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Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt School refers to the work of members of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, which was established in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923 as the first Marxist-oriented research centre affiliated with a major German university. Under its director, Carl Grunberg, the institute's work in the 1920s tended to be empirical, historical and oriented towards problems of the European working-class movement, although theoretical works by Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács and others were also published in its journal, *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*.

Max Horkheimer became director of the institute in 1930, and gathered around him many talented theorists, including Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and T. W. Adorno. Under Horkheimer, the institute sought to develop an interdisciplinary social theory which could serve as an instrument of social transformation. The work of this era was a synthesis of philosophy and social theory, combining sociology, psychology, cultural studies and political economy. The results appeared in its own journal, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1932–41), which contains a rich collection of articles and book reviews still worth reading.

The first major institute project in the Horkheimer period was a systematic study of authority, an investigation into individuals who submitted to irrational authority in authoritarian regimes, which culminated in a two-volume work, *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (1936). Fascism was a major interest during the 1930s and the Institute members wrote a series of studies of German fascism including Franz Neumann's *Behemoth* and a number of studies by Herbert Marcuse collected in the volume *Technology, War, and Fascism* (Kellner 1998).

Most members of the Institute were both Jews and Marxist radicals and were forced to flee Germany after Hitler's ascendancy to power. The majority emigrated to the USA and the institute became affiliated with Columbia University from 1931 until 1949, when key members returned to Frankfurt. From 1936 to the present, the institute referred to its work as the 'critical theory of society'. For many years, 'critical theory' stood as a code for the institute's Marxism and was distinguished by its attempt to found a radical interdisciplinary social theory rooted in Hegelian-Marxian dialectics, historical materialism, and the Marxian critique of political economy and theory of revolution. Members argued that Marx's concepts of the commodity, money, value, exchange and fetishism characterize not only the capitalist economy but also social relations under capitalism, where human relations and all forms of life are governed by commodity and exchange relations and values.

Horkheimer (1937) claimed in a key article 'Philosophie und Kritische Theorie' (Traditional and critical theory) that since 'the economy is the first cause of poverty, theoretical and practical criticism has to direct itself primarily at it'. Institute members were convinced that the capitalist economy was driving bourgeois society to catastrophe through its underlying cycle of production, anarchy, depressions, unemployment and wars. They believed that increasing

tendencies toward bureaucratization and social rationalization were destroying the features of individuality and freedom which the capitalist system extolled as its prize creation.

Horkheimer (1937) wrote that critical theory's 'content consists of changing the concepts that thoroughly dominate the economy into their opposites: fair exchange into a deepening of social injustice; a free economy into monopolistic domination; productive labour into the strengthening of relations which inhibit production; the maintenance of society's life into the impoverishment of the people's'. The goal of critical theory is to transform these social conditions, and provide a theory of 'the historical movement of an epoch that is to come to an end'.

Critical theory produced theoretical analysis of the transformation of competitive capitalism into monopoly capitalism and fascism, and some members hoped to be part of a historical process through which capitalism would be replaced by socialism. Horkheimer claimed that 'The categories which have arisen under its influence criticize the present. The Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, impoverishment, and collapse are moments of a conceptual whole whose meaning is to be sought, not in the reproduction of the present society, but in its transformation to a correct society.' Critical theory is thus motivated by an interest in emancipation and is a philosophy of social practice engaged in 'the struggle for the future'. Critical theory must remain loyal to the 'idea of a future society as the community of free human beings, in so far as such a society is possible, given the present technical means'.

In a series of studies carried out in the 1930s, the Institute for Social Research sketched out theories of monopoly capitalism, the new industrial state, the role of technology and giant corporations in monopoly capitalism, the cultural industries and the decline of the individual. It articulated theories which were to occupy the centre of social theory for the next several decades. Rarely, if ever, has such a talented group of interdisciplinary workers come together under the auspices of one institute. They managed to keep alive critical social theory during a difficult historical era and provided aspects of a neo-Marxian theory of the changed social reality and new historical situation in the transition from competitive capitalism to monopoly capitalism.

During the Second World War, the institute split up due to pressures of emigration and war. Adorno and Horkheimer moved to California, while Lowenthal, Marcuse, Neumann and others worked for the US government as their contribution in the fight against fascism. Adorno and Horkheimer worked on their collective book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which contains implicit critiques of Marxism, as well as fascism and consumer capitalism. Departing from the Marxian theory of history, they presented a philosophy of history that traced the fate of the Enlightenment from the beginning of scientific thought with the Greeks to fascist concentration camps and the cultural industries of US capitalism. They showed how western rationality served as instruments of domination and how 'Enlightenment' turned into its opposite, mystification and oppression. The book criticized enlightenment scientism and rationalism, and implicitly implicated Marxism within the 'dialectic of Enlightenment'.

After the Second World War, Adorno, Horkheimer and Pollock returned to Frankfurt to re-establish the institute in Germany, while Lowenthal, Marcuse and others remained in the USA. In Germany, Adorno, Horkheimer and their associates published a series of books and became a dominant intellectual current in Germany. At this time, the term “Frankfurt School” became widespread as a characterization of their version of interdisciplinary social research and of the particular social theory developed by Adorno, Horkheimer and their associates. They engaged in frequent methodological and substantive debates with other social theories, most notably ‘the positivism dispute’, where they criticized more empirical and quantitative approaches to social theory and defended their own more speculative and critical brand of social theory. The German group around Adorno and Horkheimer was also increasingly hostile toward orthodox Marxism and were in turn criticized by a variety of types of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ and ‘scientific Marxists’ for their alleged surrender of revolutionary and scientific Marxian perspectives.

During the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse aligned himself with the student movement and became a guru of the New Left, leading to critical exchanges of letters with Horkheimer and Adorno (see Kellner 1984 and Marcuse 2001). Habermas emerged in the 1970s as one of the world’s major philosophers and social theorists and the Frankfurt School became influential in a variety of disciplines ranging from philosophy and social theory to art history and media studies.

The Frankfurt School became known for their theories of ‘the totally administered society’ or ‘one-dimensional society’, which theorized the increasing power of capitalism over all aspects of social life and the development of new forms of social control. During the 1950s, however, there were divergences between the work of the institute relocated in Frankfurt and the developing theories of Fromm, Lowenthal, Marcuse and others who did not return to Germany, which were often at odds with both the current and earlier work of Adorno and Horkheimer. Thus it is misleading to consider the work of various critical theorists during the post-war period as members of a monolithic Frankfurt School. Whereas there were both a shared sense of purpose and collective work on interdisciplinary social theory from 1930 to the early 1940s, thereafter critical theorists frequently diverge, and during the 1950s and 1960s the term the ‘Frankfurt School’ can really be applied only to the work of the institute in Germany.

It is thus impossible to characterize the Frankfurt School as a whole, since their work spanned several decades and involved a variety of thinkers who later engaged in sharp debates with one another. Rather one should perceive various phases of institute work. (1) the empirical-historical studies of the Grunberg era. (2) attempts in the early to mid-1930s to establish a materialist interdisciplinary social theory under Horkheimer’s directorship. (3) attempts to develop a critical theory of society during the exile period from about 1937 to the early 1940s. (4) the dispersion of institute members in the 1940s and new directions sketched out by Adorno and Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment. (5) the return of the institute to Germany and its work in Frankfurt during the 1950s and 1960s. (6) the

development of critical theory in various ways by Fromm, Lowenthal, Marcuse and others who remained in the USA. (7) the continuation of institute projects and development of critical theory in Germany by Jürgen Habermas, Oskar Negt, Alfred Schmidt, and others in the 1970s and 1980s. (8) contributions to critical theory by younger theorists and scholars currently active in Europe and the USA.

In surveying the field of critical theory, one observes a heterogeneity of theories, theorists and projects loosely connected by commitment to interdisciplinary social theory, and an interest in social critique and transformation, all influenced by the work of theorists like Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas or others. Critical theorists tend to be critical of empirical and quantitative social theory and more sympathetic to theoretical construction, social critique and social transformation. It continues to be an active, though frequently marginal, tendency of social theory and continues to influence a wide range of disciplines and theorists throughout the world.

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Further reading

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