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How a Right-Wing Obsession With Art Theory Became a Racist 'Star Wars' Boycott

Ben Davis, Tuesday, October 27, 2015

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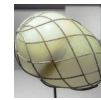
Detail of the poster for *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens*.
Image: Courtesy LucasArts.

Last week, the new trailer for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* dropped with calculated fanfare from the Walt Disney Company. You may have heard that the franchise's colossal ability to obsess the public was momentarily diverted from where it rightfully should have been focused—on how silly those three-pronged lights sabers are—by a small group of right-wing kooks on Twitter fomenting the demand to #BoycottStarWarsVII.

Star Wars: The Force Awakens Trailer (Official)



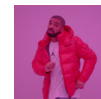
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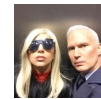
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The semi-coherent charge was that the film was a plot to promote a "white genocide," because director J.J. Abrams, who is Jewish, had cast the young British actor John Boyega, who is black, as the lead. The cry that *Star Wars* promotes #WhiteGenocide is so risible that it got a tidal wave of media pickup.

By now, plenty of [excellent assessments](#) have shown how the #BoycottStarWarsVII phenomenon was driven more by credulous reaction pieces and Twitter mockery than by actual support for the hashtag itself. The moral seems to be, once more, "Don't feed the trolls."

And yet: While it is important to put the whole thing in perspective, dismissing it as the product of few marginal wingnuts isn't quite right either. The people behind #BoycottStarWarsVII may be trolls, but they are trolls inspired by an organized worldview—and that worldview is more than just marginal.

It is at this juncture that the #BoycottStarWarsVII kerfuffle becomes an art story, or at least a story about art theory.

The most [oft-quoted](#) of all the Twitter warriors goes by the handle @genophilia, with the tagline "End Cultural Marxism;" he has been furiously promoting a variety of links holding forth on the question, "What Is Cultural Marxism?" That points to the deeper worldview that explains the otherwise curiously apocalyptic over-investment in the signifiers of multiculturalism (not just in this particular dust-up, but elsewhere, [as in some of the more surreal moments of #GamerGate](#)).



Meme of actor John Boyega in *Star Wars*, with #BoycottStarWarsVII Tweets. Image: via knowyourmeme.com.

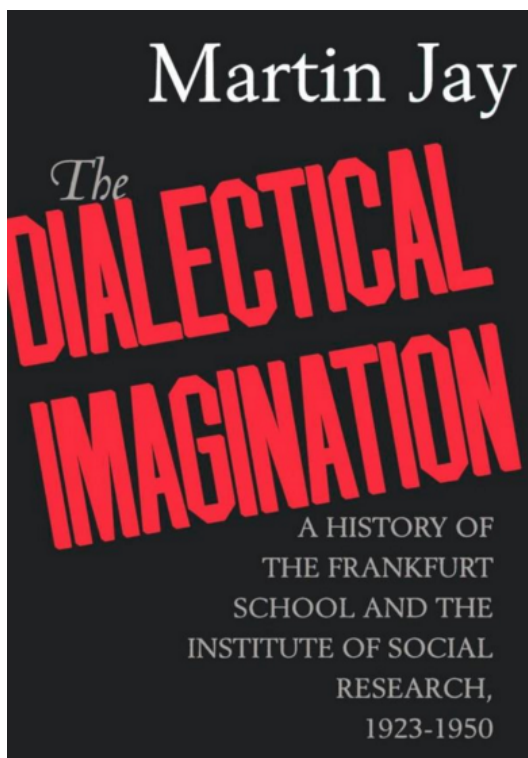
Anyone who is acquainted with recent art writing will be familiar with the Frankfurt School, the group of Marxist philosophers known for virulent critiques of mass culture. If nothing else, readers will be familiar with the ritualistic invocation of its [most sanctified figure](#), the brilliant and eccentric Walter Benjamin, author of the endlessly recycled essay "[The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction](#)."

What you may not be aware of is that, in the feverish underworld of right-wing kookiness, the words "Frankfurt School" have taken on a symbolism similar to "Freemasonry," the "Illuminati," or the "[Reptilian Elite](#)." In this world, philosopher Theodor Adorno is cast as the nefarious Emperor Palpatine of a Vast Left-Wing Conspiracy to Destroy America, while

Herbert Marcuse is cast as Darth Vader. (Benjamin, I suppose, would be somewhere in the background as Boba Fett.)

Granted, the adherents of this theory aren't always so clear on the specifics. "This march [of 'Cultural Marxism'] began in the United States in the 1930's as Marxists Antonio Gramsci and George Lukacs established the Frankfurt School at Columbia University in New York City," one recent blistering exposé of Cultural Marxism reveals—a short statement that contains by my count no less than six factual errors.

The tale of the rise of "Cultural Marxism" is, in fact, itself an illustration of the perils of the memeification of politics.



Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination*.

In 1973, the cultural historian Martin Jay put out his landmark book *The Dialectical Imagination*, the first real history of the Frankfurt School, in English. A decade and a half later, the narrative was repackaged by the Free Congress Foundation (FCF), a think tank founded by religious conservative activist Paul Weyrich after he left the Heritage Foundation, which he had also had a hand in.

The FCF tricked Jay into appearing in a video called *Political Correctness: The Dirty Little Secret*. The scholar's testimony regarding the Frankfurt School's influence on contemporary thought was cast as damning evidence that the sophomoric excesses of campus "political correctness" campaigns were actually part of a stealth Marxist plot to destroy the American way of life. Aside from Jay, the video featured a cast of future stars of the far-right punditocracy, including David Horowitz.

The theory grew in influence. In 1999, another group, the hard-right Conservative Citizens' Foundation, would release its own spin on the theme, *Political Correctness: The Frankfurt School Story*, cutting-and-pasting Jay's testimony from the earlier video and turning up the framing paranoia.

"Critical Theory"—the heterodox synthesis of Freudianism, Marxism, and avant-gardism that this polyglot group of thinkers proffered—had by the turn of the millennium morphed in the paleo-conservative imagination into a kind of philosophical Death Star looming over American life. Here is the narrator of that video:

Since Karl Marx proclaimed that criticism was a weapon of destruction, the Frankfort [sic] School's Critical Theory has become the doomsday machine of the Marx's [sic] war against Christian Civilization. Critical Theory is essentially a tool of hate, which has stirred discontent and violence among groups that consider themselves victims of a hateful system. In truth, such terms as Racism, Sexism, and Chauvinism are powerful weapons in the Marxist Psychological Warfare against Traditional American Values. Political Correctness, the product of Critical Theory, is really treason against the U.S. Constitution and against America.

The narrative, which sort of resembles the reality of the Frankfurt School's relation to the '60s New Left if you look at it in a mirror and squint hard, has Adorno and his (suspiciously Jewish) cabal of intellectuals fleeing Germany to the United States. There, observing the failure of Soviet-style Communism, they cleverly swapped a focus on economics for a focus on culture, and a focus on the working class for a focus on various oppressed groups: women, minorities, gays.



Screenshot of narrator Bill Rolan introducing the Conservative Citizens' Foundation's *Political Correctness: The Frankfurt School Story*.
Image: Courtesy of YouTube.

"By exploiting the legal system and the Federal Courts," *Political Correctness* narrator Bill Rolan concludes, "Frankfurt School operatives have successfully oppressed the White Middle Class and substituted genuine liberties with enforced equality."

Through this lens, the entire media has been infiltrated by "Cultural Marxists," who use pop culture as a mind control tool—a notion that conveniently ignores the fact that the authors of the "[The Culture Industry](#)" would likely have viewed the derring-do of *Star Wars VII* with the same strident patrician alarm that they viewed, say, the comedies of

Mickey Rooney.

At this juncture it may be worth saying, as a side note, that there actually is a *left-wing* critique of political correctness, that its overbearing obsession with semantics deflects substantive political discussion, makes politics inhospitable for the uninitiated, and is easily coopted into meaningless symbolic gestures (see Jeff Chang's great recent [Who We Be](#) for a sensitive take on multiculturalism's absorption by corporate America).

There is also a long-standing left critique of the constellation of figures grouped together as "Cultural Marxists"—whom I also think of as the "Art School Marxists," given the indubitably outsized influence of Adorno, Benjamin, et al., on art theory—for the very reason that their writings almost totally eclipsed questions of political organization and economic critique with questions of philosophical and cultural analysis (see Perry Anderson's [Considerations on Western Marxism](#) for an argument on these lines).

Yet precisely the distance between the reality of what the Frankfurt School stands for and the fever-dream cartoon of them presented by the "Cultural Marxist" conspiracy indicates that, more than anything, the invocation of the Frankfurt School serves mainly to put a nefariously foreign face on anxieties about cultural breakdown.

By 2003, a [Southern Poverty Law Center report](#) noted that the notion of a "Cultural Marxist" takeover was catching fire. At that time, the SPLC still put a question mark next to it, though, wondering if such an outlandish idea could catch on.



Andrew Breitbart "Cultural Marxism" meme.

It did. The obsession with "Cultural Marxism" found its way into the public statements of political commentator Pat Buchanan, and became a cornerstone of the Tea Party [rantings of Andrew Breitbart](#), justifying his particularly strident and confrontational version of the culture war.

By 2010, Martin Jay himself was moved to write an essay, "[Dialectic of Counter Enlightenment: The Frankfurt School as Scapegoat for the Lunatic Fringe](#)." He professed himself to be horrified at his bit part in "the transformation of 'the Frankfurt school' into a kind of vulgar meme, a charged unit of cultural meaning that reduces all the complexities of its intellectual history into a sound-bite sized package available to be plugged into a paranoid narrative."

Today, whatever the hilarity of mocking #BoycottStarWarsVII, make no mistake, those "paranoid narratives" are no joke.

Just one year after Jay published his anguished mea culpa, Anders Behring Breivik set off a car bomb in a complex of government buildings in the center of Oslo, killing eight. This terrorist act was just prelude and distraction, giving him the time to make his way to a youth camp for the ruling Norwegian Labor Party. Disguised as a police officer, Breivik summoned the campers together. Then he began to fire, killing 69 others before the real police arrived.

Breivik's 1,500-page manifesto showed himself to be a keen student of the debates about "Cultural Marxism." Amid meandering pages dedicated to the threat of a white "genocide" and endless meditations on the malign influence of American hip-hop, Lady Gaga, graffiti culture, and multiculturalism, the Norwegian madman included a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of *The Dialectical Imagination*, culminating with a moral cut-and-pasted from the "Cultural Marxist" conspiracy handbook.

He hoped to demonstrate, he said, "in Critical Theory the origins of the endless wailing about 'racism, sexism and homophobia' that 'PC' pours forth." (Breivik was, in fact, citing directly a Free Congress Foundation publication on the evils of political correctness.)



Poster art for *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens*.
Image: Courtesy LucasArts.

#BoycottStarWarsVII has come and gone—one of those outrages that flickers across the collective mind and vanishes. The underworld from which it issues, however, endures.

The notion of all-destroying "Cultural Marxism" remains out there, a readymade trope for the aggrieved and bigoted, offering, as conspiracy theories tend to do, a mythological face that condenses all their disconnected anxieties and hatreds into one target.

By all means, let's not make the mistake of feeding the trolls any more than we have to. But on the other hand, let's not make the mistake of underestimating the power of the Dark Side.

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