The Real ‘Great Satan’

Micah Mattix reviews *Free Beacon*:

> Last year, the University of Michigan funded a one-semester kicked off with a sort of big tent revival where 400 students and staff “signed a pledge to avoid using harmful language and to strive for inclusive dialogue.”
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> Posters telling students that words like “retarded” and “crazy” were inappropriate were put up around campus. Members of the university were also encouraged *The Devil’s Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West*, Walsh argues that the current obsession with politically correct speech began with a group of Marxist academics at the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt, who would come to be known as the Frankfurt School. The scholars, Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, developed a wide-ranging, if often contradictory, critique of the principal tenets of “bourgeois” Western culture—from the centrality of reason and individuality to Christian sexual mores.
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> With his typical double-speak, for example, Marcuse argued in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* that true tolerance requires intolerance. While “no government can be expected to foster its own subversion,” Marcuse writes, “a subversive majority” could topple a democracy with “apparently undemocratic means”:
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> > *They would include the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion…Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left.*

Sounds familiar.

Theodor Adorno celebrated Arnold Schoenburg's twelve-tone technique of composition, not for its musicality, but for its supposedly egalitarian qualities and critique of mythology. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin in effect reduced the value of art to its political utility. Wilhelm Reich, the inventor of a phone-booth-sized box called an "orgon" that supposedly helped his patients improve their orgasms, set his sights on monogamy. (Walsh notes that the Food and Drug Administration called Reich "a fraud of the first magnitude.")

Before and during the war, many of these men moved to the United States, winning over academics in the social sciences and the humanities. Adorno ended up in California. Erich Fromm went to Columbia University. Marcuse took a job at the U.S. Office of War Information before taking a position at Columbia, then posts at Harvard and Brandeis.

How did their ideas become so popular? Walsh does not retell the story of their rise and the various battles fought along the way, though he does suggest that it can probably be chalked up to some combination of a false sense of intellectual inferiority among American intellectuals and boredom. Critical Theory, Walsh writes, "appears to require thought, but in fact all it requires is faith—faith in the ritual and the dogma and in the trappings of thought, but always in the service of novelty for its own sake, masquerading as 'dissent' or 'revolution.'"

Walsh's main concern throughout the book is to contrast the Frankfurt School's destructive "anti-narrative" nihilism with what he calls the Ur-Narrative of Western culture (creation, fall, quest, salvation), which is expressed in great literary and musical works such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. According to

Walsh, Critical Theory was (and is) a primarily destructive force. Like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, it undermines reason, duty, courage and love, leaving only chaos and death in its place. This explains the far left's seemingly inexplicable tolerance for militant Islam, unflappable support of infanticide in the name of "choice," and the sexual objectification of women under the banner of "rights."

This is as much an aesthetic argument about the superiority of the West's Ur-Narrative as it is a philosophical or political one. Walsh's point is that the beauty of the West's founding narrative proves that it is right, even though it is under attack and seems to be losing out to Critical Theory's ugly alternative. "What if," Walsh asks rhetorically, "art is not so much imitation or reflection as it is revelation and pathway? What if it reveals deeper truths and the essence of humanity than narrow science ever could; and that the twentieth century's belief in the primacy of materialism…has misaligned the natural order and imbued us with a false consciousness of reality…?" What if, indeed.

Walsh can sometimes be long on rhetoric and short on analysis. This is unfortunate since untangling the many theoretical and practical errors of Critical Theory would have made his aesthetic argument even stronger. Still, *The Devil's Pleasure Palace* is a timely reminder of the power of great works of art and of the importance of good storytelling for the flourishing of society.