



Lars Rensmann. *The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism.* Philosophy and Race Series. Albany: [SUNY Press](#), 2017. 600 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-6593-7.

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Recent publications on the Frankfurt School agree that the critique of antisemitism was essential to Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and their colleagues, who had fled Germany in the 1930s, and that, in crucial ways, Critical Theory should be understood as a reflection on Nazism and the Shoah. Nonetheless, there have been surprisingly few attempts to combine the rich material of the Frankfurt School to study their understanding of antisemitism. In *The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism*, Lars Rensmann sets out to fill this research gap, providing the reader with a thorough theoretical and philosophical analysis of the Frankfurt School's work on antisemitism. In his book, Rensmann, who is a professor of European politics and society at the University of Groningen (Netherlands), builds on his earlier *Kritische Theorie über den Antisemitismus: Studien zu Struktur, Erklärungspotential und Aktualität* (Critical Theory on antisemitism: Studies on structure, explanatory potential and topicality), published in 1998. *The Politics of Unreason*, while similar to his 1998 book in scope and structure, is more nuanced and subtle in its arguments and makes Rensmann's work available to an English-speaking audience.

Rensmann's book is notably different from other recent publications on the Frankfurt School, such as Eva Maria Ziege's *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaftstheorie: Die Frankfurter Schule im amerikanischen Exil* (2009) or Jack Jacobs's *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (2014). Ziege examines the social, academic, and political context of the school in the United States regarding its work on antisemitism. Similarly, Jacobs looks at how the Critical Theorists related to Jewish identity and Judaism and how their personal experience of antisemitism shaped their intellectual biographies. Rensmann, in contrast, takes a more theoretical approach, focusing on sociological insights, philosophical arguments, and empirical studies that have shaped the Frankfurt School's notion of antisemitism.

Rensmann argues that antisemitism, which for a long time was ignored or viewed as a minor issue in academic discussions of Critical Theory, constitutes a central problem within Frankfurt School theory, particularly after the horrors of the Shoah. In response to Nazi barbarism, the Frankfurt School sought to develop a comprehensive theory of modern civilization that illuminates the collapse of society and the devastating rise of Jew hatred. In nine chapters—each dealing with a different aspect of Critical Theory's research on antisemitism—Rensmann discusses the writings and empirical studies of the school between 1929 and 1955. His primary focus is on the works of Adorno and Horkheimer, but he also discusses Erich Fromm, Leo Löwenthal, and Herbert Marcuse.

By revisiting and critically analyzing the empirical studies of the school, many of which have been only marginally addressed in academic publications, among them the survey of German workers in 1929, the unpublished study of the American working class in 1944, and the group experiment in 1955, Rensmann makes clear that, while these empirical studies are informative and original on their own, together they have significantly shaped Critical

Theory's understanding of antisemitism. Therefore, Rensmann argues that despite the robust critique of positivism, it is not possible to detach Critical Theory's empirical work from their philosophical investigations, and instead sees both as interconnected and essential aspects of their research. Moreover, Rensmann cautions against looking at the theory of antisemitism in isolation. He explains that, for the proponents of Critical Theory, the research on subjectivization in capitalism, authoritarianism, and the dialectical critique of enlightenment have to be connected to understand the irrational and pathological mechanisms typical of antisemitism.

After the introduction, which sheds light on the historical background of research conducted by the Critical Theorists, chapters 2 and 3 highlight the importance of Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic theory of the mind for the Critical Theory of antisemitism. Rensmann demonstrates how the Frankfurt School built on these conceptions in several theoretical works and empirical studies, most prominent among them *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford (1950). Psychoanalysis is also crucial to Critical Theory's critique of modern society, as Rensmann shows in chapter 5 where he discusses the concept of instrumental rationality and the fetishization of societal structures. Combining the works of Freud, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, Critical Theory created a distinct social-psychological approach to the study of antisemitism. Within this framework, Rensmann notes, there are a multitude of trajectories that require consideration when attempting to understand the processes of subjectivization in modern societies along with the widespread phenomena of authoritarian character dispositions.

In line with this multilayered approach, Critical Theory argues that antisemitism, like every form of "othering," will not be adequately analyzed based merely on economic interest, propaganda, or a general herd mentality. Instead, Critical Theory states that an authoritarian and ego-weak personality is prone to project their internal struggles, desires, and aggression outward. Thus, this personality type often seeks to achieve temporary gratification of their psychological needs. The emphasis on the psychological process of projection points to a key premise of Critical Theory that runs like a thread through Rensmann's entire analysis: antisemitism has nothing to do with the actual experiences or interactions with Jews. Instead, it is based on psychological, subjective, and circumstantial factors of the antisemite's life. The authoritarian individuals thus project their impulses onto other groups or individuals, who then represent traits and emotions the antisemites cannot tolerate in themselves. Following this understanding of antisemitism, Rensmann discusses the wide-ranging social and psychological functions that antisemitism serves, from enabling the gratification of internal tensions toward seeking narcissistic valorization through the imagination of belonging to a superior collective, nation, or race.

In chapter 4, Rensmann builds on these considerations, scrutinizing the complex, malleable, and often contradictory antisemitic images of the Jew. While antisemitism shares specific features with different forms of othering, Critical Theory argues that there is a projective matrix that is unique to antisemitism. The antisemitic system relies on the paranoid idea of a Jewish world conspiracy, which allows the antisemites to blame the Jews for all that is perceived wrong with modern society. In his discussion, Rensmann provides a fascinating and illuminating description of the intersections between antisemitism and its particularities in contrast with other forms of othering. Rensmann describes "illogical sentiments, denigration, generalization, sexualization, discrimination and subjugation" as essential for antisemitism and racism alike (p. 176). However, "while both blacks and Jews are constructed as forces disrupting and undermining social order, only Jews are viewed as a force behind capitalism and communism. While racism looks down on blacks as inferior, antisemitism constructs Jews as inferior, yet also elevates them to a hidden world power aspiring to dominate the world" (p. 177).

In addition to his accessible discussion of the theories of Critical Theory, Rensmann's analysis of the shifts, transformations, inherent tensions, and problems in the arguments of Critical Theory is commendable. As he examines each thesis of the famous chapter on the "Elements of Antisemitism" in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer (1947), Rensmann persuasively illustrates the tendency of the Frankfurt School to "flatten out historical, socio-cultural, and political contexts ... in the interest of theoretical universality"

(p. 278). These critical revisions are doubtless among the most fascinating and novel parts of the book.

Furthermore, Rensmann corrects several misconceptions and faulty interpretations and emphasizes some oft-neglected and marginalized aspects of the Critical Theory of antisemitism. In chapter 7, Rensmann demonstrates how the concepts developed by Critical Theory are more sensitive toward politics, societal dynamics, and political institutions than previous studies of the Frankfurt School had suggested. He establishes that Critical Theory attributes a crucial role to politics and is anything but ignorant of the importance of democratic actors, political and social contexts, and a vigilant public for limiting (or enabling) antisemitic hate speech and the rise of authoritarianism. In chapter 7, he highlights Critical Theory's contribution to understanding how antisemitism has transformed and found new outlets after the Holocaust, especially in post-Nazi Germany, where open antisemitic agitation became a social taboo. Consequently, antisemitic projections emerged in the form of secondary antisemitism: Jews were the object of hatred because they reminded the Germans of the Holocaust. In the attempt to split off guilt from memory, this new form of antisemitism blamed the Jews for their suffering. While further discussing the Frankfurt School's postwar studies on the dynamics of German guilt, defense mechanisms, and secondary antisemitism, Rensmann shows that antisemitic projection is not static but mutable and capable of adjusting to new societal and political contexts. Critical Theory's conception of antisemitism and authoritarianism helps to explain the Holocaust, Rensmann argues, and is also applicable to modern-day settings, especially with the rise of right-wing extremism and global jihadism.

It is difficult to find fault with Rensmann's detailed and lucid analysis. One could be disappointed with the fact that Rensmann hardly embeds Critical Theory in the academic and philosophical literature on antisemitism. For example, Rensmann addresses the writings of Hannah Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre only in passing, although both wrote immensely important texts on antisemitism, which would have merited a comparison with the contemporaneous analyses of the Frankfurt School. Similarly, his discussion of the Milgram experiment, which features prominently in both the introduction and the conclusion, turns out quite brief and very general. Delineating the contours of Critical Theory and contrasting it with existing research on authoritarianism and antisemitism would have further refined the book. Moreover, Rensmann does not motivate his selection of who qualifies as a theorist of the Frankfurt School, at times making Critical Theory appear more homogeneous than is warranted. A case in point is his notable neglect of Franz Neumann and Friedrich Pollock, whose debate about monopoly capitalism was essential to Adorno's and Horkheimer's reflections on the nature of antisemitism.

Such shortcomings, however, do not detract from the significant contribution of Rensmann's impressive book. *The Politics of Unreason* is a compelling, intriguing, and well-written portrayal of Critical Theory. Its theoretical considerations, in particular, raise several issues that are worthy of further research. Indeed, with today's rise of right-wing populist parties and hate speech, and a resurgence of antisemitism, Rensmann's book provides a rich, illuminating, and—unfortunately still—very relevant contribution to the social psychology of the authoritarian character, without losing sight of the peculiarity and specific dangers of antisemitism.



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