

# REVISITING THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL'S ENGAGEMENTS WITH PHENOMENOLOGY

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Recent research has demonstrated both the value of phenomenological analysis for understanding contemporary social and political problems, and the way that a focus on social and political conditions complicates phenomenology's field of study. This is equally true among those who view phenomenology as a fundamentally critical project capable of developing social and political insights following from its original methodological principles, and among those who argue that phenomenological methodology must undergo fundamental changes in order to develop a critical social and political perspective.<sup>1</sup> Christian Ferencz-Flatz's (2023) *Critical Theory and Phenomenology: Polemics, Appropriations, Perspectives* begins by situating itself in this context, citing the inauguration of the present journal, *Puncta*, as an indication of phenomenology's recent and growing interest in social and political problems (vii, fn. 7). At the same time, Ferencz-Flatz does not align himself with scholars recently working in "critical phenomenology," nor with those who insist on the critical nature of phenomenological methodology going back to Husserl. Rather, his aim is to explore the impact of early twentieth-century phenomenology on the formative figures of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. While apparently removed from contemporary discussions of critical phenomenology, he argues that this project is particularly valuable to phenomenological research today, since the early critical theorists' engagements with phenomenology open productive questions that have been underdeveloped due to the artificial separation of these two fields (xii). It is furthermore an important effort, because while the Frankfurt School is often cited as an example of an approach to critical theory in recent discussions, relatively little of this work has engaged with these philosophers' critical treatments of phenomenology in depth.

<sup>1</sup> For the first group, see the essays collected in *Phenomenology as Critique* (Aldea et al. 2022). The editors' introduction to this volume provides a good programmatic introduction to this position. For the second group, see the essays in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Weiss et al. 2020), and particularly, Lisa Guenther's (2020) essay on "Critical Phenomenology" in this volume.

The work taken on by this book is difficult, not least because of the long history of commentators pitting the Frankfurt School and phenomenology against one another. Since Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s early criticisms of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, phenomenologists have often dismissed these thinkers as misunderstanding their tradition’s core aims and intentions, while corners of critical theory readily adopted an indifferent attitude towards the phenomenological tradition. This makes revisiting these initial critiques interesting for another reason: if we want to broaden the scope of phenomenology to account for the socially or politically conditioned nature of its guiding concepts—a project in some ways shared with the later Husserl—and if this broadening in some ways mirrors the critique of the phenomenological tradition leveled by Adorno, Horkheimer, and their colleagues, it seems that it would be helpful to directly address what these theorists saw as the fundamental incompatibility between critical theory and phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> Ferencz-Flatz’s contribution is a key resource in this project, since it seeks to “reconstruct some of the core motives of their original dispute” (2023, vii). The book accomplishes this reconstruction over ten chapters grouped around the critiques and appropriations of phenomenology found in three early critical theorists: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer.

## I. ADORNO: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SOCIAL TOTALITY

The first three chapters form something of the book’s thematic core, developing a detailed reading of Adorno’s engagement with Husserl’s phenomenology and his elaboration of the concept of “social physiognomy” in response to the issues he finds in Husserl. To begin with, Ferencz-Flatz (2023) highlights the role of “pre-theoretical experience” in phenomenology and critical theory. While both fields emphasize the relativity of scientific knowledge to the world of everyday experience or the “lifeworld,” and place philosophical priority on developing knowledge through a continuing engagement with this level of experience rather than the artificially disambiguated world of scientific objectivity, their varying interpretations of science and its function in society lead them in different directions. While Adorno’s and Habermas’s contributions to the 1961 “positivism dispute” in German sociology largely agreed with phenomenology in the criticism of positivist research in the social sciences—with Habermas’s contributions to the debate explicitly invoking Husserl’s lifeworld and Alfred Schutz’s phenomenological sociology—the critical theorists were more interested in “defining the experiential basis of the social sciences,” which entailed “a much more pragmatic relationship with empirical scientific procedures” (6). Adorno’s affiliation with the Princeton Radio Project is specifically referenced in this connection (4) and his collaborative work on *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in 1950, also comes to

<sup>2</sup> For example, in *Critical Phenomenology: An Introduction*, Elisa Magrì and Paddy McQueen’s (2023) draw a connection between Lisa Guenther’s (2020) contribution to the *50 Concepts* volume and Adorno’s criticism of Husserl’s phenomenology in his early lecture, “The Actuality of Philosophy” (Magrì and McQueen 2023, 20).

mind (Adorno et al. 2019). To counter the methodological problems faced by empirically oriented social sciences, Adorno's position is to

assume a more complex stance in relation to empirical sociology, by both advocating the need to supplement quantitative data with qualitative case studies and by emphatically preferring quantitative procedures that best account for the concrete richness of the material. (Ferencz-Flatz 2023, 7)

Adorno's distinctive view of social science research stems from the way he understands everyday experience to depend on the social structure. This marks one of his major departures from some of the early figures in the phenomenological tradition. While for Husserl, Schutz and Heidegger, according to Ferencz-Flatz, an investigation into the lifeworld's *a priori* conditions uncovers eidetic, formal, or ideal-typical structures (4), Adorno and his colleagues see these structures as the effects of a social totality. According to Adorno, Husserl is right to criticize empiricism in the *Logical Investigations*, since there is no such thing as pure experience unmediated by the forms of generality given to it by the subject. At the same time, his position differs from Husserl's early work in that he locates this form of abstraction at the level of experience's social formation. What Husserl and his followers see as a set of *a priori* structures follow from the fact that society as a whole is modeled on the exchange principle, which requires a generalizing relationship to experience in order to function.

In response to this point, phenomenologists have often asserted that Adorno's criticisms of Husserl do not take account of the latter's "genetic turn," after which the sense investigated by phenomenological analysis was understood as historically-sedimented.<sup>3</sup> While admitting that Adorno's familiarity with Husserl's genetic phenomenology came mostly from his readings of the *Formal and Transcendental Logic* and parts of the *Cartesian Meditations*, Ferencz-Flatz argues that this characterization misses the core of Adorno's critique, which applies to genetic phenomenology as well (42). This critique concerns the way in which genetic phenomenology still ties sense-formation to the acts of the individual subject, rather than seeing this historical formation process—and indeed the subject itself—as the effect of a social whole. As Adorno writes in *Against Epistemology*: "Husserl just had to go through the open gate in order to find that the 'inner historicity' which he conceded was not just inner" (2013, 216; quoted in Ferencz-Flatz 2023, 31). Genetic phenomenology's recognition that our cognitions are historically conditioned, then, misses the opportunity to consider the social and political determinants of historical experience. As Ferencz-Flatz puts it:

Husserl stops short of discovering that, if [phenomenology's] objects are ultimately cultural and social products, they should be questioned not just with regard to their origin within individual consciousness, but moreover their social and historical origin proper—and this is precisely where Adorno's physiognomics and phenomenology part ways. (31)

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Thomas Bedorf 2017.

The difference between Husserl's and Adorno's "phenomenological" analyses, to put it simply, lies in the fact that for the latter, the categorical structures uncovered in the individual moment of social experience are those of an antagonistic social order. Adorno's critique of the positivist epistemology underlying the social sciences of his contemporaries therefore cannot dispense with sociological analysis but must paradoxically place it at the center of its concern. The structure of experience comes from the fact that it is socially conditioned.

The most provocative suggestion in these chapters is that Adorno reappropriates the core insights of phenomenology—especially the idea that the classical concepts of epistemology could be given in experience—and fashions his own genetic phenomenology. Ferencz-Flatz brings together Adorno's scattered references to "social physiognomy," a way of seeing the social totality reflected in its individual moments, and convincingly argues that this method is deeply influenced by Adorno's engagement with Husserl. As Ferencz-Flatz sees it, this critical appropriation of phenomenological analysis is a key resource for today's phenomenology, because it suggests that we should not view phenomenological methodology as "a general theory of the most universal and primitive laws determining immanent genesis," but rather as "an interpretative tool for unearthing concealed sedimentations in concrete historical phenomena" (51).

## II. BENJAMIN AND KRACAUER: INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND THE EVERYDAY

In the four chapters dedicated to Walter Benjamin, Ferencz-Flatz pursues a similar strategy that complicates the way we see Benjamin's engagements with phenomenology. He notes at the outset that scholarly opinion regarding Benjamin's relationship to phenomenology vacillates between underestimating this connection and overestimating it (2023, 66–67). Ferencz-Flatz suggests that we can better understand phenomenology's influence on Benjamin through attention to his biography and correspondences. While these resources make it clear that he adopted certain aspects of the phenomenological method in his work, these appropriations and critiques do not seem to follow from a detailed or systematic study of phenomenology as such, much less from the works of Husserl. Benjamin's engagement with phenomenology is "superficial and vague," but it freely mixes the concepts and approaches of this method in such a way that it can be a source of inspiration for phenomenology today (81). Owing to the scattered adoption of phenomenological insights in Benjamin's thought, Ferencz-Flatz's chapters on this topic cover a wide range of themes, including the intersections between architecture and film in the essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," *The Arcades Project's* association of Heidegger with the surrealists' views of temporality, and Benjamin's theory of mass perception. The aspect of this account I want to outline in a bit more detail, however, concerns Benjamin's criticism of phenomenological eidetics.

One of Benjamin's main departures from the phenomenologists he studied concerns the status of ideas. As he writes in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel's* epistemo-critical

foreword: “The being of ideas simply cannot be conceived as the object of an intuition—not even an intellectual intuition” (2019, 12; quoted in Ferencz-Flatz 2023, 72). Ferencz-Flatz notes that this can be understood as critical both of Husserl’s concept of eidetic intuition [*Wessenschau*], and the intellectual intuition of the Romantics. He notes that it implies a reversal or inversion of Husserl’s methodology, since Benjamin’s conception of philosophy as the expression of ideas is not seen as the intuitive grasping of essences, but rather as the creative and experimental arrangement of the conceptual elements of phenomena, so that they express the idea or essence in a fragmented form (73). The idea, in other words, is not given directly to experience, but nevertheless animates the philosophical presentation. Philosophical methodology’s role is thus not to secure the apprehension of ideas, but to arrange the conceptual contents of experience like stars in a constellation, the whole of which gives an impermanent, transient expression to the eternal idea. This reversal is also present in Benjamin’s conception of truth as the “death of intention,” since this formulation indicates that philosophical methodology is less about developing or interpreting our intentional bearing towards the object than it is about cultivating an approach to conceptual representation that allows the object or idea itself to speak.

Ferencz-Flatz’s discussion of Siegfried Kracauer’s work is another of the book’s high points, especially in the chapter, “Kracauer: The Birth of Dialectics from Phenomenological Sociology,” which initially appeared as the preface to Ferencz-Flatz’s (2016) Romanian translation of Kracauer’s *Mass Ornament*. The reflections are especially important in the Anglophone context, where Kracauer is typically known as an early film theorist and journalist. While these important aspects of his work are taken up by Ferencz-Flatz in due course, his analysis makes it clear that from his early sociological work under the influence of his teacher, Georg Simmel, until his later studies of cinema, Kracauer was consistently engaged with phenomenology. Ferencz-Flatz’s nuanced reading of the ambivalent role played by phenomenology in Kracauer’s first book, *Sociology as Science* [*Soziologie als Wissenschaft*], is of great interest to philosophers concerned with phenomenology’s relationship to sociological study (2023, 135; fn. 6). As Ferencz-Flatz points out, while this work and Kracauer’s 1928 novel, *Ginster*, adopt a critical view towards phenomenological eidetics, they do not advocate eliminating it entirely. Instead, Kracauer aims at a “material ontology” throughout his career, which Ferencz-Flatz understands as an attempt to balance the empirical and transcendental moments in social cognition. The significance of this project lies in the way it takes its start from the “unsystematic” nature of intuition, but nevertheless strives to discover within the material of experience the transcendental structures of meaning underlying it (139). According to Ferencz-Flatz, Kracauer tries “to put into play an approach which follows Simmel in being still too phenomenological in the perspective of empirical research and already too empirical in the perspective of phenomenology” (143). While striving to stay close to everyday experience, this approach sees these phenomena—much like Adorno does—as a “reactive construct” developed in response to the social world, rather than resources from which we can draw stable theoretical conclusions (147–48).

### III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This short book covers much ground, which I have summarized only selectively. Despite the nuance and thoroughness of Ferencz-Flatz's account, which deepens and makes more complex our understanding of the connections between critical theory and phenomenology, a few general critical remarks are warranted.

One of the primary issues I found in this book could also be seen as a positive, namely, its status as a collection of essays rather than a monographic study. On the positive side, the looser organization allows Ferencz-Flatz to shift to contemporary issues with ease, a benefit most clearly on display in the three chapters concretely applying Adorno, Benjamin, and Kracauer's reflections to contemporary discussions in the field of media studies. At the same time, a more unified study with an overarching argument would have allowed Ferencz-Flatz to draw clearer connections between the Frankfurt School thinkers he studied; the similar but slightly diverging accounts of eidetics found in each of these thinkers is a good example of an aspect of the book that would have been strengthened by such an approach. A more cohesive organization would also have made it necessary to address thinkers only briefly covered in these chapters, including Horkheimer and, more importantly, Herbert Marcuse, whose early attempts to combine Heideggerian ontology with Marxism, and his later break with fundamental ontology, have a clear relationship to the subject-matter of the book.

This brings me to a second critical observation, which is that this project seems to underemphasize the relationship between the Frankfurt School thinkers' engagements with phenomenology and their own dialectical and Marxist approaches to social theory. This is clear, for example, in Adorno's critique of Husserl, in which the "second nature" [*zweite Natur*] that forms the substrate of eidetic intuition is the second nature of capitalist society as a contradictory totality (26). The essences investigated by phenomenology are thus understood by Adorno as "congealed labor" (2013, 194). It seems that Ferencz-Flatz misses an opportunity to highlight the fact that Adorno's critique of phenomenology is also a critique of ideology as a set of illusions necessary for maintaining the contemporary organization of society. Taking this opportunity would allow Ferencz-Flatz emphasize an important social and political component of the difference between Adorno's "genetic phenomenology" (social physiognomy) and classical phenomenological analysis. It is not merely that Adorno introduces social determination into eidetic analysis as we saw above, but furthermore that the specific forms of conceptuality found in experience are only there by virtue of the expanding and deepening control of capitalist social relations over every aspect of life. We could draw similar connections to the accounts of social cognition found in Benjamin and Kracauer, since they were equally influenced by the Marxism of their day, albeit in slightly different ways.

Moreover, it is precisely in this regard that the Frankfurt School thinkers have some of the most salient insights for contemporary phenomenology; these are in evidence, for example, in Adorno's (2003) claim in "Reflections on Class Theory" that contemporary society is a class society that cannot appear as such from within: a "phenomenological" remark with clear social and political consequences. For, if the distinctive feature of

contemporary capitalist society is that it obscures the experience of its members so as to block the formation of class-consciousness, and if this compulsory way of perceiving society is nevertheless false from the perspective of the whole, it seems that a critical phenomenology of social life would at least partially have to involve understanding this false perspective as ideology, or as socially necessary illusion. From Adorno's perspective, a "critical phenomenology" would thus have to recognize the possibility that capitalism's power lives on even in theoretical accounts that appear to criticize this society without taking the persistent nature of its class organization into account. Influential forms of social critique that elide or obscure our society's character as one organized around class could serve to further the illusion, instead of puncturing or dissolving it.

The Frankfurt School theorists' varied recognitions of the primacy of the social object or the social totality gesture to the impossibility of attaining a critical view of experience for philosophical knowledge without incorporating insights from the dialectical critique of political economy. It is interesting, in this connection, that in one of the early programmatic statements of critical phenomenology, Gayle Salamon begins by citing Donn Welton's distinction between classical phenomenology on the one hand, and "more critical and dialectical" phenomenology, on the other (Salamon 2018, 8). If there is something to learn from the "polemics, appropriations and perspectives" found among the early Frankfurt School's engagement with phenomenology, it is perhaps that the relationship between critique and dialectics is a pressing theme for any philosophical study of experience that aspires to be critical. Because it gives us such a detailed reading of the Frankfurt School theorists' engagements with the phenomenological tradition, Ferencz-Flatz's book is a significant contribution to these efforts.

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