

Martin Jay

**At the Crossroads of Philosophy, Politics, and
Culture**

Essays for a Troubled Time

The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

Edited by:

Elliot Y. Neaman, Matthew Feldman, and Karim Mamdani

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In Memory of Jürgen Habermas (1929–2026)

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Acknowledgments

For reasons spelled out in my Introduction, let me begin with the sociologist Kurt Wollf (1912-2003) and philosopher Alan Montefiore (1926-2024), whose gentle encouragement fifty years ago planted the seeds that germinated in this collection. The rich soil in which many of them came to fruition was provided by Robert Boyers, who invited me into the pages of his remarkable “little magazine” *Salmagundi* more than four decades ago to write a semi-annual column on whatever came to mind. Five of the essays in this collection began in its pages, and I cannot express enough appreciation for the on-going opportunity to opine on issues beyond my areas of putative expertise. Two others also appeared in comparable locations outside the traditional sphere of professional refereed journals: *Aeon*, the exclusively online journal where the invitation came from Sally Davies to write about alienation, and *Electra*, the sumptuously illustrated Portuguese/English language magazine where a comparable invitation was extended by Marta Rema to contribute to an issue on lying. My thanks for their reaching out.

I have not, however, entirely forsaken professional refereed journals intended for academic audiences, and so was grateful when Roy Boyne asked me to contribute to a *Theory, Culture and Society* forum on the distinguished Polish/British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. And several years later, following lectures I gave in Mexico City at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, graciously hosted by María Pía Lara and Judit Bokser, *History and Theory* published the resulting essay on the judgment of history. I am happy to thank Ethan Kleinberg, once an outstanding undergrad in my classes and now the editor of the journal, and Matthew Specter, on its

editorial board and friendly denizen of Berkeley, for facilitating its appearance. Another invitation to acknowledge with gratitude came from Justin Burke, who was organizing a collection of essays on Habermas and dialectics that is scheduled to be published by Routledge.

The penultimate essay in this collection was self-generated, but then seen into print by another former student, A. Dirk Moses, who edits the *Journal of Genocide Studies*. Deeply involved, as he is, in the heated international discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he was able to alert me to a wealth of relevant literature, which helped me hone my argument. Published very promptly in the journal's online forum on Gaza, the essay elicited two quick critiques by Nitzan Lebovic and Zahi Zalloua, which allowed me to hone it further in the essay that closes this collection. I very much appreciate their taking my foray into their territory seriously enough to engage with it so vigorously.

My thanks also go out to another former doctoral student who has become a friend and valued interlocutor, Elliot Neaman. After he informed me about the series at *Ibidem* Press he had just helped launch, which was going to include a selection of his own scattered writings, I realized that I also had a gaggle that might cohere into a book or perhaps two. *At the Crossroads* would not exist without his initial encouragement and continued involvement in its development. I am also grateful for the help offered by Christoph Ohlwärther of *ibidem* Press, as well as the indexing of Elizabeth Bartmess.

Along the way, the essays collected here benefited enormously from conversations with, readings by, and the abiding comradeship of many other people. Even with my failing memory and the risk that some will be inadvertently excluded, I must thank the following friends for inspiring, improving and enduring my holding forth on the disparate topics treated in this collection: Peter Beilharz, Seyla Benhabib,

the late David Biale, Judith Butler, Paul Breines, John Efron, Paula Fass, Peter Gordon, Carla Hesse, David Hollinger, Axel Honneth, Anton Kaes, Robert Hullot-Kentor, Robert Kaufman, Ethan Katz, Thomas Laqueur, Waldo Martin, the late Moishe Postone, Jonathan Sheehan, and Joel Whitebook.

I met Jürgen Habermas in 1969 and we remained in fruitful contact until his death earlier this year. I learned an enormous amount from his voluminous work, which served as a lodestar and inspiration for much of my own. In dedicating this book to his memory, I hope to honor his matchless record of intellectual rigor and public involvement. There is no one in our troubled times who better exemplified the value of crossing philosophy, political engagement, and cultural criticism.

And finally, I have been supported in ways too countless to list by my family: Shana, Rebecca and Grayson, Beth, Frankie and Sammy, Ryeland and Sidney. As always, my greatest debt goes to my wife and muse Catherine Gallagher, who for more than half a century (gulp!) has been an indefatigable interlocutor, a diligent reader of first drafts, a deflater of pretensions, an inspiration to think harder, in short, an ideal partner in work and in life.

Introduction

I am by training, let me confess at the outset, an intellectual historian, not a philosopher, political theorist or cultural critic. One of the effects of that formation is a well-deserved humility in the company of the often-formidable figures whose ideas and lives we attempt to present, explicate and contextualize. Although there is inevitably some identification with or perhaps antipathy towards the subjects whose stories we narrate and intellectual contributions we reconstruct, we rarely argue with them from the point of view of a superior alternative. That is, intellectual historians are traditionally reticent in assuming the role of a critic who treats their subjects as foils for their own opinions, even if it may be impossible to avoid implicitly judging from a later vantage point in the unfolding of history. When we focus on the reception of ideas or the reputation of a thinker over time, we realize that our intervention will itself be surpassed or at least deflatingly contextualized by future commentators.

At times, however, that reticence can seem like an abdication of responsibility for expressing any opinions of our own. Striving to write with scholarly dispassion and bracketing the inevitable investments we bring with us, we end up occupying an impossible view from nowhere. And sometimes we are called out on it. I vividly recall two conversations I had after the publication of my first book on the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, in the mid-1970's with two senior scholars who challenged me in this way. Both the sociologist Kurt Wolff at Brandeis and the philosopher Alan Montefiore at Oxford, while praising the book as an exercise in intellectual history, then asked, "yes, yes, but what do you yourself think?"

Now, to be honest, it would have been foolhardy in the extreme to try to answer that question in the face of the Frankfurt School's extraordinary range of interests. In my twenties, I was in no position to judge Horkheimer's reading of Western philosophy, Adorno's takes on music and literature, Lowenthal's ideology critique of high literature and popular culture, Neumann's grasp of political theory and analysis of Nazism, Marcuse's understanding of Hegel and Freud, Fromm's revisions of psychoanalysis, Wittfogel's analyses of China, let alone Benjamin's unique response to virtually any of the range of subjects he treated. Even half a century later, I'm still not up to the task, despite the abundant critical literature now existing on which I might draw for inspiration.

Still, the temptation to enter the fray, or more correctly, a modest selection of different frays, is hard to resist, especially when you become identified with the figures whose history you have tried to write. That is, an expectation begins to grow that that you will be applying their ideas, judging their efficacy, putting them in conversation with other thinkers, and speaking as an advocate rather than just a dispassionate observer. Insofar as I morphed from an historian of Critical Theory into a Critical Theorist in my own right, at least in the eyes of some readers, it was hard to avoid that temptation. A similar trajectory turned me from an historian of attitudes towards visuality into someone assumed to have something cogent to say about visual culture itself.

I am, of course, not the only European intellectual historian of my generation who expanded his or her remit to include philosophical musing, political commentary or cultural criticism. Names like Joan Wallach Scott, Dominick LaCapra, Mark Poster, Richard Wolin, Paul Robinson, Paul Breines, Russell Jacoby and Tony Judt come to mind. All at one time or another in one arena or another played the role of public intellectual, opining on more than their credentialed

scholarly specialty. In my own case, however, the temptation to do so was amplified by an unusual opportunity offered by Robert Boyers, the editor of *Salmagundi*, the lively, interdisciplinary “small magazine” that has just enjoyed its sixtieth anniversary under his editorship. I had contributed several essays to the magazine in the mid-1970’s, but something new was made possible a decade later when he asked me, along with Christopher Lasch, Roger Shattuck and Stanisław Barańczak, to contribute biannual columns to the journal on whatever issues struck our fancy. Borrowing a concept from Benjamin and Adorno, I called mine “force fields,” a title then also used for a collection of my essays that appeared a few years later.¹ It was intended to signal the (hopefully) productive tension that appears when different approaches or fields are brought into dynamic contact, when interdisciplinarity results in something more than a harmonious integration of perspectives. The metaphor of “crossroads” adopted for the title of this collection says something similar: rather than intellectual history as a dispassionate clearing house for disparate ideas above the fray, it implies knocking some of those ideas together, applying them to current issues, and seeing what insights might result.

I have never sought, to be sure, the role of pundit, using my column to opine immediately on the ephemeral issues of the day. Instead, because “Force Fields,” appeared in every other issue of a quarterly, it provided the luxury of a longer view, permitting me to treat its subject matter in greater depth than the column form normally allows. The intellectual historian in me also insisted on the inclusion of footnotes

1 Martin Jay, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York and London, Routledge, 1993). The first column, which dealt with the scandal of Paul de Man’s wartime antisemitic journalism, appeared as “The Descent of De Man,” *Salmagundi*, 78-79 (*Spring-Summer*, 1988).