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Ungrounded

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In the 1962 preface to the republication of The Theory of the Novel, Georg Lukács introduced an epithet that has served ever since to belittle the Frankfurt School’s alleged pessimism, distance from political practice and privileged personal lives:

A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, has taken up residence in the “Grand Hotel Abyss” which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as “a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.”

(Lukács 1962)

As he admitted, Lukács had used the term before, but, as it turns out, not only in reference to Schopenhauer in his 1954 The Destruction of Reason. It had in fact been coined even earlier in a piece he wrote in 1933, but never published in his lifetime, to mock soi-disant progressive intellectuals like Upton Sinclair or Thomas Mann, who refused to abandon their bourgeois lifestyles and affiliate themselves with the Communist Party (Lukács 1984).

This more diffuse usage did not, however, resonate publicly, and it was not really until the identification with Adorno and his colleagues that it gained any real traction. Although normally employed by detractors of the Frankfurt School from the left, the term gained enough familiarity that a sympathetic “photobiography” of the School edited in 1990 by Willem van Reijin and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr could be called without apparent irony Grand Hotel Abgrund, a title repeated in two subsequent studies of the Frankfurt School (Reijen and Noerr 1990; Jeffries 2016; Safatle 2016).

I want to pause for a moment with this term because it raises an important question that goes beyond the easy condemnation of unaffiliated radical intellectuals for their alleged betrayal of the link between theory and practice. The German word Abgrund has a connotation that is absent in the English equivalent “abyss,” for it suggests the loss of the foundation or ground (Grund) on which one might securely support critique. For a Communist militant like Lukács, the only way for an intellectual to avoid hurtling into the abyss was to stand...
firmly on the ground of the vanguard party of the worker's movement, subordinating himself to the dictates of its enlightened leadership. No matter how brilliant the analysis of an anti-capitalist critic might be or how intense his moral indignation, it was only by joining with the forces that would change society that he could avoid impotence and be on the right side of history. The metaphor of a firm ground or foundation was also evident in the frequent use of the word Standpunkt by other Marxists of Lukács's generation like Karl Korsch, who insisted on the proletarian standpoint of historical materialism (Korsch 1993). Whether it be the consciousness of the proletariat, either actual or ascribed, an objective historical process leading to the terminal crisis of capitalism, or a subtle combination of both, there was assumed to be a ground on which the critical intellectual could stand, a concrete location like the French military point d'appui where forces could gather before an assault, a foundation to support a solid critique of the status quo.

In labeling the Frankfurt School “the Grand Hotel Abyss,” Lukács was thus not only denigrating the supposedly comfortable existence of its members, but also their refusal to credit the necessary role of the party and class as the concrete historical ground of radical ideas. Whether or not he was right about the former—their “damaged lives” in exile, to cite the celebrated subtitle of Minima Moralia, suggests otherwise—his second reproach was on target. From its inception, the intellectuals who gathered around the Institut für Sozialforschung knew that critique could not be directly grounded in the praxis or consciousness of the class that Marx had assigned the historical role of incipient universal class, let alone the vanguard party that claimed to be the repository of its imputed or ascribed class consciousness. In History and Class Consciousness, Lukács had argued that although the empirical class consciousness of the proletariat might be subjectively reformist, it was possible for a dialectic to impute to it an essential class consciousness that was objectively revolutionary (Lukács 1971). The Leninist party was the expression of that deeper consciousness. Horkheimer and his colleagues, however, understood the limits of the claim, whose foundations were classically expressed in Vico's verum-factum principle, that those who made the world were able to know what they had made better than those who were merely contemplating it (Jay 1988).

Was it possible to ground it instead in an objective “scientific” grasp of the totality of social relations, which would allow an unaffiliated non-partisan theoretician to decipher not only the surface phenomena of contemporary society but also the deeper, more essential trends that foreshadowed a potential future? Could intellectuals who “floated freely,” to borrow the metaphor that Karl Mannheim would make famous at the end of the decade when the Institute set up shop, have a totalizing perspective on the world below? Or is it a dangerous myth to assume anyone might have a disinterested view above the fray, especially when the very distinction between facts and values was itself called into question? Max Horkheimer had little use, however, for Mannheim's solution, which assumed intellectuals from different classes could somehow harmonize their positions and turn them into complementary perspectives on the whole (Horkheimer 1930; Jay 1988). Neither rooted nor free-floating, critique was located somewhere else on a map which included utopias still to be realized (Abromeit 2011: Chapter 4).

One possible alternative drew on the unconstrained will in which the act of founding was ex nihilo, a gesture of assertion that drew whatever legitimacy it might have entirely from itself rather than any preceding authority, whether in tradition, rationality or the practical activity of a privileged social group. Here the ground was established through what came to be called decisionist fiat, most famously defended by the Weimar and then Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, who argued that the decision to found a legal order could not itself be rooted in a prior legality. But this alternative was frankly irrationalist. Drawing, as it did, on an analogy from the purely voluntarist version of God that had been promulgated in the Middle Ages
by nominalists like William of Ockham, who denied the limitations on divine will placed by any notion or rational intelligibility or ideal form, it relied solely on a spontaneous act of a sovereign subject. As such, it implied a unified meta-subject prior to individual subjects, with the power to do the founding, a subject whose unconstrained will might also lead to domination of the material world. Consequently, Critical Theory was never tempted by it (although before he was in the Institute’s orbit, Walter Benjamin drew on Schmitt’s notion of a law-constituting power prior to legality, albeit in an essay which did not influence his later colleagues [Benjamin 1978]).

For a while, the major alternative favored by Horkheimer and his colleagues was what became known as “immanent critique,” that is, eschewing any universal or transcendent vantage point above the fray and seeking an alternative in the specific normative claims of a culture that failed to live up to them in practice. Or in more explicitly Hegelian terms, it meant finding some critical purchase in the gap between a general concept and the specific objects subsumed under it. As a recent champion of this approach, Robert Hullot-Kentor, has put it, “immanent criticism turns the principle of identity, which otherwise serves the subordination of object to subject, into the power for the presentation of the way in which an object resists its subjective determination and finds itself lacking.” To criticize without an Archimedean point beyond or outside of the target of criticism, he continues, “is the development of the idea as the object’s self-dissatisfaction that at every point moves toward what is not idea; it potentiates from within the requirement of an objective transformation” (Hullot-Kentor 2006: 230).

But what if immanent critique acknowledges the possibility that objects are always in excess of the concepts that define them or, in other words, that the Hegelian presupposition of an immanent dialectical totality fails to acknowledge the non-sublatable quality of radical otherness? Interestingly, in his analysis of phenomenology in The Metacritique of Epistemology, Adorno himself came precisely to this conclusion. Although claiming that “dialectic’s very procedure is immanent critique,” he conceded that

the concept of immanence sets the limits on immanent critique. If an assertion is measured by its presuppositions, then the procedure is immanent, i.e. it obeys formal-logical rules and thought becomes a criterion of itself. But it is not decided as a necessity of thought in the analysis of the concept of being that not all being is consciousness. The inclusiveness of such an analysis is thus halted. To think non-thinking is not a seamless consequence of thought. It simply suspends claims to totality on the part of thought. Immanence, however, in the sense of that equivocation of consciousness and thought, is nothing other than such totality. Dialectic negates both together.

(Adorno 1983: 5)

What this convoluted passage suggests is that the folding of all objects into a field of conceptual immanence is an idealist fantasy in which the nonidentical is absorbed into the identity with no remainder. Thus, immanent critique cannot be itself a fully sufficient ground, as the totality is itself never fully self-contained and concepts are never fully able to subsume all objects under them.

Moreover, in addition to the problems in the dialectical concept of total immanence, what if “the self-dissatisfaction of the object,” its striving to be adequate to its concept, fails to manifest itself in a society that Herbert Marcuse could call “one-dimensional” and Adorno “totally administered”? What if the possibility of “objective transformation” is thwarted by the ideological seamlessness of a social order that actually functionalizes apparent dissatisfaction in the service of system-maintenance? What if the totality that prevailed was not one
whose contradictions and antinomies threatened to undermine it, but rather one in which they served to keep it going through a kind of autoimmune equilibrium? In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno acknowledged precisely this danger with reference to the decline of irony:

Ironic's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared.

The former resigns itself to confirmation of reality by its mere duplication.... There is not a crevasse in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail.... Pitted against the deadly seriousness of total society, which has absorbed the opposing voice, the impotent objection earlier quashed by irony, there is now only the deadly seriousness of the comprehended truth.

(Adorno 1978: 211–212)

With all of the possible grounds for critique thus in one way or another insufficient, was it then perhaps simply a vain quest to seek a ground or foundation as the legitimating *point d'appui*? If there were no social subject position or historical agent whose praxis could be the source of critique, no purely philosophical first principles or *a priori* transcendental grounds from which to launch such a critique, and no immanent totality in which objects might become adequate to their concepts, might looking for such a ground be itself part of the problem rather than of the solution? In the subsequent history of the Frankfurt School, this anti-foundationalist conclusion became increasingly hard to avoid, as the material basis for critique grew ever more remote and both the appeal of a philosophy of transcendent principles and the confidence in immanent critique diminished. Even the resort to an “objective” or “emphatic” notion of reason, to which Horkheimer could still desperately appeal as late as *Eclipse of Reason* in 1947, lost its capacity to inspire much confidence, as rationality itself seemed to suffer a self-liquidation destined from its very beginnings in the need for self-preservation in the face of a hostile nature. “If one were to speak of a disease affecting reason,” he wrote,

this disease should be understood not as having stricken reason at some historical moment, but as being inseparable from the nature of reason in civilization as we know it. The disease of reason is that reason was born from man's urge to dominate nature.

(Horkheimer 1947: 176)

And yet Critical Theory did not, as we know, give up the mission of critically analyzing the status quo in the hope of enabling a radically different and better future. Might some explanation of its stubborn refusal to abandon that task be found not in abstract principles, or at least not in them alone, but also in the history of its own institutional foundation in the Weimar era? In the remainder of this essay, I want to explore the historical origins of the school in the hope of casting some light on the question of its assumption of a critical vantage point on the world it inhabited. How can we characterize the literal foundation of the Frankfurt School and what kind of authority, if any, did it provide for the work that followed? Might its willingness to draw intellectual sustenance from a heteroclite variety of sources—including, as I will suggest, even the anti-Hegelian philosophy of Schelling—be illuminated by acknowledging those origins?

The details of the origins of the Institute for Social Research have, of course, been known for some time (Migdal 1981; Eisenach 1987). What has to be emphasized is the ragged, inadvertent, adventitious quality of its beginnings. Nothing expresses this dimension of the story as explicitly as the source of its financial support, which came from the fortune of the German-Jewish grain merchant Hermann Weil, who had cornered the Argentine trade in...
wheat in the late nineteenth century and came to play a critical role in the economic policies of Germany during World War I, when he was an adviser to the Kaiser and the General Staff. He shared the ambitious war aims that fueled German aggression in 1914, but by the end of the war had come to argue for a negotiated peace with England to avoid economic disaster. After the armistice, he turned away from politics to philanthropy, joining the many other generous bourgeois donors who had helped create a “Stiftungsuniversität” in Frankfurt before the war (Kluge 1972). Weil’s political sympathies, however, were certainly not on the left, so it is hard entirely to gainsay the sardonic remark of Bertolt Brecht about the Institute’s founding in his unfinished satire of contemporary intellectuals, *The Tui Novel:*

A rich old man, the grain speculator Weil dies, disturbed by the miseries on earth.
In his will he leaves a large sum for the establishment of an institute to investigate the sources of that misery, which is, of course, he himself.

(Brecht 1973: 443)

Brecht was, to be sure, off the mark in his precise history, as Weil actually died in 1927, but he did put his finger on the irony involved in the generosity of an unabashed capitalist supporting a venture that was anything but a defense of the system that made him rich. In the history of Marxism, of course, this is not a new story, as demonstrated by Engels’s financing Marx’s revolutionary writings and research through his work for the family firm of Ermen and Engels, which owned the Victoria Mill in Manchester. But it does complicate our understanding of the point d’appui from which Critical Theory launched its critique, opening it to the accusation of militants like Brecht and Lukács that its radical credentials were tainted from the start (even though the latter’s own background was anything but plebian).

Interestingly, an earlier attempt to create another Institute by Hermann Weil at the University in 1920, focused on labor law, had been unsuccessful, but now with the vigorous participation of his son Felix, the second venture came to fruition. Felix Weil, born in 1889 and raised for the first nine years of his life in considerable comfort in Buenos Aires, had come to Frankfurt to study during the war and was caught up in the revolutionary events of 1918. Because of a prior connection with the Social Democrat Hugo Sinzheimer, a leading labor lawyer who served for a short while as police president of the city’s workers council, he had a brief taste of action, but apparently it was the reading of the *Sociologie der Jugend* that converted him to socialism (Eisenach 1987: 185) He joined a socialist student group at the university, among whose other members was Leo Lowenthal, later a colleague at the Institute. After a year at the university in Tübingen, working under the political economist Robert Wilbrandt but prevented for political reasons from getting his degree, Felix Weil returned to Frankfurt. Here he was able to complete his dissertation with the political economist Adolph Weber on “Socialization: Essay on the Conceptual Foundations and Critique of Plans for Socialization,” which was published in a series on “Practical Socialism” edited by Karl Korsch, still then a leftwing member of the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD). During the early 1920s, Weil was politically close to the Spartacists, although he later acknowledged that he was always a “salon Bolshevik,” who was never jailed and never considered renouncing his fortune (Eisenach 1987: 207). He used it instead to support many leftwing causes, including the Malik Verlag, the theater of Erwin Piscator and the corrosive art of Georg Grosz, who in fact painted his portrait in 1926 reading the proofs of a German translation of Upton Sinclair’s book on the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Among his projects was the “First Marxist Work Week,” which began on May 20, 1923 in a hotel near the Thuringian town of Ilmenau. The participants, mostly from the orbit of the newly formed German Communist Party, included Korsch, Lukács, Karl August Wittfogel, Konstantin...
Zetkin (son of the KPD luminary Klara Zetkin), Julian and Hede Gumperz, Bela Fogarasi, Richard Sorge, Eduard Alexander, Kuzuo Fukumoto, Friedrich Pollock, and four young friends from his student days in Tübingen (Buckmiller 1990). Here papers were given on such subjects as socialist planning and the theory of imperialism, with Lukács’s just published *History and Class Consciousness* a major object of discussion. Although the meeting was apparently a success, a second week the following year did not ensue because Weil decided to found a more permanent institution. According to the recollection of Friedrich Pollock, who was married to one of Weil’s cousins, it was conceived in conversations with a third figure, who had not been in Ilmenau, in the castle garden in the Taunus mountain town of Kronberg in 1922.

That third figure was, of course, Max Horkheimer, who with Pollock had been introduced to Weil by Konstantin Zetkin in the fall of 1919 in Frankfurt. Horkheimer’s important role in the early years of the Institute’s has not always been recognized. But as his most recent biographer, John Abromeit, has noted,

Horkheimer was instrumental in the planning of the Institute from the very beginning, a fact that is often overlooked due to his lack of involvement in the Institute’s affairs under its first director Carl Grünberg. It was not a mere formality that Horkheimer was listed as one of the nine original members of the Society for Social Research, the organization formed to found the Institute.

(Emery 2015).

What Horkheimer brought to their deliberations was a growing identification with socialism without any particular party affiliation combined with a strong commitment to academic studies, which manifested itself in a successful philosophical apprenticeship first with Edmund Husserl in Freiburg and then Hans Cornelius in Frankfurt. Although not as wealthy as Hermann Weil, Horkheimer’s father Moritz was a successful factory owner from Stuttgart, and a liberal assimilated Jew who patriotically supported the German war effort. His mother was entirely devoted to domestic pursuits, the most avid of which, by all reports, was providing her only son with unconditional love. Trained to succeed his father at the factory—his position there served to excuse him from military service until 1916, when a physical ailment prevented him from seeing frontline action—the young Horkheimer was motivated more by aesthetic yearnings than commercial ones. Although growing increasingly alienated from his parents’ values, he never broke with them personally, even when they disapproved of his love for the “unsuitable” woman he eventually married and objected to his academic career. Through the life-long friendship he began at the age of sixteen in 1911 with Pollock, also the son of an assimilated Jewish industrialist, Horkheimer seems to have found a microcosmic foretaste of the egalitarian community of like-minded souls for which he clearly yearned (Emery 2015). Although a sympathetic observer of the political turmoil after the war, he watched the events unfolding in Munich with the group around the radical bohemian photographer Germaine Krull rather than participating directly in them. Nor was he swept up in the quest for religious authenticity that would inspire future Institute colleagues like Leo Lowenthal and Erich Fromm, who were for a while part of the Frankfurt Lehrhaus directed by Franz Rosenzweig.

During the Institute’s first few years, when Carl Grünberg served as director and its focus was on the history of the labor movement, Horkheimer was occupied primarily with his university studies, working with mentors like Cornelius and the Gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb. But at the same time, he resisted becoming absorbed into the world of academic careerism, the world of what Fritz Ringer was later to call that of German mandarins in decline (Ringer 1969). As Adorno was to recollect when he had first met Horkheimer in
Gelb’s seminar, he was “not affected by the professional deformity of the academic, who all-too-easily confuses the occupation with scholarly things with reality” (Adorno 1986). In addition to his more scholarly writings, he wrote a steady stream of aphoristic ruminations that only appeared pseudonymously in 1934 under the ambiguous title *Dämmerung*, which means both dawn and twilight. Wrestling with a number of issues—the relationship between theoretical and practical reason, the materialist underpinnings of philosophy, the complex interaction of theory and empirical research, the contribution psychoanalysis might make to social theory—Horkheimer came to the conclusion that only interdisciplinary work guided by a common goal might provide answers to questions that traditional scholarship and conventional politics had failed to address. When the opportunity came to replace Grünberg as Institute director, following the latter’s debilitating stroke in 1928, he was ready to launch an ambitious program whose outlines he spelled out in the inaugural address he gave in 1931 on “The Current Condition of Social Philosophy and the Task of an Institute for Social Research” (Horkheimer 1993). Two years earlier, Weil had succeeded in convincing the Minister of Education to transfer Grünberg’s chair in political science, originally endowed by his father, to one in social philosophy. Horkheimer, newly the author of a Habilitationsschrift on The Origins of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History, was selected to fill it, thus allowing him officially to assume the directorship in January 1931.

From this very sketchy portrait of Horkheimer, whose assumption of the directorship might be considered more properly the origin of the Frankfurt School strictly speaking than of the Institute for Social Research, it is clear that the institutional founding of Critical Theory was as scattered, uneven and diffuse as its theoretical point d’apport. Financially, it was dependent on the inadvertent largess of the class whose hegemony it sought to undermine. Politically, it kept its distance from the parties or movements that might provide the historical agency to realize its hopes. Academically, it was only obliquely integrated into a university system whose advocacy of scholarly neutrality and disinterested research it could not embrace. Personally, its leadership was unsettled and uncertain, at least initially. Even its name—the bland “Institute for Social Research”—covered over its deeper agenda, which had been expressed in an earlier candidate, “Institute for Marxism,” which had been rejected as too provocative.

Although for some unfriendly commentators, such as Brecht, these anomalies smacked of hypocrisy and self-deception, it might be more useful to see them as enacting the very uneasiness with seeking a firm theoretical ground that also eluded Critical Theory. In fact, over time, the very need for an explicit foundation from which critique might be launched lost its exigency. Instead, the search for origins as grounds, the need for a point from which thinking might securely begin, became itself an explicit target of Critical Theory. In his consideration of phenomenology, Adorno condemned the quest for an “ur” moment from which all else followed. “The concept of the absolutely first,” he wrote in his book on Husserl, “must itself come under critique” (Adorno 1983: 6; Pizer 1995). Whether it be the concept of Being or the priority of the Subject, philosophies which sought a first principle—*prima philosophia* or *Ursprungsphilosophien*—were guilty of privileging one moment in a totality of relations that could only be entered in *media res*. Dialectics, even a negative one, understood that nothing was ever immediate and logically prior to the mediation of the whole.

Not only problematic from a purely theoretical point of view, the search for foundations and origins, the Frankfurt School came to argue, is also politically suspect. As Adorno made clear in *Minima Moralia*, in particular the aphorism “Gold Assay,” and later in *Jargon of Authenticity*, there was a sinister link between the assertion of origins as priority and the fascist cult of blood and soil (Adorno 1973b, 1978: 152–155; Jay 2011). The search for authenticity and genuineness contains the “notion of the supremacy of the original over the derived. This notion, however, is always linked with social legitimation. All ruling strata claim to be
the oldest settlers, autochthonous” (Adorno 1978: 155). Here the angry voice of the exile, expelled from a connection to his original home, can be heard, but there were earlier sources for Critical Theory’s distrust for foundationalist claims, both historical and philosophical.

Although the evidence for it is largely conjectural and indirect, a hitherto under-appreciated stimulus to resist first philosophies and immanentist holism may paradoxically have been the Idealism of Schelling, who was particularly aware of the function of an Ungrund or Abgrund in resisting totalizing rationalism (Bowie 1993, 1995). For those who identify Critical Theory as a variant of Hegelian Marxism or who know the Frankfurt School’s critique of Schelling only from Marcuse’s Reason and Revolution, such a suggestion will seem implausible. In that work of 1941, the later Schelling was identified along with Auguste Comte as the exemplar of a “positive philosophy” that sought to undermine the critical impulse in Hegel’s “negative philosophy.” Despite their differences, Marcuse charged, “there is a common tendency in both philosophies to counter the sway of apriorism and to restore the authority of experience” (Marcuse 1960: 324), which meant a rejection of metaphysical rationalism. From Marcuse’s essentially Hegelian Marxist point of view, the political implications of both kinds of “positive philosophy” were affirmative, even reactionary, as evidenced by the inspiration Schelling provided to conservative theorists like Friedrich Joseph Stahl. Understood as the defender of intuition against reason, nature against history, and art against politics, as he sometime has been, Schelling seems like an unlikely inspiration for Horkheimer and his colleagues.

But the younger Schelling, the one who collaborated with Hegel on the posthumously discovered fragment “The Earliest System-Program of German Idealism” (Harris 1972; Jamm and Schneider 1984; Richter 2002) and resisted Fichte’s excessive reliance on the constitutive subject (which he had himself once shared), was a very different story. Although he initially embraced the challenge laid down by Karl Leonhard Reinhold and Solomon Maimon to generate a meta-critical, phenomenological foundation for systematic philosophy, which would surpass the limits of Kant’s cautious transcendentalism, Schelling, who gave up publishing his work after 1812, came to understand how difficult squaring that circle would be (Beiser 1987). As remarked by no less an interpreter than Jürgen Habermas, who had written his dissertation on Schelling (Habermas 1954; McCarthy 1978: 403; Douglas 2004; Peukert 2005: 359), the philosopher’s proto-materialist defense of an otherness that escaped the idealist assimilation into a relational totality had a resonance that could be found in unexpected places:

In his remarkable polemic against the bias toward the affirmative, against the purification and the harmonization of the unruly and the negative, of what refuses itself, there also stirs an impulse to resist the danger of idealist apotheosis—the same impulse for the critique of ideology that extends all the way up to the pessimistic materialism of Horkheimer and to the optimistic materialism of Bloch.

(Habermas 1984, 1992: 123)

Horkheimer had in fact written and lectured on German Idealism in general and Schelling in particular in the 1920s before assuming the Institute’s directorship (Abromeit 2011: 111–124). Although distancing himself from what he saw as Schelling’s goal of absolute identity located in nature or symbolized in art, he applauded the philosopher’s critique of Fichte’s constitutive subjectivism and solipsistic reduction of nature to a mere effect of that subject. Toward the later anti-rationalist Schelling, to be sure, he remained hostile, but he acknowledged that there was something in Schelling’s search for an Absolute beyond subjective constitution that comport well with a materialist critique of Idealisms of any kind.
In his middle period, exemplified by his unfinished *Ages of the World*, Schelling had addressed the issue of foundations directly (Žižek and Schelling 1997). Although the book is an uncompleted torso, often cryptic and hard to decipher, the gravamen of its argument was that attempts to know the Absolute were always aporetic, as it ceased being Absolute when it was transformed into an object of knowledge. Schelling's primary animus was against the rationalist monism of philosophers like Spinoza, although his contemporaries Fichte and Hegel were also inviting targets. Without regressing to a no less problematic dualism of the kind associated with Descartes, Schelling struggled to articulate a way to gesture toward something unknown that could not be adequately expressed.

It is not true, Schelling opined in opposition to the subjective Idealism of his day, that a deed, an unconditioned activity or action, is the First. For the absolutely First can only be that which the absolutely Last can be as well. Only an immovable, divine—indeed, we would do better to say supradivine—indifference is absolutely First: it is the beginning that is also at the same time the end.

The very notion of a "ground," he contended, is hard to defend coherently. The distinction between *Urgrund* and *Ungrund* is paper-thin. If "ground" is more than just an empty word, the people must themselves acknowledge that there was something before the existing God as such that did not itself exist because it was only the ground of existence. Now, that which is only the ground of existence cannot have an essence and qualities that are as one with what exists; and if existence is to be regarded as free, conscious, and (in the highest sense) intelligent, then what is merely the ground of its existence cannot be conscious, free, and intelligent in the same sense.

(Žižek and Schelling 1997: 149)

There is thus an unbridgeable gap between absolute Ground and empirical Existence, and subject and substance cannot, pace Hegel and Spinoza, be seen as one, even through a sublation of their differences. Žižek glosses the implication of all this as follows:

prior to Grund there can only be an abyss (Ungrund); that is far from being a mere nihil prativum, this 'nothing' that precedes Ground stands for the 'absolute indifference' qua the abyss of pure Freedom that is not yet the predicate-property of some Subject but rather designates a pure impersonal Willing (Wollen) that wills nothing.

(Žižek and Schelling 1997: 15)

As David Farrell Krell notes, with reference to another Schelling work of this period,

the primal, primordial, incipient, or original ground and the nonground are brought as close together as possible: only a single letter distinguishes them, and not even an entire letter inasmuch as it is here merely a matter of prolonging a single stroke of one, of one letter extending the arc of the r in Urgrund to the n of Ungrund. The one stroke alters origins to nihilations.

(Krell 1988: 25–26)

Not surprisingly, Schelling’s critique of rationalist metaphysics was attractive to thinkers trying to extricate themselves from an overly ambitious philosophy in which all contingency was absorbed into a relational system, and all ineffable mystery was interpreted as ultimately intelligible. In Weimar, a salient example was Franz Rosenzweig, whose abandonment of
his earlier Hegelianism was abetted by his reading of Schelling’s *Ages of the World*. In April 1918, Rosenzweig wrote to his mother; “I am an anti-Hegelian (and anti-Fichtean); my holy protector among the four is Kant—and above all—Schelling. That I have just found Schelling’s work [das Schellingianum] is a completely remarkable coincidence” (Rosenzweig 1935: 299). As Paul Franks and Michael Morgan explain,

for Rosenzweig, Schelling’s tremendous achievement was to disclose the twin actualities of the unique individual and the actually existing Absolute that are excluded from and yet presupposed by the system of reason, the philosophy of Idealism. These gave his thinking a new foundation in the experience of the contingent, existing individual and its relation to the preconceptual, pretheoretical Absolute, the *Urgrund*, the ‘dark ground’.

(Gibbs 1992: 40–56; Rosenzweig 2000: 42; Betz 2003)

The latter was also an abyss (*Abgrund*) prior to the system of rational relations that made up the world described by metaphysicians. There was no way to illuminate this negative space out of which creation emerged.

The proto-existentialism in Schelling, who preceded Sartre in denying that essence preceded existence, is not hard to discern. Nor is it surprising that later advocates of what has broadly come to be called post-structuralism, such as Slavoj Žižek and David Clark, would find in Schelling a kindred spirit (Clark 1995; Žižek 1996). His warning against the excessive reach of rationalism could be interpreted as a psychoanalytic—in Žižek’s case, Lacanian—defense of the resistance of the unconscious to the claims of consciousness. His critique of the reflection theory of knowledge, in which subjects and objects mirror each other, anticipated the anti-representalism of post-structuralist epistemology (Frank 1987). And his version of an Absolute that cannot be objectified or made present has been seen as proto-Derridean, foreshadowing the ways in which *différance* both attacks identitarian concepts and serves as an anti-originary origin dependent on them (Dews 1987).

But how does Schelling help us understand the early Frankfurt School, which in so many ways drew on the power of Hegelian dialectical negation? How could a philosopher who fashioned a philosophy of identity at one point in his career and affirmed positivity at another be a possible source of Critical Theory’s defense of nonidentity and negation? If there is a distance from Hegelian Marxism in Horkheimer’s work, it is, after all, normally understood to be a product of his abiding sympathy for Schopenhauer’s legacy, not Schelling’s (although it may be possible to discern debts to Schelling in Schopenhauer himself) (Vecchiotti 1987). And in the case of Adorno, it is the anti-Hegelian Benjamin who is often credited with alerting him to the limits of even a materialist dialectics.

Yet it is not implausible to see some Schellingian motifs, especially when it comes to the question of grounds, in Critical Theory, most clearly evident in Adorno’s version of it. It is first worth recalling that Adorno, as Susan Buck-Morss first argued, was likely to have learned of Rosenzweig’s “New Thinking” in Jewish theology in the 1920s (Buck-Morss 1977: 5). Neither he nor Horkheimer were, to be sure, ever in the Frankfurt Lehrhaus circle, unlike Lowenthal and Fromm, but he certainly knew of Rosenzweig through Benjamin and Scholem. And although Adorno did not follow Rosenzweig in explicitly repudiating Hegel, he might well have absorbed some of his reservations about an identitarian dialectics in which all otherness was absorbed into a rational totality (Caygill 2005). After his return to Germany, Adorno would, in fact, acknowledge that “in [Schelling’s] approach from the standpoint of identity philosophy many themes can be found that I reached coming from completely different premises” (Adorno 1998: 34). Here he was referring in particular to Schelling’s *Lectures on the Method of Academic Study*, a work that Benjamin had also
appreciated (Scholem 1975: 33). Jürgen Habermas would also remark on the continuing influence of this book at the Institute, even in the 1950s:

What Schelling had developed in the summer term, 1802, in his Jena lectures to serve as a method of academic studies as an idea of the German university, namely to ‘construct the whole of one's science out of oneself and to present it with inner and lively visualization,’ this is what Adorno practiced in this summer term in Frankfurt.

(Habermas 2003)

There was also a substantive debt to Schelling in Adorno’s suspicion of seeking a firm ground for philosophical critique. In his 1931 lecture “The Idea of Natural History,” he mediated history by nature and nature by history without seeking a higher-level sublimation of the two terms. Although Schelling is not explicitly mentioned, one can discern his shadow in Adorno’s resistance to a purely historicist model in which “second nature” is identified solely with Lukács’s idea of a reification that must be overcome by the power of collective subjective constitution of the historical world. As one commentator puts it, “Arguably Ages of the World invents this history of nature which will inform Benjamin’s and Adorno’s reformulation of ‘natural history’ as history subject to nature: ‘the self-cognition of the spirit as nature in disunion with itself’” (Rajan n.d). Indeed, the essay may even have provided a nuanced critique of Benjamin, to which it is in many ways indebted, for, as Hullot-Kentor has noted, “Benjamin’s study of the Baroque is a research of origins, which Adorno distantly criticizes” (Hullot-Kentor 1984: 106). The same impulse courses through Dialectic of Enlightenment, written in the 1940s. As Andrew Bowie puts it, “Schelling makes, throughout his career, many of the moves which are the basis of Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception of a ‘dialectic of enlightenment,’ in which reason deceives itself about its relationship with nature, and thereby turns into its dialectical opposite” (Bowie 1993: 58). The melancholic tone suffusing much of Schelling’s work also bears comparing with the “melancholy science” Adorno practiced so diligently (Clark 1995: 109–115; Adorno 1978: 15).

In his 1959 lectures on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, Adorno would continue to denounce the “mania for foundations” (Fundierungsphantasie), which had led Kant and other philosophers to seek a firm ground for their arguments. “This is the belief,” he wrote,

that everything which exists must be derived from something else, something older or more primordial. It is a delusion built on the idealist assumption that every conceivable existent thing can be reduced to mind, or, I almost said, to Being...You should liberate yourselves from this ‘mania for foundations’ and...you should not always feel the need to begin at the very beginning.

(Adorno 2001: 16)

In Negative Dialectics, he positively cited Ages of the World as an antidote to rationalist consciousness philosophy, noting that “urge, according to Schelling’s insight, is the mind’s preliminary form” (Adorno 1973a: 202). Although resisting Schelling’s privileging of intuition above reason, an inclination that Hegel had found particularly disturbing, Adorno did seek a balance between noetic and dianoetic roads to the truth. As Herbert Schnädelbach once noted, Adorno was a “noetic of the non-identical. He always stressed, above all in his remarks on formal logic, that the goal of dianoetic operations was noetic” (Schnädelbach 1983: 75). Accordingly, in his Aesthetic Theory, his debts to Schelling, who more than any other German Idealist granted a special privilege to the work of art as able to express, indeed
to perform, nonidentity in a way purely discursive—that is, dianoiastic—philosophy cannot, have not been hard to find (Zuidervaart 1991; Bowie 1997).

In short, the Frankfurt School's willingness to live with the abyss, or more correctly at its edge, meant that it avoided the problematic reliance on an "expressive" concept of totality, which Hegelian Marxists like Lukács had defended (Jay 1984). It reflected their recognition that nature could not be subsumed under the rubric of history and that the world of natural objects could not be seen as the projection of a constitutive subject. It allowed them to free critical thought from its dependence on an ur-moment of legitimating empowerment prior to the imperfect present.

Their hesitation before a Hegelian rationalist immanence that would fold the pre-rational ground into the totality did not, to be sure, mean that they followed Schelling in the direction that Heidegger and others wanted to take him, a direction that could end by celebrating the irrational (Bowie 1995: 253–257). Not only Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, but also works like Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* testify to their dogged insistence on the critical potential in rationalism. Even when Habermas could jettison the emphatic, still metaphysical concept of reason that had animated the first generation of Critical Theorists, he would warn that "whenever the one [the Absolute] is thought of as absolute negativity, as withdrawal and absence, as resistance against propositional speech in general, the ground (Grund) of rationality reveals itself as an abyss (Abgrund) of the irrational" (Habermas 1992: 121). For Habermas, the reliance on a pre-propositional, world-disclosing, intuition of the Absolute paradoxically led to abandoning the only version of "Grund" that he could support: grounds as the giving of reasons. And yet, by acknowledging the limits of reason in its more emphatic sense and accepting the legitimate claims of something else—aesthetic experience, mimesis, the unconscious desires of the libido, even the hopes expressed in the idiom of religion—the Frankfurt School understood that living on the edge of the abyss would not be without its benefits.

There is in short an unexpected congruence—perhaps better put a symbolic affinity—between the lack of a secure foundation in the institutional history of the Frankfurt School and in its openness to the theoretical lessons of an unexpected influence like Schelling. This is not to say that either can be called the true "origin" of Critical Theory’s suspicion of origins for to do so would be to undermine precisely the force of their resistance to a firm and stable Grund from which to support critique itself. The Institute's “founding fathers” seem to have understood that the only viable point d'appui of critique was in the imagination of a possible future rather than a recollected past, a utopian hope rather than a past moment of originary legitimation.

To clarify this point, one might perhaps compare their practice with that of the American founding fathers as interpreted by another German émigré luminary, Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution*. In that work, Arendt contrasts the attempt to begin ex nihilo in the French Revolution, deriving legitimacy from a Rousseauist sovereign general will, with the American Revolutionaries' tacit reliance on prior compacts, covenants and precedents. Comparing it more with the Roman Republic, which drew its authority from the earlier founding of Troy, rather than the act of creation ex nihilo by the Hebrew God, she argued that the American Revolution did not seek a monolithic foundation, a moment of decisionist legitimation before legality. Power, she argues, “was not only prior to the Revolution, it was in a sense prior to the colonization of the continent. The Mayflower compact was drawn up on the ship and signed upon landing” (Arendt 1965). By placing the act of legitimation in a receding train of possible founding moments, prior even to the settling of the colonies out of which the new republic was fashioned, the American experience was one in which the potential for future perfection was as much of a ground for critique as any past episode of actual founding.
It is, to be sure, a long way from the Pilgrims’ landing at Plymouth Rock to the founding of the Institut für Sozialforschung, and perhaps an even longer one between the Enlightenment hopes of the Founding Fathers and Schelling’s obscure arguments about the irrational God whose existence cannot be subordinated to his essence. But what these loose comparisons help us understand is that the Abgrund may well be less fatal to a critical theory—and emancipatory practice—than one might suspect. It alerts us to the anarchic moment—in the sense of lacking an original ur-moment or archê—in Critical Theory, as well as its surprising similarity to Heidegger’s notion of a simultaneous origin that defies a primal ground (Gleichursprünglichkeit) (Pizer 1995: 138–148). It allows us to realize that there may be many different starting points and disparate grounds for critical reflection without searching for the one Archimedean point on which critique must be balanced. It is perhaps symbolically meaningful that the actual location of the First Marxist Work Week, sponsored by Felix Weil, was not a luxurious Grand Hotel “equipped with every comfort” at the edge of an abyss, but rather a much more modest train station hotel, owned by a Communist named Friedrich Henne, in the small town of Geraberg bei Arnstadt near Ilmenau in Thuringia (Buckmiller 1990: 145). From such humble origins, although not from them alone, something remarkable came into the world.

Note

I This essay first appeared in “Politisierung der Wissenschaft”: Jüdische Wissenschaftler und ihre Gegner an der Universität Frankfurt am Main vor und nach 1933, eds. Mortiz Eppe, Johannes Fried, Raphael Gross and Janus Gudian (Frankfurt, Wallstein, 2016), with many substantive that are footnotes absent in this version.

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Further Reading


