it's a constant battle and so what you described the use of instrumental rationality in problematic ways. This is true of almost any idea that any idea, this is what I mentioned earlier about traveling theory, can be misread, can be vulgarized in a way that goes against the intention of the original coiner of the idea. But sometimes this is good and sometimes is bad, so there's no rule of thumb which says that the ideas are the absolute possession, kind of intellectual property of the people who create them. They gain a life of their own. They gain a kind of capacity to be integrated with other ideas that no one anticipated and that's just the way ideas work in the world. They travel. They have adventures that we couldn't anticipate, they flourish, or they wither and there's nothing we can do about it. We try to help the process along but inevitably, we're only small cogs in a very large machine.

**SUN Yizhou:** My concerns pertain to a common criticism of the Frankfurt School, namely their unfinished project of mediating theory and practice. On the historical level, your general narrative of the Frankfurt School suggests that their optimism about the possibility of fundamental change

shifted to pessimism after the 1940s. However, if we examine the attitudes of the inner circle towards the specific struggles that occurred during the 1930s, we see that they were more inclined towards declining activism while criticizing it theoretically. This leads one to wonder if their radicalism was limited to mere lip service, so their attitude shift seems more like ship in a bottle of ivory tower, with very limited connections to practice. For instance, when Horkheimer criticized anarchism, his word was that the timing was not yet ripe. But is this not precisely where practice comes in?

**Martin Jay:** This is a question often asked and it's clear they never came up with a successful connection. But frankly, no one else has either. That is to say, what is sometimes called the organizational question in Marxist Theory: how you move from theory to radical practice via, say, a certain party structure? Should it be a big party, a small party, a vanguard party, a mass party? Should it be one party, should it be a coalition of parties? There's always a question of how you organize, and no organization has produced the revolution that has emancipated mankind it ended alienation and reification. So, we all struggle with this, so they're not alone and feeling frustrated.

Having said that, we should also recognize that after the World War II and after they returned to Germany, Horkheimer and Adorno were involved with what might be called a more modest political program of trying to restore or create for the first time a viable liberal democracy in post-Nazi Germany. They wrote for the popular press, they gave lectures that were on radio, they were involved in a kind of rebuilding of Germany, which meant that they were not the radical great refusal anarchist, anti-establishment figures that some people thought they were going to become. And Habermas, we might say, inherited that radical progressive but not revolutionary stance. And politically he was involved with issues of constitutionalism, issues of legality, issues that you know seem more mundane, but which did have potential progressive implications.

Today in our climate, in which democracy broadly speaking is threatened by authoritarianism, sometimes one has to make a kind of compromise with what is possible, even as one hopes for more radical changes in the future because there's so much still to protect. My own feeling is that we are now at a perhaps dangerous point, in which there are serious forces that may turn back certainly the 21st century but even the 20th, and restore traditions which are far more deleterious, far more harmful to human flourishing than the imperfect ones that we have created in broad context over the years. That's not an answer that will satisfy the people who hoped that the Frankfurt School would be the inspiration for a more radical change. But I think it's the only honest one to make under the current circumstances.

**SUN Yizhou:** As you may have sensed now, although I am the translator, I can come across as quite critical of critical theory because, frankly, I am. To put it nicely, the development of critical theory relies on self-criticism. However, the fact is, despite my best efforts on philosophy, there are some aspects of their theories that are simply unconvincing to me, even though they have been written into textbooks. Fromm's theory above and Adorno's premature judgments on jazz music, we wouldn’t have the time to discuss them case by case, but more generally, their arguments are pre-occupied by an agenda, as the Frankfurt School presupposes their general outlook of modern society as the liquidation of the autonomous subject, so everything they dislike is directed towards this

judgment. Monopoly capitalism, anti-Semitism, the cultural industry, authoritarian states, and positivism - I enjoy none of them. Trust me, my math is poor, and I might be one of the few Chinese in my generation who doesn't watch short videos at all, even my old parents do. It's fair to say that they already exacerbated on each other and triggered extensive and profound social and historical issues, but to say that all these issues ultimately come down to the same thing and share the same philosophical grounds is beyond my understanding. Do you think my generalization and reservation is reasonable?

**Martin Jay:** I think you're absolutely right to be critical of critical theory and they themselves would share that sense of, I think, being open-ended, being experimental, being refutable by historical change, being in need of constant correction updating. The whole point to critical theory is not to become a body of dead texts which are simply repeated. I just was sent, for example, a series of books by my friend Rainer Forst who is one of the major fourth generation critical theorists. And three of the books are books of forced critics and his answers to their criticism something that Habermas also has done very frequently. Let us say, he writes critical responses to criticisms. The point is to treat critical theory as not sacred texts. Having said that it's also true to recognize that at times, and this is especially the case of the first generation, a point that Adorno once made about psychoanalysis may be applicable. He said in psychoanalysis only the exaggerations are true, by which he meant that sometimes you have to say things in a way that is clearly in excess of the complexity of the nuance of a gray situation to show what the deeper implications might be, the more exaggerated implications.

The point about popular culture. I mean, it's obvious that one could debate is this popular culture or that popular culture, part of a culture industry which operates in a one-dimensional way which makes us all robots, or other counter examples. But what the exaggeration tells us is that we often may be fooled into thinking we're being transgressive rebellious and somehow anti-authoritarian. But in the larger sense, we are still complicity with a system that is being maintained by our very pseudo-rebelliousness, by what I think it was Marcuse first called “repressive desublimation” that we seem to be losing our cultural constraints. But in fact, we do it in the service of maintaining the system. So broadly speaking, capitalism operates by allowing challenges by absorbing what might be called self-critique into its own fabric. It flourishes not by absolute rigidity but by flexibility and sometimes despite our best intentions we're caught up in that. The Frankfurt School maybe gives us some lesson even as we may find it problematic and certainly worthy of being contested. And I would hope that that model, I mentioned Rainer Forst, of having discussions, justifications, arguments and also a willingness to listen and change is part of critical theory's legacy. Habermas, for whatever one may think about his ultimate positions, has always learned from his critics. He had debates with Gadamer, with Luhmann, with post-structuralist, with Derrida, but his own position evolved in conversation with them rather than always defensively maintaining his own position.

**SUN Yizhou:** Yes, I know that Professor Habermas is pretty much a fan of debates, The list of great theoreticians he debated with is quite a long one. As the translator of your book, I would also like to discuss language with you. The Frankfurt School persisted in writing in German during their exile in America, which shows their strong sense of mission to preserve German culture. However, this also led to their relative isolation within the American intellectual environment. In Adorno's words,

"the German language has a special elective affinity to philosophy," which sometimes results in unnecessary obscurity in his prose style. his way of thinking entirely rooted in German tradition. However, when you were writing this book, you were to some extent a translator as well. Your work is translated into many languages partly because English has a wider audience, and many academic achievements require introduction through the Anglophone community. Furthermore, academic exchanges are increasingly globalized, and this generation of critical theorists are able to use English fluently in academic writing and lectures. How would you describe the difference in perspectives from English academia and German local studies on critical theory? I hope none of you will loss "the special elective affinity to philosophy."

**Martin Jay:** This is also a great question. I mean someone like Benjamin of course in "The Task of the Translator" addressed the utopian possibilities produced by translation that no middle language exists. We have no language like Esperanto, which is superior to all the others, so we're always involved in a kind of horizontal process of translation. Translation may happen even within languages but certainly between or among languages. In my case, I'm a native English speaker which gives me a certain advantage because everybody else in the world now seems to feel that they have to learn English and speak it to us and here we are having our own conversation in English, so there's some advantage. But the disadvantage is that I'm not really at home in any other language. I mean I can work my way through French, German, little Italian, a little Spanish, but I could you know couldn't even begin to read something in an Asian language. It's a great disadvantage to speak only really one tongue.

Having said that, it's also wise for us to recognize that it's important to honor the uniqueness of each language and to recognize that, when we move from say German to English or from English to Chinese or from Chinese to French or to Vietnamese or whatever, that we both gain and lose, that language sometimes we often say a poem is improved in translation, that sometimes we clarify something the original language doesn't fully make clear. But also, we may lose nuance, we may lose metaphor, we may lose the richness of the original language. It's a process that is endless and I think you're correct to say that my book was an act of translation. And I'm grateful to people like yourself who have spent the time and energy in turning my own English words into, for me, a foreign word.

In fact, sometimes retranslating… I think my Adorno book was translated twice into Chinese and I gather this is the second translation of *The Dialectal Imagination*. Adorno has been retranslated successfully by my friend Robert Hullot-Kantor from original translations, say *Aesthetic Theory* and *Dialect of Enlightenment* was retranslating in English, so the opportunity even to have new translations, which reveals something that had been missed in the first translation or even mistranslated also shows the importance of translation. I have great appreciation of the act of translating, I have always felt great gratitude to the people who spend that time and effort, so I'd like to give chance to sort of thank you personally for that. But also, to recognize that we're all engaged in kind of the endless task of translation which as I said earlier involves both misreadings and also creative possibilities that were not there in the original. Let's continue to do it as much as possible and make this and also make it both directions.

One of the great things about being an English speaker is that a lot of words, a lot of works are translated into English, not all obviously, but a lot are and so I get to read things in languages that I would never be able to read the original and that's a great advantage. Whereas some of the languages, say if you're a native speaker of, I don't know what, Croatian, you can't read a thousand works in Croatian because there haven't been that many translations, so you have to read them in the original or in an English or maybe German translation. So. I'm very fortunate in having English as my native tongue.

**SUN Yizhou:** Great, I hope learning Chinese would be your next challenge. But the problem of language might seems more serious in East Asia due language barriers. At least in China and Japan, many scholars in this field admire Delphic style of continental philosophy, partly because they believe that philosophy should be ambiguous. That's partly why Heidegger is popular after 1990s in China, even if you don't speak German, you can easily jump on concepts like *Dasein* or *Gestell*. On the one hand, their efforts certainly paid off, but on the other hand, this approach sometimes resulted in textual exegesis. Scholars debated over and over on the translation on keywords. Their contributions are admirable, but it can be challenging for one to remain critical if they already assume the existence of certain truths and have devoted their life's work to a particular field. It seems that the discussion of the first-generation critical theorist is more open in 1970s since your impression is not yet consolidated. But without new material to discover, how can newcomer of this areas avoid *Kammerdienersperspektive*: the view from below by a servant who washes dirty linen?

**Martin Jay:** I mentioned earlier the Lovejoy and idea of the "pathos of obscurity," so that the idea of the profundity comes with ambiguity, with complexity, with in some ways the gibberish of an esoteric language. We have to be very careful about that and recognize that sometimes a paraphrastic translation is important to show that a word really is just simply confused. One of the other great traditions of German scholarship is so-called *Begriffsgeschichte* or the history of concepts that we associate with people like Reinhart Koselleck and there is a worldwide interest in *Begriffsgeschichte*. I found my own work that I, in a way, was doing it without fully appreciating the power of the precedent of Koselleck and his German (colleagues), a team of researchers. Here the idea is that you have to unpack a word or a concept over time by looking at its multiple usages, looking at the sedimented meanings of a word, looking at the etymology, but also the ways in which words have proliferated over time and had different meanings without assuming that there is a single correct definition that we don't have to legislate that the word means in a kind of equivalent way only this. Words have connotations, dennotations, they have histories. Adorno understood this, Nietzsche understood this, the idea that words are not static we have to both be sensitive to the need to clarify, the need to define but also the need to understand a word's complexities over time without necessarily assuming Heidegger that the etymology of word in Greek, or in whatever the language is, is the true meaning.

Philology, intellectual history and literary criticism are very sensitive to precisely these issues that a translator or a philosopher has to deal with and there's no simple answer to that. We could argue about what Heidegger meant by *Dasein* or *Gestell* forever. Sometimes, something good will come out of that, but sometimes we have to move on and ask other kinds of questions. We don't want to fetishize words that there are no sacred words. There are no holy words that need to be somehow

worshiped, words need to be unpacked, their histories understood and then we have to use them in in ways that are also appropriate to the questions that we ask of them.

**SUN Yizhou:** Regarding the book, an exclusive source is the Horkheimer-Löwenthal correspondence, which provides valuable insight into their ideas. In addition to essays, former scholars also made letters between Benjamin and Adorno a must-read aesthetic debate. However, with the development of communication technology, letter-writing has become increasingly rare. For instance, if one were to research Honneth and Martin Jay, would it be necessary to examine all your emails? As an intellectual historian, do you have any thoughts on how intellectual history will be written in the coming century? Otherwise, the intellectual history will end with postman and repeated discussing the highlight of Western civilization.

**Martin Jay:** You're absolutely right. The era of correspondence, written correspondence, saved correspondence ended around the 2000. I had myself large folders of letters throughout my career. Some with very interesting people. You know, with Adorno or Habermas or Derrida or letter from Levi Strauss, Meyer Schapir, people like that. Very interesting letters and I've had people come and look at the letters that I had with say Felix Weil or others. These letters have been sources. But then around the year 2000 that all stopped, and everything was in e-mails. Now occasionally I'll print out an email, I printed out some of my e-mails recently with Judith Butler, e-mails with Habermas, but most of the e-mails are gone, or at least hard to access. I often wonder if future intellectual historians will be like the intellectual historians of the medieval period where their sources will be very hard to come by and it'll be very difficult to reconstruct the behind the backs, non-publications of figures.

That we now benefit from when we can get access to correspondence, but it's also possible that the storage of even e-mails will become a resource. Recently we had this trial in the United States in which Fox News was attacked for having basically defamed a company, the company that had voting machines, that supposedly hijacked the election, and what came out were thousands of pages of e-mails, private e-mails, embarrassing e-mails, e-mails that showed the real opinions of the scoundrels at Fox News and this helped the defamation suit to go against them. So, it's possible that even e-mails can be retrieved somewhere in the future. How we index them, how we make somehow them accessible with the millions and millions and millions of e-mails that exist and tweets and other ways in which people are using social media. God only knows. This is clearly an amazing storage problem, accessibility problem, problem that future scholars will have to deal with in ways that thankfully I'll be spared.

**SUN Yizhou:** There’re also many personal matters in correspondence unrelated to theory, at least not directly. As the Chinese translation of *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* was published last year and achieved a quiet success, many readers not only admire his work but may also identify with his image as an undiscovered genius. For instance, I came across a thesis by a scholar who argued that the romance between Benjamin and Lacis was fruitful and legitimate, which reminded me of the bestseller *Zeit der Zauberer*, where Heidegger's affair was seen as corresponding to his phenomenology. While I do not intend to pass moral judgment on historical figures, using academic contributions to justify personal behavior seems like a one-trick pony in biographies. Although I don’t have intention to gutted people out of context, drawing unnecessary and direct connections

between the content and its creators can be seen as cultish. As a collective intellectual biography, your book has managed to avoid getting bogged down in personal trivia. For intellectual historians, how do one balance personal experiences with theoretical creation?

**Martin Jay:** This is a perennial question. I followed Hegel's idea that "no man is a hero to his valet", but that's not because heroes are not heroes, it's because valets are valets. In other words, the valet sees the dirty linen, sees the everyday life and knows that the hero has, as we say, feed of clay, but it doesn't mean that the hero doesn't achieve great things anyway, or that the philosopher who may be a scoundrel in personal life doesn't achieve important insights anyway. The real tests, the real challenge is to figure out how the two go together, how the life and the work, how the experience and the ideas are connected and there's, once again, no formula, so we discovered this.

I mean I recently had this discussion with Richard Wolin over his new Heidegger book. This is a great issue when it comes to whether or not we cancel Heidegger's philosophy because we know what a terrible person, politically awful, antisemite he was, whether or not we say “Well. the ideas are just expressions of that”, or the idea transcend. My last collection was called *Genesis and Validity*, and it deals in a way, or tries to deal with precisely this theme which I think is not one that we can resolve once again with a simple formula. When it's relevant, the ideas are grounded somewhere, they don't come out of just the mind, they come out of the experience of the person, but also the ideas can certainly have a life of their own afterwards. We can use them in ways that are not reducible to their origins and so it's a question really of what we might call tact and the ability to see the ideas as rooted but not completely reduced to where they come from. And once again, there's no way in advance know whether or not that's true in every case, whether that's just expressions or transcendent expressions. There's a recent biography, what we might call fictional biography of Thomas Mann, which is called *The Magician* by Tóibín, which tries to do this, and I think very reductively, where all the novels are simply written expressions of his personal life and I found it very reductive and very annoying as a result, so one has to do it very carefully.

**SUN Yizhou:** Yes, I audited you conversation with Professor Richard Wolin several months ago. You posed a question to Professor Richard Wolin, which is particularly relevant to the study of intellectual history. On one hand, figures like Heidegger are creature of their moment, meaning that any limitations or wrongdoings should be understood within the historical context, and readers should not take a superior position in judging them. On the other hand, if a thinker's ideas or works transcend their time period, then audiences should acknowledge their legacy. While Professor Wolin vividly divided them into two Heidegger, the distinction is not always that clearly. I am not trying to diminish any specific figure, but this double logic is quite common in intellectual biographies and can leave readers a slavish reverence. Perhaps we could call this tension "the thinker's two bodies" – one existing in the historical background, and the other in the history of ideas.

Anyway, I’d like to ask you a hypothetical question on that. In the book, you wrote: Löwenthal had the satisfaction of having his counterargument “proved” a few years later when Hamsun joined Quisling’s collaborators in Norway. My question is, what if he didn’t? Will Löwenthal’s argument on Hamsun’s pseudo-naturalism less persuasive?

**Martin Jay:** It's always nice to have a prediction confirmed and Löwenthal was going against the popular opinion then that in some sense Hamsun was a progressive figure. I think Benjamin thought that so. He intuited that Hamsun's literature basically had ideological implications, which would possibly be compatible with authoritarianism and when Hamsun was foolish enough to become a supporter of the Nazis. He felt vindicated. Would he have been correct without the vindication? It's a counterfactual, we know he was vindicated. It's always possible to see latent possibilities. And then when they become manifest, we can say yes, we would prove right, but the latent possibilities may have been there anyway. So, a possibility is not the same thing, a potentiality not the same thing as an actuality, but there are potentialities which we can identify. I remember years ago saying that "look, Nietzsche may not have been responsible for Nazism, but his writings had the potential to be used by the Nazis," in a way that say John Stuart Mill's or Alexis de Tocqueville's writings never could have been used by the Nazis. It's as if he didn't somehow recognize the danger in his own work and preclude the misuse of it by the Nazis. That's a nuanced answer to your question about how things may potentially play out but don't necessarily play out until in fact, they do.

**SUN Yizhou:** Ok, my last question is about combined approaches. I noticed that your book not only begins with an introduction to the atmosphere of interwar Germany, which is necessary for contextualizing the Frankfurt School, but it also ends with a sociological analysis of the critical theorists, following Fritz Ringer's *The Decline of the German Mandarins*. This is an unfamiliar material for me, and maybe for my generation. I was particularly struck by the comparison you drew between the critical theorists and Chinese literati, which resonated with me as the Chinese translator. While critical theorists are often associated with radicalism, many of their behaviors are quite traditional, such as their hostility toward technology. I have a sense that German scholars might be reluctant to make such comparisons, but as an outsider to the field, you seemed open to both philosophical evaluation and socio-historical analysis.

**Martin Jay:** The Mandarin concept is very interesting, Max Weber first used it and then Fritz Ringer, who was one of my teachers at Harvard, picked it up and talked about German intellectuals in the 19th century, university intellectuals who were also public servants. They were bureaucrats. And as mandarins, they were insiders. They basically were people who wanted to support the Prussian state, more or less, with some counter examples. There are figures like Nietzsche who was outside, who was an anti-mandarin. As I said earlier, the Weimar culture argument that Peter Gay meant that outsiders now became insiders, so they were no longer the old mandarins, they had come from the margins and now had positions, if not of power at least of influence.

The Frankfurt School had a certain, we might say, residual mandarinism in their own attitude towards high culture, towards the importance of *Bildung*, they were elitists, and they didn't pretend to be coming from the working class. But they also recognized that they ought not to be servants of the state, so the Institute had a connection with the university but was also outside it, and they wrote for the popular press, Kracauer would be a good liaison, and later they were figures who spoke to an audience that was outside the *Bildungsbürgertum*. They tried to expand it beyond that, and modernism was an aesthetic that was also critical of what we might call the establishment ascetic.

The mandarin conditions such as it was in Germany had, I would say, echoes but also has been

challenged by them. It's fascinating mean I have no access to the residues of mandarinism in China today. I know there's a Neo-Confucian attempt to bring back Confucius and so forth, whether or not that has any significance, whether intellectuals still understand themselves in that tradition. I've noticed in Japan now where the word sensei(先生) has a kind of still powerful resonance. There is a certain significance to what might be called the Japanese version of mandarinism. Maybe in Germany also, professors have a kind of cachet they don't have in the United States. It's interesting to apply sociological categories that are derived as Weber did from other traditions, from the ancient Chinese mandarin tradition of education to contemporary Germany, his contemporary Germany and then to think about whether they still are applicable in our own 21st century context. Sociological categories like all traveling theories are basically available for misinterpretation and creative misreading as well. I would hope that it's still useful. But I'm not sure how much I could say it has purchased in contemporary China or in the West in the 21st century.

**SUN Yizhou:** I don't know since when but in China the word teacher becomes quite a normal title you are calling people, like calling you teacher Jay, even if you are not. But unlike sensei(先生) in Japan, which has a very strict requirement of the people you're calling's occupation, like layers, teachers, doctors, or politicians. But I never dig into it, I don't have a sociological explanation for that. Maybe it's just because it's a decent title for every white-collar, or we're all able to play the role of teacher in some ways in this era.

I believe I have taken up enough of your time. Before we conclude, do you have any other thoughts or messages you would like to share with the audience or Chinese readers about this cherished work that you gifted to us half a century ago?

**Martin Jay:** I would say so. It's a great privilege to have a Chinese audience and I have often benefited from exchanges with Chinese colleagues. What I would hope for would be a return to the active exchange that was so beneficial to both of our countries in the years before the pandemic. As I said the last time, I was in China was 2019. Today there has been an unfortunate diminution of contact and we get far fewer Chinese scholars in the United States than we did Chinese students. It's more difficult for us to come to China and I would hope, you know, this is a very big sort of geopolitical question, that we could return to what was such an encouraging development during the two or three decades before the pandemic, a real dialogue between ourselves and Chinese intellectuals. I met a number of people over the years HUANG Wei or TONG Shin, or a number of other people who were clearly the international level of intellectual prominence that I regret we don't have an opportunity to interact with as much as I would like to today. So that would be my hope that this this book and other translations contribute to the ongoing and increasing dialogue that will bring us together as in a world where alas there are too many tensions and too many unforced oppositions.

**SUN Yizhou:** Thanks professor for your time and your insights.

**Martin Jay:** Thank you so much. It's great pleasure Yizhou and thanks once again for translating the book.