Conversations with Martin Jay

Peter E. Gordon

Prof. Martin Jay*, intellectual historian and Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of many seminal works on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, social theory, visual culture, post-structuralism and postmodernism. In an exclusive interview with the* Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics *to mark his 75th birth anniversary, he reflects on his life, interests, inspirations and influences, and the gradual shift in his scholarly concerns. He also describes the impact of his visits to India on his own work, and enlarges on his vision of the humanities in the coming years. The interview is conducted by his most celebrated doctoral student* ***Prof. Peter E. Gordon****, Amabel B. James Professor of History and a faculty affiliate in the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University.*

1. Your study, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, was first published in 1973. It was the first comprehensive study of Frankfurt School critical theory, exploring both its institutional genesis and the major contours of its ideas. The book was translated into thirteen languages, and it is singularly responsible in laying the scholarly foundations for our understanding of the Frankfurt School. What first drew your attention to the Frankfurt School and what moved you to devote your first book to this topic?

More than fifty years, amazing as it may seem, have passed since I chose my dissertation topic. Perhaps even more amazing is the stroke of good fortune that led me to choose it. In 1967, when I passed my "general examination" in the Harvard History Department, and had to begin research for my thesis, the Frankfurt School had yet to

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emerge on the radar of American intellectuals, even those on the left. Herbert Marcuse, to be sure, had already become celebrated (or in some quarters, reviled), as the guru of the New Left, but the origins of his work were unknown. No books by Horkheimer or Adorno were yet translated—Adorno's collection *Prisms* appeared in an obscure British edition only that year—and journals like *Telos*, which did so much to introduce Western Marxism, were just being founded. A recent book by a young German historian, Robert Zwarg, *Die Kritische Theorie in Amerika*, provides an excellent account of that era and the role my book played in it. What is striking is the steep learning curve that confronted Americans who tried to make sense of the new and challenging ideas that were coming from Western Marxism in general and the Frankfurt School in particular.

I was aided in that endeavor by the fortunate fact that my dissertation director, H. Stuart Hughes, had become friends with many members of the School during their American exile. Hughes was then himself politically engaged, having in fact run for the Senate five years earlier in Massachusetts as a peace candidate (and losing overwhelmingly to Teddy Kennedy). He had worked with Marcuse and Franz Neumann in the OSS during the war, and wrote one of the first accounts of the latter's career in a pioneering volume on the intellectual migration from Nazi German to America edited by two other Harvard historians, Bernard Bailyn and Donald Fleming, in 1969. He was also friendly with other figures in the history of the Institute of Social Research, such as Paul Lazarsfeld (I was recently sent a copy of the gracious letter of introduction Hughes wrote on my behalf to Lazarsfeld, who was an invaluable source for my project). Because of Hughes' interest in the intellectual migration as a whole—he was preparing a book to be called *The Sea Change* on it, which appeared in 1975—and the fact that many its members were still alive and willing to talk, the opportunity to write a history of the Frankfurt School was apparent.

It was also made possible for a young American, whose command of German was still in a work in progress, to do it for three reasons. The first is that because Critical Theory was at the time so much at the center of heated political polemics back in Germany, no German scholar had yet considered it a subject of distanced, historical inquiry. Only an outsider with no stake in the political struggles in Germany could have the innocence to think it might be. Second, because I was coming to the project without a strong ideological investment in the theory or indebted to its surviving figures as my personal teachers, I could assume a dispassionate and objective stance. Although I felt drawn to some of their ideas, I was skeptical of others—one of my first publications in fact was a critique of what I called Marcuse's "metapolitics of utopianism"—and thus could avoid writing an in-house, hagiographical account or a debunking exposé. The third reason, ironically, was the relative scarcity of documentary material that I had to master before writing my narrative. My richest primary source, beyond a substantial number of published texts, was the correspondence of Leo Lowenthal, which I examined in the summer of 1968 in Berkeley. Lowenthal, with whom I later became a colleague and very close friend, answered my questions about arcane references and obscure facts,

and allowed me, with some exceptions, to cite directly from the letters. I also benefited from responses to early versions of my chapters by other protagonists in the story, most notably Felix Weil, Friedrich Pollock and Erich Fromm. But "luckily" I had only minimal access to the voluminous correspondence and unpublished materials of other Frankfurt School figures, all of which is now available in extraordinary abundance. It would have been overwhelming had I been confronted with such riches then. A few years ago, I gave a talk at the library in Frankfurt at the opening of Horkheimer's digital archive, which contained something like 275,000 pages! As I said at the time, I would still be writing my dissertation if it had all been accessible in 1967. There were, to be sure, costs to my limited source base, which has allowed subsequent scholarship to fill in many gaps and modify or even challenge some of my interpretations. But all in all, the book that resulted from the dissertation seems to have survived its inadequacies and continues to introduce the Frankfurt School to new readers around the world.

2. Following your 1973 study of the Frankfurt School, and the next two major books, *Marxism and Totality* and *Adorno* (both published in 1984), your work underwent a certain shift and you turned to the question of vision, as demonstrated in the 1993 book, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*. What explains this shift in scholarly concerns?

Marxism and Totality concluded with a brief discussion of the increasing challenge to Western Marxism, especially to those of its representatives most indebted to Hegelian dialectics, presented by the rise of what was already called—at least in the Anglo-American world—post-structuralism. Using Foucault as the exemplary figure, I argued that even Habermas's more modest defense of a decentered, non-expressive view of totality would have to answer post-structuralist critics, often inspired by Nietzsche, who raised troubling questions about the point of view from which the whole might be seen. Although I cautiously suggested that a rapprochement between their positions was not entirely out of the question, I was fully aware that in many respects they would be at odds theoretically for a while to come.

That intuition proved, of course, prescient, as the so-called "theory wars" of the 1980's gained in ferocity. Although my instincts were to side more with Critical Theory, I also recognized that many of Adorno's positions could be seen as anticipating certain post-structuralist ones, especially those of Derrida and his followers, and that Foucault's insights into the dialectic of knowledge and power echoed arguments made in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. When I had a chance to discuss this question directly with Foucault during his visits to Berkeley in the early 1980's he had confirmed the affinity (and much to my narcissistic delight, credited his reading of my first book with that realization).

The more precise connection between *Marxism and Totality* and *Downcast Eyes* concerned the issue of what was called "the totalizing gaze," which could somehow see the whole from enough distance to make out its contours and structure. In temporal terms, this meant the backward gaze of something like Hegel's "owl of Minerva," which

could fly high enough to make retrospective sense of history as a coherent and meaningful narrative. Many of the critics of holistic thinking had denied that such a "God's eye view" was possible, which raised the question of the visual underpinnings of knowledge in general. Once my attention was directed to that issue, I began to notice that in many different contexts and in the work of thinkers from different theoretical backgrounds, suspicion of visual primacy itself, or what I called "ocularcentrism," was rampant. I was not prepared when the project began for the ubiquity of that suspicion among a wide variety of French intellectuals, which sometimes even led to a repudiation of the Enlightenment tradition as inherently problematic because of its reliance on the primacy of sight.

Of course, in the history of the Frankfurt School over several generations, the status of the Enlightenment and its legacy in what Habermas was to call the "uncompleted project of modernity" was also a contested issue. So it was never a question of an either/or opposition in which a cartoon version of rationalist modernists from Frankfurt were pitted against irrationalist post-modernists from Paris. The French thinkers I studied were, after all, deeply indebted to Germans (or Austrians) like Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and Freud. And many would still consider themselves broadly speaking sympathetic to Marx.

Downcast Eyes, as an exercise in intellectual history, tried to be charitable to the figures it treated, entering into their arguments as sympathetically as possible rather than judging them from the outside. Still, the book ends with a modest plea to avoid a wholesale repudiation of visuality in all of its guises, suggesting we explore the virtues and deficits of a plurality of scopic regimes and replace ocularcentrism with an "ocular-eccentrism" that also acknowledges the claims of the other senses to enrich our experience and guide our interaction with the world.

3. In much of your work one detects a strong interest in the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas. This was already evident in the concluding chapter of *Marxism and Totality*, and in subsequent essays from the 1980s and 90s. The generally favorable assessment of Habermas's philosophical achievements also appears more recently, especially in *Reason after its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory* (published in 2016). This year (June, 2019) Habermas celebrated his 90th birthday. Why does Habermas figure so prominently in your writing, and what significance do you find in his work?

I first met Habermas in January, 1969, during my research trip to Frankfurt for my dissertation. Not yet forty, he was already a powerful figure in Germany, but still virtually unknown in America. I was immediately struck by his remarkable intellect, independent judgment and openness to new ideas. In the multi-generational history of intellectual formations, it is rare that someone from a second generation will show as much creativity and initiative as he has without breaking radically with his or her predecessors. Habermas was neither a piously dutiful son, defensively guarding the legacy of his fathers, nor a patricidal rebel acting out his oedipal hostility towards their power over him by repudiating their influence entirely. Instead, he preserved the essential critical impulse behind their theory, while frankly confronting the weaknesses in their arguments, and attempting to find remedies in the creative appropriation of insights from other intellectual traditions.

Habermas has also been an extraordinarily energetic and widely admired public intellectual, who embodies through his own interventions into a score of sensitive debates the old Marxist imperative to combine theory with practice. He has been on the winning side of some—for example, the "Historian's Debate" over relativizing the Holocaust—and the losing side of others—such as the argument over a new constitution for a reunified Germany—but he has never adopted the "strategy of hibernation" that allowed Adorno to be accused of hypocrisy by the German New Left.

Although moving away from the more intransigent utopian hopes of the Frankfurt School's first generation, he has also avoided succumbing to their more pessimistic assessments of the dialectic of enlightenment and the project of modernity.

There is much more than I might say about Habermas's defense of communicative rationality and the challenges to it from many different quarters, which I try to summarize in the final chapter of *Reason after its Eclipse*, but I want to end by foregrounding one aspect of his own practice, which is consistent with that theory. We were together a year ago at a conference in Munich, and a picture was taken while I asked a question from the floor. Habermas, sitting next to me, is bending over and listening with intense focus to whatever nonsense I was blathering. The picture reminded me of the admiration I had felt when I was at my first conference with him back in the early 1980's in Starnberg, where he had recently become the co-director of the Max Planck Institute. At the end of several days of papers, Habermas took the floor and with an extraordinary recall of their main points, produced a measured and judicious response to all of them. What this performatively demonstrated was the vital importance of listening in any communicative interaction. Habermas has always been a vigorous defender of his own ideas with passion and determination, but he has also been able to learn from his critical interlocutors and respond to their criticisms. Thus in his debates with figures like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Niklas Luhmann or Karl-Otto Apel, he has always come away with a more nuanced and improved version of his argument. As an example of communicative interaction, he has always been a model of performative consistency.

4. During the 1980s and 90s, the multi-faceted theoretical movement typically referred to as "post-structuralism" enjoyed an enthusiastic reception among humanists and students in the United States. But your own assessment of post-structuralism, one might say, was noticeably less enthusiastic. One might say that you shared some of the same misgivings as were expressed by Jürgen Habermas in his book, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (German, 1985; English, 1987). What accounts for your more measured stance toward post-structuralism during the era when so many of your colleagues seemed to see it as a theoretical movement of great promise?

Post-structuralism was never a unified movement with a single perspective, despite the branding of it as such in the Anglo-American academy and popular press, mostly by its enemies. It was often conflated with an even murkier cultural formation that came to be called post-modernism, which has now almost entirely vanished from our cultural landscape. For reasons that perhaps had as much to do with generational conflicts and the need to make careers through identification with something new in the intellectual marketplace, it turned into both a rallying cry and a target of opprobrium. When I taught a course at the School of Criticism and Theory in the summer of 1986 on the French critique of visual primacy, based on the research I was doing for *Downcast Eyes*, I witnessed how intensely partisan the champions of different master thinkers—Lyotard, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Irigaray, to name the most obvious—could be. Each was convinced that the others had failed to see the light (or perhaps had been dazzled too much by it). No less polemical were many of their opponents among traditional humanist scholars, defenders of the scientific method, militant Marxists, and, it has to be admitted, some stalwarts of the Frankfurt School.

My own inclination was to side with Habermas in his defense of communicative rationality in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, a book I reviewed in *History and Theory* with sympathy when it first appeared. But I was also aware that many of the post-structuralists were asking important questions about language, power, subjectivity, and the ways in which rhetoric and philosophy were entangled. There were also obvious parallels with certain insights in Walter Benjamin's work and Adorno's defense of non-identity. In the contribution I made to the volume edited by Richard Bernstein called *Habermas and Modernity*, I pushed Habermas to clarify his attitude towards the relationship between aesthetics and reason, and was gratified when he provided a very thoughtful answer. I was even more gratified when he began dialogues with Foucault, cut short, alas, by the latter's death in 1984, and Derrida. Much to the chagrin of some of their respective supporters, Habermas and Derrida ultimately reached a point of sufficient convergence to compose a joint statement in 2003 on the state of European politics. The Cold war between Critical Theory and post-structuralism can perhaps be said to have already ended when Derrida was given the Adorno prize in Frankfurt in 2001. This is not to say that real differences didn't linger, just that the extreme partisanship of the previous decades faded considerably. Doing the research that produced *Downcast Eyes* had already alerted me to the value of much French theory, so I was not among those chagrined by the cautious rapprochement between the two sides.

5. Theodor Adorno participated with colleagues in California in the landmark research study in political psychology, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950); based on empirical research gathered mostly in the Bay Area, near Berkeley. The revival of authoritarian politics is a noticeable feature of our times, not only in the United States but across the globe. In what respects to you feel that the research project of 1950 retains its relevance today, or has the political landscape changed too much to warrant analogies between 1950 and our contemporary era?

History never repeats, Mark Twain is supposed to have said, but it often rhymes. *The Authoritarian Personality*, indeed the entire series of *Studies in Prejudice* produced by the Institute of Social Research in collaboration with a number of other researchers, was written in the shadow of the Second World War. Although fascism had been defeated on the battlefield, the anxiety still existed that it might return, either directly or indirectly, and perhaps even come to America. The collaborative study was published on the threshold of the McCarthy era, when the vulnerability of liberal democracy was clearly evident. Seeking a tool to measure the psychological character types that were open to the fascist siren call, Adorno nonetheless assumed—as you have reminded us in your recent consideration of its history and current applicability—that the problem was on a much deeper social level. That is, those who scored high on the "f-scale," which showed predispositions to fascist attitudes, were the ones who had introjected ideological patterns of thought from the society as a whole, patterns that reflected deeper trends in the social structure of late capitalism itself. Individual psychopathology was ultimately collective social pathology.

Now, insofar, as late capitalism is still with us, one might argue that the potential for the repetition of the irrational, divisive politics of the McCarthy era (and perhaps even of the fascism that was apparently defeated in 1945) is still great, and has recently been actualized in the wave of right-wing populism sweeping much of the world. Not only *The Authoritarian Personality*, but also Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman's contribution to the *Studies in Prejudice*, *Prophets of Deceit*, which explores the techniques of demagogues, thus seem all too relevant today.

But it is important to acknowledge that rhymes are not straightforward repetitions. First of all, we have the lessons of historical disasters to prevent at least the innocent embrace of fascist politics by many people who can remember where it led the last time. The cult of violence and heroic vitalism that allowed authoritarianism to justify, even crave war, is now much harder to support. Getting tough on migrants is one thing (and awful for its victims), but invading foreign countries is something else. So far no one but Putin has succumbed to that temptation, and Trump, for all his bluster, is more an isolationist than interventionist in world affairs. Second, the end of the Cold War means that right-wing authoritarianism doesn't really have an enemy to fight comparable to the Communism that fascists and McCarthyites were able to demonize so effectively. "Radical Islam" and the War on Terror, however much they may function to generate exaggerated fears, don't really have the same capacity to mobilize ideological panic, or at least not yet. No one in America besides perhaps John Bolton is itching to begin a military conflict with Iran. Finally, the exponential expansion of the internet and social media has had an ambiguous impact, accelerating the dissemination of both misinformation and its exposure, which is like nothing before in our history. The democratization of access to the digital public sphere is combined with increased uncertainty about the quality and veracity of what appears there. The new technologies abet state and commercial surveillance, but also allow oppressed groups to practice

what has been called sousveillance (for example, body cams or smartphone videos) to challenge official narratives. All of this may well produce the cynicism that feeds loss of faith in democracy, but it can also help undercut the authority of elites who have hitherto ruled with impunity. Populism, it is important to acknowledge, has both left and right varieties, and can at times be an understandable response to corruption and crony capitalism. In short, although we are in a darkening period in global history, especially with climate catastrophe looming on the horizon, it is not yet the second era of fascist authoritarianism.

6. Professor Jay, your high stature in the field of intellectual history is incontestable, and you served as a great inspiration to scholars in a wide variety of disciplines, not only in the Anglophone world but in humanistic scholarship around the globe. Even in India, your scholarship has an enthusiastic following. If I am not mistaken, you have visited India on at least three occasions. What impact did these visits have upon your own work, your perception of the humanities, and your vision of the humanities in the coming years?

My wife Catherine Gallagher and I first visited India in January, 1988, at the invitation of the literary critic Prafulla C. Kar, whom we had met when he was a participant in the School of Criticism and Theory during the summer of 1986. We spent a week at the American Studies Research Center in Hyderabad, then directed by T.S.R. Sharma, and travelled widely to other parts of the country. It was at that time, if memory serves, that I made my first contact with Ananta Sukla and the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*. Prafulla, who has been a tireless facilitator of international conversations in the humanities and organizer of the Forum in Contemporary Theory, invited us again in 2005 to conferences in Bangalore and Vadodara. Ten years later we returned, this time for a visit organized by the literary critic Sambuddha Sen, which took us to the University of Delhi, where I taught for a week or so in the Political Science Department and had lively exchanges with Pradip Kumar Datta and his colleagues. I also visited Kolkata, to speak at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences at the invitation of Partha Chatterjee.

In addition to all of the overwhelming experiences that every Western visitor to India inevitably has—and my wife and I were able to tour many different regions of the country from Tamil Nadu to Rajasthan, Kerala to West Bengal—my great good fortune at being able to interact with so many Indian intellectuals and scholars in the humanities and social sciences left an indelible impression. If I had to sum it up in a simple formula, it deepened my appreciation of the dialectic of sameness and otherness that has become so much an abstract theoretical theme in recent decades.

The element of sameness in my experiences with Indian colleagues would have to begin with an acknowledgment of our common linguistic heritage. Whatever one may say about the problematic effects of British colonial domination, one palpable consequence was the spread of English as an international lingua franca. In contrast to other Asian countries—and I have had the opportunity to lecture often in China, Japan and Korea—where fluency in English is still uneven, in India, at least among the educated elite, it is virtually native. As a result, Americans such as myself, who have never fully mastered a foreign language and remain dependent on the generosity of others to compensate for our inadequacies, can communicate more comfortably and with less concern about misunderstanding in India than anywhere else in Asia (Singapore and perhaps Hong Kong aside). In addition, Indian academics, for all their politeness and tact, are more forthright and self-confident in their interactions with Westerners. As a result, debates are substantively meaningful, disagreements candid, and the level of discussion accordingly high. And with so many scholars of Indian origin having become important voices in American scholarly life—Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhaba, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Srinivas Aravamudan, Suvir Kaul, Ania Loomba, Sumathi Ramaswamy, and Bharati Mukherjee, to name only those I've known personally—there is a sense of familiarity when meeting their counterparts who have remained home.

But in addition to the recognition of a certain sameness or at least the sharing of many common reference points and attitudes, it is hard not to feel how different on many levels we inevitably are. Just to remain with the issue of language, in both cases (or at least for the vast majority of Americans whose ancestors came from elsewhere than the UK), English is the upper layer of a palimpsest that covers over, but doesn't completely erase, previous languages. But for us, with the exception of recent immigrants, the earlier language is largely supplanted, even forgotten, whereas in your case, it remains an active supplement to what only appears to cover it. That is, most Americans are mono-lingual, whereas English-speaking Indians always have the good fortune of being fluent in more than one tongue. One result is that the relative cultural homogenization that afflicts American life, for all the lip-service we play to multi-culturalism, is kept at bay in India, where cultural identities are more complexly layered. What can be said about plural linguistic abilities can also be said about the powerful living presence of millennia of indigenous traditions, religious, culinary, sartorial and the like, which are immediately evident to anyone who comes to India. It is possible in other parts of the global south to visit mega-cities in which the past has been almost entirely obliterated in favor of tediously homogeneous new developments (e.g. in Sao Paolo), but in their Indian counterparts, the resistance of the old remains, for good or for ill, enormously powerful. It does not take long for a visitor to sense the same complexity in the sensibilities of even the most Western-trained and cosmopolitan Indians, whose roots in the different regions of the sub-continent never disappear.

If I had to suggest any lesson for the humanities in this hasty and insufficient response to your question, it would be that visiting India makes clear the virtues of hybridization and cultural complexity. At a time when populist movements in both America and India seem to be clamoring for national purification and the abjection of otherness, it is vital to appreciate how much strength can come from the dialectic of sameness and difference that comes alive when one has the privilege of visiting this extraordinary country.