

THE DIALECTICAL IMAGINATION BY MARTIN JAY: CONCLUSION ON LABOR DAY

This series has been wonky, even for me. *The Dialectical Imagination* by Martin Jay is an eye-opening description of the creation of Critical Theory, a way of approaching the social sciences that is still important today, although the forces of formulaic empiricism are gathered against it. The insights of the scholars of the Frankfurt School were remarkably prescient, and are crucial today. They give a nice description of Homo Economicus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 175, long before Friedman and Hayek began their push to create the new human. They were also right about the culture industry and the effect of mass culture. Michael Moore tells a version of this story in his movie *Columbine*.

But for me, the most important insight is the form that reason took during the Enlightenment. This is from an interview of Michel Foucault in 1978.

... I think that the Frankfurt School set problems that are still being worked on. Among others, the effects of power that are connected to a rationality that has been historically and geographically defined in the West, starting from the sixteenth century on. The West could never have attained the economic and cultural effects that are unique to it without the exercise of that specific form of rationality. Now, how are we to separate this rationality from the mechanisms, procedures, techniques, and effects of power that determine it, which we no longer accept and which we

point to as the form of oppression typical of capitalist societies, and perhaps of socialist societies too? Couldn't it be concluded that the promise of Aufklärung (Enlightenment], of attaining freedom through the exercise of reason, has been, on the contrary, overturned within the domain of Reason itself, that it is taking more and more space away from freedom?

The rationality Foucault is talking about here is the same one the Frankfurt School aimed at: the systematic logic of science and technology, focused by a drive for dominance over nature and over human beings. Our society is controlled by system of mechanisms, procedures, techniques and effects of power that focus that logic and allow it to dominate us. That project is far from complete, but we can see its outlines. The political system supports only one kind of life, a life focused on work. The solution to every problem is "Get a Job". Schools are focused on jobs training, almost from the outset. Those without jobs are scorned and openly vilified, at least if they aren't rich.

Businesses are focused on achieving dominance. The goal is monopoly and monopsony power, or at least oligopoly and oligopsony. They lobby for laws that free them from responsibility and give them the widest possible scope to control the lives of workers, and the freedom to screw the worker as it suits managers. They pay off courts and legislators to get their way. They demand trade conditions that permit them freedom at the expense of the rest of us. Those who best succeed at dominance get all the money, and corporations fight efforts to limit their income, even by disclosure.

Dominance entails a related submission. People readily allow the growth of dominance. We tell ourselves that our work is fulfilling, and that we are making a contribution, but just ask yourself how much of your work day is filled with mindless and stupid crap that shouldn't be

done at all. Most of us work for entities which are working towards dominance, and our own work is measured by how much we contribute to achieving dominance for the employer. Those not directly involved in establishing dominance are outsourced. That has led to a two-tier economy, in which people who can directly support the drive to dominance are made actual employees and rewarded, and those who don't are pushed out into dead-end temp, contractor, adjunct or gig jobs.

A people who once fought and died for a fair share of the productive pie now accept flat wages, grotesque inequality of wealth and income, and slowly decaying prospects for our children. We carelessly threw away the protections our parents and grandparents won for us, 40 hour work weeks, paid vacations, fair taxation, and all those communal benefits from fairly priced colleges and tech training to decent mass transportation.

We all understand the reason for these losses. We just can't afford this stuff. We can't pay for essentially free college and technical training. If businesses have to pay fair wages, some foreign company will under-price them and put them out of business. If we tax the filthy rich, they'll leave for the Cayman Islands and take their jobs with them. If we don't put in 65 hour weeks, someone else will. We don't have money for mass transit, so we sit on the road in heavy traffic. We give up our hours to traffic, our money for schooling, and our lives for a company that will dump us when it can.

All this is guided by the formal logic of capitalism, so we understand it. That's the rationality Foucault and the Frankfurt School are talking about.

Each of these losses makes us less free. Every surrender to the formal logic of capitalism makes us less free. Every bit of information that Amazon and Facebook and Apple and Google and all the rest glom onto makes us less free, easier to manipulate. That's the rationality of

capitalism. That's what comes of formal logic divorced from understanding and recognition of the wide variety of possible purposes. That's what happens when the only thing that matters is dominance. That's what happens when we submit to economic dominance.

The promise of the Enlightenment was that we could achieve freedom through reason. Seventy years ago the creators of Critical Theory told us that was wrong. Today we are learning how right they were.