Leo Lowenthal's Legacy: The Relevance and Response of Critical Theory to Authoritarianism, Austerity and Antisemitism Today

An Interview with Martin Jay¹

Katrin Stoll

Abstract: The interview is concerned with the legacy of Leo Lowenthal (1900–1993), who was born into a Jewish family in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Lowenthal belonged to the first generation of Critical Theorists under Max Horkheimer's directorship at the University of Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Taking Lowenthal's understanding of Critical Theory as their point of departure, the interlocutors – Katrin Stoll and Martin Jay – discuss ways of renewing Critical Theory in general and the necessity of thinking as a form of negation in particular. The interview provides reflections on the current political situation brought about by the global capitalist order, which owes its stability to both objective social processes and to authoritarianism, austerity, autocracy, anti-semitism, racism, and fascization. Recasting Critical Theory in new ways, requires, as Martin Jay forcefully argues, creative theoretical experimentation. By way of example, the interlocutors engage in a joint critical rereading and reevaluation of Leo Lowenthal's and Norbert Guterman's 1949 book *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, recently reissued in Germany. Adopting the concept of "racket society", which was developed by the Critical Theorists in the 1930s and 1940s, after their emigration from Nazi Germany, Martin Jay provides an analysis of current society and political culture in general and the United States in particular. He makes the point that the strongman/client relationship becomes possible through an internalization of patterns of domination as well as by loyalty and protection. The interview closes with a reflection on why it is important to criticize the false way of life and in so doing opening up the possibility of a life that is not wrong.

Keywords: antisemitism; authoritarianism; Critical Theory; Institute for Social Research; Frankfurt School; Leo Lowenthal; Jewish motifs; utopian impulse; racket society; nicht mitmachen

To mark the recent re-issue in German of Leo Lowenthal's and Norbert Guterman's 1949 study *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, Katrin Stoll has conducted an interview with Martin Jay, Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Berkeley, and one of the leading scholars of Critical Theory.

1 The following interview took place over the months of March and April 2021. It took the form of the submission of written questions for the interviewee, who in turn sent back the answers by email.

1.

Katrin Stoll: Leo Lowenthal (1900–1993) was a central member of staff at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute of Social Research), founded in 1923 at his hometown University of Frankfurt am Main. Lowenthal belonged to the first generation of Critical Theorists under Max Horkheimer's directorship. In his book *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, Thomas Wheatland refers to this group, which included Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, and Friedrich Pollack, as the "Horkheimer Circle" (Wheatland, 2009, p. xvii) because they were working under Horkheimer's direction. Their journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* was more than an intellectual endeavor:

It had been the intent of the founding members to create a community of scholars whose solidarity would serve as a microcosmic foretaste of the brotherly society of the future. The *Zeitschrift* [...] helped cement the sense of group identity; and the common experience of forced exile and regrouping abroad added considerably to this feeling. (Jay, 1996, p. 31)

It was Leo Lowenthal who edited the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* during the period of forced exile (Wheatland, 2009, p. 279). Being conscious of the threat posed by the Nazis, the Institute had made preparations a few years before the Nazis came to power on January 30, 1933, ensuring that they could not steal either the Institute's library or its money (Löwenthal, 1980, p. 70). Lowenthal was the last to leave the Institute on March 2, 1933. Three days later the SA occupied the building (Löwenthal, 1980, p. 70). Emigrating to the United States in 1934, Lowenthal dropped the *Umlaut* from his surname.

In contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer, who returned to Germany after the Second World War and the Shoah and re-established the Institute at Frankfurt University, Leo Lowenthal, along with fellow émigrés Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, and Erich Fromm, remained in the United States. Bringing a humanistic approach to social sciences, Lowenthal engaged in collaborative work and scholarship, as evidenced by the numerous publications he co-authored with others. *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, published in 1949 in the Institute's *Studies in Prejudice* series,² was co-authored with Norbert Guterman. Before we talk about this book, a new translation of which has been recently re-issued in Germany (Löwenthal, 2021), I would like to ask a more general question about the legacy of Critical Theory and the necessity of engaging in critical thinking.

According to Leo Lowenthal, Critical Theory meant "a perspective", namely "a shared critical fundamental attitude that applies to all cultural phenomena without ever

2 The following studies were published in the series: *Dynamics of Prejudice: A Psychological and Sociological Study of Veterans* by Bruno Bettelheim and Morris Janowitz; *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* by Nathan W. Ackerman and Marie Jahoda; *The Authoritarian Personality* by T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford; *Prophets of Deceit* by Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman; *Rehearsal for Destruction: A Study of Political Anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany* by Paul Massing.

claiming to be a system” (Löwenthal, 1980, p. 77). The task is “to record that which is wrong” and “critical thinking is conducted within a framework in which the entirety (*das Ganze*) is criticized” (Löwenthal & Hager, 1992, p. 56).

We are living in the age of neoliberalism, and austerity politics, which has made destructive competition the norm in all social relations and has created conditions of fear, insecurity and precarity. The problem is that the academic system has adopted the neoliberal doxa. Thus, academics have lost their capacity for criticizing the struggle for economic and social success. This is due to the fact that they are mostly concerned with their own academic ambitions and success or, in the case of those who do not accept the current state of things, the existential struggle for survival. The possibility of revolution seems not to exist. Indeed, the end of capitalism would appear to be unimaginable. Two things come to mind here concerning revolution and utopia. In an interview with Helmut Dubiel, the 79-year-old Löwenthal said with reference to the utopian motives that he had held dear at the age of 17 or 18: “I did not abandon politics and the revolution; the revolution abandoned me” (Löwenthal, 1980, p. 226). What also springs to mind is a sentence from your book, Martin, in which you state that “Critical Theory must contain a strongly imaginative, even utopian strain, which transcends the present limits of reality” (Jay, 1996, p. 77). In view of the current situation within as well as outside of academia, how can the perspective of Critical Theory be actualized with a view to making the idea of a humane and caring society without exclusion imaginable? I’m addressing this to you as someone who has dealt extensively with this subject, publishing numerous works on Critical Theory and its Thinkers.

Martin Jay: If the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory is to remain relevant today, its inheritors have to be willing to engage in a self-critique as well as a critique of the rapidly changing world in which we live. Luckily, one of its strengths has always been an understanding that different historical circumstances require theoretical flexibility and an openness to new ideas from other schools of thought. Rather than turning into defensive guardians of the original insights of Marx or the practical lessons of Lenin, as was the case with some other tendencies in Marxism, they always appreciated the need to respond to new and unforeseen circumstances – the weakening of working-class resistance to capitalism, the rise of fascism, the Stalinist betrayal of emancipatory socialism, the deadening effect of mass culture, and so on – and to take on board fresh insights, wherever they may be found. It is for this reason that we can talk of different generations of Critical Theorists, even three or four in number, which have included very talented thinkers like Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, Axel Honneth, Christoph Menke, Claus Offe, Rainer Forst, Helmut Dubiel, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Jay Bernstein, Susan Buck-Morss, Thomas McCarthy, Andrew Feenberg and many others. Although there are some commentators who might call their work a dilution of the original utopian impulse of the Frankfurt School or complain about aspects of their attempts to recast Critical Theory in new ways, they bear witness to the continuing

development of a tradition that refuses to stagnate into a cult devoted to worshipping sacred texts and charismatic founding figures. It is thus encouraging to see scholars around the world attempting to apply some of the insights of the tradition to issues that the founders ignored, such as colonialism (and post-colonialism), international relations, identity politics, or climate change and ecology. There is even a vigorous discussion of the relationship between religion or theology and Critical Theory, which has involved scholars like Hent de Vries, Eduardo Mendieta and Peter Gordon. In all of these arenas, contemporary inheritors of the tradition often candidly face the shortcomings or blind spots of the first generation of Critical Theorists, without rejecting all of their still potent ideas.

One example of this attitude appears in the way in which Critical Theory has responded to what you describe as our “age of neoliberalism, and austerity politics, which has made destructive competition the norm in all social relations and created conditions of fear, insecurity and precarity”. Although a number of scholars in the tradition have confronted neo-liberalism – in fact, I just co-edited a collection for a Japanese publisher of American Critical Theorists writing about that very phenomenon – others have focused on the ambiguous populist responses to neo-liberalism, which have hijacked protest against many of its effects. That is, rather than merely meekly acquiescing in the austere and increasingly unequal post-welfare-state world order that came into being with Reagan, Thatcher and Kohl, there emerged a powerful current of discontent aimed at the elites who benefitted from it, understood culturally as well as economically. An example would be the Occupy Movement that emerged a dozen or so years ago in many countries around the world. The story of the second decade of the 21st century, we might say, is the way in which that discontent moved rightward, so that anti-neoliberal populism could become more nationalist than democratic. Nothing shows this more than the ways in which hostility to the European Union, which had been mostly on the left in places like the UK, migrated to the right during the Brexit controversy. A great deal of energy has been expended by Critical Theorists trying to explain the new right-wing populism, as we will doubtless have occasion to discuss shortly. At the moment, at least in the United States, the defeat of Trump and the encouragingly progressive stance of the Biden administration may indicate both the waning of neoliberalism and the blunting of the right-wing populist answer to it. Whether or not it will lead to anything like the “humane and caring society without exclusion” you describe as the normative goal of Critical Theory remains, of course, very much to be seen.

One final thought in response to this question: although my own focus has been on the German and Anglo-American elaboration of Critical Theory, there has been a global diffusion of its legacy, which has brought a great deal of fresh thinking into the mix. There is now, for example, an International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs, which grew out of the one at Berkeley, developed by Judith Butler and myself fifteen or

so years ago. It now produces an open-access online journal called *Critical Times*, which publishes work done by scholars around the world. No one, in short, owns the tradition any more.

2.

Katrin Stoll: In the Weimar Republic, Lowenthal was politically engaged: first in the cause of socialism, later as a student of philosophy and psychology at Heidelberg University when he joined the Zionist movement. He was also very much interested in psychoanalysis. He became a “member of the psychoanalytic circle around Frieda Reichmann, to whom he had been introduced by his wife Golde and introduced in turn to Erich Fromm, her future husband” (Jay, 2018, p. 32). In your article “Leo Lowenthal and the Jewish Renaissance”, from which the quote is taken, you write that Lowenthal’s “Jewish impulses [...] found their way into Critical Theory” (Jay, 2018, p. 37). In a footnote you write: “In his 1979 interview with Helmut Dubiel, Lowenthal admitted (much to my delight): ‘However much I once tried to convince Martin Jay that there were no Jewish motifs among us at the Institute, now, years later and after mature consideration, I must admit to a certain influence of Jewish tradition, which was codeterminative’” (Jay, 2018, p. 46). Could you please elaborate on the issue of “Jewish motifs”?

Martin Jay: This is a very sensitive and complex issue. It is sensitive because of the sad fact that any mention of the Jewish origins of the Frankfurt School, however one construes them, can serve as fodder for antisemites who denounce Critical Theory as an example of the Judeo-Bolshevik menace to Western civilization (a fantasy that has been recently discussed by the historian Paul Hanebrink in *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*; Hanebrink, 2018). Even today the alt-right critics of “cultural Bolshevism” insinuate, or boldly assert, that the Frankfurt School were subversive Jews who are responsible for “political correctness” in all of its lamentable forms. It is for this reason that Felix Weil and others in the School’s history were adamant in denying any significance to the Jewish backgrounds of the Institute of Social Research’s members.

It would, however, be wrong to accept this denial, which goes to the opposite extreme of the antisemitic slander, at face value. Nonetheless, when one tries to make sense of the impact of their experiences as German Jews at a time of increasing peril or to trace substantive residues of Judaism in their thought, the task is made very difficult by differences in their individual cases as well as by changes during their lifetimes (for example, before and after the Holocaust). There is an excellent recent book by Jack Jacobs called *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (Jacobs, 2014), which bravely tackles these issues. But significantly, even he has little to say about the extraordinarily challenging question of Walter Benjamin’s debts to heterodox Jewish

theology. There are, however, other attempts to explore that subject, such as Agata Bielick-Robson's imaginative study of "philosophical Marranos" in *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity* (Bielick-Robson, 2014). She provides a very suggestive analysis of what she calls "Jewish nominalism", which I've found very useful in my own current work on the legacies of nominalism in contemporary thought.

In the specific case of Lowenthal, what he called "Jewish motifs" would likely include some general inclinations – a strong desire for social justice, an identification with the underdog, a reverence for intellectual pursuits and the value of high culture – that have been typical of European Jewry for many centuries. More specifically, it would include a reluctance to provide a positive image of utopia, which the Frankfurt School came to identify with the so-called *Bilderverbot*, the prohibition of picturing God or even speaking his name followed by observant Jews. And it would also likely mean an impatience with the compromises of assimilation, which Lowenthal vehemently rejected after the First World War, when he turned against his parents and adopted for a while a messianic, apocalyptic version of Judaism. Although this phase of his intellectual development, like his parallel interest in Zionism, was short-lived, it was echoed in the radical intransigence of his critique of bourgeois culture and the economic system that accompanied it, which he never lost.

3.

Katrin Stoll: In an interview with Peter Gordon conducted a few years ago, you said that "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" (Gordon, 2019, p. 8). Do you still believe that this is the case or do you think that it is now necessary to revise this assessment? In posing this question, I have in mind a conference on "The Authoritarian Personality" that took place at Yale University in February 2020. The conference, at which you delivered the keynote, dealt with subjects such as "Politics and Psychoanalysis", "The Authoritarian Personality and the New Right", "Racism and Antisemitism". To what extent can the work of Theodor W. Adorno and Leo Lowenthal help us to understand current manifestations of authoritarianism and autocracy?

Martin Jay: There is no question that the spread of liberal democracy, which seemed so promising with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire only a few years ago, has been thwarted in many places around the world. I need not spell this out to Europeans concerned with the consolidation of authoritarian regimes in Russia, Hungary, Poland, Turkey and elsewhere on the continent. The upsurge of support for LePen in France and the AfD in Germany is very frightening. The reversal of liberalization in

China, evidenced in the suppression of Hong Kong, is also alarming. The Arab Spring turned sour quickly, and democracy has been undermined everywhere from Brazil to Myanmar. There is, however, a glimmer of hope. Although it may be premature to announce America's recovery from the menace of Trumpism, which peaked with the failed insurrection of January 6, the worst may be over. Or at least the economic upturn that will accompany the end of the pandemic – fingers crossed – will make it harder for right-wing populism to thrive on resentment and conspiracy theories.

Still, the extent to which many Americans were susceptible to the siren call of Trumpism, with 74 million votes cast in the 2020 election for a patently pathological, corrupt narcissist, suggests that our country has also participated in a world-wide phenomenon that has allowed some commentators to talk of the return of fascism. I am not yet convinced, however, that this label, with all of its horrific associations, which reach their extreme when the Holocaust is implied, is fully justified. The terms you've chosen – "autocratic" or "authoritarian" – along with "right-wing populism", seem to me more accurate. The reality they describe is, alas, bad enough.

As for the contribution of the work of Lowenthal, Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School in helping us make sense of what is happening, I would say with some reservations that it has returned to relevance. If you look at Lowenthal and Guterman's *Prophets of Deceit* or Adorno's study of the agitator Martin Luther Thomas, it is chillingly clear that many of the manipulative techniques and rhetorical strategies used in the mid-20th century are still effective today. Can there be a better example of the "big lie" than Trump's repeated assertion without a shred of evidence that the 2020 election was stolen, which inspired the storming of the Capitol in January 2021?

What, however, makes me a bit tentative in my endorsement of all of their arguments, especially the fundamental one underlying *The Authoritarian Personality*, is the costs of psychologically pathologizing our political opponents. Although it is hard not to be critical of the irrational appeal of many of the tricks used by demagogues, attributing deep characterological flaws to those who fall for them has its own dangers. As we know from theorists like Canguilhem and Foucault, the distinction between "normal" and "pathological" may have its justification in biological or medical terms, but becomes problematic when extended to psychological, social or political subjects. The historical misuse of epithets like "degenerate" to condemn non-normative sexual behaviors as biologically regressive should make us hesitate before adopting personality types in political circumstances. In addition, by labeling people as "authoritarian personalities", we implicitly exculpate them from the guilt for the moral choices they have made and rob them of responsibility as autonomous adults for their crimes. In fact, after World War II, Adorno worried explicitly about this danger in his remarks for the *Gruppenexperiment* survey done by the Institute of Social Research on German attitudes towards democracy. Finally, by turning our political opponents into pathological personality types, we foreclose any attempt to include them in the conversation that is the premise

of deliberative democracy. We know in advance they cannot be persuaded by the better argument, so we can only treat them strategically rather than dialogically. The Habermasian model of an enlightened public sphere is, of course, a counter-factual ideal, not a reality, but if we abandon it entirely, it is hard to know how we can retain the normative model of democracy, which necessitates the inclusion of everyone in a deliberative process.

4.

Katrin Stoll: Do you think that Donald Trump fits the concept of American agitator as spelled out in Lowenthal's and Guterman's book *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949)? How can Trump's impact on American society be examined using the analytical tools of Critical Theory?

Martin Jay: As I noted in my previous answer, there are many insights in *Prophets of Deceit* that are still relevant. Its content analysis of the texts of radio programs, public speeches and street-corner harangues by demagogues like Father Coughlin and Huey Long would likely be replicated by a similar exercise today. The rhetorical devices, scapegoating tactics, self-pitying victimization narratives that were used then can still be heard from media demagogues like Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Tucker Carlson, who contributed so much to the receptiveness of the American people – or at least a frighteningly large proportion of them – to Donald Trump.

There was also a less widely appreciated insight in the uncompleted work the Critical Theorists did in the 1930s and 1940s on what they called “racket society”. It has been thoroughly reconstructed in a recent book by the German scholar Thorsten Fuchshuber (Fuchshuber, 2019), and I tried to apply it to the case of Trump by looking at Martin Scorsese's movie *The Irishman* last year (Jay, 2020). According to Horkheimer and his colleagues, modern society has regressed to the strongman/client relationship that characterized many earlier social arrangements based on loyalty and protection. Instead of abstract laws or even the workings of an impersonal market, power resided in those who provided security and spoils to their dependents. Rather than blaming the ambivalent psychological make-up of the working class or their ideological prejudices, this was a structural analysis in which the proletariat, instead of opposing the capitalist ruling class, has come mimetically to internalize its pattern of domination. At many levels of the current society, the logic of protection rackets has become increasingly prevalent. Although ultimately abandoned after the Second World War by the Frankfurt School as too sweeping, the model has come to seem increasingly relevant in our age of resurgent crony capitalism and corrupt autocracies whose leaders cynically think they are above the law. Trump's relationship to politicians in the Republican Party has

clearly been one in which he demands absolute loyalty in return for delivering the votes of his base. The outrageous pardons he granted near the end of his term of office were in many cases motivated by the blind loyalty of his henchmen, even though they had been convicted of explicit crimes. His own economic and political self-interest rather than any deeply held ideology seems to be his real motivation (which is one reason it would be wrong to call him a fascist).

5.

Katrin Stoll: “The basic task” of *Prophets of Deceit* is “to discover the social and psychological strains of agitation by means of isolating and describing its fundamental themes” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 5). According to Lowenthal and Guterman, the agitator – as opposed to the reformer and the revolutionary – “always suggests that what is necessary is the elimination of people rather than a change in political structure” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 7). Thus,

[w]hatever political changes may be involved in the process of getting rid of the enemy he sees as a means rather than an end. The enemy is represented as acting, so to speak, directly on his victims without the intermediary of a social form, such as capitalism is defined to be in socialist theory. (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 7)

In differentiating between reformer, revolutionary, and agitator, Lowenthal and Guterman state that “the energy spent by the reformer and revolutionary to lift the audience’s ideas and emotions to a higher plane of awareness is used by the agitator to exaggerate and intensify the irrational elements in the original complaint” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 8). In short, the agitator does not produce the intellectual awareness of the real causes of people’s suffering.

Have today’s politicians lost the capability of translating complaints caused by injustice and inequality into objective issues? To put it differently, do the condition of capitalism and the neoliberal notion that “there is no such thing as society” (Thatcher, 2013), as stated by Margaret Thatcher in 1987, prepare the ground for the emergence of agitators?

Martin Jay: This is a terrific question. Although I would hesitate before making sweeping generalizations about “today’s politicians”, I agree that the ratio of personalized scapegoating as opposed to impersonal structural analysis seems to be tipping in favor of the former. There has, to be sure, always been a mixture of the two. Take, for example, the ways in which a critique of capitalism as a system of exploitation has often turned into a demonization of capitalists as the villains of the story (a tendency especially obvious when the denunciation of finance capitalism turns into antisemitic attacks on

“Jewish bankers”). When the often justified resentment of those who are victimized by structural causes boils over, as it has done in many parts of the world today, it is always easier to blame personified causes rather than impersonal ones. The alarming expansion of conspiracy theories, which are so easily spread by social media, bears witness to this trend.

Your suggestion about the effect of Thatcher’s notorious hyper-nominalist denial of the ontological reality of something called “society” is intriguing. It does make challenging an analysis which takes seriously the power of social forces that are not determined by the intentions of individual agents. However, it should also be acknowledged that neoliberals like Thatcher do believe in the workings of another impersonal institution, the economic marketplace, which they think is on automatic pilot. The “invisible hand”, after all, is not connected to any discernible body in particular. What we are seeing with the increased subjectification and personalization of explanations for inequality by right-wing populists is distrust towards not only social, but also economic institutions like the market, in favor of blaming sinister and often hidden elites who control the levers of power.

There has, however, also been some pushback against the neglect of institutions and systems and exaggeration of the influence of subjective intentions and elitist conspiracies. In the United States, for example, the idea of “structural racism” has become popular as an explanation of the persistence of inequality that cannot be attributed entirely to the prejudice, conscious or otherwise, of the majority population. That is, we are increasingly aware of the long-term causes of, say, African-American oppression, which have resulted in, for example, differentials in housing equity, educational opportunities and wealth transfer across generations. The growing consideration of reparations, which has in fact already produced a few modest attempts on the local level, suggests that the trend you identified towards personal and away from structural explanations may be changing. Or at least we can hope so.

6.

Katrin Stoll: While Chapter 6 from the book, which goes under the title “The Enemy as Jew”, is based on the analysis of agitational material produced in the United States, the themes identified by Lowenthal and Guterman are emblematic of the production of the antisemitic image of “the Jew” in general. A central characteristic is the fusion of contradictions. “The Jew” is portrayed as both weak and powerful, as foreign and familiar, and he is imagined as being behind both capitalism and communism. The logic of antisemitic persecution goes like this: “The Jew is the victim, and victims are there to be victimized. The Jew *should be* persecuted because he *is* persecuted – this is the core of the agitation-

al theme of the Jew as victim” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 72). The theme of “the Victim” is linked with the theme of “the Other”. Lowenthal and Guterman write:

The theme that says the Jew should be a victim because he is a victim is developed into the notion that he would not and could not be singled out for persecution if he were like everyone else. The Jew must have done something to deserve the general hostility directed against him, and he has done this because he is by nature unassimilable. (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 73)

Consequently, “the Jew” is forced into an impossible position:

The Jew is caught in a trap. When viewed as the Other, he is primarily accused of refusing to adjust himself; but if he shows the slightest sign of trying to be like the gentiles, he is told that he cannot change and is accused of malicious motives in wanting to change. (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 73)

The agitator’s reaction to this is persecution. The cause of antisemitic persecution is located in “the Jew” – in the character or behavior of this fantasmatic figure – while in reality the cause lies in the fact that the agitator reacts to the image of “the Jew” that he in fact has produced.

How can Lowenthal and Guterman’s insights concerning the production of the anti-semitic image of “the Jew” be re-actualized with a view to combatting antisemitism in present-day societies?

Martin Jay: The baffling resurgence of antisemitism in a number of places around the world today defies easy explanation. There are both continuities and discontinuities between the era when Lowenthal and Guterman were writing and today. To take the latter first, the shock produced by the Holocaust, which took a while to be registered, made many overt expressions of prejudice against Jews very hard to voice in public, at least in the United States and Western Europe. The taboo has been somewhat eased in recent years, but it is still very different from the period in which Lowenthal and Guterman were preparing their study. Additionally, what might be called “structural antisemitism” scarcely exists anymore, at least in most of the world. Although cultural prejudices still survive (often ironically in places where there are no actual Jews), there are no quotas for admission to universities or restricted country clubs or neighborhoods where Jews are prohibited from buying houses. Subjective prejudice, of course, is another thing, and sometimes even leads to acts of violence. But in comparison with, say, the structural racism that has thwarted the collective prosperity of African-Americans or denied their active participation in politics (once again threatened by the shameful current campaign to restore Jim Crow voting laws by Republicans), Jews, at least in the US, are no longer in trouble.

Another reason for discontinuity is that the role Jews often played as scapegoats has been taken over by other groups, for example, Muslims, Hispanic immigrants, or Asian-Americans. Although the image of the powerful Jewish banker or media figure

still has the ability to alarm right-wing bigots, the fear that Jews are also somehow a source of “race pollution”, sexual degeneration or disease – the fantasy of the “dirty Jew” – has diminished as other groups have been victimized by these projections.

And finally, what has dramatically changed the context for antisemitism is the effect of Israel’s existence and the role it plays in the world. By undercutting the assumption that Jews are always powerless victims and have to assimilate to the cultures in which they survive, Israel has created a new image of the Jew as self-sufficient, independent and even powerful. Of course, because of the ways in which Israel’s success has been at the cost of Palestinian rights, there has emerged a strong leftist anti-Zionism, which sadly sometimes recycles older antisemitic ideas. The Labor Party in the UK under Corbyn is an example of how this dynamic can play out. Ironically, Israel has become the darling of right-wing movements in many contexts, and, as shown by the disturbing popularity of Trump in Israel (one survey had more than 70% of Israelis supporting his candidacy over Biden’s), the feeling seems reciprocated. Thus, we have the odd spectacle of right-wing evangelical Christians – who would likely have shared the prejudices analyzed by Lowenthal and Guterman in the 1940s – now among the most ardent pro-Zionists.

As for the continuities, it is very disturbing to see how many of the stereotypes that once seemed discredited have been so easily revived. For example, the targeting of George Soros in so many places around the world as the epitome of Jewish financial and political manipulation, a latter-day Rothschild acting as a puppet master behind the scenes, shows how persistent the fusion of categories flagged by Lowenthal and Guterman can be. Soros is damned as both a predatory capitalist and the supporter of radical left-wing causes. The latter is particularly risible in the light of his debts to the outspokenly anti-Marxist philosopher Karl Popper, whose praise for a liberal “open society” has been adopted by Soros for his philanthropic foundation. In the addled mentality of alt-right populists, a member of the finance capitalist elite can also be a leader of the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy to take over the world. No longer promoted only by the lunatic fringe, this contradictory fantasy has also been embraced by political leaders like Trump, Orban and even Yair Netanyahu, the son of the Israeli Prime Minister. A world in which an Israeli political leader can draw on ancient antisemitic tropes to denounce a fellow Jew shows how confusing things have become!

7.

Katrin Stoll: In one of Chapter 6’s subsections entitled “Spotting the Jew”, Lowenthal and Guterman touch upon the issue of racist antisemitism. Pointing out that the “agitator plays the part of a bloodhound always hot on the scent of the Jew who cannot

hide his true identity” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 76), the authors specify that the agitator uses the terms “oriental” and “Asiatic” to mark “the Jew” as “foreign”. According to Lowenthal and Guterman “[t]he climax in the process of spotting the Jew occurs when Jews, still without being called Jews, are referred to by Jewish sounding names” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 78). In the eyes of the agitator, the Jewish name “is a stigma, it pins the Jew down, and he can no longer escape” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 78). The Jewish name is used in a racist way in that it “is made to indicate a species, a race. The name becomes a stereotype of nonindividuality: if you know one Jew you know them all” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949, p. 79). It is striking that Lowenthal and Guterman do not term this form of antisemitism as racist. If we look at the whole book and its table of contents, we observe that the subject of racism is notable by its absence. How can one account for the fact that Lowenthal and Guterman do not deconstruct the notion of white supremacy in their book?

Martin Jay: I have no definitive answer to this question, but my guess is that the concept of “white supremacy”, which is so much a part of our discourse now, was less prominent during the period their book was being written. The Aryan/Semitic binary did not map perfectly onto the white/nonwhite one. And prejudice against “Negroes” in the United States was not yet as widely decried as it was to become a bit later with the Civil Rights movement, while anti-Asian bigotry was still sanctioned by anger against the “Japs” who had bombed Pearl Harbor in a “sneak attack”. Antisemitism had been racialized during the late 19th century, but its origins went back much further than dubious social Darwinist racial theories. Its roots in Christian supersessionist theology, in which the Jews’ refusal to convert was seen as an affront to God, also played a key role. So, too, did resentment over the role Jews traditionally played as economic middlemen or as agents of modernization, which were not reducible to their alleged racial characteristics. Although it is possible to analogize with other forms of discrimination and bigotry, antisemitism has its own dynamic (as I’m sure is the case with other comparable prejudices), so that it would be problematic to reduce it to merely an example of racist “white supremacy”. The chapter on “Elements of Anti-Semitism” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Lowenthal helped write, makes clear the over-determined and deep-seated causes of antisemitism, which began well before the modern pseudo-scientific race theory.

What should always be understood in the study of prejudice is the dialectic of fungibility and uniqueness that makes it necessary to acknowledge both that targets can sometimes be exchanged for each other and sometimes they cannot. There was a dark joke often told during the Nazi period that is still often repeated:

“You know it is a historical fact that the Jews are the basis of our misfortunes”, says one man to his friend.

"Of course", replies the friend.
"The Jews and the bicycle riders", adds the first.
"The bicycle riders? Why the bicycle riders?" asks the friend.
The first one replies: "Why the Jews?"

The point of the joke is that scapegoats are both arbitrarily chosen for no real reason, and can easily be exchanged for each other. We have seen some of this happening today with the other groups I mentioned who have been assigned the role of the stigmatized "other" once primarily reserved for Jews. But what also has to be understood is that the multiple sources of antisemitism mean that it can be revived even at a time when some of its functions are fulfilled by scapegoating different victims. It stubbornly survives even when other groups serve as targets of prejudice. And of course, as we know from the Covid 19 virus, just when you think a threat is under control, new variations can arise. Controversies over Israel's role in the world, which range from its expansion in the occupied West Bank to its very right to exist as an ethno-nationalist state based on settler colonization, give a new excuse for some to hate the Jews in general. What is often forgotten – or willfully ignored – is the great variety of opinions in the global Jewish community about the Zionist project in general and its current abuses in particular. Ironically, the right-wing philosemitism that has emerged in support of a militant version of Zionism among certain evangelical Christians can at the deepest level be no less sinister. Because it is premised on the fantasy that an apocalyptic war in the Middle East will be the prelude to a final "rapture", it treats the Jewish people as a means rather than an end. The reason is not racism, but rather a bizarre prophetic belief that looks forward to Armageddon.

8.

Katrin Stoll: While researching for your book *The Dialectical Imagination* (Jay, 1996), you had access to Leo Lowenthal's correspondence. In fact, you got to know him quite well and the two of you became good friends. In his conversation with Helmut Dubiel, Leo Lowenthal said: "Mitmachen wollte ich nie" (Löwenthal, 1980, p. 46). "I never wanted to play along". Can you tell us what you think he meant by that?

Martin Jay: When I first met Leo Lowenthal in 1968, he was an honored and admired figure at Berkeley as a scholar, a teacher, and as a wise campus elder often chosen for important administrative duties. For example, he was one of the members of the committee that prepared the faculty's report on the Free Speech Movement and made recommendations for changes to deal with student demands. Although he supported his close friend Herbert Marcuse during the turmoil of the 1960s, even offering him refuge in his second house in Carmel Valley when Marcuse faced death threats,

Martin Jay and Leo Lowenthal in 1984 (Courtesy of Martin Jay. © Martin Jay)

Lowenthal did not match him as an outspoken public figure serving as a “guru” to the New Left (to cite the label bestowed by the press on Marcuse).

And yet, Lowenthal never entirely lost the rebellious, transgressive and idealistic impulses that were so evident in his earlier years. He instinctively sided with the marginalized underdogs in the community, was a mentor to many younger radicals, and spoke out against what he feared were the dangerous tendencies in American society. Unlike many celebrated intellectuals in the twilight of their careers, he was not content to reminisce about his past, but was fully engaged in present events and had the gift of starting new friendships with people half his age. I myself benefited enormously from endless conversations over the two decades of our friendship about every possible topic. The evolution in my own career from being a historian of other people’s ideas to having the confidence to enter the intellectual fray myself, drawing on the lessons of Critical Theory when applicable, but also open to other theoretical approaches, owed a lot to his example.

One of Lowenthal’s last targets was the fad of post-modernism, which he saw as muddying the waters politically and undercutting the normative basis of critique. When he claimed that “mitmachen wollte ich nie” had been his personal motto, he was refer-

ring to his life-long refusal to accept injustice or become complacently self-satisfied. But the phrase also indicated, I think, his resistance to leftist conventional wisdom, including the ascetic imperative to live a life of sacrifice in order to be at one with the suffering masses. Like other members of the Frankfurt School, he maintained that enjoying the pleasures of life, without – to be sure – exploiting others to achieve them, provided a model of a future that all might share. This, of course, was the attitude that allowed critics of the Frankfurt School, like Lukács, to attack them for living in a “Grand Hotel Abyss” where they could watch the apocalypse from afar in bourgeois comfort. The accusation is not without some force, if you expect the type of rigorous consistency that drives a radical theorist to become a revolutionary militant. But if you accept Adorno’s famous argument that “es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen” (Adorno, 1951, p. 5), there is no right way to live in a false or wrong world, then it is possible to appreciate Lowenthal’s refusal to play along in this sense as well.

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**Dziedzictwo Leo Lowenthala:
znaczenie teorii krytycznej i jej reakcja na autorytaryzm,
politykę oszczędności oraz antysemityzm. Rozmowa z Martinem Jayem**

Abstrakt: Prezentowana rozmowa dotyczy spuścizny Leona Lowenthala (1900–1993), który przyszedł na świat w żydowskiej rodzinie we Frankfurcie nad Menem. Lowenthal należał do pierwszego pokolenia teoretyków krytycznych działających w Instytucie Badań Społecznych Uniwersytetu Frankfurckiego pod kierownictwem Maxa Horkheimera. Przyjmując za punkt wyjścia wypracowaną przez Lowenthala koncepcję teorii krytycznej, Katrin Stoll i Martin Jay zastanawiają się nad możliwościami odnowy teorii krytycznej, a w szczególności nad koniecznością myślenia pojmowanego jako forma negacji. Rozmówcy nawiązują też do obecnej sytuacji politycznej spowodowanej przez globalny porządek kapitalistyczny, który zawdzięcza swą stabilność tak obiektywnym procesom społecznym, jak i autorytaryzmowi, polityce oszczędności, autokratyzmowi, antysemityzmowi, rasizmowi i faszyzacji. Przekształcenie teorii krytycznej wymaga, jak przekonująco argumentuje Martin Jay, twórczego eksperymentowania w sferze teorii. Ilustracją takiego podejścia jest podjęta przez rozmówców krytyczna lektura i rewaluacja książki *Prophets of Deceit. A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* [Prorocy fałszu. Studium technik amerykańskiego agitatora], wydanej w 1949 roku przez Leona Lowenthala i Norberta Gutermana, a ostatnio wznowionej w Niemczech. Rozwijając pojęcie „społeczeństwa mafijnego” (*racket society*), wypracowane w latach trzydziestych i czterdziestych XX wieku przez teoretyków krytycznych po ich emigracji z nazistowskich Niemiec, Martin Jay przedstawia analizę współczesnego społeczeństwa i współczesnej kultury politycznej, zwłaszcza w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Argumentuje, że relacja wódzowsko-kliencka staje się możliwa za sprawą zinternalizowania wzorów dominacji oraz lojalności i ochrony. Rozmowę zamyka refleksja na temat tego, dlaczego ważne jest, by poddawać krytyce fałszywe sposoby życia, a tym samym otwierać się na możliwość życia, które nie upływa w błędzie.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: antysemityzm; autorytaryzm; teoria krytyczna; Instytut Badań Społecznych; szkoła frankfurcka; Leo Lowenthal; wątki żydowskie; impuls utopijny; społeczeństwo mafijne (*racket society*); nicht mitmachen

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