



**Lars Rensmann, *The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism*, Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 2017, 600 pp.**

The Frankfurt School encompasses a variety of social researchers, philosophers, and theorists associated with the Institute for Social Research at the Goethe University of Frankfurt. Founded during the interwar period, the Frankfurt School has had an enduring impact on the social sciences and humanities in the twentieth, and the twenty-first century. As a school of social theory and philosophy, its contribution within the history

of human thought and ideas concerns, above all, the foundation and the development of a philosophical approach which emphasizes dialectical modes of reasoning applied to the progression of history, and society, as well as a critical stance in observing, what seem to be, unchangeable aspects of human reality. Accordingly, the Frankfurt School is often simply referred to as Critical Theory, written with capital letters.

Yet, while the Frankfurt School's overall influence on social sciences and humanities, from a philosophical and theoretical point of view, is regularly acknowledged, their fundamental contribution to the understanding of antisemitism and, reciprocally, the centrality of antisemitism for their work, has largely been neglected.

Although initially, to be sure, the members of the Institute for Social Research showed minimal interest in antisemitism *per se*, the ongoing developments in Europe of that time – namely, the formation and rise of Nazi and fascist ideologies, as well as the unspeakable extermination of the European Jews – have rapidly turned the Institute's members into severe “scholars of judeophobia” (p. 13).

Inspired by these scholar's abundant, yet unduly neglected work on the conditions and dynamics of antisemitism, as well as its striking marginalization in the context of rising authoritarian sentiments and the long-lasting prominence of antisemitism in global politics, Lars Rensmann, in his recent book, *The Politics of Unreason*, aptly revives the Frankfurt School's “enduring legacy” (p. 420), by reconstructing Critical Theory's multifaceted approach to antisemitism, and re-reading some of the researchers' most well-known works in the field.

Systematically organized into nine chapters, the volume, apart from merely reconstructing the Frankfurt School's approach to modern judeophobia and interlinking it with contemporary studies and research, challenges, at the same time, several misconceptions associated with the researchers' work, as well as critically reflects upon its contradictions, underlying tensions, and limitations.

On the whole, *The Politics of Unreason* can be divided into two mutually-reinforcing sections; while the first part

of the book primarily operates on a micro level, dedicated, chiefly, to observing Critical Theory's social psychology of modern authoritarianism and antisemitism, the second part of the book, acquiring an interdisciplinary approach, largely observes the social dynamic of antisemitism on a broader, societal scale – that is, a macro level.

Following this agenda, Rensmann's reconstruction opens with a thorough discussion of the Frankfurt School's incorporation of Freudian psychoanalysis in its research. For the Critical Theorists, Freud's innovative psychoanalytic approach offered a vocabulary through which the scholars could communicate the results of their empirical studies. Under this perspective, the opening chapters of the book theoretically prepare the ground for Rensmann's further reconstruction of the Frankfurt School's take on modern authoritarianism, and the complex psychology behind it.

Gradually advancing from this initial, psychological level of his study, Rensmann, in the following chapters, touches upon the specific cohesion between the societal and the individual which brings about modern authoritarianism. As Rensmann writes, the Frankfurt School essentially presupposes that authoritarian and antisemitic sentiments are deeply rooted in "unresolved tensions between society and individuals" (p. 61).

On the individual level, according to Critical Theory, authoritarian sentiments emerge from a fundamental, complex instability of the psyche, engendered by an impossibility to satisfy the individual's drives in the context of repressive, and blindly internalized, social norms. On a societal level, such sentiments are ignited, in the Critical Theorists' view, by the "transformed social organization under conditions of advanced modernity" (p. 146), primarily, as Rensmann notes, the transformations of "authority structures in family and society" (p. 220).

While the rise of modern authoritarianism and antisemitism essentially remains linked to the changing social conditions of modernity, it is predominantly based on certain subjective factors, Rensmann's study continues, rather than actual experience and interaction between the anti-Semite individual and the Jews (p. 171). Along these lines, the distorted image of the Jew, crea-

ted by an intrinsically pseudo-rational logic of the anti-Semite, acts as a "projective matrix", or "container", to unload all the problems of modern society, as well as one's own repressed fantasies, and drives (p. 176).

In what follows, Rensmann explores the phenomenon of antisemitism as a "projective matrix", as well as its connection with the emergence of various stereotypes traditionally associated with the image of the Jew, in more detail. The main line of argumentation presupposes that these distorted images of the Jews, in line with the Frankfurt School's approach, represent an ideal surface on which the "ego-weak" authoritarian character can freely project his own weakness and feelings of inferiority (p. 210). But while this "projective matrix" falsely reflects the "internal psychodynamics of authoritarian dispositions" (p. 149), it simultaneously serves as an image of what the "ego-weak" anti-Semite, ultimately, envies the Jew – his unrepressed, individual happiness. It is amidst this love-hate relationship between the anti-Semite and the Jew, as Rensmann concludes, that Critical Theory detects the spark of modern antisemitic resentment.

Turning to the societal origins of antisemitism, and drawing on the insights from Marx and Weber, the Frankfurt School further diagnoses the causes of anti-Semitic politics of hate in the history of civilization, arguing that antisemitism originates, in fact, in the evolution of the "instrumental rationality of the mastering-mastered subject" (p. 221). At the same time, it is a product of "specific modern social relations that increasingly dispose individuals to authoritarianism" (p. 222). Against this backdrop, Rensmann correctly asserts that instrumental social rationality "run wild" can, with astonishing speed, turn into a "paranoid system of unfettered destructiveness" (p. 222). And truly, the rise of Nazi and fascist ideologies, together with the genocide against the European Jews during the Second World War, firmly support Rensmann's point.

Despite their critical stance towards enlightenment and modernity, Rensmann nevertheless warns that the Frankfurt School's critically-oriented approach should not be mistaken for an all-together rejection of demo-

cratic institutions, liberal laws, and constitutional rights (p. 245), essential for the functioning of modern democratic societies.

In the ending chapters of his study, Rensmann takes his reconstruction into a slightly different direction, aiming to explore the inter-collision between the realm of politics and the Frankfurt School's approach, which is often characterized as substantially apolitical. Rensmann turns his focus, to be more precise, onto the interconnection between Critical Theory's lens and the broader institutional and political context, specifically targeting, within this framework, the relevance of political mobilization, as well as the mechanisms which serve as a unique *modus operandi* on which antisemitism is based not only in totalitarian but also democratic societies.

Within these chapters, Rensmann discusses that, although antisemitism may seem as a relic of the past, "antisemitic politics of paranoia" can "transform and modernize" (p. 323), surviving, as such, in various new forms. It is here, moreover, that Rensmann's reconstruction starts emanating its present-day significance, revealing that "wild, extreme racial antisemitic fantasies often lurk underneath the political surface, under which old stereotypes and hate are detectable" (p. 339). And, indeed, they regularly recur in the global political playground.

Be it the classical discourse of an international Jewish conspiracy, or a certain Jewish "spirit" (p. 342), old tropes, impregnated with antisemitic resentment, still persist, as Rensmann discusses, serving as "vehicles for political mobilization" (p. 326). Jews, remarkably, together with the refugees, remain a targeting group at which political demagogues continue to point whenever it becomes necessary to detect the cause for all the ills of modern, democratic societies. In this regard, Rensmann remarks that "many of the elements and psychotechnologies of antisemitic agitation remain uniform across the most disparate political conditions—even after Auschwitz and in democratic context" (p.343) as most vividly exemplified by the propagandistic use of antisemitic discourse by the present dictatorships in the Middle East, and around.

Continuing on this track, the volume, lastly, points our attention to the phenomenon of "secondary anti-semitism" which, in Rensmann's interpretation, is a new form of Jew hatred utilized by the Frankfurt School to denote the repression of the Holocaust memory, and the accompanying sentiment of guilt, in an attempt to avoid its identification with one's national identity (p. 374). By investigating this phenomenon, Rensmann makes the case that the way a society deals with the memory of the Shoah and antisemitic resentment reveals its state of democratization. In that sense, a healthy relationship with one's past, in post-Holocaust societies, is vital for the establishment and sustainment of democratic institutions, as well as a stable, democratic political culture.

In summation, by meticulously broadening his study on the relevance of the Frankfurt School's approach for the understanding of modern antisemitism and authoritarianism, from an initial micro perspective built upon the relevance of underlying psychological traits shaping authoritarian persona and the anti-Semite, onto situating modern judeophobia in the context of globalized politics, contemporary democracies, and international relations, Rensmann, indeed, succeeds in recapturing Critical Theory's relevance in what he interprets as a "new age of global authoritarianism" (p. 405).

In the first systematic study of the Frankfurt School's contribution in the field of antisemitism, Rensmann, finally, revives its vast opus as a source from whose insights contemporary academia, and research, can enduringly benefit when investigating modern forms of antisemitism, racism, and authoritarianism. Rensmann reminds us, conclusively, that ideologies of hate, rather than being a mere issue of the past, are, on the contrary, a serious threat to "the foundations and future of human rights and democracy" (p. 405). As such, Rensmann effectively nurtures the "enduring legacy" of the Frankfurt School, with a study of remarkable analytical sophistication and depth.

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