

Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School

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Citation:

BLACK, Jack (2019). Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School. Rethinking Marxism, 31 (4), 532-535. [Article]

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Black, J. 2019. Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School, *Rethinking Marxism*, 31(4): 532-535.

To link to this article:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08935696.2019.1650572>

Book review: 'Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School'

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Abstract

This review considers Stuart Jeffries’s *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*. Providing a detailed account of the work and lives of the Frankfurt School, Jeffries is commended for his ability to present an illustrative biography of the school’s members and associates, as well as the variety of topics that their work engaged with. Consequently, while Jeffries manages to merge biography and academic theory in a readable and, at times, detailed and engaging narrative, such work is undermined by a tendency to focus on the salacious gossip of a group of men whose real-life complications can overcome the significance of their argument. Nevertheless, in view of the school’s work, it is suggested that the book’s paradoxes can serve as an important opening to contemporary topics and, more importantly, to theorizing these topics in light of the Frankfurt School.

Keywords

The Frankfurt School, Marxism, dialectic, culture, consumerism

In series 3, episode 8 of the HBO television series, *Girls*, the show’s protagonist, Hanna Horvath (played by the show’s creator, Lena Dunham), is given her first month’s paycheck, working at *GQ* magazine as part of the advertorial team. Despite landing a writing job, Hannah’s work in advertising follows the realization that the

rights for a collection of essays, which she has completed as part of an eBook deal, are owned by her publisher for the next three years and, after the death of her editor, the publisher has no intention of producing her book. With her book deal stalled, Hannah undertakes the job at *GQ*. However, when astonished by the figure on her paycheck, Hannah's apprehensions in working for the magazine's advertorial team quickly evaporate. She exclaims, "This is how much money I make a week? This is a lot more than my rent. This is insane. I'm just going to walk into a store in the meatpacking district and just be like, 'Make it rain!'".

What does this episode have in common with Stuart Jeffries's (2016) *Grand Hotel Abyss*, a collective biography of the Frankfurt School? The answer is paradox and, in particular, the paradoxes enveloped in capitalism, consumerism and the media. As evident in the *Girls* episode, by subjugating her creativity, Hannah is left working for a department that centers on creating "fake" lives in order to help sell consumer products. Creatively deficient, but all well and good when the paycheck arrives. According to Jeffries (2016, 10), "if the Frankfurt School's diagnosis is right" then it is these paradoxes which "kee[p] us obligingly submissive to an oppressive system", grounded in fakery.

Indeed, it is this sense of paradox which underlies the book's structure and style as well as the individuals it examines. A group who were clearly Marxist, but failed to present a considered judgement on the Soviet Union; critics of capitalism, yet bankrolled by an endowment provided by a German businessman; cultural snobs, who derided popular culture for the high culture of Beethoven; critics of authoritarianism and aware of the power of false consciousness, but, while in exile from Nazi Germany, completed work for the CIA and later, upon returning to West Germany, happy to accept military contracts from the Federal Republic. For Jefferies, it is these

paradoxes that are recounted in the century which shaped the Frankfurt School and the topics and themes that its members sought to investigate. The effects of the failed German Revolution in 1919, the emergence of fascism in Germany, the persecution of the Jewish population and the proliferation of US consumerism, all combined in the school's ideas, concepts and academic pursuits. In short, the book is an account of these paradoxes in the work and lives of its formative members: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Friedrich Pollock, and, according to Jeffries, the group's theoretical mentor, Walter Benjamin.

Overall, the book offers a unique perspective that, in its structure and writing style, serves to combine biography with a narrative that steers more towards storytelling. The book is well-structured and biographically detailed, yet – with a shudder – one is compelled to describe it as a “page turner”. Ironically, such a popular descriptor serves to highlight that, while the Frankfurt School sought to critique the popular, mass produced commodity, in part, such a description serves as a commendable critique of a book that manages to successfully achieve something that is rather difficult. That is, it manages to merge biography and academic theory in a readable and, at times, detailed and engaging narrative. This coherently offers a broad and accessible account.

Nevertheless, in marrying a journalistic style with a body of work that links Hegel, Freud and Donald Duck, one is left with a narrative that tends to sweep over a range of thinkers as well as a variety of concepts and topics, including: reification, dialectics, Jazz and art. Perhaps the problem here is that the book steers between two audiences. While Jeffries's narrative and biographical content effectively illustrates the lives of the Frankfurt School's members, academically, the book divides and, in

some instances, may even offend those seeking a considered appraisal of the school's work and their impact upon society.

Biographically, we are provided with an account of how the lack of radical action on behalf of the school (in particular, Adorno), was viewed as a betrayal by the student movement. As one student flyer stated, "Adorno as institution is dead" (Jeffries 2016, 345). When Adorno fails to become involved in the student protests – he famously called the police to remove a group of occupying students and later suffered the disruption of one of his lectures from students who protested his silence by bearing their breasts – his retreat and cancelation of his seminars is prefaced by the assertion that, originally, Adorno was largely supportive of the protests. Nevertheless, we do not get any further explanation for this contradiction. What becomes clear, therefore, is the extent to which the book dialectically embodies the paradoxes that its protagonists sought to examine.

That is, although the reader is subject to an interpretation of a group of academics who, while inciting revolution in their work, were more inclined to sit stroking cuddly toys, marrying their dead friend's wife and struggling to maintain a relationship with their step-child (this description is taken from Jeffries's account of Marcuse), we are left wondering whether it is the work itself that we should be encouraged by or the salacious gossip of a group of men whose real-life complications can, at times, obscure the significance of their argument.

Consequently, towards the end of the book, after the death of Adorno and Horkheimer, and in view of the book's discussion of Habermas's contribution to critical theory, one is left wondering what to do with the latter's professors. Jeffries (2016: 887) contends that in using critical theory today, its proponents should maintain a sense of irony. Yet, it is difficult to determine whether we are being asked

to be ironic; or, perhaps, ambivalent or even cynical? Is such cynicism merely a consequence of the failure of enlightenment, as argued by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002)?

Left with these questions, the biggest paradox of the book is that in highlighting the dialectical approach of its authors, it fails to relate this understanding to their work and theory. While time is spent highlighting the travails of an internet geared towards customized culture, and whereas Jeffries is adept at tracing the school's assertion that fascism's success resided in its ability to subsume the contradictions within German society, it is in detailing these contradictions, in light of Trump's "Make America Great Again" presidential campaign and the UK's exit from the EU, that a more considered appraisal of the school's work can be provided and a more applied account of Jeffries's argument can be found.

In sum, for those who are looking for an introduction to the Frankfurt School, there is much to be gained from Jeffries's biographical work. However, for those seeking a more detailed conceptual understanding, that does not shy away from an engagement with the individuals behind the Frankfurt School, then Löwy's *"Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'"*, provides a philosophical and theological insight into Benjamin's understanding of history and, more importantly, the political significance of his work; Held's *"Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas"*, offers both a introduction to, and an applied application of, the school's approach; and, finally, Jay's *"The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social research, 1923-50"*, presents a measured account of the Frankfurt school, the institute and its key ideas. Indeed, it is in view of these authors, that Jeffries's account can serve as an

important opening to the lives and work of the men behind the Frankfurt School as well as their continuing theoretical significance.

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