



BOOK REVIEW

Heufelder, Argentinischer Krösus

Christian Fleck

christian.fleck@uni-graz.at

Heufelder, Jeanette Erazo. 2017. *Der argentinische Krösus. Kleine Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule* (The Argentine Croesus: Short Economic History of the Frankfurt School). Berlin: Berenberg Verlag.

205 pp.

ISBN 978-3-946334-16-3,

Price: € 24,00

The so-called Frankfurt School is one of the most studied groups of intellectuals-cum-scholars of the 20th century. After Martin Jay's Ph.D. thesis (1973) and Rolf Wiggershaus' voluminous monograph (1986/1994), one would have thought that there was nothing left to be uncovered. But the publications on the School did not come to a stop, and some latecomers did have to say something new about the particular aspects of the group under the leadership of Max Horkheimer (Dahms 1994; Faber & Ziege 2007; Faber & Ziege 2008; Steinert 2007; Boll & Gross 2009; Ziege 2009; Wheatland 2009; Lichtblau & Herrschaft 2010). In all studies on the history of the "Institute," one name regularly showed up without being portrayed in depth: Felix Weil. The German ethnologist, documentary filmmaker, and author Jeanette Erazo Heufelder, unknown in the history of the social sciences until now, offers a fascinating look behind the walls of the Institute and into the behavior of its members in this concise biographical study on Weil.

Felix Weil was born in 1898, eight years after his father Hermann arrived in Buenos Aires as an employee of a Dutch merchant starting the trade of grain from South America to Europe. Shortly before Felix was born, his father quit his job and founded together with two of his brothers a new firm "Gebrüder Weill und Partner" (Weill Brothers & Co.), which was listed as "Hermanos Weil y Cía" in Argentinian documents. Within a very short period of time Weil's father became a kind of tycoon in the international trade of grain. At this time, before World War One, Argentina was on the rise in economic terms, as one of the richest countries in the world, and Buenos Aires was a real metropolis not only of the Southern Half of the Globe, but also worldwide. When Felix turned ten his father stopped working, sold his company, and returned to his native Germany, where he lived the life of a coupon cutter. Felix attended a *gymnasium* there and graduated on the eve of the Great War; as an Argentinian citizen he was not drafted into the Emperor's *Reichswehr*, but he volunteered as a helping hand organizing subsidies for the trenches. Hermann's expertise in foreign affairs brought

him even a dinner with the Emperor and his generals. Hermann's name was afterwards (mis-)used as the author of pamphlets calling for victory-peace as the aim of the German Reich.

Meanwhile, Felix started to study at the newly erected university in Frankfurt economics and joined one of the liberal Germanic fraternities, a so-called *Burschenschaft*; later he transferred to Tübingen, one of the characteristic small cities hosting a university. There Felix encountered for the first time a lecture on Marxism by the renowned economist Robert Wilbrandt. Felix was taken by the revolutionary mood of the campaign to nationalize the German industry in which Wilbrandt participated with other professors, like Emil Lederer and Joseph A. Schumpeter, as one of the experts under the presidency of Karl Kautsky, who was then still the leading theoretician of the German Social Democrats. Wilbrandt's right hand there was Karl Korsch, who became one of the exponents of what later was called Western Marxism. Felix entered politics and was banned from Württemberg shortly afterward. He nevertheless managed to finish his studies and graduated from the University of Frankfurt. (Without further detail, on p. 32 Heufelder mentions Alfred Weber, the younger brother of Max, as Weil's supervisor there, which sounds wrong because Alfred Weber taught in Heidelberg since 1907).

Surprisingly enough, Felix just married, returned to Buenos Aires in 1920 to show his wife the land of his early youth, and did some business there to keep a promise he made to his father. Besides these activities, Weil wrote an article about the "Labour Movement in Argentina," which was published in 1923 and reprinted two years later in the famous journal *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*.

Before that, Felix entered another "business" when he became the delegate and informal collaborator for the Communist International responsible for South America. Felix reported to Sinovjev under the nom-de-guerre Lucio about Latin American parties willing to enter the Comintern.

After a year Felix returned to Germany, telling his father that he was not fit to do business, but remained friendly with him and persuaded the old man to give money philanthropically not only for medicine but also for the establishment of an institute dedicated to Marxist scholarship. Shortly before he died, Hermann Weil became a Doctor h.c. of the institute. Felix was looking for qualified people to run the institute but kept himself a low profile. To find people for the second rank was much easier than identifying and persuading a German professor to run such an institute. The first candidate, Kurt Albert Gerlach, died unexpectedly before the contract between the donor, the university, and the Prussian Ministry for Education had been agreed upon. In these negotiations Weil was forced to use Äsopian language, hiding some of his intentions. It is well-known that this Äsopian approach later became the *façon de parler* of the Institute, such as talking about Critical Theory when Marxism was meant, etc.

In the early days the Institute functioned as a knot in a network connecting the German Social Democratic Party with the newly established Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. Its

first director, Carl Grünberg, was an economic historian and teacher of the first generation of the Austro-Marxists, and the founding editor of the before mentioned *Archiv*. The Soviets wanted to edit the works of the founders of Marxism but needed the consent of the Germans, who possessed the papers of Marx and were legally owners of his legacy. Grünberg and Rjasanov, the founding director in Moscow, were close collaborators, and Weil agreed to finance photographing the Marx Papers and handing over one copy to Rjasanov, while holding another one for Frankfurt. In addition to this scholarly collaboration, the Institute was populated with people who later became famous as spies, like Richard Sorge, or members of the illegal branch of the KPD, Germany's communist party.

From 1923 onwards Weil put a lot of his inheritance into left-wing cultural political endeavors, with the Institute as just one of the recipients. Others included the then famous Malik publishing house.

Weil's friendship with Max Horkheimer and Fredrik Pollock dated from before the founding of the Institute, but neither Horkheimer nor the others around him were willing to accept "Lix," as he was nicknamed, as a scholar despite his heavy efforts to become accepted as such one. One reason for this, which Heufelder does not consider, might have been the multi-tasking personality of Weil. He never concentrated on one activity alone but always juggled quite a number of balls. His dedication to support and develop Marxist social science never weakened, and as result he lived his last couple of years meagerly, compared with the luxury he enjoyed in his younger years. If one needs to name an individual as the embodiment of a Salon Bolshevik's social character – a verdict most probably developed vis-à-vis the members of the Institute around Horkheimer – Felix Weil would be a very good candidate, and ironically he used this label himself late in his life (p. 112).

Before Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, Weil left again for South America because his family's old company lacked leadership and lost its leading position on the international markets. Weil decided to stop the trade of grain across the Atlantic and to diversify his own and other family members' wealth. Ingeniously he established a net of companies and trust companies, and recruited trustworthy men to run all these businesses on a daily base. His genius in handling money was greater than he himself was willing to recognize. During the entire Nazi period, the Dutch branches of the Weil imperium were not uncovered by the Nazis, who were focused on taking money from their Jewish victims.

In Buenos Aires, Felix Weil continued his multifaceted life, remained in contact with the Comintern, financed the Argentinian Communist Party, and acted as a consultant for the new government's Minister of Finance, Federico Pinedo, together with later luminaries such as Raul Prebisch. In 1933 Weil published in Spanish a book on income taxation and instructed tax collectors. In addition to all these activities, he commissioned the erection of a new Art-Déco skyscraper and reserved the highest floor for himself. Troubles with relatives hindered Weil from using the new apartment because he moved to New York, fearing the Argentinian state attorney and intrigues of relatives from whom he had generously borrowed money. There he met Horkheimer and the other members of the Institute.

Meanwhile, the two friends Horkheimer and Pollock had secured complete control of the Institute, and they did not want to offer Weil a say in the running of it. The generous founder and still a major financier of the Institute was once again sidestepped. As a form of compensation, Horkheimer arranged for Weil to meet the daughter of a banker family from Horkheimer's native Stuttgart. Shortly afterwards she became Weil's third wife.

The initial will to establish the Institute as a network of foundations, companies, and associations that was transparent and accessible to outsiders turned into an arcane building that no one had a chance to influence individually. Besides the Kurt Gerlach Memorial Foundation (named for the first director who died before taking over its leadership), a Social Science Association, the Herman Weil Memorial Foundation, the Société Internationale des Recherches Sociales SIRES Realty Corporation (and some of its sub-firms that were active in suburban housing development), and a SOCRE Corporation contributed one way or another to the well-being of the Institute, in particular the dictatorial director Horkheimer, who owned an apartment in Manhattan and later a newly designed and built bungalow in California. Heufelder makes it completely clear that Horkheimer and Pollock pulled the lines; the socially awkward Felix Weil was the puppet out of whose pockets dollars fell into the hands of the puppet players. However, a new wife on Lix's side made it more difficult to continue channeling money from Weil's accounts into Horkheimer's purse.

In the 1940s Weil devoted his energy to writing a book he had promised 20 years earlier, which finally appeared under the title *Argentine Riddle* (1944) in New York. Two years later, when Juan Perón became president of Argentina, Weil opted for US citizenship and never returned to his home country.

The bad economic situation of the Institute forced Horkheimer to accept an ordinary white-collar job at the American Jewish Committee, in whose name he directed the Studies in Prejudice from 1943 until his last days in the USA in 1950. Horkheimer, Pollock and Adorno became reinstated as professors at the University of Frankfurt, but the initiator and financier of the Institut für Sozialforschung, Felix Weil, remained in California.

When Weil published a short piece in a newspaper there calling himself a member of the Institute, Professor Horkheimer lectured him immediately that he had only received this title honorably because of his loyalty and contributions, and that he should consult its director before publishing anything that appeared to be written in the name of the Institute.

In the late 1960s, Weil took over a new job as a US Major. Out of necessity, he started teaching American soldiers in Ramstein, West Germany, on taxation and municipal budgeting. In his last years before dying in September 1975, Weil was working on his memoirs where he wanted to correct the yet-to-be-established narrative of the Horkheimer Circle. The unfinished manuscript ended up with Weil's only son from his first marriage, who let several people use it since then.

Hochfelder did a fine job of illustrating the biography of a very unusual man, both in writing and in selecting the visuals. A portrait of Weil, painted by George Grosz in 1926, is on the cover of the book (late in life Weil was forced to sell it at an auction for 9000 dollars). One

can find three more pictures in the book: one showing a group of young radicals from the early 1920s and two from Buenos Aires in the 1930s.

One cannot blame someone with a different intellectual background for not placing Weil and his life more in the personal and intellectual environments in which he lived and acted. Hochfelder consulted Weil's unpublished manuscripts and some of the published secondary literature; given the fact that Weil's activities were dispersed over at least three different countries, one cannot expect more. The small book is nevertheless highly recommended for all persons interested in Marxism, communism, and the Frankfurtists, as Bert Brecht called his Californian neighbors in his diary.

References:

- Boll, Monika and Raphael Gross (Eds.) (2009). *Die Frankfurter Schule und Frankfurt. Eine Rückkehr nach Deutschland. Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung im Jüdischen Museum Frankfurt*. Göttingen: Wallstein.
- Dahms, Hans-Joachim. (1994). *Positivismusstreit. Die Auseinandersetzungen der Frankfurter Schule mit dem logischen Positivismus, dem amerikanischen Pragmatismus und dem kritischen Rationalismus*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Faber, Richard and Eva-Maria Ziege (Eds.) (2007). *Das Feld der Frankfurter Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften vor 1945*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Faber, Richard and Eva-Maria Ziege (Eds.) (2008). *Das Feld der Frankfurter Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften nach 1945*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Jay, Martin. (1973). *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research 1923-1950*. Boston, Toronto: Little & Brown.
- Lichtblau, Klaus and Felicia Herrschaft (Eds.) (2010). *Soziologie in Frankfurt. Eine Zwischenbilanz*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Steinert, Heinz. (2007). *Das Verhängnis der Gesellschaft und das Glück der Erkenntnis: Dialektik der Aufklärung als Forschungsprogramm*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.
- Wheatland, Thomas. (2009). *The Frankfurt School in Exile*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wiggershaus, Rolf. (1986). *Die Frankfurter Schule. Geschichte, theoretische Entwicklung, politische Bedeutung*. München: C. Hanser. English Translation: Wiggershaus, Rolf. 1994. *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ziege, Eva-Maria. (2009). *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaftstheorie. Die Frankfurter Schule im amerikanischen Exil*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.