



Gran Hotel Abismo: Biografía coral de la Escuela de Frankfurt (Noema)

Stuart Jeffries , José Adrián Vitier (Translator)

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Vida y obra de Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer y otros pensadores que definieron el mundo tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial.

"Están ustedes alojados en el Gran Hotel Abismo", le dijo un día el filósofo Lukács a Adorno, refiriéndose a todos los miembros de la Escuela de Frankfurt: un hotel equipado con toda clase de lujos, pero colgado sobre un precipicio, sobre el vacío y el absurdo...

Este grupo de pensadores alemanes ha tenido una inmensa influencia sobre las ideas y la cultura de las últimas generaciones. Su intención fue siempre arrojar luz sobre la política cultural durante el auge del fascismo, y para ello empezaron a reunirse y crearon la Escuela de Frankfurt en 1923. Muchos de ellos tuvieron que exiliarse huyendo de los nazis y acabaron en Estados Unidos.

Su vida, su época y sus ideas siguen siendo hoy relevantes. Este es un libro fundamental para entender cómo percibimos la cultura en la sociedad de masas y cómo nos relacionamos con la información, con los medios y con nuestra época.

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From Reader Review **Gran Hotel Abismo: Biografía coral de la Escuela de Frankfurt (Noema)** for online ebook

Robert says

Grand Hotel Abyss recounts the efforts of several social theorists--Germans and in the main Jews--to use Marx and, to a lesser extent Freud, to think their way through the collapse of the Weimar Republic, the rise of Hitler, the Holocaust, Stalinism, the Cold War and the global domination of capitalism. Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erik Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and, latterly, Juergen Habermas were the tangential or direct beneficiaries of a rich grain merchant's desire to please his son by endowing a social research institution with a Marxist bent in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923, hence the name "the Frankfurt School," which went through many incarnations over the following decades.

Stuart Jeffries does a handsome job of intertwining biography with intellectual history, making this book enjoyable to read if, by virtue of its subject, somewhat depressing. Walter Benjamin's story glitters with imagination and tragedy; Max Horkheimer's story doesn't quite get told; Adorno's tale conveys both his brilliance and his prickliness; Fromm's heresies are entertaining; Marcuse's "solution" is even more entertaining and Habermas's life and opus ends up seeming rather pointless, despite his worldwide renown as a philosopher.

The problem all these thinkers confronted, ultimately, is whether pure thought could have any impact on the juggernaut of violence and capitalism that triumphed, if that is the right word, in the 20th century. Most of them suspected their Marxism was a dead end, in practical terms, and most of them regarded capitalism as the ultimate control mechanism. Marcuse's novel contribution was to suggest that eros might be a force wily enough to endow modern existence with a certain piquancy, if not freedom, but as Jeffries recounts, Marcuse's eros became, in the popular imagination, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and that became trapped in the commodification of ecstasy, either by promiscuity, drugs, or simple shallow-mindedness. Ultimately Marcuse viewed contemporary western life as one-dimensional, flat, constrained, and directed by an impersonal dictatorship of economic interests.

Habermas had the misfortune to be optimistic that still another way out of this No Exit scenario could be found in the realm of genuine social communication apart from the tyranny of "the system." Jeffries uses many of Habermas's skeptical critics to make him pay for this. The problem was that Habermas was a classical system-builder, someone who was determined to bring all manner of philosophical concerns together in the manner of Kant or Hegel. No one believes that's a useful proposition anymore--better to pick smaller targets of attack, make your point, and move on.

Adorno coaching Thomas Mann through musical theory as he wrote Doctor Faustus was my favorite passage in this book. Benjamin's desperate attempts to write a lot by writing a little--precisely not writing as Habermas wrote, rather by proceeding from fragment to fragment--are the book's saddest passages.

Saving "critical theory," which the Frankfurt School is credited with developing for last, I have to say Jeffries never seems to try to define it. As presented here, the proposition essentially is philosophizing within multiple dimensions of an historical moment or movement...playing that moment or movement's contradictions back to it...understanding that there is no disassociating a wrong from a right...presenting and dissecting the ambiguities of overarching forces, be they economic or related to Freudian notions of self-repression and deferred gratification, i.e. the inherent discontents of orderly social existence.

Adam Dalva says

Intermittently strong, wonderfully researched book with a great thesis (and title), held back by some quirks in the execution. Jeffries seems to be trying to bridge the stylistic chasm between philosophic and pop writing, but the result is a weird mix of chatty and repetitive. The biographical information, particularly Benjamin's, held my interest more than his analysis of the Frankfurt texts, and he produces too wide a web of characters for any besides the core 4 to hold interest. Oddly riddled with typos as well - a near miss, useful for non-fanatics who are trying to get into this (depressingly relevant) era of thinkers.

Jay Green says

A wonderful read. Doesn't dumb down the ideas of the Frankfurt School excessively while simultaneously making complex arguments accessible to lay readers. I particularly like Jeffries's wry descriptions of the School's personalities and their various idiosyncrasies. Most enlightening!

Steffi says

Critical theory's founding question: why did the German working class support fascism rather than socialism is, unfortunately, acutely relevant again.

The book is not an intro to critical theory as such, it's more like a kind of (very accessible) group biography of the core Frankfurt School gang. Starting with the upper middle class Jewish German childhoods of the main cast - Walter Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer - the book focuses on Benjamin in the 1930s, Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1940s and 50s (with exile guest appearances of Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht, among others) , Marcuse in the 60s plus a chapter on the Frankfurt School's second generation (Habermas) and contemporary third generation of Honneth and the post Global Financial Crisis interest in critical theory.

philosovamp says

You would not think so from Jeffries' accessible, even goofy on occasion, tone, but *Grand Hotel Abyss* is a stubbornly ambitious book. Not only is it an attempt at what's always a doomed project, an intellectual biography, which tries to present the lives and the work of some intellect; not only is it a group biography, which tries to explore three generations of shockingly heterogeneous thinkers; but it is a portrait of a group who, as Jeffries acknowledges right away, is thoroughly controversial and, in some circles both left and right, irredeemable -- a portrait that Jeffries hopes redeems them for readers today.

Grand Hotel Abyss is an enjoyable read, an instructive read, and a useful read, but it does not, it seems to me, succeed at much of what it sets out to do. As an intellectual biography it is uneven; at the end we have a robust picture of Habermas' philosophy but virtually no idea of who he was as a person; we have a clear idea of the Oedipal childhoods of Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer but little idea of what that has to do with their philosophy; and of course, if you want to know either exactly what Adorno was doing in 1948, or a solid understanding of The Arcades Project, you will be left wanting. That's the difficulty of the intellectual

biography.

As a group biography, GHA is also uneven, in both the biographical and intellectual details; up until Benjamin's death, this book is the Walter Benjamin Story, and our other Frankfurters circulate in the background. My cynicism tells me this is a deliberate promotional scheme from Verso to promote their line of Benjamin re-printings and the rehabilitation of everyone's favorite emo Marxist -- but enough of that. (And on this note, it's worth pointing out that GHA starts off very rockily and improves as it goes; the first chapters are in DIRE need of editing). Needless to say, other figures crop up when its convenient and languish when its not; poor Fromm primarily shows up merely as a foil to Marcuse.

And as for arguing for the relevance of the Frankfurt school today....ehhhh? The entire book reads as an exercise in Benjamin's Jewish redemption-of-the-past project as Jeffries presents it -- how do we make, for example, the curmudgeonly, pessimistic, cop-calling Adorno redeemable? On the one hand, the final chapter which presumably is supposed to solidify this argument, is shockingly flimsy -- all we get is Badiou and, erm, Occupy. On the other, this is no polemic, and Jeffries gives the Frankfurters the respect they deserve. (Which is not to say he doesn't have favorites, or doesn't poke or praise as he sees fit; Grossman and Marcuse come out unscathed as certified Praxis-Respecters). But on the third hand, which I found most important: why does the Frankfurt school need to be justified? The contradiction of the academic and pessimist, Marxist or otherwise, I think is worth embracing; not deriding, not justifying, not mollifying. I understand that's not what most leftists ordinarily prefer to do, utopian melancholics that they are, but...

I enjoyed reading Grand Hotel Abyss, especially in the latter half. I have a better idea of the Frankfurt school's thought, importance, and concerns than I did beforehand; and I think the 60s conundrum Marcuse and Adorno found themselves in is immensely instructive for today's world of campus activism and nu red guards, which Jeffries satisfactorily presents. Marcuse became the willing father figure to campus militants, though One-Dimensional Man seemed to ruthlessly scorn the idea; Adorno was relentlessly bullied by radicals while he attempted to defend exactly what it seems he should be criticizing; very relevant stuff! I also appreciated the middle chunk of the book when the Frankfurt school is fleeing fascist Europe, a terrifying and difficult prospect. There are problems with the book throughout, I think, and someone more familiar with the Frankfurt school would do much better to look at the Further Reading section, but it is a fine piece of group intellectual biography / apologism, though you may have to do some of the work yourself.

Mandy says

This well-written and well researched book tells the story of The Institute for Social Research, or the Frankfurt School as it came to be known. The group of thinkers, philosophers and intellectuals who came together to form it included such well-known names as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse amongst many others, and author Stuart Jeffries has done a terrific job in making their ideas and philosophies, usually known as critical thinking, reasonably accessible for the uninitiated. He gives equal weight to their lives as to their thinking, and explores their influence on younger generations of thinkers and their relevance to our contemporary world. I certainly found some of the book challenging, but then philosophy is a demanding subject and overall Jeffries makes it all as comprehensible as possible. The book is an engaging and readable group biography, a history of the times they all lived in and an excellent exposition of the school's thinking. Anecdotal as well as being a work of scholarship, I learnt a great deal from what is a truly excellent example of a book that expertly keeps the balance between the academic and the popular. Highly recommended.

Antônio Xerxenesky says

Uma história extremamente concisa e cômica (sim, cômica), com um poder de amalgamar informações de diferentes épocas impressionante. Tem problemas? Tem. Citações descontextualizadas (ou melhor, tiradas do contexto original e cravejadas num contexto muito díspare) e um puxa-saquismo de leve com Jürgen Habermas, o maior bostalhão da filosofia alemã. As referências pop-culturais, às vezes, parecem acrescentar pouco (3 citações a Woody Allen? sério?). Mas, de modo geral, é um livro engraçadíssimo e informativo - onde mais eu saberia do fetiche de Marcuse por hipopótamos de pelúcia?

Scot says

My copy is an uncorrected proof, yet despite the errors the book read really easily and worked really well both as biography, historical narrative, and as a way into understanding the personalities that drove the Frankfurt School and the personal contexts informing the analysis each of the most significant players contributed. I highly recommend it if you happen to be a philosophy and history nerd, said the reader while searching for his pocket-protector and pens.

Domhnall says

This is a lively and sometimes amusing history, examining the work of the Frankfurt School in each decade from 1900 to the late 1960s and beyond that to recent times, the internet, Facebook and Twitter. It is quietly critical, sometimes reprimanding, sometimes mocking, but often also supporting the school against its rivals and mockers. It has a lot that is perfectly relevant today.

The Frankfurt School is not just a body of ideas or writers, as I expected, but an autonomous academic institution which was given the resources to survive even transposition to the USA during the Nazi era by a bequest from a wealthy capitalist for the sake of his Marxist son. Its initial mission was to account for the failure of the German working class to emulate the Russians by overthrowing capitalism in a successful revolution, particularly in 1919. Using social research in the Thirties it identified an authoritarian strand to popular culture which made the German people vulnerable to the Nazi ideology, while in the USA in the Forties and Fifties it extended this work to demonstrate the role of authoritarian attitudes in a liberal democracy. Returning as an institution to post-war Germany, the mission was redefined to call for solutions that might prevent the barbarism of Nazism and in particular of the Holocaust from ever happening again. In the event, both in Europe and in the USA, its theorists encountered forms of totalitarian control over the mass of people that were no less terrifying yet were achieved by subtle and seemingly non-violent means. From discussions of the coffee house societies of Eighteenth Century Europe to the internet and Facebook, the recurring theme seems to have been very much the one concern: the seeming impossibility of ever thinking differently.

In particular, they reflected on how everyday life could become the theatre of revolution and yet in fact was mostly the opposite, involving a conformism that thwarted any desire to overcome an oppressive system. p.18

IF CRITICAL THEORY means anything, it means the kind of radical re-thinking that challenges what it

considers to be the official versions of history and intellectual endeavour. Benjamin initiated it, perhaps, but it was Max Horkheimer who gave it a name when he became the director of the Frankfurt School in 1930: critical theory stood in opposition to all those ostensibly craven intellectual tendencies that thrived in the twentieth century and served as tools to keep an irksome social order in place – logical positivism, value-free science, positivist sociology, among others. Critical theory stood in opposition, too, to what capitalism in particular does to those it exploits – buying us off cheaply with consumer goods, making us forget that other ways of life are possible, enabling us to ignore the truth that we are ensnared in the system by our fetishistic attention and growing addiction to the purportedly must-have new consumer good. p28

In his last essay, Benjamin wrote: 'There is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.' That sense of the repression of the unacceptable, the embarrassing, the awkward, of the ideological disappearing of that which doesn't fit the master narrative, had come early to him and remained with him lifelong: barbarism, for Walter Benjamin, began at home. p30

Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions, he [Horkheimer] wrote. 'While they work, they do not fulfill their own needs and faculties but work in alienation.' p74.

Even though the Institute was nicknamed 'Cafe Marx', that scarcely captures its austere mood, which was better reflected in its architecture: the neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School were modern-day monks working in retreat from a world they could not change and a politics they had no hope of influencing p91

Revolutions, thus conceived, required the proletariat to have the patience of the bus queue. They must wait for what would, inevitably, come, and then jump on board. p93

an era when it seemed to be, increasingly, a brain-numbing, spirit-crushing, soul-destroying nightmare, and the only alternative to the Marxist cogito (I work therefore I am) was the consumerist one (I shop therefore I am).

Under Horkheimer, the Frankfurt School rebelled against this orthodox German view of the value of work and in particular against the Marxist credo that we fulfil ourselves through labour. For the likes of Horkheimer and Adorno, if not for Fromm who remained more faithful to Marx than his colleagues, labour is not the basic category of human realisation p136

In 1931, capitalism seemed able to defer its abolition, perhaps even indefinitely. In such circumstances, Horkheimer argued, the Institute must consider not only the economic basis of society but its superstructure. It must develop a critique of the ideological control mechanisms that held capitalism in place. p157

The insistence that the past can be transformed remains, for Marxists and others, one of Benjamin's most appealing ideas. The critic Terry Eagleton, for instance, wrote: 'In one of his shrewdest sayings, Benjamin remarked that what drives men and women to revolt against injustice is not dreams of liberated grandchildren, but memories of enslaved ancestors. It is by turning our gaze to the horrors of the past, in the hope that we will not thereby be turned to stone, that we are impelled to move forward.' p197

*In 1492, the Abbot of Sponheim wrote a tract called *In Defence of Scribes* urging that the scribal tradition be maintained because the very act of handcopying sacred texts brought spiritual enlightenment. One problem: the abbot had his book set in movable type so his argument could be spread quickly and cheaply.*

Certainly, the angel of history whom Benjamin invokes in thesis IX is a figure who inverts such crude historical materialism: for the angel, the past is not a chain of events but a single catastrophe and the task of

any justifiable historical materialism is not to predict revolutionary future or communist utopia, but to attend to and thereby redeem the sufferings of the past. p246

Every morning, to earn my bread, I go to the market where lies are bought. Hopefully I take my place among the sellers. [Brecht] p248

Fromm distinguished between negative and positive freedom – freedom from and freedom to. The responsibility conferred on humans by having freedom from authority can be unbearable unless we are able to exercise our positive freedom creatively. p281

*Fromm argued that this fear of freedom was not a peculiarly fascist one, but threatened the basis of democracy in every modern state. Indeed, at the outset of *Escape from Freedom*, he quoted with approval the words of the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. ‘The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is also accordingly here – within ourselves and our institutions.’* p281

*In *Negative Dialectics*, too, Adorno expressed better what human duty was in the wake of Auschwitz than he had a decade earlier. ‘A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.’* p307

Marcuse maintained close links with his former colleagues Adorno and Horkheimer in Frankfurt, and in key respects, their critique of America is similar. For all three, the rugged individualism of US society that was pitted rhetorically against the collectivism of the Soviet bloc during the Cold War was a myth: Americans were infantilised, repressed pseudo-individuals p319

*During 1952 and 1953, for instance, Adorno spent ten months in California analysing newspaper astrology columns, radio soap operas and the new medium of television, and what he had to say about them bore closely on what Marcuse wrote in *Eros and Civilisation*. Adorno found in all these forms of mass culture a symmetry with fascist propaganda: both mass culture and fascist propaganda, he argued, meet and manipulate the dependency needs of the pseudo-individual character, ‘promoting conventional, conformist and contented attitudes’.* p319

The American society, or any other civilised society for that matter, that postured in the 1950s as free and affluent was, so Marcuse argued, straitjacketed by conformity. p321

*This part of Marcuse’s analysis clearly connected with Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the despoliation of nature in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For all three, any desirable transformation involved reuniting humans with nature rather than treating it, as it had been since Francis Bacon, as fit for nothing but domination.* p325

In particular, psychoanalysis claimed that the autonomous individual is a chimera. We are not free either of our biological instincts, nor can we escape determination and domination by the social order. ‘Decisions for men as active workers are taken by the hierarchy ranging from the trade associations to the national administration’, wrote Adorno and Horkheimer, ‘and in the private sphere by the system of mass culture which takes over the last inward impulses of individuals who are forced to consume what is offered to them’. The autonomous individual, the figure that Fromm needed to construct his road to sanity, was

programmatically denied by critical theory.p329

*This attitude – that there is nothing easier than to love – has continued to be the prevalent idea about love in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.’ In Marxist terms, society treated love as a commodity rather than realising it was an art that took time, skill and dedication to master. The beloved too became reified, an object serving instrumental purposes rather than a person. All the five types of love Fromm identified in *The Art of Loving* were becoming similarly debased – brotherly love by the commodification of humans; motherly love by narcissism; self-love by selfishness; love of God by idolatry; and erotic love by the absence of tenderness. The death of the tenderness in erotic love, he charged, came from the refusal of personal responsibility, the insistence on entitlement and the tendency to look outward in demand rather than inward in obligation.* p332

For Habermas, the Federal Republic had accorded many fundamental rights to the West German people under its so-called Basic Law and had given them access to politics at the federal level by means of elections to the Bundestag. But, as Rolf Wiggershaus notes, the Bundestag had lost power to the executive, the bureaucracy and lobbying groups. Elections, then, seemed to confer democratic political power, but in fact made a mockery of it. p336

*Adorno despised in Europe. ‘No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one that leads from the slingshot to the megaton bomb’, he wrote in *Negative Dialectics*, the book he published in 1966* p365

In order to enter into a conversation in which you might lose your prejudices, Fish argued, you would have to begin by putting aside your prejudices p403

While Horkheimer and Adorno linked emancipation to refusing to adapt to current social reality, Habermas’s extraordinary hope is that social reality can be changed by means of creating truly democratic institutions that are capable of withstanding the corrosive effects of capitalism. p423

freedom of choice, as Habermas understood from the first generation of Frankfurt scholars, and from Marcuse in particular, was no freedom at all. p423

If there is any small remnant of utopia that I’ve preserved, then it is surely the idea that democracy – and its public struggle for its best form – is capable of hacking through the Gordian knot of otherwise insoluble problems. I’m not saying we’re going to succeed in this; we don’t even know whether success is possible. But because we don’t know, we still have to try.’ Habermas. p424

Among capitalism’s losers are millions of overworked, underpaid workers ostensibly liberated by the largest socialist revolution in history (China’s) who have been driven to the brink of suicide to keep those in the west playing with their iPads. The proletariat, far from burying capitalism, are keeping it on life support. p439

the best writings of the Frankfurt School still have much to teach us – not least about the impossibility and the necessity of thinking differently. p441

Goatboy says

A clearly written and very informative history of the Frankfurt School and its thinkers. Most of my exposure

to the Frankfurt School authors has been through the writings of Walter Benjamin, but *Grand Hotel Abyss* provides a head start in understanding the writings and theories of the other players. Very much recommended if you are interested in this fascinating slice of history, especially since so much of what the Frankfurt writers had to contend with politically at the time is now, in 2017, so completely timely.

Murtaza says

A very ambitious group biography of the Frankfurt School Marxist intellectuals, specifically Benjamin, Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer. These were a group of strange and sometimes brilliant German-Jewish thinkers whose cloistered and privileged lives were thrown into anarchy by the rise of the Third Reich. They were completely aloof from the common people whom they (theoretically at least) sought to liberate. But from a distance, these men were able to offer cutting critiques of the degraded mass culture then just starting to rear its head in Europe and America. This crass, consumerist culture was warping the minds of the public, while cutting them off from reality and the possibility that they would experience a popular awakening to the real conditions of modern capitalism. The ultimate goal of these thinkers was to critique and dismantle this degraded mass culture, as a means of lowering the floodgates holding back socialist revolution.

The storytelling in the book is so strangely uneven and at times repetitive that it made me wonder how much this had actually been edited. Its a shame, because there a lot of gems here and there in the text. Particularly well done was the biography of Walter Benjamin. The overview of his body of work was powerful, though many of the quoted passages were bizarrely repeated throughout the book. Jeffries does a good job of conveying how odd Benjamin's life and upbringing were, as well as the way in which his family circumstances (particularly his relationship with his father) shaped his later political outlook, as it did for all the Frankfurt School thinkers. It is telling that all of them came from privileged backgrounds that they sought to explode, even though their own lives of dilettantism and freewheeling intellectual pursuit had been made possible by the capitalist labors of their parents. This is not to condemn them, but rather to understand the roots of their oppositional natures. Despite their oddness, I think that their hearts were in the right place.

A theme that emerged from both Marcuse and Benjamin's work was the realization of how much The Machine was beginning to warp the minds of its users in the modern world. The explanation of commodity fetishism in capitalism as a type of Myth of Sisyphus - a real-life phantasmagoria where objects become real and people become merely objects - was moving and evocative. The endless treadmill of capitalism, where wants are sated only to give rise to new wants on an endlessly repeated cycle that never leads to fulfillment, reminds me of a famous saying attributed to Prophet Jesus in Islam:

“The example of a person who seeks [the corporeal world] is like that of a person who drinks salt water from the ocean. The more he drinks, the thirstier he gets, until he is killed by it.”

(from a tafsir related by Ibn Kathir)

This book definitely made me want to read more of the primary source materials that it cites, particularly some of Benjamin's essays that have been republished in recent years. Overall not a bad read, though I have to say that it feels more like someone's brilliant notebook meanderings than a coherently edited volume.

Hadrian says

Fair introduction to the oft-maligned or misunderstood thinkers of the Frankfurt School, with biographical portraits and expositions of their philosophies. While some chapters are suspect (the earliest one tying their philosophy to childhood behavior, for example), much of the book is enough of a primer that the reader would want more.

Jonfaith says

3.5 stars

Tandem read with Joel, who was quick to question Jeffries' style, a wonky all too clever sort of exposition qua allusion. There were certainly times to grit one's teeth. I agree with others that it is a page-turner, this is a surprise given the thematics. This is an episodic chronicle of the Institute of Social Research a Frankfurt think tank tasked in its inception in 1920 with the query why wasn't the revolution successful in Germany? The book's title refers to a musing by Lukács that the FS guys (gents only for a long time) were ensconced in a retreat from the gruesome reality they were committed to understanding, if not ending.

The book opens with the claim that the founders of the Institute were all the egg headed sons of assimilated Jews, a group of bookish sorts who uniformly deeply disappointed their fathers. Thus begins the lifelong crusade to wed Marx and Freud. Biographic stretches link this narrative, largely one of Walter Benjamin. Thoughts on the public/private, Brecht and suicide proliferate, often linking with Jeffries posturing on Beckett or Woody Allen. This becomes part and parcel of this meandering history. Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas gather most of the attention. The thesis remains a social critique without any ability to explain or empower. This is very Monday-morning but it does appear rough to kick the institute for not only not explaining Germany's inability to follow Marx's historical imperative but how instead it went so horribly wrong with the advent of the National Socialist party. Adorno/Horkheimer decided after the Shoah that perhaps the Enlightenment itself and the regulation of Logos was to blame. This lead to some tricky thinking where Adorno/Horkheimer proposed that only intermittent flashes by solitary thinkers could pierce this damning delusion. Marcuse meanwhile became the Dylan of Theory (at least outside of Francophone academia) until he may or may not have collapsed under his own contradictions -- which left Habermas as carrying the fire and deciding that compassion of a religious ethic may be necessary in the pits of canine competition. This was enjoyable but somehow wanting. I do wish to embark on a further Benjamin endeavor, this time focused on Baudelaire.

Tosh says

The Frankfurt School is the first 20th-century group of German intellectuals and philosophers, in 1923, who had the interest to look at their culture and define it as the narrative of that world as it happens. Which we know now, a lot has happened. Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin all played their part in this social circle, that was obsessed with the issues of Marxism, and of course, the Nazi years.

"Grand Hotel Abyss" is an excellent introduction to these authors/thinkers. Stuart Jeffries gives a detailed account of their lives, and more important, their literature. Throughout the book, there are highlights for me. For example, the troubled production of Brecht's plays with Kurt Weil and Marcuse's student/teacher

relationship with Angela Davis, which was profound and sweet. The spider web that came from Adorno and others reached a large piece of 20th-century pop culture as well as the thinking of what it means to be alive in such a harsh century. For sure I'm going to check out Adorno's works because he had a remarkable interest in classical music. He hated jazz, and the author (and others) claim his criticism of that music is totally dated. Still, it will be a great interest to me.

David M says

The whole is the false

In a culture that values convenience and pleasure above everything else, one task of the philosopher is to sow dissonance and make us face despair. And just in case you thought you were going to enjoy yourself today, here comes Theodor Adorno to put a damper on that plan.

But then one might also wonder if this despair isn't itself a kind of luxury, a dandified pose. Lukacs made one of the great intellectual disses of all time when he accused Adorno and his critical theorist confreres of taking up residence in the grand hotel abyss.

By using this phrase as his title, Stuart Jeffries is recognizing the mixed legacy of the Frankfurt School. Marxists who seemed to give up on the proletariat and spent much of their time theorizing about the stupidity of the masses. Radicals who held themselves utterly aloof from the society they were supposedly trying to save. Jeffries's new book is marvelously alive to these tensions and paradoxes. Highly recommended. I'd definitely call it a page turner.

*

Some impressions on the major players:

-Adorno. The crux of it all. I'm inclined to say Critical Theory stand or falls with him. Personally I've never been able to make my mind up completely about this guy. He is at once eternally seductive and often extremely frustrating to read. Many of his writings on pop culture now seem downright embarrassing - as far as I know, no one is willing to defend his views on jazz today. At the same time, undoubtedly he was on to something with what he called the culture industry. Who could deny the awful, gnawing emptiness of our culture. Pop culture, first and foremost, is propaganda for emptiness.

Adorno was also just a great writer. Witness the snarling hatred of *Minima Moralia*, vivifying rage ripping through veils of illusion. This is true even when the target of his rage grows obscure. The force of the revelation remains even when you can't paraphrase what just happened.

-Horkheimer. He now mostly seems to be known as Adorno's occasional co-author. Nothing in this book made me want to look into him more. If Adorno's specific political commitments were often dubious, Horkheimer's were just plain awful. Here we see him censoring Benjamin and Habermas, excising references to communism and revolution from their writing. After the war he refused to sign a petition against the Federal Republic acquiring nukes, then more or less banished Habermas from the Institute for signing. But the kicker came in the sixties when he *came out in favor of the Vietnam war*. At that point you have to wonder in what sense this guy was a leftist at all. Something has gone seriously wrong when you condemn American popular culture in the same breath as Auschwitz but then support the American firebombing of Indochina.

-Marcuse. This book contains a moving interview with his protege Angela Davis. Much more than Adorno, he took the radicals of the sixties seriously and tried to be their ally. Sounds as if he did an honorable job navigating the sometimes obnoxious behavior of the students in light of the real criminality of US cold war policy... Still, my gut feeling is that as a writer or thinker he wasn't near the stature of Adorno. A lot of his ideas now sound like dated radical chic.

-Habermas. I was used to thinking of him as a boring old pillar of the establishment, so it's a bit of a surprise to find a portrait of him here as a principled young leftist... From a theoretical perspective, I think he was entirely right to revise Adorno and Horkheimer's account of enlightenment reason as a monolithic conspiracy stretching back to the mists of time. By positing domination as so total and without remainder, a seemingly radical theory may actually a form of quietism. On the other hand, Habermas's great ideals of communication and consensus can easily become quite vacuous. What if the only thing people have to talk about and agree on is their own emptiness?

-Benjamin. Though he was a close friend and influence on Adorno, his connections with the institute were actually quite tangential. I'd put him in his own category. As a writer, he was even greater than Adorno. Various attempts to turn his work into a school of thought will always ring a bit hollow. Benjamin was a singular genius - poet, mystic, philosopher Jeffries's appropriately pays tribute to the mystery; that's all one really can do.
