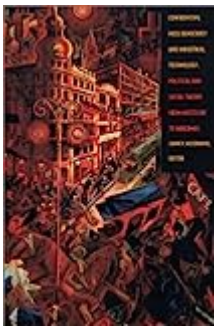
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John P. McCormick, ed. *Confronting Mass Democracy and Industrial Technology: Political and Social Theory from Nietzsche to Habermas.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002. 368 pp. $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2778-3.

Reviewed by Kees Gispen (Department of History, University of Mississippi)

Published on H-German (September, 2005)

German Social Thought and Instrumental Rationality in the Twentieth Century

The organizing principle of this volume of essays by and for specialists in modern German social and political thought is the intellectual reaction to modernization, specifically, the twentieth century's permutations of the French and the Industrial Revolutions: the "mass democracy" and "industrial technology" of the title. In spite of the editor's introductory remarks to the contrary, neither democracy nor technology appears in the body of the volume as a concrete phenomenon or in its ordinary meaning. For the most part, the contributors treat the two concepts in the same way as they were dealt with by the thinkers and social philosophers whom they discuss–as vast, theoretical abstractions that characterize all of western civilization since the Enlightenment. "Industrial technology," in particular, refers not to any specific technology, either in Germany or elsewhere, but to instrumental rationality in western society in general, reaching back in the cases of the volume's central thinkers, Martin Heidegger and the team of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, to Plato, Aristotle, and Homer.

Arranged in seven broadly chronological sections, the volume's fourteen essays were written by scholars in political theory, philosophy, literary criticism, law, and history, and range from the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century: from Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber to the Frankfurt School's critical theory and JÃ¼rgen Habermas. Other well-known figures whose ideas are examined include Georg LukÃ¡cs, Herbert Marcuse, Bertolt Brecht, Sigmund Freud, Helmuth Plessner, Carl Schmitt, Helmut Schelsky, Ernst Bloch, Reinhart Koselleck, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and Martin Heidegger, as well as lesser known individuals, such as the GDR economist Fritz Behrens, the East German legal theorist Hermann Klenner, and the West-German, Schmittian jurists Werner Weber and Ernst Forsthoff.

The editor, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and author of a pioneering study of Carl Schmitt, recognizes that the volume's chronological sweep, its variety of topics and hypotheses, and the different disciplines represented by the contributors pose "something of a risk" (p. 6), but he makes a case in the introduction for the essential coherence of the different contributions. One way or another, he contends, all of

the authors discussed confronted Germany's twentieth-century crises and catastrophes–World War I, revolution, Weimar, depression, Nazism, World War II, genocide, division, and rebirth–in terms of the twin challenges of mass democracy and modern technology. To be sure, they did so at high levels of abstraction, but precisely in those rarified spheres there was a widely shared and profound disillusionment with the nineteenth century's liberal outlook and its faith in science and technology. All the thinkers and writers discussed in the volume thus engaged in a fundamental reexamination of the proposition that the practical uses of Reason and the technological conquest of nature were synonymous with human progress. In their different ways, they problematized Reason and liberal democracy, looking for new answers in decisionism, *Gemeinschaft*, communism, or the apocalyptic imagination. Even pro-technological and *Gesellschaft*-oriented exceptions such as Plessner in the 1920s feared democratic massification and therefore turned to authoritarianism. Others such as Arendt, who came to embrace the western political tradition, nevertheless remained highly critical of modern, industrial-bureaucratic, i.e., technological, society. Above all, the thinkers assembled here tended to single out instrumental rationality and the logic of modernity in general as principal causes of the problems of contemporary civilization, in particular the sense of immanent evil that dominated post-1945 consciousness. Whether or not one agrees with this perspective, or accepts the editor's claim of thematic unity, there can be no doubt that the essays in this volume represent first-rate scholarship by contributors who, for the most part, remain within the orbit of the intellectual tradition(s) on which they comment.

Tracy B. Strong examines the origins of Max Weber's emphasis on the importance of scholarly self-discipline. He argues that Weber's view was based on the notion of "maturity," which he derived from Nietzsche, rather than on a demand for "resoluteness" with potentially more sinister associations. Strong emphasizes both Weber's questioning of the traditional foundations of objectivity as inherent in the scientific enterprise itself and his insistence on the importance of dedicating oneself to an abstract higher cause in such a way as to keep open the possibility of re-enchantment in the realm of politics. Ultimately, for Strong, this renders Weber's political vision "more dangerous, more permissive, more open to temptations and to greater dishonesty than is Nietzsche's" (p. 41).

Andrew Feenberg revises the interpretation of Georg LukÃ¡cs as a neo-Stalinist. He argues that LukÃ¡cs strove for a theoretical synthesis of Rosa Luxemburg's and Vladimir Lenin's principles of political organization in such a way that Luxemburg's call for democratic and spontaneous working-class self-mobilization would continue to inform Lenin's much more effective but dictatorial methods of organization. To be sure, LukÃ¡cs failed in this effort, just as the Bolshevik project itself derailed and descended into catastrophic despotism. According to Feenberg, however, this outcome was a failure of theory and imagination rather than the result of conscious design.

Richard Wolin gives a highly critical reading of the work of Herbert Marcuse, especially the philosopher's notion of "liberating tolerance," which in truth was a call for selective intolerance. Marcuse developed this idea in the context of his critique of what he called, in an eponymous 1965 essay, the "repressive tolerance" of American technological society. Marcuse's disturbing tendency to accept despotism for the sake of his progressive ideals, according to Wolin, was in part a consequence of his intellectual indebtedness to Plato and Rousseau, but it should also be seen in the light of his interwar experience of Weimar Germany's collapse and surrender to Hitler.

Richard Dienst contributes an essay about Brecht's attempt to represent in aesthetically and theatrically effective ways the evils of capitalist "unreason," with special emphasis on the script of Brecht's 1932 film, *Kuhle Wampe*. Gia Pascarelli analyzes Freud's 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," to argue that implicit in Freud's discussion (centered on E. T. A. Hoffmann's story, "The Sandman") there are the elements of a critique of modern industrial technology.

Jan-Werner MÃ¼ller's essay on Helmuth Plessner, who in the 1930s made a complete turnabout and became a key figure in the propagation and consolidation of the *Sonderweg* thesis, has already been mentioned. MÃ¼ller's superb contribution is followed by David Dyzenhaus's careful analysis of Carl Schmitt's and Helmut Schelsky's interpretations of Thomas Hobbes. Contrasting those German views from the 1930s with current Anglo-Saxon interpretations of Hobbes as an antipolitical and rationalist social philosopher (e.g., Quentin Skinner), Dyzenhaus suggests there is merit in viewing Hobbes instead as a "political philosopher of the first rank" (p. 190). Dyzenhaus also takes seriously Schmitt's and Schelsky's observations that Hobbes, recognizing the limitations of naturalistic reason as the basis for absolutism, in spite of himself resorted to a degree of myth-making in the construction of his Leviathan.

The volume's remaining contributions deal with the period after 1945. The first two of them examine the ideas of three practically oriented authors each in East and West Germany. Peter Caldwell describes the failed efforts of Fritz Behrens, Hermann Klenner, and Ernst Bloch in the mid-1950s to reform aspects of the GDR's "democratic centralism." These men exemplified the existence of a substantial albeit severely circumscribed "public sphere" in East Germany, which effectively punctures the myth of monolithic totalitarianism. Caldwell concludes nonetheless that even those who dared to make positive criticism "remain tainted by the moral ambiguity that inheres in reformist positions within the modern Leviathan" (p. 220). William Scheuermann concentrates on the writings of three prominent conservative scholars in 1950s West Germany: the jurists Werner Weber and Ernst Forsthoff and the historian Reinhart Koselleck, to illustrate the lasting influence of Carl Schmitt on the Federal Republic's political culture. Followers of Schmitt, all three men suffered from the "central paradox of Schmittianism," according to Scheuermann (p. 222). By this he means that while the logic of their intellectual positions drove them to authoritarianism and fascism, it was impossible to do so after the war. This led to complicated balancing acts of one kind or another. With regard to Koselleck's famous 1959 study, *Critique and Crisis*, for instance, Scheuermann points to that work's central argument: that the Enlightenment's irresponsible utopianism became a force trying to remake the world in its own image, thereby unleashing an endless cycle of violence that culminated in World War II–the mapping of an historical development, in other words, in which Germany was more victim than perpetrator.

The volume's penultimate section, "Throwing of the Yoke of 'the German Master,' " consists of three ambitious contributions that center on the question of Heidegger's influence in post-1945 social philosophy. Steven B. Smith focuses on the work of Leo Strauss. He argues that the Chicago political philosopher, though deeply influenced by Heidegger, came to embrace an intellectual position fundamentally opposed to that of his former teacher. Smith contends that whereas Heidegger suffered from a fatal deficit of moral and political consciousness, Strauss was instead a fundamentally moral and political thinker, a defender of liberty who came to "endorse … liberal democracy as the best practicable regime" (p. 261).

McCormick's contribution compares Adorno and Horkheimer's 1947 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with Heidegger's ostensibly very similar 1954 essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," to tease out the fundamental differences between the two works. He makes a case that while Heidegger constructs a genealogy of destructive and inescapable instrumental rationality dating back to Aristotle and Plato, his twin protagonists, despite all appearances to the contrary but in keeping with their critical Marxist vision, seek to preserve the possibility of emancipation and escape from technological domination. It is not entirely clear, however, whether McCormick fully succeeds in this alternate reading of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as in places he remains agonizingly vague and abstract.

Richard J. Bernstein's excellent chapter on Hannah Arendt's response to Martin Heidegger concentrates on Arendt's concept of "plurality." Bernstein readily acknowledges that Arendt, like Strauss, was profoundly influenced by her former teacher and lover. But he shows that she went on to "think … *against* him" by developing her own, eminently moral vision of politics (p. 318). There was nothing in Heidegger's work, Bernstein argues, that even comes close to Arendt's "plurality," by which she means that humans "can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves", and which leads directly to the primacy of the political in her work (p. 305).

The final two contributions, each, significantly, written by a woman, are sympathetic but nevertheless critical engagements with the Frankfurt tradition of critical theory, "whose perspective," in the editor's words, "more or less pervades the volume" (p. 12). Nancy S. Love takes to task JÃ¼rgen Habermas, perhaps Germany's most determined defender of democracy against the encroachments of instrumental rationality, for his failure to consider gender differences in his recent work on legal discourse theory. As Love puts it, "textually based, male ordered discourse exists in some tension with Habermas's democratic commitments. Only by recognizing gender (and other embodied) differences in discursive styles can communicative rationality realize its democratic potential" (p. 342).

Seyla Benhabib combines personal and professional reflections on the contemporary state of the Frankfurt School's critical theory with an examination of the extent to which her current work remains indebted to that tradition. Limitations of space make it impossible to summarize her complex argument here. Suffice it to say, however, that in her iteration of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that study reappears thoroughly historicized, contextualized, and modified by insights derived from feminist theory, critiques

of postmodernism, and theories of communicative action (Arendt, Habermas), as well as an acute awareness of the centrality of the politics of identity in the contemporary world. With explicit reference to globalization and its discontents, which she compares with the threat of instrumental rationality to the autonomous personality in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, Benhabib is receptive to the themes and realities of "hybridity" and "multiculturalism" in today's world. Appreciating the different historical forces and constellations (including a much deepened understanding of the Holocaust) that have pushed issues of ethnicity, gender, and identity to the top of the agenda in recent decades, she searches for the possibilities of democratic politics on a global scale in the decades ahead.

Needless to say, the preceding thumbnails cannot begin to do justice to the nuance, subtlety, and scholarly depth of the essays in this volume. Even so, the book is not above criticism. First, about half of the essays (those by Strong, Feenberg, Pascarelli, Dyzenhaus, McCormick, and Love) seem unnecessarily abstract, self-referential, or decontextualized, rendering them all but inaccessible to a wider audience and of limited use to most historians. Second, the volume's perfunctory index of names is clearly inadequate for a scholarly book of this type, while copyediting and proofreading are well below par, resulting in embarrassing mistakes and more than the usual number of typographical errors. Some of the most unfortunate examples: "Throwing of the Yolk of 'the German Master' " (p. 10); "Ron" instead of Rosa Luxemburg (p. 46); Max "Webber" instead of Weber (p. 245); the subtitle of the volume's final part appears in the table of contents as "Language, Gender, Ethnicity," but in the editor's introduction as "Law, Language, Gender, Culture" (p. 11). In places, there are small mistakes that render the text meaningless, such as "Whereas Odysseus's cunning consists in the attempt to appear [presumably "appease"] otherness via a mimetic" (p. 349); "institutions along [presumably "alone"] capable of counteracting," (p. 226); " 'Man would rather will nothingness, then [presumably "than"] not will"' (p. 41); and numerous other spelling and typographical errors.

Finally, and with the partial exception of the contributions by Love and Benhabib, one wonders whether the essays centered on Heidegger, the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and the question of instrumental rationality do not remain rather too close to the authors and the community of discourse on which they comment. Specifically, the pervasive mood of apocalyptic despair about the human condition after 1945 was, of course, inextricably intertwined with the unique events of Hitler's dictatorship, Germany's destruction, and the Holocaust. To the extent that the Holocaust figures in the volume at all, however (the word itself appears only in a very few places), it is almost exclusively in connection with instrumental rationality, or the Enlightenment approach to nature and mankind, which allegedly caused it to devour its own children in the guise of the dreaded "other." Nazi antisemitism and genocide are always present in the background, to be sure, but, again, they figure only as the result of Enlightenment modernity and industrial society. Heidegger's infamous postwar statement to the effect that the manufacturing of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps was essentially the same thing as modern food processing is rightly condemned as outrageous and held up as proof of that tainted philosopher's moral blindness, if not something worse. But is there fundamental disagreement with the idea that the dominance of instrumental rationality, modern industrial technology, bureaucratic organization, and the structural conditions of modernity are principally at fault?

The validity of this argument has been debated, tested, scrutinized, and subjected to microscopic examination in the past twenty years or so by an ever-growing army of Holocaust scholars and students of genocide. Many of them have come to rather different conclusions. Auschwitz and the death factories remain important, of course, but the sufficiency of explanations centered exclusively on large structural forces, the nefarious logic of bureaucratic irresponsibility, modernity, the "banality of evil," functionalism, and other such factors has increasingly been called into question. Instead, a different picture has emerged, in which ideological and religious fanaticism, greed, opportunism, racism, misogyny, brutality, spontaneous murder in the field, the historical specificity of time and place, irrationality, and even contingency play a much larger role than they had before. One would expect such findings, and what they might say about the human condition, to have at least some consequences for the insights of contemporary social theorists and political philosophers. Apart from the exceptions noted above, however, there is not much evidence of that in this volume.

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: Kees Gispen. Review of McCormick, John P., ed., *Confronting Mass Democracy and Industrial Technology: Political and Social Theory from Nietzsche to Habermas*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11132