

THE DIALECTICAL IMAGINATION BY MARTIN JAY: THE PROLETARIAT

“A great truth wants to be criticized, not idolized”. Friedrich Nietzsche

Max Horkheimer, a scholar of the Frankfurt School, agreed with this statement, according to Martin Jay, author of *The Dialectical Imagination*. It sums up an important aspect of Critical Theory: it says that when we are faced with some absolute statement about the nature of anything, we need to question it, to examine it, and to test its continued truth in our time and place. Everything is to be questioned.

In Chapter 2, one of the issues that Jay takes up is the role of the proletariat in bringing about social change. Marx argued that the proletariat would lead the revolution against capitalism and bring about common ownership of the means of production. Here's Wikipedia, with brief descriptions of important terms:

According to Marxist perspective, class conflict within capitalism arises due to intensifying contradictions between the highly productive mechanized and socialized production performed by the proletariat, and the private ownership and appropriation of the surplus product (profit) by a small minority of the population who are private owners called the bourgeoisie. As the contradiction becomes apparent to the proletariat through the alienation of labor, social unrest between the two antagonistic classes will intensify, until it culminates in social revolution. The eventual long-term outcome of this revolution would be the establishment of socialism – a socioeconomic system based

on social ownership of the means of production, distribution based on one's contribution, and production organized directly for use. As the productive forces and technology continued to advance, Marx hypothesized that socialism would eventually give way to a communist stage of social development, which would be a classless, stateless, humane society erected on common ownership and the principle of "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs".

The proletariat is the group of workers who own no property and only live by selling their labor; for more see this Wikipedia entry.

It became obvious quickly that the proletariat wasn't going to lead the way. May writes:

In fact, Horkheimer argued, Nietzsche had been perceptive in refusing to romanticize the working classes, who were even in his time beginning to be diverted from their revolutionary role by the developing mass culture. P. 50.

May says that by the 1930s they saw signs that the proletariat was becoming integrated into society, especially in the US, which they saw first hand after emigrating. P. 41.

As it became obvious that the proletariat was not going to lead the revolution, the Frankfurt School turned to a study of the two elements they thought were responsible for this unexpected outcome: mass culture and the structure and growth of authority, the fields where their work is still viable. Their focus in those studies was to search for the means to bring about social change.

In retrospect, it's true the working class was brought into mainstream society, as part of a true middle class through home ownership and pensions, and many gained entry to the upper

middle class through greatly expanded admission to higher education. That continued for several decades.

If the proletariat was largely integrated into society, it is being reconstituted now. After the Great Crash, 9.3 million people lost their main source of wealth, their homes, in large part because the Obama Administration and the Congress helped the rich, not the victims of fraud. This study by the CBO, based on the Fed's 2013 Survey of Consumer Finances, gives the gory details. The losses among the young, those just starting out in work, are awful, and most likely will never be recouped. A big part of that problem is the massive debt that generally funds higher education for those not born into the upper middle class.

These economic changes are producing political backlash. Somehow, the elites have persuaded most people that they were not responsible: that this was not a problem with the system, but with the individual failings of the vast number of losers who deserved to lose. Widespread acceptance of that lie is indeed a testament to the power of culture and authority in this country and around the capitalist world. Critical Theory is a tool for responding to that lie.