

TORSTEN KEHLER

Fin-de-Siècle Socialism

Fin-de-Siècle Socialism and Other Essays
by Martin Jay

New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, Inc., 1988, 216 pp.

With the publication of *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism*, Martin Jay, the noted intellectual historian of the Frankfurt School, Western Marxism, and 20th century German social theory, has given us an effort worth purchasing if one has \$18 but not a library card. The book is not without flaws, chief among them being the forced coherence of the collection. This time Jay has taken advantage of the current trend in academe of running together essays on different topics, thereby bowing, as he admits in the postscript, to professional pressure to publish. While Jay pulls it off, one notes with regret that one of his most widely recognized essays of the eighties (on Michel Foucault) has been left out of the present collection.

One immediate problem is that neither Jay nor his publisher state when or where these essays were originally anthologized or published. I note this only for the reader who might buy this book thinking that these are new or contemporary essays; actually, some of these pieces are more than ten years old.

For example, Jay's essay on the Habermas-Gadamer debate, a minor classic, now seems dated, having been surpassed in quality by other studies. A second problem is that Jay is often too vague; for example, he will use unwieldy phrases such as "the plural sites of the discourses of politics" when greater clarity is obviously needed.

In *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism* Jay has moved into territory somewhat new to him. Whereas in previous work he charted the history of this century's German social thought, he now concerns himself with some of the polemics raging in culture criticism and intellectual history. At the

same time, he still attends to debates that have raged in the past, such as that between Max Horkheimer and Siegfried Kracauer. What underlies Jay's emphasis is his conviction that social thought in general and critical theory in particular can thrive only where it not only takes its point of departure from the past, but also engages the present. The question I would pose to Jay is whether critical theory thereby loses its always tenuous identity as a unified utopian body of knowledge concerned with criticizing all presentations of the historical as natural.

In the book there is a tacit linking of critical theory with other, seemingly disparate, forms of inquiry, such as those practised by Alvin Gouldner, Jürgen Habermas and Hans Blumenberg. This is the theme that Jay hopes will hold the book together: namely, that the scope of critical discussions and interventions in culture must be expanded to include many different endeavours with different trajectories, even if the only thing that explicitly links some of these endeavours is a recognition of the need to grapple with current social concerns. But even on this score, Jay is a revisionist with respect to more orthodox critical theory. The older generations of critical theorists saw the need to come to grips with capitalism in all its various facets. It seems clear that Jay, to the delight of some and to the chagrin of others, has abandoned the idea of a comprehensive critique of capitalism. In jettisoning a Marxism tainted with faith in totality, Jay has simultaneously jettisoned that which served as the *object* of (Marxist) criticism — capitalism. Ironically, in doing so, Jay has succumbed to the type of Either/Or thinking condemned most vigorously by those thinkers (Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin) of whom his *The Dialectical Imagination* is still the most compelling history.

Jay advocates a critical intellectual history. As he describes this intellectual history, one sees its resemblance to the version of Western Marxism sketched in his *Marxism and Totality*. In that book Jay wrote that Western Marxism has undergone a transformation from an earlier holistic position — one represented philosophically and aesthetically by the concept of totality, politically by Leninism and Stalinism, and in all these by the notion of a vanguardist representative elite — to one represented by a pluralistic politics. For Jay, intellectual history must follow the lead of what he calls the new politics in renouncing totality, and give up the search for "a perfectly unitarian political identity" on the basis of which alone the social order can be overthrown in one massive revolutionary heave. Indeed, resistance can be undertaken in different ways by the "new politician":

Rather than seeking an ultimate explanation for all oppression in economic, productivist, or class terms, they've sought to yoke together a series of relatively autonomous struggles in a loose and unhierarchical bloc or coalition.

In this context, Jay rightly highlights the contributions of the ecological and feminist movements. And he mentions, in the space of one page, a number of recent political events all adduced as evidence for the relevance and success of this new pluralistic politics with its new appreciation of the values of political democracy: the anti-apartheid movement; Solidarity in Poland; the overthrow of Marcos; the yearning for democratization in places like China; and the improved human rights record of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev. However, one wonders about the importance or interpretive power of a conception of democratic politics that is so easily applied to so many complex events. If intellectual history rests on combining Jesse Jackson, Ernesto Laclau and Adorno, then it threatens to become banal. This new emphasis on democracy and pluralism is said by Jay to be apparent in social theory, and not just in the world of politics. Jay paints a picture of the happy family of theorists, where Althusserians, Budapest School Lukacsians, Trotskyists, *New Left Review* (ex and still) Leninists converge with Frankfurt School devotees and Habermasians, all affirming the value of democratic politics.

The melancholic paralysis that has accompanied the *fins* of modernity's *siècles* had raised the hopes of many thinkers that the century around the corner (i.e., our century) would usher in a time in which their hopes could be realized.



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Many of Jay's speculations occur in the context of his first essay, "Fin-de-Siècle Socialism." Here Jay draws a number of parallels between the 19th century and the waning years of our own century, in order to find suggestions for the kinds of social thought that might appear in the 21st century. He holds that the melancholic paralysis that has accompanied the *fin*s of modernity's *siècles* had raised the hopes of many thinkers that the century around the corner (i.e., our century) would usher in a time in which their hopes could be realized. However, our no-longer-Western and no-longer-bourgeois current fin-de-siècle movements differ from previous ones.

First, Jay distinguishes late 19th century socialist theory from late 20th century socialist theory, misleadingly calling the latter "fin-de-siècle socialism" (misleadingly because both can claim the title fin-de-siècle). Jay maintains that the latest fin-de-siècle socialism is characterized by its willingness to defend accomplishments of bourgeois modernity and modernization. He properly mentions in this regard the work of Habermas whose attempt to extend and complete the emancipatory aspirations of modernity represents a firm departure from the apocalyptic despair that marked the earlier bourgeois fin-de-siècle and compelled it to posit a melodramatic "choice between socialism and barbarism." Thus, the two fin-de-siècles are distinguished above all by the fact that our current one (if indeed it exists) has lost hope not just in utopia but in the yearning for totality which inspires utopian thinking.

Accordingly, Jay says, we have learned to accept some "inevitable imperfections of whatever social order humans might create." While such a cavalier attitude might disturb many readers, Jay insists that such lowered expectations do not necessarily lead to political paralysis. On the contrary, for Jay, a new post-redemptive socialism may accomplish more as a rainbow coalition, "a counter-hegemonic block of disparate protest groups." Released from the constraints of having to measure all achievements against the daunting model of a "normatively totalized, fully redeemed social order," our new fin-de-siècle socialist theory can (Jay claims) build on the better parts of the socialist tradition (such as enlightenment, emancipation), preparing "for the challenge of a new century — or to be more precise, of a new millennium, in which the millennial hopes of the last are finally laid to rest." Fortunately, most readers should be able to recognize that in the absence of any concrete discussion of specific "achievements," or any criteria for discussing the "better parts" of something as broad as the socialist tradition, Jay's effort in this book amounts to little more than an uncritical capitulation to political postmodernism.

In the course of drawing out some of the implications of the parallels he finds between the two fin-de-siècle socialisms, Jay mentions a number of thinkers who represent significant landmarks in the move from the grandiose ambitions of a messianic redemptive avant-garde to the contemporary suspicion of holism and totality. These thinkers, or the debates surrounding their work, then become the subjects of the book's individual essays. Such a practice is meant to give the book a certain coherence. However, because most of the essays were not specifically written for this collection, there is a sense in which they are forced to provide answers and responses to questions posed by the first, introductory essay, written after them. The upshot is that the later essays seem murky and directionless in comparison with the first essay, which ironically points to them for support.

The second essay, on the dispute between Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer, while not the best to have been written on the subject, is at least one that tries to put the debate in the context of philosophical speculations on language, communication, and understanding. From the 20th century theologians, for whom revelation is intimately connected to speech, through Anglo-American ordinary language philosophers, to semiologists and post-structuralists, semanticists and action theorists, Chomskians and intentionalists, language has been seen as the central mediating entity, insight into which would also give insight into something special about humans. For Gadamer, language is central because all human reality is in the last analysis shaped by its linguistic nature. This represents a twist on the older *Geisteswissenschaften* tradition for which Spirit or collective mind provided the context for knowledge. Habermas is interested in Gadamer's work as it challenges both transcendentalism and subjectivism, as well as the notion of language as a technological instrument of manipulation. But for Habermas, (self) reflection is more binding; it can appraise distorted communication because it is tied to a pragmatic universe of discourse — it is, in a word, evaluative. Jay doesn't give enough of a sense of the profound disparity between a critical theory (Habermas) that emphasizes critical reflection based on validity claims that allow us to transcend and criticize tradition, and a hermeneutic rehabilitation of tradition and prejudices (Gadamer) that necessarily subordinates anything like Habermas' communicative theory of social action to a dependency on the authority of a pre-understanding and a non-evaluative tradition. Nor does Jay highlight what Habermas has learned from his exchange with Gadamer. Habermas learned that the possibility of a neutral social science is an illusion, a notion to which he has added the stronger claim that there can be no act of understanding or description of meaning without critical judgment.

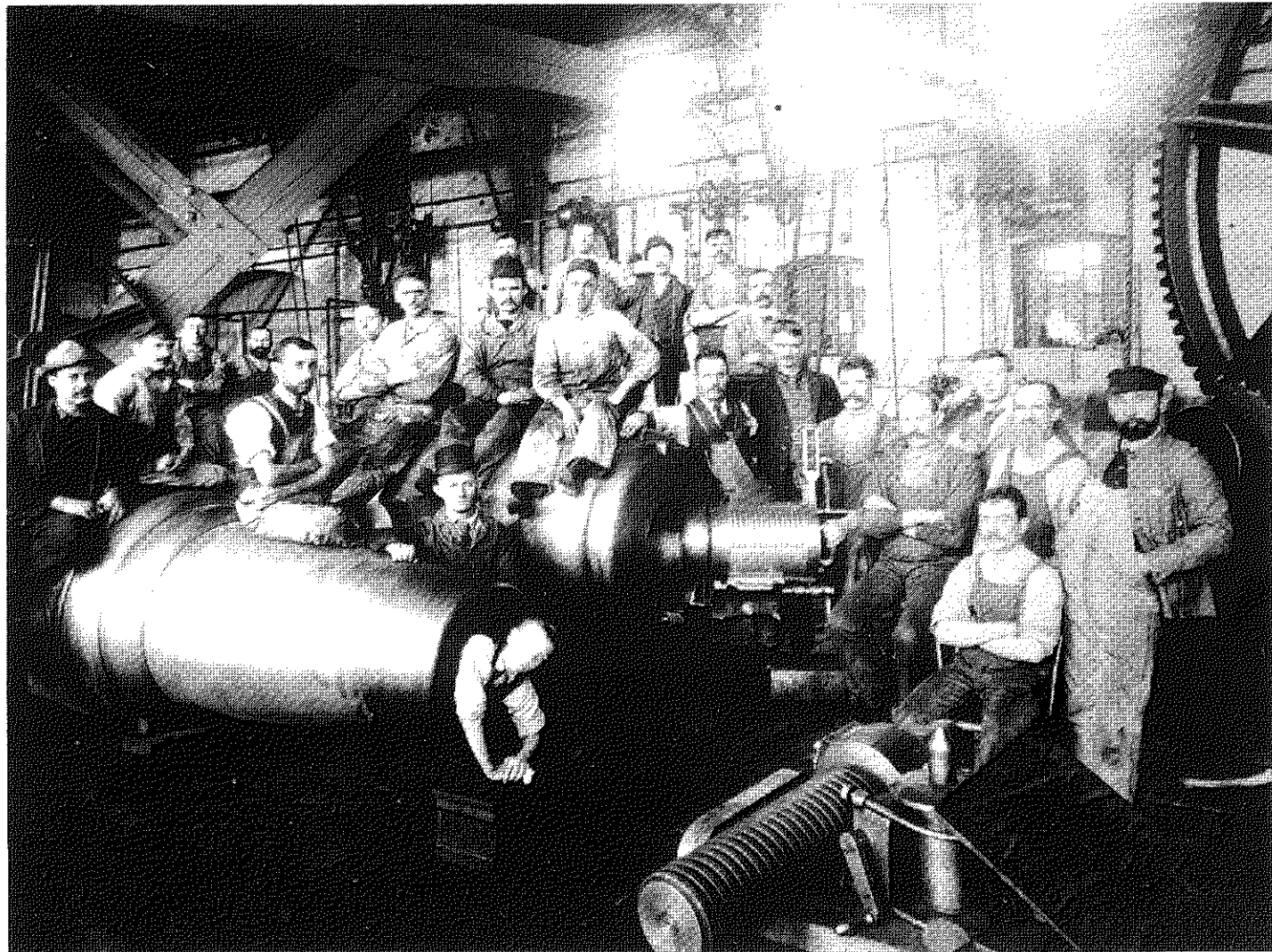
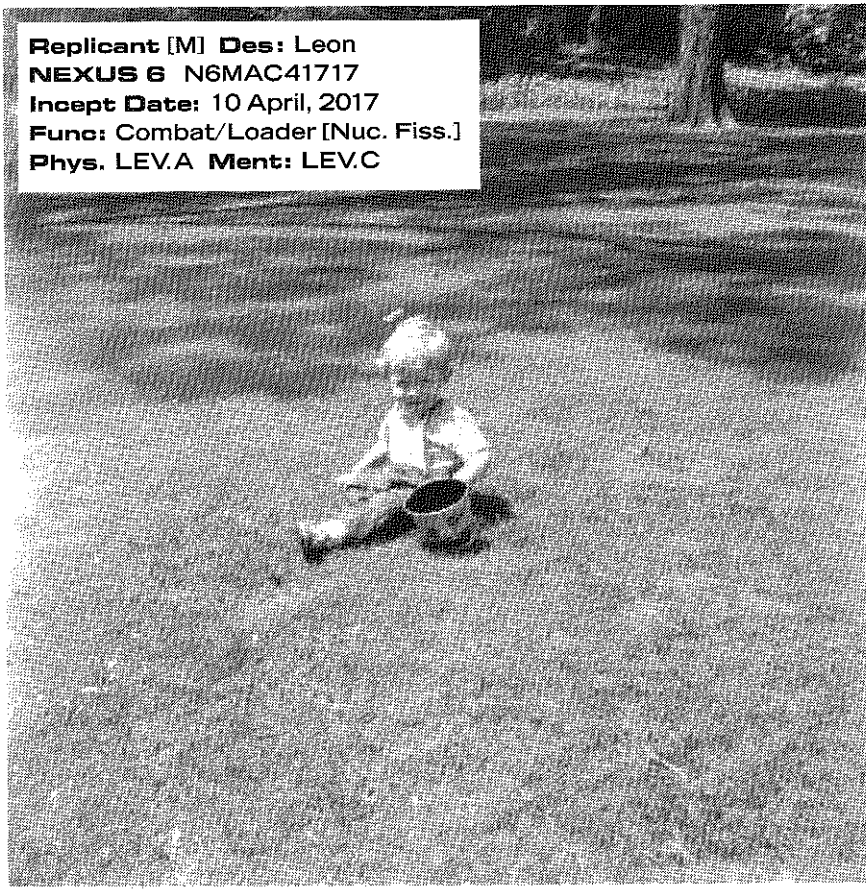
Jay fares a little better in the third and fourth essays and the postscript, which are thematically linked. Here he teases out

the implications of Adorno's late remarks on how this century has shattered the faith in the redemptive powers of high culture. Several practitioners of cultural criticism who are highly suspicious of hierarchy in general, and in particular that hierarchy implied by the high culture/mass culture split, come under Jay's scrutiny. He concludes with a subtle version of the argument that hierarchy, rather than being something to be blindly and violently opposed, is a "conservative idea with radical implications." Pleading neither for a timeless canon of any kind in the humanities and arts, nor a flattening out of esoteric and exoteric art one into the other, Jay argues that even if there are "genuine reasons to bemoan the specific implications of the types of hierarchy that now exist, and I think that there are, there are also lots of reasons to be thankful that we have not entirely lost our capacity to make distinctions of quality and rank." Aspects of high art, an art that Jay maintains is nonetheless renewed from below, exercise a kind of criticism over and against the world of mundane objects. The blurring of all hierarchies would destroy the capacity for art to serve as the guardian of the distinction which relies on



Language has been seen as the central mediating entity, insight into which would also give insight into something special about humans.

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the alienation of high art from society in general to sanction whatever emancipatory role art can play today. Adorno expressed this best when he wrote that truth is the antithesis of every and any society.

The next seven essays – on Vico and Western Marxism, the Horkheimer/Kracauer debate, two on Gouldner (the late “outlaw” Marxist), two on Habermas, and one on Blumenberg – continue the theme of the challenges to orthodox Marxism. Once again a discussion of art is central to several of them, for art and its relation to culture has consistently represented a problem for Marxist criticism of culture which confines art to the superstructure.

Jay’s essay on Vico draws attention to Vico’s ambiguous legacy to Marxism, a legacy which was fertile in “liberating that tradition from the scientific delusions of the Second International” but which “now appears to be entirely spent.” Vico was largely responsible for the distinction between the “made” and the “discovered,” where the former refers to human history and the latter to a nature somehow outside of human influence and hence knowledge. Jay notes Vico’s problematic reduction of *praxis* to making, which bequeathed a dubious legacy to Western Marxism, and which “oversimplifies the complex ways in which men are active in the world.” Correct as Jay is on this score, he offers little insight, and one has the impression that this essay is included here only because it wasn’t good enough to be included in his massive book on Western Marxism. And in all his discussions, Jay ignores pragmatism and the tradition of social democracy and critique that often intersected with pragmatism. While he also deals briefly with the *Naturwissenschaften/Geisteswissenschaften* split in the first essay, noting that it inspired Marxism to conceive of the process of totalization as emancipation from human embeddedness in nature (and “to delimit the concept of totality by excluding the natural from it”), Jay again fails to mention pragmatism. Pragmatism has the merit of working with a notion of holism without any metaphysical splits between categories like the social and the natural, and so avoids reducing mental or any other activity like language to either “producer” of the world or to “mirror” of reality.

The next essay deals with a topic that hasn’t seen much press – the Horkheimer/Kracauer debate, and it is to Jay’s credit that he resurrects it as an important example of the conflict between modernism and the avant-garde with respect to attitudes towards mass culture. Relying on the work of Peter Burger, Jay writes that modernism originated as a reaction to “art-for-art’s-sake” movements, calling into question “the traditional image of the coherent, closed organic work of art by problematizing its formal and linguistic assumptions.” While it called these assumptions into question, modernism uncritically accepted the model of

aesthetic autonomy: like *L’art pour l’art*, it was largely complicit with an institution of art contrasting with “other social and cultural practices by its utter indifference to ethical, instrumental, utilitarian, or political concerns:

The avant-garde, in contrast, attacked the very institution of art itself, challenging its alleged differentiation from the larger life world from which it arose.

Both Horkheimer and Kracauer reacted against the category of *Bildung* (intellectual development or formative educational process), which had dominated all Western discussions of culture, art, and education for over one hundred years. But they reacted in different ways and by different means. Horkheimer adopted the position now associated with Adorno and held that affirmative high culture implicitly contained a protest against social conditions by maintaining a utopian moment in art. Thus Horkheimer was drawn to modernist art, and was suspicious of overtly political art, such as Brecht’s which he accused of creating a false harmony. Kracauer took the opposite track and championed the view, now called “avant-gardist,” that the distinctions between art and the life world should be collapsed with the intended consequence that a reconciliation of art and life “would be a way-station to a rational future.” Jay is a sure guide through what he calls the “sobering lessons” of the dispute over art and its utopian potential, and this chapter, though one of the shortest, is one of the most interesting.

Jay’s *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism and Other Essays* testifies to the vitality and importance of the debates surrounding such topics as: intellectual history, the future of critical theory, post-totality politics, the relationship between art and society, and Western Marxism and fin-de-siècle cultures. At a time when many efforts at cultural and theoretical interpretation and critique amount to little more than chic, it is to Jay’s credit that he has set high standards for debate even as he struggles to reach them himself. ♦

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MARK DRISCOLL

Hip or Hippie? Old and New Cynicism

**Critique of
Cynical Reason**
by Peter Sloterdijk

University of Minnesota Press,
1987, 558 pp.

Part Foucauldian genealogy, part Nietzschean volume of aphorisms, Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* is mainly an attempt to marry the melancholics of critical theory to the textual free-play of French post-histoire, with a revived Heideggerian ontology performing the ceremony. Sloterdijk is writing against and with Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a major critical theory text that explores how the pernicious effects of Enlightenment rationality turned enlightened “progress” into barbarism and fascism.

Sloterdijk critiques cynicism as the predominant mode that is making post-modern man’s (there are hardly any women present in the text) body more docile than ever. We have inherited the Enlightenment’s negative strains and, as a result, are lobotomized victims of what he calls “enlightened false consciousness; that modernized, unhappy consciousness on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and in vain.” Postmodern cynics are “borderline melancholics” who can barely keep themselves together long enough to get to the office or boardroom/boredroom/bedroom every day.

Aspiring to more than a history of the Diogenic impulse, Sloterdijk seeks to counterpose the cultural and political malaise he finds dominating the *Zeitgeist* of the postmodern 1970s and 1980s with the paradigm of Diogenes the Cynic, the exemplar of an embodied strategy of kynical resistance. I find this Diogenic impulse problematic, for it spoils what is otherwise a dashing intervention into the present passive space of cultural historicizing.