

for early Soviet ideology of the new man, as exemplified by Russian Cosmism, astronautics and the futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913). Timofeeva argues that a ‘hypermasculine image of humanity as an all-powerful conqueror of the universe’ persisted in both communist and capitalist modernity. This will to power makes sense in an economy with growing demand of energy. After all, the sun is ‘the most powerful fusion reactor in our planetary system’. But how can we use the sun’s energy without exploiting it? In other words, how do we become solar, if ‘to be solar is not the same thing as having a solar cell in your pocket’?

We have to become solar – and this is the controversial lesson that Timofeeva draws from late Soviet philosophy and science-fiction – through an ultimate ‘cosmic sacrifice’. Solar economy does not mean the transition to renewable energy within a capitalist system. Only if we cease to fight for our survival will we truly open up to the sun. Many readers will find it difficult to take this step with the author. Towards the end of the book, we are presented with a vision of total annihilation, emerging

from Evald Ilyenkov’s ‘Cosmology of the Spirit’. In her reading, this heretical text of late Soviet Marxism marks ‘a dialectical passage from the restrictive economy to the general on the cosmic scale.’ In other words, we become solar through our own self-destruction, the entropic ‘fire’ which consumes our universe.

Is this all we are left with? Our political actions are nothing but ‘offerings to the planetary debauchery irradiated by the sun’? This would be an underwhelming if not alarming diagnosis. The conclusion, ‘The Sun is a Comrade’, does not offer a more satisfying resolution either. Highlighting the significance of nonhuman violence for emancipatory struggle, *Solar Politics* instigates an important, refreshing shift of perspective on the disastrous ecological crisis we are facing. Yet how solar politics might concretely tackle this crisis remains a mystery until the end. Maybe efficient political action itself, and this might be one reading of the book, already vanished when viewed at a cosmic scale. Now, humanity has to facilitate its final transition into the nonhuman sphere, gloriously illuminated by the sun.

Isabel Jacobs

Countering populism

Paul K. Jones, *Critical Theory and Demagogic Populism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). 288pp., £85.00 hb., £25.00 pb., 978 1 52612 343 5 hb., 978 1 52616 373 8 pb.

Jeremiah Morelock, ed, *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism: Methodologies of the Frankfurt School* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022). 502pp., £25.99 pb., 978 1 64259 767 7

Although there is now a massive literature on the right-wing populisms that have reshaped politics over recent decades, debates continue as to whether we have really understood these movements, and the nature of their parties and leaders. Two new books consider how the Frankfurt School tradition, in particular, can help us assess – and oppose – today’s authoritarian or demagogic populisms.

In *Critical Theory and Demagogic Populism*, Paul K. Jones focuses on the Studies in Prejudice programme which members of the Institute for Social Research worked on between 1943 and 1950, during their exile in the USA. He argues that whilst resulting work, especially *The Authoritarian Personality*, ‘continues to exert influ-

ence in social psychological and political psychological studies of authoritarianism, it has rarely featured in the contemporary literature on populism’. Jones sees this as a field in which political science and political theory are unfortunately privileged over work by sociologists or social psychologists.

Jones draws on the Institute’s analyses to illustrate certain shortcomings which he identifies in ‘orthodox populism studies’. These include an underestimation of the role of modern media in shaping what Theodor Adorno called the ‘physiognomics’ of demagoguery and the ways this is enabled by ‘the culture industry’; populism’s social psychological dimensions; and the importance of understanding any particular form of populism in rela-

tion to its specific political and social context, rather than presenting it as a phenomenon which disturbs that context as if from outside.

In substantial early chapters, Jones considers connections and differences between the most influential assessments of populism and critical theory. This allows him to correct some misrepresentations. Against those who say that critical theorists in the 1940s overemphasised individual psychological susceptibility to racism, Jones notes the ‘division of labour’ within Studies in Prejudice between research on ‘followers’, which is the focus of *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno and his co-authors (1950), and work on ‘leaders’, the best-known example of which is *Prophets of Deceit* by Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman (1949) (both of these books were reissued by Verso in recent years).

He usefully highlights Adorno’s argument that ‘liberal exposure’ or ‘truth propaganda’ is insufficient as a response to right-wing demagoguery. Too much of the opposition to reactionary populism assumes that it can be discredited by calling out the cynical character of leaders’ rhetorical devices or the ‘incoherence’ of their positions. Notions that Trump’s appeals to his supporters or the ‘attractions’ of Brexit promoted by Farage and Johnson could be countered by ‘fact checking’ involve an over-reliance on liberal norms of journalism and imply the existence of an ideal ‘informed citizen’. Overcoming this naivety, opposition to right-wing demagoguery needs to recognise the powerful socio-psychological mechanisms which it activates and mobilises, for ‘reasoned argument’ is not effective, in itself, to resist the appeals of paranoia and ‘false projection’. Jones notes the positive example provided by Adorno’s tone and positioning: his critique is always ‘directed against the contempt that the demagogue holds for the audience, rather than against that audience itself’.

This approach of continuing to respect people who fall under the influence of right-wing populists is exemplified in a previously unpublished version of the foreword to *Prophets of Deceit* by Adorno (1949), which Jones provides as an appendix. Adorno explains how racist demagogues’ ‘performance offers the audience vicarious gratifications’, as they direct their appeal towards peoples’ ‘inner and largely unconscious mechanisms’. These are manipulated in ways which mean that they ‘are to stay unconscious’ so that audience members are

‘prevented from gaining insight’ into their ‘real social interests’.

Across two chapters, Jones assesses the work of Ernesto Laclau and Stuart Hall, asking whether it is possible to bridge the ‘considerable gulf’ between their ‘Gramscian’ approaches and the Frankfurt School’s work. He tracks the different positions taken by Laclau, Hall and Nicos Poulantzas at various times. One of his conclusions is that both Frankfurt School theorists and followers of the ‘diverse Gramscian legacy’ recognise the strong intersections between fascism and populism – a dynamic which ‘completely vexes’ today’s ‘orthodox’ theorists of populism.

Part two of *Critical Theory and Demagogic Populism* explores how ‘the culture industry’ often serves ‘as an alternative “crucible” of demagogues to the orthodox political sphere’. Jones takes account of the ways that cultural forms and communication technologies have developed over recent decades, including the shift away from serious journalism as ‘the central means of political communication’. He begins with nuanced observations about how Adorno and Max Horkheimer actually conceived of ‘the culture industry’, as opposed to a ‘cultural populist’ caricature of their position as ‘elitist’ (Jones also makes careful distinctions between theorists and historians who have varied relationships to ‘cultural populism’). Once onto his main theme, Jones argues that if the culture industry can indeed generate demagogues, then contestation of ‘bad populism’ needs to take ‘a different shape from that usually advocated by critical analysis’. This ‘usual’ shape, which is in Jones’ view largely ineffective, is that of ‘learning and emulating “populist logics” as a counter-hegemonic practice’ – a strategy that he identifies with the work of Hall and Laclau.

What should be done instead? Jones considers attempts to oppose demagogic populism through popular art. His examples include Edward R Murrow’s television journalism which discredited the anti-communist Senator McCarthy in the mid-1950s, Elia Kazan’s film *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) and The Who’s ‘rock opera’ *Tommy*. He then provides a short but well-focussed account of ‘Trumpian psychotechnics’, underlining the extent to which Trump built on his reality TV profile and depended on Twitter and the Fox news channel. Jones concludes that, for all its new features, the dynamic of Trump’s successes ‘uncannily resembles’ that identified by the

Institute for Social Research in the 1940s.

Given the ‘integral relationship between modern means of communication and demagogic populism’, recent and ongoing changes in the character of cultural production and the media raise new threats and questions. These are explored in Jones’s final chapter (in which he also justifies his book’s focus on the USA as a ‘pivotal case’ for the issues he has covered). Engaging critically with some of Jürgen Habermas’s concepts, Jones notes that developments including the proliferation of private television channels and the growth and character of social media tend to disintegrate and splinter whatever was left of any shared ‘public sphere’. Mainstream political communication ‘faces the harsh reality that the “agenda-setting” role of journalism has declined dramatically and the institutional resources sustaining political journalism have shrunk’. This changing structural context adds to the risks of populist movements being captured by demagogic reactionaries: any potential counterforce provided by what remains of liberal and well-informed

‘public sphere’ resources is severely weakened, and we are without ‘a global -counter-demagogic tradition’.

Jeremiah Morelock builds on his well-received collection *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* (2018) with the pieces assembled in *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism*. Like Jones, Morelock aims to show how techniques and methodologies drawn from the Frankfurt School can be used to address reactionary politics today. The book’s opening assertion that ‘no other school of thought has focused so thoroughly on understanding and critiquing how authoritarian movements come to be embraced within liberal democracies’ is tied to a three-fold explanation of why, nevertheless, this tradition remains on the margins rather than being in the mainstream of social sciences: its indigestible radical ‘boldness’; its troublesome interdisciplinarity; and the ways it rejects the alternative ‘poles’ of positivist, empirical methodology and of interpretivist approaches which reproduce the relativism of postmodernism, at the same time as refusing the ‘lazy pragmatism’ which Morelock



(with Daniel Sullivan) defines as the currently dominant research paradigm, one which he castigates as a 'threat to the reflexive dialogue that actively promotes quality in academic work' and to critical thinking more generally.

It's in the nature of an edited collection that none of the twenty-three contributors have space for the complexity and detail which is found in Jones's arguments. If this makes most chapters in Morelock's book relatively accessible, this sometimes comes at the cost of oversimplification. (At the same time, there are some passages where tighter editing could have made unnecessarily difficult expositions considerably clearer.) The book's most regrettable stylistic-political misstep is that a couple of chapters conclude with attempts to cultivate the consolations which come from weakly-grounded optimism, a stratagem which was always foreign to Adorno and Horkheimer.

Most of the pieces, however, are clear and focused, accurately describing the arguments of a range of Frankfurt School figures and discussing these in relation to current challenges. In the book's first part, on 'philosophical methodologies and foundations', David Norman Smith provides interesting historical information. Detailing how understandings of commodity fetishism and characterological authoritarianism were properly elaborated for the first time in the 1920s, Smith highlights the contribution of lesser-known activists and scholars to the Frankfurt School's early work, including Hilde Weiss and the School's benefactor, Felix Weil. Smith also underlines the significance of two Marxists who are very well known, but whose direct contribution has routinely been downplayed. The standard histories by Martin Jay and Rolf Wiggershaus record that Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács spoke at the 1923 Marxist Study Week which effectively inaugurated the Institute for Social Research, but I had not registered, until reading Smith's chapter, that 'between them, [Korsch and Lukács] contributed nearly twenty per cent of the total pages' to the Institute's journal between 1924 and 1931. These essays on 'reification, alienation and commodity fetishism ... sprang from and shaped Institute preoccupations'. (Another unfortunate editorial lapse means that such important points are not easily re-referenced: there is no mention in the index of Korsch, Lukács, Weil or Weiss).

Lauren Langman and Avery Schatz provide one of the key chapters in the second part of the book, drawing

out the importance of psychoanalytic thought in Frankfurt School work. They focus on the interplay between 'irrational claims', conspiracy theories and authoritarian politics, building on a clear statement of the widely-held understanding that 'times of crisis evoke ... fear, "extinction anxiety", anger, *ressentiment*, and shame' which are then projected onto enemies – so-called elites 'above' and 'below', minority groups who already face multiple forms of discrimination, marginalisation and oppression. Langman and Schatz trace how 'psychodynamic processes transform both the emotion (from shame to anger ...) and intentional object (from self to other) with the purpose of protecting the vulnerable self'. Authoritarian populists consciously craft their rhetoric to connect to these processes: 'repressed shame therefore constitutes a social mechanism that may mediate between the emotional patterns of contemporary society ... and support for right-wing populist parties'.

Gregory Joseph Menillo develops this theme with a consideration of 'the psychoanalytic framework' which key members of the Institute for Social Research used to 'link the culture industry with fascism'. In the decades after the Second World War, Adorno applied the concepts of standardisation and 'pseudo-individualisation' in his insistence that 'modern, mass consumer culture' is 'animated by ... authoritarian dynamics'. Menillo quotes Fredric Jameson's observation that Adorno saw the Allies' 1945 victory as involving 'the triumph of the culture industry over Nazism', so that the shift from the 1930s-40s to the 1950s-60s was 'perhaps better understood as a "variation within a single paradigm, rather than the victory of one paradigm over another"'.

Rudolf J Seibert, Michael R Ott and Dustin J Byrd seek to combine Frankfurt School approaches with critical political theology, drawing from the work of Johann Baptist Metz and others. They propose that religion continues to carry the 'potential for the revolutionary creation of a more reconciled, humane and peace-filled society'. Realising this would mean translating the 'liberating, prophetic, Messianic and eschatological substance of religion into rational, revolutionary secular theory and praxis of societal change'. By contrast, A K Thompson's arguments on religion are more concretely grounded. Considering the importance of a version of Christianity to 'the historical bloc now galvanised around the Republican Party', he notes that the religious beliefs which are

organised in this way are 'internally riven and politically ambivalent'. This creates the possibility of progressive activists 'exacerbating the factional schisms' within the 'current Christian bloc', a task which Thompson argues would involve 'provisionally accepting the desires that animated the initial wishful attachment' to Christianity before demonstrating that these 'desires ... cannot be resolved within the terms set out by Christianity itself', thus pushing 'toward left conclusions'.

The book's main theme is resumed in part three, which surveys empirical work carried out by Frankfurt School figures, including Erich Fromm's 1930s study of working-class attitudes in Weimar Germany, the United States programmes and the 1950s 'group experiments' back in Germany, which revealed the ongoing persistence of authoritarian attitudes in spite of 'de-Nazification'. These extensive studies, which have been relatively little considered, provide evidence that the 'pessimism' and critical insights of Horkheimer and Adorno were grounded in concrete research to a greater degree than allowed by 'conventional narratives', which suggest that they 'abandoned empiricism ... in favour of pure theory'. Sullivan argues that there is still much to draw from this work, not only through recovering the riches of raw data held in archives, but more importantly by learning from 'the methods' which Frankfurt School researchers 'constructed for probing the interplay between unconscious individual and mass-sociological factors in the emergence and sustenance of authoritarianism'. Christopher Craig Brittain's chapter is a stimulating illustration of how such methods can be deployed, showing how Trump's unclear and inconsistent rhetoric helped him engage his audiences, not in spite of but *because of* the 'uncontrollability' of his messages.

The fourth and final section of *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism* examines 'strategies for interpreting different types of media artefacts and discourses'. It takes in discussion of Siegfried Kracauer's work on film, and insights into how the categories used in *Prophets of Deceit* can be 'extrapolated' to identify 'agitator-like qualities' in politics today. Stefanie Baumann critiques

contemporary documentary films: she observes that a significant number of 'big commercial productions' have uncovered 'shocking scandals', arguing that their format can nevertheless work against the cultivation of critical thinking, by inciting 'the viewer to subordinate herself to the authority of the provided information and its explanation rather than leaving space for her own interpretation'. Panayota Gounari offers a reading of Herbert Marcuse in order to pinpoint features of 'one-dimensional discourse' which can sharpen our analysis of the styles and languages of social media 'in the context of authoritarian capitalist societies'. These include dehistoricisation, operationalist and aggressive language, the cultivation of the self as a brand, and the 'discourse of amusement'.

Douglas Kellner's short afterword emphasises the current relevance of *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism*. As Morelock and Sullivan argue, the volume demonstrates that the legacy of the early Frankfurt School is an important resource, 'a massive, powerful, multi-dimensional, transdisciplinary collection of methodologies to aid in the ongoing struggle against authoritarianism and authoritarian populism in late capitalist society'.

Recent events underline how important that struggle is. The electoral success of Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy proves that activists with neo-fascist roots can come in from the margins to displace 'mainstream' politicians. The current moment in the (dis) United Kingdom's ongoing 'great moving right show' illustrates that long-established parties can be reshaped around ever-more regressive policies. Both books reviewed here direct us to what are therefore urgent problems: what explains the attractions of authoritarian reaction? How do we act through our politics, social movements and cultural interventions to effectively counter the right and advance a progressive agenda? Jones and Morelock provide rich evidence that the concerns and arguments which Horkheimer, Adorno, Löwenthal and their colleagues developed seventy years ago and more can offer starting points to meet key challenges of our time.

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