

Stuart Jeffries



Stuart Jeffries is an author and journalist for the *Guardian*. He has worked as a jazz columnist and TV critic, but his latest book, *Grand Hotel Abyss* (Verso), provides a fresh perspective on the lives of some of the harshest critics of popular culture – the Frankfurt School. A group of radical intellectuals, including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Hubert Marcuse, the Frankfurt School sought to create a critical space beyond the clutches of capitalism, fascism and Soviet orthodoxy. Interest in the school's thought has seen a resurgence alongside the rise of the far right and a growing scepticism with globalised capitalism.

Interview: [Meadhbh McNutt](#)

Portrait: [Kay Holmes](#)

Meadhbh McNutt Can you remember the first time you encountered the Frankfurt School and how you felt about them at the time?

Stuart Jeffries My philosophical

training was in the Anglophone analytical tradition. You would hear about these guys who were regarded, even within the continental philosophical tradition, as being rather passé. In the

1980s, when I studied philosophy, they were completely verboten because they were part of a post-Kantian European tradition completely separate from the Anglophone tradition in which I was brought up. I was aware of them as kryptonite. They weren't appropriate for me to read because the Oxbridge tradition was antipathetic to something that was one, steeped in Marxism and two, had anything to do with psychoanalysis.

MM The book concludes with some thoughts on the culture industry and customised culture. There are difficulties in critiquing culture when hip-hop albums produced by major record labels or a series like HBO's *The Wire* can be more subversive or experimental than work in an independent gallery. It seems we need a more dialectical approach to criticising products of the culture industry.

SJ I found it very difficult to have a dialectical approach to some of these capitalist behemoths like Amazon or Facebook. I don't often appreciate what is creative or interesting about them in the book; I seem to take them as purely terrible things. A useful corrective is thinking about how Benjamin wrote about culture in comparison to how Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote about it. While Benjamin is always looking to cinema as a possible revolutionary tool or something that improves our subjectivity, Adorno is always as queasy, melancholy and pessimistic as I am about the possibility of cultural change being for the good. I write in my book about despising Facebook, and I think most of the Frankfurt School would have done the same because for them, to be human is to be corrupted by these vast corporations for the profit of those corporations. That's all true but the point you make, the dialectical thing, I should have done more of that in the book.

MM It would have been difficult; you cover a lot of ground! Benjamin, in particular, is known for questioning linear concepts of time and history. In light of today's attention economies, is there something that we can learn from the Frankfurt School's studies on time?

SJ The whole idea of time as an arrow – it's the ruling class's narrative of time in which what gets lost is the suffering of people who aren't part of that narrative. The Frankfurt School's conception of time seems this very sort of odd philosophical notion, but actually, it is political. To Marxist thinkers since Benjamin, it's been pertinent. They've thought about how the narrative of the

ruling classes is one of progress. That's also a problem for Marxists because the idea is that we are progressing towards communist utopia. Benjamin's never a crude Marxist in the sense that this will happen. That's why they're critics rather than prophets. I've been pulled up for not dwelling on Benjamin as a prophet, but I think he's critical of the notion of the future rather than ra-ra-ing for it or for any ideology. But you mentioned attention economy?

MM The idea that attention is a commodity and there's a shortage of it. It determines the quality of experience.

SJ Absolutely, it's a measure of experience. Years ago, I worked for a newspaper which paid us a bonus for the number of retweets our articles received. That seemed to commodify everything I was doing and changed the way I worked. Subjectivity becomes quantifiable. Everything you do and experience becomes monetisable. That's the scary thing about it, and attention is part of that economy.

MM Benjamin often wrote of entertainment and childhood comforts. There's the scene of the apple baking in his bedside oven. Did that come to mind while writing *Mrs Slocombe's Pussy* [Jeffries' 2001 TV memoir] or did your studies of television inform your writing on Benjamin?

SJ Not at all knowingly, but as you say it, there was probably an unconscious impulse. The best parts of *Mrs Slocombe's Pussy* are the sections on childhood, that Proustian rediscovery of childhood through some sort of involuntary memory. Benjamin was hot on that, and one of the first great readers of Proust. He was struck by the way Proust wrote about memory, nostalgia and experience. I was trying to get to two things at the beginning of this book about that image of the baked apple. Smell and taste are some of the most pertinent things for evoking one's childhood memory. Benjamin was a Proustian in the sense that he was evoking an utterly bourgeois, privileged, cosseted world. He had a maid who would come in to put an apple in an oven to warm up and make his room smell nice. I wanted to bring a class critique to that – that's what's dialectical. At the same time, it's a beautiful memory of a youth that he looks back on from an adulthood completely shattered by what is happening in Europe in terms of Nazism.

MM While studying critical theory, especially Adorno, I struggled with the almost totalising tone that vacillates

between utopia and complete delusion. It provokes an emotional effect in that it can lead you to see everything as compensatory. Did that kind of despairing tone have an effect on you? **SJ** It is suffocating to an extent, but to empathise with his intellectual struggle and what it's born of, it's worthwhile to set his thought in its historical context. If you're a Jew after the Holocaust, a Marxist who has been serially disappointed, that melancholy and lack of hope is completely comprehensible. It's chastening and worthwhile for people like us who didn't suffer in quite the way that he did to think about it. It's like old theology; there's this idea that you can never speak about God. If you do negative theology, you can only speak about what God isn't and God emerges in that negative space.

MM The feminist aspects throughout their work have been picked up on quite generously, but they've also received critiques of androcentrism. The most scandalous Frankfurt School anecdote is the *Busenaktion* or "breast incident", during which three bare-breasted women dance around Adorno, scattering petals. How did you grapple with the ambiguity of that story?

SJ I was torn because I felt sorry for him. He's just this old bloke who wants to do his lecture. When Benjamin was a student leader in 1912, he led a student group to protest against the idea that German tertiary education should be about serving up the next wave of bureaucrats. He had an idea of what further education should provide: a critical sensibility. The women who did that to protest with Adorno had a similar mindset. They were worried that the universities and the German state were just producing willing subjects. In retrospect, I regret not having more about what they were thinking because all the way through, there are few women's voices in the Frankfurt school and in this book.

MM You've been asked about what the Frankfurt School can tell us about the rise of Trump and the far right. Do they offer any form of solution beyond foresight?

SJ Marcuse developed some political programmes, but they weren't very convincing. The alliance of different marginalised groups always seems really cynical. Kate Millett shared a platform with Marcuse at UCLA in the 1970s, after he had written *Marxism and Feminism*. She took him to task on it and told him: "This is opportunistic." It's devastating because she was right.

MM An alliance as a surrogate for the working class...

SJ Yes, the idea for Marcuse was that the working class had become too cosy; they had been bought off. So what do you look for now? You look for people of colour, you look for oppressed women, and somehow bring them together as the new revolutionary subjects. It's cobblers.

MM One empirical study that came from the Frankfurt School was *The Authoritarian Personality*, a volume analysing racist, paranoid sentiments compiled from interviews with American citizens. Do you think this study would work today?

SJ Absolutely. What struck me is the linguistic analysis of the way Trump speaks and how he shifts rhetoric. They would probably be doing those verbal analyses. There's another parallel with *The Authoritarian Personality* in the demagoguery of Trump. Father Coughlin [a 1930s broadcaster and fascist sympathiser] had a similar thing of gaslighting – that pure destruction tactic that Sean Spicer does all the time. Lots of *The Authoritarian Personality* pertains to what is happening now. Could you do Adorno's F-scale for Trump supporters? Probably. Why not?

MM The title borrows from György Lukács's jab at academic privilege. It's interesting to discover how the Institute was financed because it's not something you hear often in academic discussion, but it informs the theory to ask: what are the conditions of possibility that allow for critique?

SJ In the 1940s, there was Aesopian language, which essentially means: we won't use the "m-" or "c-word", Marxism or communism, in any of our research papers because we won't get funding. Returning to Germany, they're similarly hobbled in that they're thinking about getting contracts from the West German Defence Ministry. You think: "The West German Defence Ministry is part of NATO. Why are you trying to get into bed with those guys?" They're hobbled because that's where the money comes from.

MM What are you working on now?

Anything related to critical theory?

SJ It's going to infuse my approach to writing. The next book I'm writing is about neo-liberalism. Oddly, most of the great philosophical thinkers of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism were European Jews and went through a similar narrative to these guys. It might be a useful companion book. §