

# CRITICAL THEORY AND A READER SOCIETY

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## Introduction

*Stephen Eric Bronner and  
Douglas MacKay Kellner*

*Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* provides a selection of particularly important essays by members of the Institute for Social Research. Founded in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany, it became the first formally unaffiliated Marxist-oriented institute in Europe. Under its most influential director, Max Horkheimer, its members attempted to revise both the Marxian critique of capitalism and the theory of revolution in order to confront those new social and political conditions which had evolved since Marx's death. In the process a "critical theory" of society emerged to deal with those aspects of social reality which Marx and his orthodox followers neglected or downplayed.

The term *critical theory* itself was only coined in 1937, after the majority of the Institute's members had already emigrated to the United States following the triumph of Hitler. The concept was initially a type of code which, while differentiating its adherents from prevailing forms of orthodoxy, also tended to veil their radical commitments in an environment that was hostile to anything remotely associated with Marxism. But the term stuck and soon was used to encompass and define the general theory of contemporary society associated with Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, T. W. Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, and Frederick Pollock—as well as with Jürgen Habermas and others who later undertook to continue the tradition.

We have assembled this reader in the belief that critical theory can promote important developments in social theory today. Growing dissatisfaction with the academic division of labor and the dominant views in the various disciplines have led to increased interest in both theoretical and political alternatives. Critical theory offers a multidisciplinary approach to society which combines perspectives drawn from political economy,

sociology, cultural theory, philosophy, anthropology, and history. It thus overcomes the fragmentation endemic to established academic disciplines in order to address issues of broader interest.

An antidote to the frequently noncritical quantitative approaches within contemporary social science, critical theory also provides a potentially more useful and politically relevant alternative than currently fashionable approaches like existentialism and phenomenology, poststructuralism and postmodernism, as well as the various versions of humanist idealism which are periodically recycled and repackaged. By contrast, critical theory maintains a nondogmatic perspective which is sustained by an interest in emancipation from all forms of oppression, as well as by a commitment to freedom, happiness, and a rational ordering of society. Eschewing divisions between the humanities and the social sciences, it thus sets forth a normative social theory that seeks a connection with empirical analyses of the contemporary world.

Fundamentally inspired by the dialectical tradition of Hegel and Marx, critical theory is intrinsically open to development and revision. Inherently self-critical, it offers a well-articulated standpoint for thematizing social reality—unlike the current postmodern theories which attack all forms of thought in an undifferentiated manner. Against all relativistic and nihilistic excesses, critical theory seeks an emancipatory alternative to the existing order.

The diversity of interests and insights among critical theorists made the choice of texts for this book particularly difficult. Our selection was guided by an attempt to emphasize the most characteristic theorists and themes within the tradition. We also sought to balance the historical importance of any given text with its contemporary relevance. Finally, without sacrificing intellectual quality, we tried to choose texts which were somewhat less esoteric than some for which the critical theorists are infamous.

This reader focuses, for the most part, on the "inner circle" of the first generation of critical theorists, which consisted of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Lowenthal, Pollock, and Erich Fromm. Yet we have also included texts by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, who were to varying degrees associated with critical theory, as well as selections from Jürgen Habermas, who is clearly the most significant member of the second generation. Unfortunately, space constraints forced us to omit texts by contemporary critical theorists such as Oskar Negt, Alfred Schmidt, Claus Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer. We also could not include works by such significant members of the Institute as Karl Wittfogel, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Borkenau, and Henryk Grossmann, as well as related theorists like Karl Korsch and Ernst Bloch, who were

occasionally supported by the Institute or—in Korsch's case—published by its journal.

This volume has been designed both to provide an introduction to critical theory and to inspire the advanced student. The selections have been organized into five sections which, we believe, highlight the most significant aspects of critical theory. Part I opens with some key texts which set forth the original program and research agenda of the Institute for Social Research. This section, like the others, contains important texts which have been translated into English for the first time and which should provide an informative introduction to the program and scope of the original enterprise. Part II is constructed around the theory of society which the Institute sought to develop, while Part III attempts to elaborate the cultural criticism and critique of mass culture for which its members have become justly famous. Part IV contains provocative contributions to their project for a new social psychology, while Part V advances certain "critical visions" which attempt to link critical theory with politics and provide perspectives for future inquiry within the framework of this tradition.

Each section is organized chronologically, and many of the essays comment on previous positions set forth within the Institute. Yet even when they address similar issues, it will become apparent that sharp differences existed between members of the Institute. In fact, critical theory is not a single doctrine or unified worldview. Instead, it is a set of basic insights and perspectives which undermine existing "truths" even as they foster the need for a theory of society that remains to be completed. In this spirit, while not systematically evaluating the positions set forth in each essay, our introduction will attempt to illuminate the socio-historical matrix wherein critical theory evolved and indicate the relevance of basic issues addressed with respect to the project as a whole.

Our first section contains essays concerning The Institute for Social Research and its original program. When the Institute was founded in 1923, the "heroic" period of the Russian Revolution as well as the proletarian revolts which followed World War I had come to an end. The Weimar Republic, established following the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II, was initially threatened by uprisings from the left and the right. By 1923, however, the period of revolutionary upsurge had waned and intense discussion had begun concerning the "failure of the revolution" and "the crisis of Marxism." Many members of the Institute maintained ties with the various parties of the Left and—under the leadership of the Austrian Marxist Carl Grünberg—developed a research program centering around the character of the labor movement, the capitalist economy, the new experiments with planning in the Soviet Union, as well as those "subjec-



tive" conditions which subverted a proletarian victory in Germany. During the period of Grünberg's tenure, a rather orthodox Marxism permeated the Institute and was carried over, to a greater or lesser degree, in many of the writings from the thirties. Nevertheless, a shift in direction took place when Max Horkheimer became director in 1930, following Grünberg's retirement due to a stroke.

The son of a German industrialist, a philosopher by training, Horkheimer was also interested in sociology as well as a wide range of other academic pursuits. It was under his leadership that the Institute developed the project for which it would become internationally renowned. A highly effective academic entrepreneur, he gathered around him many individuals who would eventually achieve fame in a variety of disciplines. Under Horkheimer's direction, the Institute undertook to develop a theory of society, and it is fitting that the first selection in our volume should be Horkheimer's previously untranslated inaugural lecture "The State of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research." Here, Horkheimer defines the tasks of the Institute and sets forth the multidisciplinary program which would characterize it. Presenting the Institute's position against more mainstream conceptions of social theory and science, Horkheimer calls for a multidisciplinary integration of philosophy with the sciences in the hope of providing a theoretical instrument for transforming politics, society, the economy, and everyday contemporary life.

One of the distinguishing features—and novelties—of the new approach was its attempt to develop a critical social psychology. For this task, the Institute appointed a Freudian psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, who would become one of the most widely read social theorists of the postwar era with works like *Escape from Freedom* and *The Sane Society*. Our second selection is accordingly the first English translation of a 1929 lecture by Fromm entitled "Psychoanalysis and Sociology," which clearly sketches the attempt to combine sociology and psychology in a new theoretical framework. Though he never did develop a theory of the manifold mediations which exist between the individual and society—in the manner of, say, Jean-Paul Sartre—Fromm, along with Siegfried Bernfeld and Wilhelm Reich, became one of the first to undertake a Marx-Freud synthesis in order to analyze the ways in which social conditions constituted the psyche and psychological factors affected social life.

The Institute's members published the results of their research in a journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which served as their public platform. In keeping with the Institute's general project, its key members usually read and discussed each others work so that the edited and published version often reflected the spirit of a collaborative enterprise. The first issue of the journal illustrated the Institute's approach to the various

disciplines. It contained articles by Fromm on psychology, by Henryk Grossmann and Pollock on economics, and by Adorno on music, as well as a host of others. From this issue, we decided to include Leo Lowenthal's essay "On Sociology of Literature" and Horkheimer's "Notes on Science and the Crisis." Both of these articles argue that application of the Marxian historical materialist approach to the relevant disciplines provides the best starting point for inquiry and research.

Lowenthal, who would become an important critic of literature and mass culture at the University of California at Berkeley, argues against dominant idealist and philological positions. Instead, he favors an approach which interprets texts and determines the meaning of cultural objects within their social and historical context. Refusing to study literature as a self-contained object, Lowenthal was unable to provide either an explanation for literary transcendence or normative aesthetic criteria in the manner of Lukàcs. Nevertheless, he became a pioneer in the development of the sociology of literature—as well as a member of Horkheimer's "inner circle" who played a key role in managing Institute affairs.

Horkheimer himself tended to publish the key programmatic statements of the Institute. "Notes on Science and the Crisis" is one of those pieces which addresses a particular historical situation and its impact on the Institute's research agenda. The "crisis" refers to the world economic depression of 1929, whose persistence was producing ever more massive unemployment as well as social and political instability. In his article, Horkheimer explains how science and technology are potentially emancipatory forces of production even as they are fettered by the irrationality of the capitalist economic system. The implicit presupposition is that a more rational form of social organization would use science and technology to dramatically improve human life. It was only in their later work that members of the Institute would assume a more critical stance on the role of science, technology, and the notion of progress with which both bourgeois society and "actually existing socialism" (Rudolf Bahro) identified.

Even initially, however, the Institute's theorists believed that only by calling the most basic assumptions into question would it become possible to provide an adequate critical theory of society. In a 1937 essay, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," Herbert Marcuse pointed to the importance of critical rationalism for the Institute's theoretical enterprise. Indeed, along with Horkheimer's classic "Traditional and critical theory," this essay contains one of the most comprehensive programmatic statements of the Institute's attempts to synthesize philosophy, the sciences, and a radical political perspective.

Where traditional social sciences based on positivist assumptions wish to exclude normative concerns from social scientific inquiry, and banish them to the realm of metaphysics or obscurantism, Marcuse highlights the

importance of concepts such as reason, freedom, and happiness for critical theory. Recognizing the need for empirical research, though ultimately unable to define its role within the new project, Marcuse emphasizes that speculative reason is the yardstick with which to measure the degree of social rationality or irrationality inherent in any given form of social or political organization.

Despite his inability to specify institutions by which an emancipated order might reproduce itself, Marcuse is aware that freedom is not license and that a rational ordering of society will universally expand the opportunities for the exercise of individual autonomy. Such notions are crucial to the tradition of philosophical idealism which Marcuse wants to link with a materialist heritage whose importance derives from its concrete emphasis on individual happiness and well-being. A materialist stance suggests that freedom, happiness, and reason are not spiritual features of the individual. Instead, they are concrete potentialities for satisfaction that demand realization. It is this commitment to the "good life" which critical theory places at the forefront, and then uses to call existing repressive conditions into question. Thus, according to the new standpoint, a materialist project of social reconstruction requires a foundation in critical rationalism which alone can forward the utopian projection of a free society.

This utopian commitment of critical theory points to the fervent desire of its proponents for an emancipatory alternative during a period when the Great Depression was spreading throughout the capitalist world and fascism was threatening to engulf Europe. In this vein, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of fascism for the development of critical theory. Since most of the Institute's members were Jews and Marxists, the Nazis quickly forced them into exile. In 1934, after numerous complications, its headquarters were finally moved from Frankfurt to Columbia University, in New York, which offered office space and institutional support. Upon coming to the United States the Institute's members began their inquiry into the roots of the fascism and the manner in which socializing institutions—especially the family—induced individuals to accept even the most irrational forms of social and political authority. It was also while in exile at Columbia University that the Institute's members developed their particular style of "ideology critique" which analyzes the social interests ideologies serve by exposing their historical roots and assumptions, no less than the distortions and mystifications which they perpetuate. Indeed, this was the time when the Institute began to programmatically form its conception of critical social theory.

Part II is entitled "Fragments of a Theory of Society" because, in reality, the Institute never produced that comprehensive theory of society which

its members sought. While they provided elements for a theory of the transition from market/entrepreneurial to new forms of state and monopoly capitalism, their positions on these developments were quite diverse and their various insights never coalesced into a coherent theory. Consequently, though these fragments provide some of critical theory's most important contributions, the failure to articulate a more fully developed social theory points to the limitations of the original program sketched out by Horkheimer.

The section opens with the first English translation of Horkheimer's essay "The Jews and Europe." Written in 1938, as Hitler was preparing for war, it prefigures many of the basic concerns which would later define critical theory even as it shows how a certain orthodox Marxism remained part of the original project. Consistent with the general thinking of the Institute's members, the essay views fascism as an outgrowth of capitalism moving from its liberal to its monopoly stage; thus, in an oft-quoted passage, Horkheimer writes: "Whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism."

Although the topic nominally involves European Jewry, Horkheimer basically interprets anti-Semitism in terms of its usefulness for monopoly capitalism. In considering it as a mere ideological facade for the elimination of an entire sphere of circulation, defined by small banks and the vestiges of a market, Horkheimer grossly underestimates the centrality of anti-Semitism to the Nazi project—a flawed interpretation that later Institute studies would rectify. The essay, however, also reflects Horkheimer's deep despair over a future in which he foresaw mass-mobilized groups submitting to new forms of totalitarian domination.

All of the Institute members were in agreement that fascism had emerged from a capitalism in crisis and that it evidenced a new form of the capitalist state. Still, there were sharp arguments within the Institute over whether the new fascist state was basically independent of the economy or merely a tool of monopoly capitalist interests. Franz Neumann, perhaps the most prominent scholar in the Institute, published the classic *Behemoth* (1941), which argued that fascism was a form of totalitarian state capitalism. Neumann had been a famous labor lawyer in Weimar Germany, as well as an important member of the German Social Democratic party. In his widely discussed book, he stressed the continuing primacy of the economy over the state in the fascist era. Against him, the Institute economist Frederick Pollock argued for "the primacy of the political" and claimed that the state was assuming power over the economy in the current era of fascism and welfare-state capitalism.

The interested reader might consult Neumann's *Behemoth* and contrast it with Pollock's article "State Capitalism," which is included in the present volume. Pollock's article is historically important insofar as it

presents an interpretation of fascism shared by Horkheimer and others within the Institute. In fact, it established a framework for the Institute's later analysis of the new relations between the state and the economy during the postwar era. Pollock claims that state capitalism—in both its “democratic” and “totalitarian” forms—produces a “command economy” exhibiting a “primacy of the political” whereby the state comes to manage the economy. Against Neumann, Pollock maintained that “the profit motive is superseded by the power motive.” Indeed, the Institute members would never agree whether economic or political imperatives were primary for the new fascist state.

Building on the Austrian Social Democrat Rudolf's Hilferding's *Finance Capital* (1910), Pollock's essay laid the foundation for later claims regarding the integration of the economy, the state, and the public sphere. It also maintained that capitalism had discovered new strategies to avoid economic crisis and provided the basis for the burgeoning belief that capitalism could henceforth stabilize itself and prevent the realization of socialism. Thus, it raised new doubts concerning the revolutionary role of the working class which was so central to the classical Marxian theory.

For Marx, the industrial proletariat was to serve as the agent of socialist revolution. Bearing the burden of industrial production, the working class was seen as the logical subject of revolution due to its crucial position in the production process and its potential for growth and organization in highly centralized and large-scale industries. The Marxian theory of revolution also predicted severe capitalist economic crisis which would lead the working class to revolt against conditions of poverty where it had “nothing to lose but its chains.” Even as capitalism was undergoing one of its most intense crises in the 1930s, however, the powerful parties and unions of the European working classes were defeated by the forces of fascism. Indeed, following that defeat, the prospects for socialist revolution looked ever bleaker to the Institute theorists.

As a consequence, they increasingly distanced themselves from the traditional Marxist position which claimed that socialist revolution was inevitable and that historical progress would necessarily lead from capitalism to socialism. Henceforth, the critical theorists' relation to Marxism would become more ambivalent and complex. Thus, where individuals like Horkheimer would eventually abandon Marxism altogether for a form of mystical irrationalism derived from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Marcuse and others would continue to develop their own particular versions of the Marxian theory.

After World War II, the Institute theorists began their widely discussed analyses of working class integration within contemporary capitalist societies. According to many of the critical theorists, new forms of technology, new modes of organizing production, new configurations of class; and

new methods of social control were producing a “one-dimensional” society without opposition. It also seemed that new forms of political, social, and especially cultural conformity were becoming institutionalized. This development of a “totally administered society” led Adorno and Horkheimer to proclaim “the end of the individual” and to stress the importance of preserving subjectivity in order to fulfill the goals of liberalism and socialism alike. The eradication of subjectivity, they believed, was a betrayal of the promise of modernity, which was itself predicated on the belief that the augmentation of science and technology would improve human control over nature and produce more freedom, individuality, and happiness. Instead, the critical theorists argued, the institutions and practices of “advanced industrial society” were apparently producing ever greater conformity and social domination. Thus in his highly esoteric *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno attempted to resurrect a repressed subjectivity against mass society and its philosophical expressions like existentialism and positivism.

Still, it was ultimately Marcuse who provided the most comprehensive formulation of this position in *One-Dimensional Man*. In his now-classic analysis, advanced industrial society integrates and absorbs all forces of opposition so that the “subjective” conditions for conflict between classes, as well as between the individual and society, vanish at the very time that the “objective” reality of exploitation and injustice intensifies. That argument would perhaps come to define the idea of the Institute more than any other, and so we include here an article by Marcuse, “From Ontology to Technology: Fundamental Tendencies of Industrial Society”—translated from French into English for the first time—which provides a sketch for *One-Dimensional Man*. In this essay, Marcuse analyzes the new forms of social control in “one-dimensional society” and the diminution of the “other dimension” of social critique, rebellion, and utopian thinking which present alternatives to the existing order.

Marcuse describes a universe in which technology and scientific rationality produce a new world of thought and behavior. Where thought had previously functioned to provide alternatives to the existing society, in the new technological universe, it exists merely to make the prevailing system more efficient and raise technical means over normative ends. Indeed, precisely because moral and critical ends lose their force, the dominant modes of thinking analyzed by Marcuse make individuals adapt to the existing order rather than foster their capacities for critical judgment.

One of the key Institute positions was that the “culture industries” were now playing an increasingly important role in managing consciousness and obscuring social conflict. First sketched in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during the early 1940s and published in 1947, this standpoint became an essential component of critical theory

and inaugurated a new discourse about the role of mass communication and culture in the constitution of contemporary societies. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industries were organs of mass deception which manipulated individuals into accepting the current organization of society. In their view, the culture industries were therefore engaging in sophisticated forms of ideological indoctrination, using "entertainment" to sugar-coat the ideological content of oppression while eroding cultural standards in order to quell any forms of expression which might contest the given order.

This critique of the culture industries appears in an article by Adorno, arguably the most brilliant and multitalented of all the Institute's members, entitled "The Culture Industry Reconsidered." He argues that "mass culture" is not a "popular culture" rising from the experiences and concerns of the people, but rather a form of administered culture imposed from above. The theorists of the Frankfurt School were among the first to provide a critical approach to mass culture, and this article summarizes many of their insights regarding the new socio-cultural forms by which neocapitalist societies legitimate and reproduce themselves.

In this vein, Jürgen Habermas, a student of Adorno and Horkheimer, carried through a ground-breaking historical and theoretical investigation of the transition from liberal democratic societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to modern capitalism. Where in an earlier stage of capitalist society, the individual developed his ideas in a free "public sphere" which protected him from the state, advanced industrial society has redefined that sphere in terms of an artificially induced public opinion which binds the individual to the existing order and undermines his critical capacities. The study was published in German as *Structural Change of the Public Sphere (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit)*, and we include here a translation of the German encyclopaedia article "The Public Sphere," which summarizes Habermas's position.

This essay provides both a historical sketch of the transition to our current media-dominated society and a normative model for a more democratic public sphere. It is also important because the concept of a "public sphere" would animate Habermas's later philosophical endeavors, including his attempt to elaborate a theory and practice of "undistorted" communication, as well as his attempt to reinvigorate democratic life by bringing normative social judgments to bear on putatively technical forms of decision-making by elites. Such free and unrestrained communication would foster public debate, as well as the democratization of everyday life and the promulgation of generalizable interests necessary to ascertain and institutionalize "the common good."

The distance between Habermas's work and that of the first generation of critical theorists points to the increasing heterogeneity of the Frankfurt

School and the significant differences within critical theory. While Adorno and Horkheimer became increasingly critical of the Enlightenment tradition and the project of modernity with which it was connected, Habermas eventually came to the defense of both the Enlightenment and modernity itself. The collaboration of Adorno and Horkheimer during the early 1940s, in fact, marked a distinctive shift in the development of critical theory. Surrendering attempts to develop a Marxian theory of society oriented toward radical social transformation, they became concerned with how modernity was rooted in forms of domination which went back to the Greeks. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* thus represents a shift away from interdisciplinary social theory to philosophy and cultural criticism, around which much of critical theory would center during the next two decades.

The growing fragmentation of critical theory, which would culminate in the break-up of the Institute, was in part a result of the historical situation. During World War II, Marcuse, Lowenthal, Neumann, and others went to Washington to work for the U.S. government in the struggle against fascism, while Adorno and Horkheimer moved to California, where they pursued their theoretical endeavors. After the war they returned, with Pollock, to Germany while the others remained in the United States. Henceforth, the differences between the one-time colleagues would multiply and a variety of positions would eventually emerge among those who had participated in the original Institute.

Critical theorists are perhaps most celebrated for their cultural criticism and critique of mass culture. The third section of our reader therefore provides some key examples of this crucial dimension within their theory. It opens with a fascinating article by Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament." Kracauer was a close friend of Adorno and intimate with other members of the Institute—though he was never formally affiliated. After a brief career as an architect, he became a well-known writer and cultural critic in Weimar Germany. In the United States, he would become famous for his outstanding works of film criticism, which include *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film*.

"The Mass Ornament" was written for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and later appeared as the title essay in an important collection of Kracauer's work. First published in 1927, it presents a model of cultural criticism which stands in direct relation to the cultural concerns of the Institute. The critical theorists shared Kracauer's conviction that typical artifacts of mass culture and other surface manifestations of a society can disclose its basic traits as well as the most important historical trends of an epoch. Through a close analysis of the "Tiller Girls"—a popular revue of dancing girls who were featured in movies, newsreels, and variety shows during the 1920s—



Kracauer uncovers some basic features of contemporary capitalist society. He argues that the geometric patterns and highly orchestrated movements reflect the massification of audiences before spectacles of the "distraction factories"—Kracauer's term for the culture industries.

Kracauer's study seeks to provide a physiognomy of the emerging mass society following World War I. At the same time, it anticipates the emergence of totalitarianism by portraying the ways in which masses can be mobilized and manipulated through mass culture. Although the article is extremely dense and quite difficult, we believe that its richness and suggestiveness justify the intellectual efforts its comprehension requires. Indeed, to the extent that the essay develops the art of deciphering important social insights from obscure and offbeat phenomena, an encounter with it might even yield surprising new insights into such social phenomena as movies, massification, capitalism, mythologies, and fairy tales.

In a similar vein, T. W. Adorno's "Lyric Poetry and Society" extends the sociological approach to literature outlined in the earlier article by Leo Lowenthal. Adorno argues that even in lyric poetry, seemingly the most ethereal mode of high culture, social tendencies are evident. He acutely notes that approaches which interpret poetry as one of the most sublime escapes from the cares of everyday life themselves point to an oppressive organization of society which requires transcendence. The article reveals how culture can provide sources of critical knowledge, and attests to the Institute's concern for a subjectivity threatened by the modern world. Through a close reading of poems by German poets like Goethe, Rilke, Mörike, and Stefan George, Adorno demonstrates how social insights can be unearthed from the form, rhythm, and images of lyric poetry as well as from its content. Adorno's article therefore also embodies critical theory's claim that authentic art provides both a form of opposition to the established society and a utopian mode of reconciliation with nature. Indeed, as their hopes for revolutionary political change diminished, Adorno and Marcuse in particular celebrated the "aesthetic dimension" as a domain of emancipatory experience that posed one against and beyond established consciousness.

In general, critical theorists prized the modernist avant-garde over the exponents of realism. Walter Benjamin's "Surrealism" reveals that commitment to the avant-garde, but also the potential importance of such movements to political revolution—which sharply distinguishes his position from that of Adorno. Benjamin was radicalized through his relationships with the maverick Marxist Ernst Bloch and a Russian revolutionary named Asja Lacin. He also became close to the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht, whose theater he championed as a model of revolutionary art. Benjamin never officially joined the Institute, but he received a small stipend which helped finance his studies in Paris during the early years of

the fascist epoch. Long a devotee of French culture, Benjamin believed that surrealism retained great revolutionary potential by virtue of its "pro-fane illumination" of everyday life and its intoxicating experiences of break, rupture, and ecstasy.

Benjamin opens his article by reflecting on the origins and nature of surrealism and attempting to illuminate the movement through discussing some of its most important advocates such as André Breton. In general, Benjamin believed that certain kinds of art provided a virtually mystical "revelation" of truths and insights concerning social life which are hidden from the everyday consciousness—a position which he shared with Adorno and Kracauer. Nevertheless, in contrast to Adorno, who rigidly separated art from radical politics, Benjamin believed that certain experiences which broke with everyday consciousness and routine could promote revolutionary awareness and action. It is for this reason that Benjamin wanted to illuminate and appropriate the energies of surrealism for the revolutionary movement of the day.

"Surrealism" is typical of Benjamin's frequent willingness to judge different types of art in terms of their revolutionary potential or lack of it. Unlike other critical theorists, for instance, he advanced a profound belief in film's ability to promote socially critical consciousness—at least under the proper circumstances. More than that, however, this piece evidences the most radical expression of critical theory's revolutionary message. Anticipating the "situationist" attempt to transform everyday life and the values of individual experience, as well as the cultural politics of the 1960s, it praises "surrealism" for rebelling against the "inner poverty" of the individual and exploding the verities of "normal" perception from a standpoint which manifests the "intoxication" of the revolution.

In "Historical Perspectives on Popular Culture," Leo Lowenthal provides a clear contextualization of the Institute's theory of mass culture. Attacking the uncritical empirical approaches to culture and society that were particularly dominant in the United States, he sharply contrasts them to the historical and critical approaches of the Institute. Situating present debates over the nature and value of popular culture in the contrasting attitudes toward leisure of Pascal and Montaigne, Lowenthal shows how the former believed that popular entertainment distracted individuals from their religious vocation. Montaigne, by contrast, maintained that modern life required a certain amount of relaxation and diversion which popular culture could provide—and which thus made it beneficial for individuals and society. Stripping Pascal's critique of mass culture of its religious overtones, Lowenthal defends a critical approach to the study of mass culture. The article concludes with a concise summary of the approaches to popular culture developed by the Institute, and suggestions concerning how they can be utilized to provide more adequate analyses.

The attack on conformity and the culture industry, however, has its blindspots and limitations. In "Perennial Fashion—Jazz" Adorno provides one of the most controversial and sharply criticized attacks on mass culture produced by the critical theorists. Whereas many people believe that American jazz creates a type of rebellious, nonconformist musical experience, Adorno argues that it actually reveals the conformist tendencies shared by all forms of fashion and the culture industry. For Adorno, rather than providing a fresh and innovative musical idiom, jazz merely exhibits "incessantly repeated formulae" and accelerates the trends toward standardization, commercialization, and reification implicit in all mass culture. Thus, in Adorno's view, jazz is "utterly impoverished" while its fans joyfully experience nothing more than "psychological regression."

Adorno's uncompromising critique raises the much-debated issue of the cultural elitism which allegedly informed the Institute's perceptions of mass culture. Indeed, there is no doubt that the "inner circle" was composed of highly cultured European intellectuals and radicals who found life in the United States extremely distasteful. Clearly, they blamed mass culture for making the working classes blind to their own exploitation, and thus for creating obstacles to radical social change. Despite their biases, however, it was nonetheless the critical theorists who provided the first set of sustained and systematic insights into the important new roles that mass communications and culture were playing in contemporary societies. It was precisely their status as European exiles which enabled them to gain insights into the ideological nature and social functions of mass culture, which were missed by American theorists and radicals, who simply took mass culture for granted as a fact of social life, and so overlooked its increasingly important social functions.

By the same token, their status as exiles also caused the critical theorists to ignore certain key aspects of American life, such as the continuation of political and cultural struggle during that difficult period, and the contradictions within mass culture which frequently exhibit socially critical elements. By assuming that the transformation of an artwork into a commodity destroys its emancipatory function, many critical theorists reached the conclusion that popular culture had no emancipatory potential whatsoever. That is why most of them have traditionally been so emphatic in maintaining the division between "high" and "low" (or mass) culture. Even so, they never provided categories for differentiating among cultural artifacts or the diverse purposes which they can serve.

Against this view it is preferable to perceive culture as a contested terrain with potentially subversive elements. Still, the aesthetic theories of the Frankfurt School contain many valuable aspects, and their analyses of cultural texts are among their major contributions. The commitment to aesthetics was genuine. Indeed, both Adorno and Marcuse sincerely

believed that only the aesthetic realm could preserve a subjectivity threatened by the very structure of advanced industrial society.

The freedom and autonomy of the individual was always a central concern of the Institute, and the attempt by Erich Fromm to synthesize Marx and Freud in terms of a critical social psychology was obviously meant to compensate for the neglect of consciousness and the "subjective" factor in orthodox Marxism. In a 1931 article titled "Politics and Psychoanalysis," Fromm argues for the relevance of psychoanalytic perspectives to revolutionary politics, claiming that psychoanalysis provides a theory which can help explain mass behavior and political events as well as the actions of an individual. While suggesting how the socio-economic analysis of events typical of Marxism can be combined with psychoanalytic explanation, he argues against interpretations which claim that the two theories are incompatible. Indeed, Fromm believes that they can work together to explain the ways that instinctual drives and psychic attitudes can be mobilized to support political movements and leaders.

Fromm's essay was written when the Nazis were seizing power in Germany. The Institute responded by attempting to provide an explanation of the appeal and power of fascism. One of the distinguishing aspects of their analysis was their discussion of how psychological dispositions toward authoritarianism nurtured submission to fascist domination. In a collective work published in 1936, *Studies in Authority and the Family*, the Institute members explored some of the ways that the patriarchal family engendered authoritarian traits which would predispose individuals to embrace fascism. In fact, the Institute became involved in a number of such studies which sought to analyze how various established institutions and ideologies promote the development of personalities susceptible to manipulation and authoritarian domination.

After the defeat of fascism, in conjunction with a Berkeley research group, Adorno and other members of the Institute for Social Research undertook a collective inquiry of the psychological propensities toward authoritarianism in the United States. The result was a major work, *The Authoritarian Personality*, from which we include the introduction. Here Adorno and his colleagues outline the project of their social research, as well as the basic assumptions and methods utilized in the study. There is no doubt that the undertaking itself was motivated by the fear that a new character type, the authoritarian personality, was emerging. In a manner somewhat inconsistent with the Institute's position on mass culture, however, the authors conclude that education might prevent a duplication of the European experience.

The researchers devised an elaborate set of questionnaires, which were

sent to 2,099 respondents, along with a set of interpretive techniques to determine a potentially fascist mind-set from the answers tabulated. The answers were classified to correlate individuals on an A-S (anti-Semitism) scale, an E (ethnocentrism) scale, a PEC (political-economic conservatism) scale, and an F (potentially fascist) scale. Interviews were then conducted with a large number of individuals who registered both the highest and lowest scores on the fascist potential scale to draw further conclusions about the behavior and personality structure of the authoritarian personality.

Questionnaire and interview results were tabulated, analyzed, and published in the various studies that comprise *The Authoritarian Personality*. The study disclosed a surprising degree of anti-Semitic prejudice in the United States and an alarming number of people who scored high on the scale which measured the extent of authoritarian potential in individuals. *The Authoritarian Personality* was widely read and discussed, and remains to this day a classic example of critical group research which combines interviews, psychological depth analysis, and socio-economic data with a critical perspective.

Setting forth a different view, Herbert Marcuse, in a lecture entitled "The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man," claimed that the sort of psychological configuration analyzed by Freud—whereby individuals submit to mass leaders—is now obsolete. Marcuse maintains that the Freudian concept of man presupposes an individual ego that stands in conflict with the demands of society, as represented by the superego, and that individuals will identify with leaders who emerge as surrogate father figures to alleviate guilt and anxiety. This Freudian model, however, also assumes that the family is the basic institution of socialization and that individuals develop their personalities in conflict with their fathers while still identifying with patriarchal images and roles. Against this model, Marcuse claims that cultural institutions are currently socializing individuals directly, and so replacing the family as the dominant instrument of socialization.

In Marcuse's view, the mass media, school, sports, and peer groups are coming to directly manage ego-development. A new form of socialization tends to eliminate the conflict between individual and society built into the Freudian model—thereby producing massive social conformity and weak egos. As a consequence, Marcuse claims that in contemporary industrial society individuals ever more surely identify with society itself—with the entire apparatus of production, consumption, and entertainment. A submission to authority therefore takes place which engenders psychological regression into herdlike conformity, a weakening of mental faculties, and an unthinking acceptance of whatever is offered by mass society, from television to the nuclear arms race. Thus, for Marcuse, a

critical social psychology becomes another way to explain the creation of one-dimensional society.

While all critical theorists agreed upon the importance of developing a radical social psychology—and the need to synthesize Marx and Freud—there were significant differences among the Institute's members on the nature of psychoanalysis and the role it should play. To demonstrate this, we conclude our section on critical theory and psychology with a selection from Erich Fromm's "Crisis of Psychoanalysis." Fromm, who was a practicing analyst, claims that a crisis has resulted from the transformation of Freud's critical categories like the unconscious into instruments of conformity and adjustment. In this essay, written long after his break with the Institute, Fromm attacks Marcuse's use of Freudian theory and vividly demonstrates the profound differences within the tradition of critical theory.

Although the full story of Fromm's break with the Institute has yet to be told, increasingly bitter polemics broke out between him and his former colleagues. The split initially surfaced in public in 1955 with the publication of Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, which attacked Fromm as a neo-Freudian revisionist whose theory was putatively conformist and idealist. Fromm countered with a sharp critique of Marcuse, who, in turn, riposted with a defense of his position in the pages of *Dissent* magazine. In "The Crisis of Psychoanalysis," however, Fromm spells out his criticisms in detail, claiming that Marcuse fails to understand some of Freud's key concepts and that the former's ideal of a "non-repressive society" is "an infantile paradise where all work is play and where there is no serious conflict or tragedy."

There is an argument to be made that both Fromm and Marcuse misrepresent the other's position in their polemics, and the reader is strongly advised to read their main works themselves. But there are also clear differences between Marcuse's "meta-psychological" use of Freud to create a theory of instinctual liberation and a nonrepressive civilization, and Fromm's more modest clinical use of Freud's psychological insights. For Marcuse, the unconscious provides integral images of happiness and liberation which allow for a critique of existing society. Nevertheless, both Marcuse and Fromm see libidinal energies as a source of opposition to the existing order and privilege subjectivity as an emancipatory force.

Against the trends toward conformity, massification, and submission, the critical theorists all advocate strengthening the ego and developing critical individualism. This psychological emphasis comes to shape their politics and points to both their contributions and limitations. But although such emphasis on the emancipatory role of the individual psyche can help foster individual rebellion, it can also simply reproduce the egotistical values of advanced industrial society. In fact, the critical theorists neither

developed an adequate theory of social change nor achieved that unity of theory and practice which they so frequently championed.

The Frankfurt School's political perspectives tended to be rather abstract, and its members never based their critique of advanced industrial society on any positive theory of revolution. But they did produce a set of what might be termed "critical visions" regarding the mutable character of history, society, and the future. In this concluding section, we have selected texts which articulate some of these perspectives. In one way or another, all of them point to the legacy of critical theory and the impetus it might offer to future social inquiry with an emancipatory intent.

In his controversial and paradoxical "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin seeks to confront the triumph of fascism as well as what he considers the atavistic assumptions of an orthodox Marxism which maintains that the capitalist transition to socialism, and then to a superior communist order, is somehow "inevitable." Opposed to all unilinear conceptions of progress, while aware of the contemporary barriers to emancipatory change, Benjamin proposes the need to remember and compensate for the evils and suffering of the past. This recollection of past suffering is what he believes will provide an inspiration for struggle against oppression in the present. It is therefore "the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" which offers the best impetus to continue the quest for emancipation. To move forward, it is therefore necessary to look backwards so that an emancipated future ultimately comes to rest on a philosophical reappropriation of the past.

Writing in 1940, as the Nazi war machine blitzed through Europe, Benjamin saw modernity as an unending catastrophe and thus viewed more optimistic theories of history with contempt. Providing a considerably more critical perspective on Western culture than Marcuse in "Philosophy and Critical Theory," Benjamin claimed that even high culture was often merely the ideological cloak for barbarism, and that it was always the victors—however barbaric—who wrote history and established systems of thought to legitimate their systems of oppression. Shortly after publishing these theses, Benjamin himself was forced to flee the Nazi occupation of France, and committed suicide on the Spanish border when it appeared that he would be captured by the fascists. Ironically that action spurred the Spanish border officials to allow the rest of Benjamin's group to escape into freedom.

By this time, Horkheimer and his associates were already established in New York. His "Notes on Institute Activities" sketches some of the defining features of critical theory in the new context as well as its relevance for contemporary research and politics. The validity of its

concepts is, first, determined by their ability to comprehend historical processes and the trends for social transformation. In this vein, Horkheimer describes the inductive character of critical theory and how it presents society as a system in which every part should be interpreted from the standpoint of the whole. At the same time, however, he maintains that critical theory also projects alternatives to the existing society by engaging in what the Frankfurt School theorists call "immanent critique"—a method which judges society by the very norms of freedom and happiness which it professes to accept.

Although Adorno would later make some very different and more subjectivist assumptions in *Negative Dialectics*, this perspective is further articulated in his 1963 article "Society." Revealing how Critical Theory retains a positive relation to the Marxian heritage, Adorno argues that the very concept of "society" is historical in nature, and that it should not be used simply to denote abstract relations of individuals to one another. Instead, "the specifically social" refers to "the imbalance of institutions over human beings." "Society" thus refers to the system of social organization and the ways that social institutions, roles, practices, and the organization of the economy come to dominate the activity of human beings in specific historical constellations. Following Marxian arguments, Adorno can therefore claim that society is the living background for every empirical occurrence and that the capitalist market system imposes commodity and exchange relations on every individual act—even as it fuels an overriding rationalization process which provides an apparatus of social control. Against those who argue that the Marxian concept of class is no longer relevant to social processes, Adorno insists that we still live in a world fundamentally organized around class relations and characterized by class struggle. Thus, even as particular members of the Frankfurt School like Horkheimer were turning sharply to the right and away from Marxism, a connection to that old tradition and the Institute's standpoint before World War II continued to exist.

Of all the critical theorists, it was probably Herbert Marcuse who most systematically attempted to relate theory to politics and consistently contrasted critical perspectives on the current social order with those of an emancipated future. In "Liberation from the Affluent Society," he sketches what in retrospect emerges as a vision of liberation which articulates many New Left perspectives of the 1960's. The address begins by asserting the importance of those radical cultural currents which seemed to constitute a "great refusal" of the competitive, materialistic, and bellicose values of advanced industrial society. It is important to remember that Marcuse's utopian rationalism exerted a powerful influence in the sixties. During that time, even while believing that the working class remained the sine qua non for revolutionary transformation, Marcuse was one of



the prime exponents of what became known as "the marginal groups theory," which suggested that the catalysts for radical action by workers would be those groups least integrated into the given order—students, racial minorities, women, etc. This argument anticipated militant movements and struggles in France and Italy, even though the reaction which was gathering force in the 1970s began to make Marcuse ever more skeptical about the "proletariat"—a skepticism central to his 1978 article "The Reification of the Proletariat," which we have also included.

During the 1970s, Marcuse continued to believe that a linkage between critical theory and the new social movements was possible. It was in this period that he desperately searched for a revolutionary agent to replace the industrial proletariat. Putting aside the undifferentiated and radical indictment of a liberal advanced industrial society central to his and the Institute's earlier work, Marcuse stressed the importance of democratic struggles and political reforms. Supporting McGovern in the 1972 presidential election, he continued his support for national liberation struggles in the third world, and even looked to the "Eurocommunist" parties—which were tactically seeking to separate themselves from Brezhnev's Soviet Union in Spain, France, and Italy—for a radical response to contemporary capitalist societies. Yet, in "The Reification of the Proletariat," which was published shortly before his death in 1979, Marcuse also analyzed the "right turn" which would come to characterize the prevailing political climate of the 1980s. Although Marcuse is doubtful that the traditional industrial "proletariat" continues to be the main force of revolution in advanced capitalist countries, he somewhat uncritically believes that a growing working class with expanding consciousness and political awareness will provide a new base for radical social change in contemporary society even as he points to a set of emerging social movements as catalysts for a new era. Though he has nothing to say about the matter of political organization, Marcuse correctly insists that revising Marxism and critical theory in the light of new conditions does not constitute a betrayal. Yet the article also points to how far from their earlier socialist revolutionary perspectives the critical theorists had traveled. Indeed, the Frankfurt School never developed adequate criteria to judge the political potential of different movements in different historical epochs and, with few exceptions, stood apart from the major political controversies of the postwar era.

While Marcuse gained world renown as the defender of the New Left in the 1960's, it is Habermas who developed the most consistent political position following the decline of the student movement of the sixties. Throughout his publications in the 1980s, he has defended the democratic and rationalist heritage of the Enlightenment and reinterpreted critical theory accordingly. In the process, he has intervened in some of the

most important debates within German intellectual circles, ranging from attempts by arch-conservatives like Ernst Nolte to turn their backs on the Nazi past in the "historians' controversy," to those of postmodernists who have sought to foster a pseudo-radical spirit of nihilistic relativism. Our reader thus closes with a selection from Habermas's "The Tasks of a Critical Theory of Society," which forms part of the conclusion to his two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981).

In this selection, Habermas explores the central themes of critical theory after World War II, and then indicates some unfinished tasks for the contemporary era. These include the need to analyze 1) the new mechanisms of political integration within post-liberal societies; 2) the forms of familial socialization and ego-development; 3) the role of mass media and mass culture; and 4) the potential for crisis and the contemporary possibilities for protest especially with respect to the "new social movements" which have assumed such political importance.

Whether these are actually *the* crucial issues remains open to question. After all, Habermas concentrates exclusively on the reproductive mechanisms of advanced industrial society. Missing are those concerns which directly relate to the production process itself and its corresponding logic of accumulation. Though his emphasis on the role of new social movements is laudatory, the issue of class cannot be ignored. It is thus important to address particularism and promote inter-group unity in order to confront the obstacles which have been erected against extending democracy and civic responsibility in the modern state. Then too, since the world of the future is becoming ever more surely defined by multinationals, new technologies, and a new trans-national economy, critical social theorists should advance the need for new cosmopolitan values and international institutions which constrict the arbitrary use of power. A reconstruction of critical theory is necessary to meet these concerns. A new generation thus has new challenges to confront in reinvigorating and repoliticizing that notion of emancipation which inspired critical theory in the first place.

**Political Science/Philosophy/Sociology**

The Institute for Social Research, usually referred to as the Frankfurt School, was the first Marxist-oriented research institute in Europe. Its members attempted to revise both the Marxian critique of capitalism and the theory of the revolution in order to confront the new social and political conditions that had evolved since Marx's death. As a result they developed a "critical theory" of society to overcome those aspects of social reality which Marx and classical Marxism neglected or downplayed.

Composed for upper-level undergraduates, graduate students and a broad intellectual readership, the main purpose of this book is to provide a general overview of the perspectives which comprise the modern tradition of critical theory.

At the same time, it explores the contributions of such crucial thinkers as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas, and Herbert Marcuse to various fields of intellectual inquiry—social psychology, cultural criticism, philosophy, and political theory, among others.

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