

Peter M. R. Stirk

Critical Theory, Politics and Society

An Introduction



CONTINUUM STUDIES IN CRITICAL THEORY

Critical Theory, Politics and Society: An Introduction

Peter M.R. Stirk

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This book is dedicated to Sue

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Acknowledgements and Notes on References

I am grateful to Dr Julia Stapleton for comments on drafts of this book, which have helped to improve the clarity of the argument. I, of course, remain responsible for any remaining opacities.

In the notes, where the date of first publication, or occasionally the date of writing, of works by members of the Frankfurt School differs from the date of publication of the text cited, the former is given in square brackets for the first reference to that item in each chapter. The abbreviations *GS* for *Gesammelte Schriften* and *ZfS* for *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* have been used throughout.

Biographical Notes

Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno (1900–69). According to the pioneering historian of the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay, he adopted the name Theodor W. Adorno at the request of Pollock in order to reduce the prominence of Jewish-sounding names at the Institute. Adorno was a philosopher, sociologist and musicologist. He was originally better known in the United States as one of the authors of the influential work *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). His major works include a strong attack on Heidegger and his followers, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964) and a complex text titled *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Contemporary critical theorists critical of Habermas's reformulation of critical theory often turn to Adorno's aesthetics, especially his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). His *Minima Moralia* (1951), which bears the subtitle *Reflections from Damaged Life*, is a revealing and relatively accessible work.

Erich Fromm (1900–80). After his doctorate on *Jewish Law: A Contribution to the Sociology of the Jewish Diaspora* he taught in the Free Jewish School before turning to psychoanalysis in the mid-1920s. He was a member of the Frankfurt Institute of Psychoanalysis, established in 1929, and joined the Institute of Social Research in 1930. Although his contributions to the Institute's journal were central to its interdisciplinary research programme, he left the Institute in 1939 amidst some bitterness. He was a prolific and popular author as well as a practising psychoanalyst and was Professor in Mexico (1950–65). In the post-war period there were several very critical exchanges between Fromm on the one hand and Adorno and Marcuse on the other hand.

Jürgen Habermas (b.1929) published a highly critical review in 1953 of the publication of Heidegger's lectures from 1935. Like Marcuse, he was

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shocked by Heidegger's lack of remorse about his complicity with the Nazi regime. Habermas was later a research assistant in the Institute for Social Research (1956–9). Horkheimer was highly critical of the radicalness of his early work. His *Habilitationsschrift*, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962) was supervised by Wolfgang Abendroth at Marburg. He later held chairs at Heidelberg and Frankfurt and was Director of the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg. He has been a prominent public critic in the Federal Republic of Germany as well as producing major theoretical works, including *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) and *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1992).

Max Horkheimer (1895–1973). Director of the Institute of Social Research from 1930, he was responsible for the main methodological essays in the Institute's journal during the 1930s. He was the co-author, with Adorno, of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), a central reference point for many people (the French postmodernist Michel Foucault said that if he had read it earlier it would have saved him a lot of time). Horkheimer was Rector of Frankfurt University for two years from 1951. His reservations about post-war Germany were evident in posthumously published notes, which reveal, as Habermas put it, a man living on unopened suitcases.

Otto Kirchheimer (1905–65) wrote a doctorate on *Constitutional Theory in Socialism and Bolshevism* under the supervision of Carl Schmitt, though he sought to give some of Schmitt's ideas a radical socialist twist. He moved first to Paris in 1933, and became a research associate of the Institute in the following year, and then to New York in 1938. Initially he worked on *Punishment and Social Structure*, a work begun but left uncompleted by George Rusche. His contributions to the Institute's journal covered the comparative analysis of the party system and, more specifically, the development of the Nazi legal system. Kirchheimer joined the Office of Strategic Services in 1944 and subsequently the State Department, where he remained until 1955. He then returned to academia and moved to Columbia University in 1962, the year after he published *Political Justice*.

Leo Löwenthal (1900–93). Originally a philosopher, he became a sociologist of literature and was proud of having predicted the fascist sympathies of the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsen. He also worked on right-wing political movements in the United States. He was employed in the American Office of War Information in 1943 and by Voice of America in 1949. He became Professor of Sociology in Berkeley in 1956, without, as he noted, having had an orthodox academic career.

Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) was a pupil of Heidegger before joining the Institute. He was the author of two major books on Hegel as well as contributing to the Institute's journal. He was employed by the Office of Strategic Services in 1942 and remained in the service of the American government until 1951. He subsequently held various research and academic posts, including Professor of Philosophy at California (1965–70). He was famous for *Eros and Civilization* (1955) – a radical reinterpretation of Freud – and *One Dimensional Man* (1964) – a critique of the consumer society. He was popular with radical students in the 1960s and his support for them led to threats on his life. He was the most utopian of the older generation.

Franz Leopold Neumann (1900–54) was a lawyer who acted for German trade unions before emigrating. He retrained in London, doing a Ph.D. on the rule of law under the supervision of Harold Laski. He was taken on by the Institute initially to work on legal and administrative matters. He was the author of a major study of the Third Reich, *Behemoth*, which is still held in high regard by many historians despite being first published in 1942. He worked in the Office of Strategic Services with Marcuse and then in the State Department from 1942. In 1947 he became Professor at Columbia University, the same university which had offered the Institute refuge in 1934. Neumann died in a car accident in Switzerland.

Friedrich Pollock (1894–1970) was a close friend of Horkheimer. His own theoretical work suffered from the amount of time he devoted to the Institute's affairs and to supporting Horkheimer. Nevertheless he was the author of an early study of the Soviet economy and of articles on the nature of the Nazi economic system, which divided the Institute's members, as well as other works.

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Introduction

According to Theodor Adorno 'philosophical terminology gains a decisive significance where firm philosophical schools form'.¹ This is true of the idea of 'critical theory' which is intimately associated with the 'Frankfurt School', one of whose most prominent members was that same Theodor Adorno. As so often, however, the link between terminology and the philosophical school was not straightforward and has been contested in various ways. In the case of critical theory and the Frankfurt School it was the terminology which came first. Critical theory was the philosophical banner raised in two essays published in 1937. The first, 'Traditional and critical theory' was written by Max Horkheimer. The second, 'Philosophy and critical theory' was written by Herbert Marcuse.² The source of publication, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (*Journal of Social Research*), was important both to the coherence of the school and the later success of the terminology. The *Zeitschrift* was the house journal of the Institute for Social Research, of which Max Horkheimer was Director. The Institute provided financial autonomy for the three men and their colleagues whilst the journal provided a platform from which they could formulate their critical theory. In intent, at least, the coherence of their position was reinforced by strict editorial policy and careful consideration of each article.

The label, the Frankfurt School, came later and was initially used by others as a convenient shorthand to identify the advocates of critical theory. The choice of term arose from the association of the Institute of Social Research with the University of Frankfurt. This is not without some irony. For during most of the years in which the Institute's journal was published, that is 1932 to 1941, the Institute was based in New York. Since its members were not only Marxists, albeit mostly of an unorthodox variety, but also Jews, they were doubly suspect in the eyes of the Nazi regime. It was, however, their communism which the Gestapo invoked when it closed down

the Institute for 'activities hostile to the state'.³ When the Institute returned to Frankfurt after the end of the Second World War, several of the critical theorists chose to remain in the United States. Although the diverse range of their interests makes many of them difficult to categorize in terms of traditional academic disciplines, only two of what might be called the Institute's philosophers returned to Germany, namely Horkheimer and Adorno. The third, Marcuse, remained in America. So too did the sociologist of literature, Leo Löwenthal, Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer, both lawyers and political scientists, and the psychologist Erich Fromm. Indeed, of the core members only Horkheimer's close friend, the economist Friedrich Pollock, joined the two philosophers. It was after their return that the past and present members of the Institute began to be referred to as the Frankfurt School.

The label, the Frankfurt School, has been extended beyond the members of the original Institute to include Jürgen Habermas. Habermas, born a generation later than Horkheimer and his colleagues, also differed in not coming from a Jewish background. By his own account such biographical differences are of some significance in accounting for the tension between his advocacy of critical theory and the older generation. One characteristic he does share with the older generation is that diversity of interests which makes him difficult to pin down in disciplinary terms. Indeed one survey of political science in Germany described him as a philosopher and sociologist only to promptly note that he is regarded by German political scientists as a leading political theorist.⁴

Given the diverse interests between the individual members of the Frankfurt School, it is not surprising that critical theory has been taken up by a host of theorists on both sides of the Atlantic who have taken up different positions. The very success of critical theory has inevitably led to even greater difficulty in discerning the common features that define it. Indeed, one survey concluded that 'the question What is the meaning and significance of Critical Theory today? has to be answered in local terms. The response in Germany will differ from that in the United States.'⁵ The growth of interest in the Frankfurt School and critical theory has led to another problem with the use of these terms. After the pioneering work of Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, commentators began to explore the contributions of individual members.⁶ Again it is not surprising that such studies often discerned omissions in the broader accounts, including Jay's, and, more importantly, were impressed by the differences between individual members of the Institute or by alliances hitherto unnoticed or insufficiently emphasized.⁷ Similarly, while Marcuse and Adorno received the most scholarly attention, other commentators have sought to rescue the comparatively neglected members of the Institute from their relative obscurity.⁸ That has also led to emphasis on individual virtues, and vices, which makes the unity

conveyed by the terms Frankfurt School and critical theory seem questionable. The emphasis on diversity at the expense of unity has been aided by the fact that the critical theorists themselves became critical of each other in varying degrees. Thus Fromm split from the Institute in 1939 amidst considerable acrimony and was later attacked by Adorno and Marcuse over his interpretation of Freud. There had always been some tension between Adorno and Marcuse and their response to the student radicalism of the 1960s differed substantially. Adorno, however, was supportive of the young Habermas whereas Horkheimer was damning. Habermas in turn was later highly critical of Horkheimer and Adorno, though more so of the latter.

In the light of all this emphasis upon divergence, is it then still helpful to write about the Frankfurt School and critical theory? There is a strong *prima facie* case that it is, namely that all of the putative members of the School, for some part of their career at the very least, adopted some form of collective label and clearly believed that they were engaged in a common enterprise. As part and parcel of that common enterprise, they identified common opponents whom they attacked in often highly polemical fashion. They differed over the adequacy with which each expressed their common endeavour and over the prospects of success, some, especially Horkheimer, succumbing to a deep pessimism, which had accompanied him to some degree throughout his life, others, especially Marcuse, retaining an optimistic streak despite the pessimism of some of his works.

The problem of unity versus diversity is naturally greatest when comparing the ideas of Habermas with those of the older generation, if for no other reason than the difference in biography associated with their dates of birth and background. The older generation were all born around the turn of the century. Horkheimer, born in 1895, and Pollock, born in 1894, were slightly older than the others. The youngest, Kirchheimer, was born in 1905. Although some were conscripted towards the end of the war, none belonged to the front generation whose life was marked by the trenches of the First World War. For the critical theorists, the beginning of their adult experience coincided more or less with the opening of the Weimar Republic amidst revolution, especially the defeat and suppression of those who wanted to go beyond the compromises of the Weimar Republic.

The frustration of revolutionary ambition was one common element of the Weimar experience for those on the left. Yet Leo Löwenthal also recalled a certain optimism. He noted:

that what was extraordinarily characteristic of the time after the First World War was, let me say, a kind of readiness to take up everything that was different. That was, first of all, of course, the socialist, if not actually communist motif. But that coupled itself at the same time with a rejection of everything that seemed bourgeois, including the bourgeois organization of science and bourgeois philosophy.⁹

Insofar as Löwenthal and his future colleagues exhibited such openness, they were met halfway by Weimar society. In all kinds of ways Weimar marked what the historian Detlev Peukert has characterized as 'the crisis of classical modernity'.¹⁰ According to Peukert, Weimar meant on the one hand conflict between the generations, attempts to create a new more rational economic order, social policies which foreshadowed the modern welfare state, the breakdown of traditional social melieux, the transition to mass culture and mass consumption and the development of '“modern” *life-styles*'.¹¹ On the other hand, Weimar witnessed a reversion to more conflictual policies in industrial relations, the reversal of concessions to the working class under the pressure of economic crisis and the demands of obdurate industrialists, the emergence of mass manipulation and mass mobilization by extreme political movements and the denunciation of modern lifestyles as symbolic of the Americanization of life.

In intellectual terms this was a world in which the unorthodox Marxists, Georg Lukacs, Karl Korsch and Ernst Bloch opened up new perspectives linking Marxism with philosophy and utopian thought. Freud's psychoanalysis offered yet another novel perspective and attracted Löwenthal, Fromm and Horkheimer. Even the more reserved Adorno sought to incorporate Freud into his unsuccessful *Habilitationsschrift* on *The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Doctrine of the Soul*.¹² It was also a world in which, when Adorno met Lukacs in 1925, he was shocked to find that Lukacs was already retracting precisely what Adorno found fascinating in the attempt to restore his reputation with Communist Party authorities.¹³ Others also found that putative intellectual mentors could prove unreliable. In varying degrees Neumann and Kirchheimer looked to the jurist and political scientist Carl Schmitt, while Marcuse started his *Habilitationsschrift* under Martin Heidegger. The attraction of both Schmitt and Heidegger was that, albeit in quite different ways, they seemed to deal directly with contemporary experience. As Marcuse later recalled, 'Philosophy was at that time totally empty, the academic scene was dominated by neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism, and then suddenly [Heidegger's] *Being and Time* appeared as a truly concrete philosophy. There, there was talk of "Being-there" [*Dasein*], of "existence", of "man", of "death", of "care". That seemed to concern us.'¹⁴ Insight into the paralysis of a sterile parliamentarianism, into the dissipation of individual identity amidst pressure to conform, crude utilitarianism and a naïve faith in technological progress, was what seemed to be offered by critics like Schmitt and Heidegger. Yet both Heidegger and Schmitt promptly lined up to praise the Nazi regime.

The openness and radicalism of the Weimar intellectual agenda, even if sometimes ambivalent and deceptive, contrasted sharply with the 1950s, the decade in which Habermas, who was born in 1929, embarked upon his academic career. The Federal Republic of Germany in these years was animated by an anti-communist ethos. The small Communist Party was

banned in 1956 and Marxism was marginalized in German Universities. Few professors would even openly acknowledge being socialist.¹⁵ The Institute of Social Research, now re-established in Germany, sought to conceal the radical past of its leading figures, not always successfully. Habermas recalled that 'from the academic standpoint, I grew up in a provincial German context, in the world of German philosophy, in the form of a declining Neo-Kantianism, of the German Historical School, of phenomenology, and also philosophical anthropology'.¹⁶ Like others who gravitated to the left, he had to reappropriate the texts of radical Marxism stage by stage, including the earlier works of Adorno and Horkheimer.¹⁷ Likewise he progressively incorporated realms of Anglo-Saxon theory into ever more complex theoretical structures. His trajectory is well summarized by Max Pensky:

The irony is that Habermas has become *the* intellectual of the Federal Republic by consistently championing precisely those universalistic democratic political ideals that seek to oust Germany's long-held and calamitous fascination with characteristically German forms of collective identity. Insofar as it takes its bearing from the particular historical and cultural *situation* of postwar Germany, Habermas's political and theoretical work is highly particular. And yet ... the dynamic that it derives from its own particular context has impelled Habermas's thought towards a thoroughgoing political universalism.¹⁸

To that extent the suggestion that the meaning and significance of critical theory has to be answered in local terms is both true and false. It is true in the sense that any attempt to appropriate a body of theory takes place against the background of culturally specific sets of assumptions, interests and sensitivities. From this perspective the notion that 'the response in Germany will differ from that in the United States' is both inevitable and unobjectionable. Yet it is also false. For the meaning and significance of critical theory only become apparent when the culturally specific sets of assumptions, interests and sensitivities of its authors are taken into account. As Pensky implicitly argues, that need not issue in any form of relativism. Indeed the culturally specific may itself drive theory beyond the contexts in which it originates. Part of the abiding fascination of the Frankfurt School consists precisely in that dynamic.

Another reason for this fascination lies in the interdisciplinary ambitions of the critical theorists. There is some dispute about how far the older generation held to the original programme of interdisciplinary research and indeed about whether it was ever viable at all.¹⁹ There is, however, a general sense in which the critical theorists sought to break through disciplinary barriers. Within all of the social sciences, or to be more precise, within dominant schools within the individual social sciences, there is a tendency not only to focus on diverse institutionally determined aspects of human

behaviour, but also a tendency to privilege specific modes of rationality and motivation. That, in turn, also leads to attempts to overcome these delimitations and typically to attempts to put back the whole man in place of the abstraction created with the promise of greater analytic rigour.

Although the image of the 'whole man' exerted some attraction upon the early Marcuse, the critical theorists were generally more discriminating. By seeking to link approaches to the capacities and competencies of individuals – and the deformations of individual capacities and competencies – with approaches to the public actions of individuals – and their unintended consequences – they not only transcended the disciplinary boundaries of their day, but also sought to break through the antithesis of agency and structure without sacrificing the distinction between the two. In that sense they belong with theorists like Anthony Giddens who have sought to refine Marx's insight that 'Men make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing.'²⁰

Much of course depends upon how much significance one ascribes to the weight of circumstance. The older generation of critical theorists have often been criticized for construing the weight of society as so oppressive that the scope of agency shrinks to a vanishing point. In some formulations that criticism is justified. There is, however, another side to that coin. This other side is a sensitivity to the self-defeating illusion that the individual is some safe point of refuge. According to the older generation, this notion took the shape of the cult of inwardness, that is, one of those traits favoured by those disposed towards the idea of a distinctive German political culture. Habermas has been much more assertive of the possibilities of human agency, but he too has warned against excessive expectations about individual capacities. It is arguable that such caution, though it can be criticized in detail, is relevant today. Amidst the growing literature on globalization and the increase in the risks associated with modern life, there is also an emphasis upon the ability and necessity of greater reflexivity in the modern world. The ability to choose, to treat one's identity as a project which can be purposefully constructed, is exalted. So far has this gone that Giddens can argue that 'in some circumstances of poverty, the hold of tradition has perhaps become even more thoroughly disintegrated than elsewhere. Consequently, the creative construction of lifestyle may become a particular characteristic feature of such situations.'²¹ As is suggested below, Habermas may have gone too far in emphasizing the constraints on identity formation, yet his caution may turn out to be preferable to the exaltation of the possibilities open to those who live in poverty. Indeed, the latter sounds suspiciously like the old cult of inwardness turned inside out. Where the cult of inwardness discerned some realm for personal development cut off from the wider world, the new imagery presents the world as a screen on which the individual can project himself, having chosen from the endless possibilities of a globalized world.

As is suggested in the conclusion to this book, there are other ways in which critical theory, and not only the most recent formulations of critical theory, are relevant to the contemporary agenda. Indeed, the difficulty is less in discerning that it is relevant than in choosing between the multiple claims for its relevance in so many areas. A similar difficulty lies in putting together a survey of this nature. Attempts at bibliographic stocktaking of works on Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno produced lists in excess of four hundred items.²² The publication of the collected works of several critical theorists, the 'rediscovery' of the importance of members of the Institute who had been relatively neglected in the initial waves of research, and the continuing vitality of the work of Jürgen Habermas, have all added to the voluminous literature on critical theory.

The sheer extent of the literature has meant that attempts to provide an overview of critical theory have become increasingly difficult. It is notable that since Martin Jay's pioneering and still invaluable *Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950*, surveys have tended to grow longer. David Held's *Introduction to Critical Theory* exceeded five hundred pages. The last major survey, *The Frankfurt School* by Rolf Wiggershaus, weighed in at over seven hundred pages in both the German and English editions, and this was published before Habermas's major work on democracy and the rule of law.²³ If one took an even broader approach to critical theory, and this is certainly legitimate, one would need several volumes of such length.²⁴ However, instead of producing an even longer book, I have tried to provide a shorter but well illuminated access route through the critical theory of the Institute and Habermas. That has meant making choices about what to include and what to exclude. Even a well illuminated access route does not necessarily allow one to peer down every side street and some major roads may also remain in the dark. In this case Adorno's aesthetic theory and work on music have been passed over, as has the work of Walter Benjamin, despite his importance to Adorno.²⁵ Karl Wittfogel has also been ignored.²⁶ Such omissions are not intended as judgements on the quality or intrinsic merits of what has been left out of this account. Considerations of space and the coherence of the argument in the individual chapters have determined the choice of material to be included. In contrast, the political context and significance of critical theory, issues of rationality, morality and identity have been emphasized, as has the idea of critical theory as a form of reflection upon the vicissitudes of bourgeois society. Readers already familiar with critical theory will readily detect the influence of Habermas in this choice of perspective, though it is a perspective that, I argue, allows us to make sense of much of the work of the older generation. I do not claim that other access routes lack their own virtues, though short of a much larger work each is bound to leave something in the dark. I have sought to combine a reasonably comprehensive and up-to-date treatment of the topics that I have selected

while conveying some sense of the nature of the arguments advanced by the critical theorists.

The account which follows has been structured with the intent of allowing those unfamiliar with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School to approach it in stages. Hence, Chapter 1, 'The Frankfurt School', begins with an account of the formation of the Institute of Social Research and introduces the critical theorists and their major works. Emphasis is placed upon the subsequent development of the Institute and on the political background against which the critical theorists wrote. A central idea here is their role as critics in the public sphere. Despite the sometimes difficult style in which some of them wrote, most notably, though in quite different ways, Adorno and Habermas, the critical theorists have been prominent public critics. In part that was a product of their unanticipated renown. That in turn was related to the fact that the Institute had intentionally preserved an aspect of German culture which the Nazi regime had sought to extirpate. As is explained below, Horkheimer and Adorno were selective in how much of that culture they put back into the public domain. Consideration of the political background induced a certain amount of what might be called self-censorship. Neither Marcuse nor Habermas seems to have felt such strong constraints, though Marcuse was clearly walking a tightrope in his support for student radicalism, being both encouraging yet warning against an enthusiasm which tipped over into self-indulgence.²⁷

Chapter 2, 'A Preliminary Outline of Critical Theory', draws on the work of the Frankfurt School's 'philosophers' in order to provide a broad framework for understanding critical theory. The first characteristic of critical theory identified in this chapter is, as Habermas put it, recognition of the 'embedding of theoretical accomplishments in the practical contexts of their genesis and employment'.²⁸ This should not be understood in a reductionist sense or be seen as implying relativism. It is directed against conceptions of philosophy, whether epistemological or moral, which have disdained entanglement in the contingency of the empirical world in favour of some supposedly higher reality. It is compatible with a fairly wide array of more specific strategies, with, for example, Adorno's persistent, and problematic, attempts to reveal the social origins of even the most abstract concepts of the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Edmund Husserl. It is also compatible with Marx's famous assertion that 'You cannot transcend philosophy without realizing it'.²⁹ Insistence upon the importance of the genesis and employment of ideas is, they argued, compatible with notions of truth and obligation, though they differed in how the validity of those notions was to be determined. The second broad characteristic concerns the relationship between human agency and social structures. The claim was that society had to be construed as the product of human agency yet as something that had escaped human control and confronted individual human agents as if it were comparable to natural processes. Although both the older generation and

Habermas agreed on the importance of the general dilemma, the older generation construed it in a more pessimistic and more utopian manner. That is, they placed more emphasis on the obduracy and opacity of social processes while holding out the prospect of a revolutionary transformation that would make them fully transparent and controllable. The weaker their faith in the possibility of this utopian transformation became, the more pessimistic they became. Habermas rejected the image of a fully transparent society while at the same time he argued that there is more scope for human agency than the older generation allowed. Despite this considerable difference in emphasis, the general point, that there are some social processes whose autonomy *vis-à-vis* human agents is neither necessary nor desirable, defines the scope of the critique. The final broad characteristic picked out in Chapter 2 is the interdisciplinary ambition of critical theory referred to earlier. Several issues are at stake here. One is that the complexity of the relation between agency and structure in the modern world cannot be dealt with from the perspective of any single discipline. But this is less important than another issue, namely the assumptions about human agency, including the cognitive and moral components of human agency, that are bound up with disputes within and between the different disciplines. Again, Habermas has been more cautious and arguably more discriminating than the older generation.

Chapters 3 and 4 serve the dual function of providing some illustration for the outline of critical theory and setting the critical theory of the Frankfurt School in the context of competing theories. It is true, and not entirely trivial, that any theory is more intelligible when placed in the context of what its author takes to be competing theories. With the Frankfurt School, however, there is an additional reason for this focus. Both their contemporary opponents and commentators have sometimes been surprised by the vehemence of the critical theorists. This is true even in the case of Habermas, who has more often shown a striking willingness to incorporate the insights of competing theories. Again choices have had to be made about which competing theories to include. The first group, dealt with in Chapter 3 under the heading 'The Failure of Metaphysics', might appear somewhat strange. For it includes those who sought to reassert the validity of metaphysics, notably Martin Heidegger, and the self-avowed postmodernists who have condemned the Western philosophical tradition precisely for its pursuit of grand metaphysical visions. Nevertheless, Habermas discerned some continuity between the two. The important issue here is that the critical theorists saw themselves as defenders of the Enlightenment. This is true of the older generation despite their own trenchant criticism of the Enlightenment project, most notably in Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.³⁰ It is their hostility to the Enlightenment that unites the opponents of critical theory, a hostility that the critical theorists saw as theoretically and practically injurious to viable conceptions of human agency.

Opposition to these opponents and to the positivists considered in Chapter 4 has also been a strong factor in the self-avowed unity of the Frankfurt School, despite their differences. As Habermas put it, 'The dual confrontation of the old Frankfurt School, against positivism on the one side and *Lebensphilosophie* and general metaphysical obscurantism on the other side, has sadly become contemporary again.'³¹ Strictly speaking, this was not entirely accurate. While *Lebensphilosophie* and obscurantism may have resurfaced in another guise, militant positivism as a philosophy of the natural and social sciences has faded away, as Habermas noted. Yet the encounter with positivism was a defining experience for the older generation and confrontation with positivist doctrines played a crucial role in Habermas's early work.

Chapter 5, 'The Attractions and Limits of Psychology', deals, as the title suggests, not with competing theories in a strict sense, though there is an element of that in the reaction of the older generation. Predominately, however, psychological theories, especially Freud's, were one of those innovations that Löwenthal noted. They also played an important role in the internal dynamics amongst the older generation. The early importance of Erich Fromm arose from his attempts to integrate Freudian theory into the Institute's interdisciplinary project, yet his interpretation of Freud and others also became the occasion of acrimonious dispute between Fromm on the one hand and Adorno and Marcuse on the other. At the same time Marcuse sought to develop a utopian vision on the basis of a reworking of Freud, a vision which made an important impression on Habermas in the mid-1950s. Yet Habermas did not attempt to pursue Marcuse's strategy. Instead, he integrated Freud into his criticism of positivism, using Freud to provide a model of critical theory. Although he never renounced his interpretation of Freud, he did not pursue this strategy either, turning instead to other psychologists. These disputes and fluctuations point to the difficulty which the Frankfurt School has had in integrating psychological theories. The difficulty is significant for two reasons. First, the promise of psychology was that it would help to explain the mediation between structure and agency, social processes and the individual. Second, psychological theories deal directly with motives, and motives, as is suggested in the conclusion, are a strong candidate for the future development of critical theory.

While the first four chapters are skewed towards an emphasis upon the broad context of critical theory, subsequent chapters have a more thematic character. Chapter 6, 'The Analysis of Bourgeois Society', argues for the centrality of this concept, despite what some regard as its archaic connotations. For the older generation the prominence of the idea of the decline of the bourgeoisie is warrant enough for this emphasis. Yet there is another reason, namely their concern for what Löwenthal called 'the increasing fragility of the bourgeois individual'.³² For all their revolt against 'everything that seemed bourgeois, including the bourgeois organization of science and

bourgeois philosophy', they did not want to cast out the virtues of the bourgeoisie along with its vices. That such virtues existed for Habermas too was evident in his criticism of the 'cynicism of bourgeois consciousness [which] has progressed to the point that the neo-conservative heirs to the bourgeois emancipation mistrust the latter's own achievements and entreat us not, please, to take too literally its acknowledged ideals'.³³ Although it is no longer fashionable to say so, these ideals were the product of a specific social class in a specific part of the world. To vary Pensky's argument about context and political universalism in Habermas's thought, the fact that these ideals had a specific origin has in no way restricted their universal validity.

Chapter 7, 'Paradoxes of Reason', focuses upon a specific aspect of bourgeois ambition as understood by the critical theorists, namely the claim to shape the world in accordance with the dictates of reason. The starting point for both the older generation and Habermas was the Hegelian version of this ambition. Of the older generation Marcuse clung most firmly to Hegel, though he conceded that the Hegelian system was flawed. Horkheimer and Adorno, though greatly influenced by Hegel in other respects, ruthlessly pursued the earthly origins of rationalist thought, linking it tightly to imperatives of self-preservation. Indeed so tightly did they construe this link that they found it increasingly difficult to keep in sight the possibility of using reason to check that imperative. It is argued, however, that one can accept much of their argument without drawing the conclusions that they did. Indeed, alternatives are easily discerned within their own work. The fact that they did not take up these alternatives is to be explained primarily by the historical context, that is, by the paralysing image of the Third Reich and by specific features of their account of bourgeois society. Habermas's alternative is not reliant upon the Hegelian edifice and offers a highly persuasive and nuanced strategy. Yet it does have one troubling aspect, that is the difficulty in linking reason and motivation.

One of the reasons contributing to the pessimistic logic of Adorno and Horkheimer was their methodological commitment to the principle of immanent critique. Such methodological considerations form the focus of Chapter 8, 'The Contours of Critical Theory'. The choice of title here, 'contours' not methodology, is deliberate. Though it is perfectly legitimate to treat the work of the Frankfurt School within the framework of 'methodologies', there is a risk that their explicit reservations on this issue are neglected. Again Löwenthal serves as a good guide. He denied that methodology had been their prime concern and insisted instead upon the relationship of theory to practice.³⁴ In fact their hopes in this respect were constantly frustrated. By contrast, Habermas adopted more modest ambitions for the role of theories, but precisely in order to create more room for a conception of political practice that was attainable by contemporary citizens and protected from the tutelage of privileged insight, which has so often plagued discussion of the relationship between theory and practice in

the Marxist tradition. Habermas took apart what the older generation bundled together in another sense. In quasi-Hegelian fashion the older generation construed immanent critique not just as an intellectual activity but as a kind of logical development of society and culture. Applied in the context of the paradoxes of reason, this contributed to the difficulty of taking up the alternatives to a fateful dialectic of enlightenment. By drawing distinctions between different types of critique and by insisting upon a normative foundation for critical theory, independent of the contingencies of history, Habermas has sought to avoid the difficulties that confronted the older generation.

During the decisive years for the older generation, that is from the 1920s to the 1940s, the prospects for meaningful activity by ordinary citizens were not auspicious. It was inevitable that they would focus upon the politics of authoritarian states. As discussed in Chapter 9, 'The Authoritarian and the Democratic State', that in turn meant a sensitivity to the arbitrary use of political power and the fragility of the rule of law when faced with powerful sectional interests and organized violence. The conception of politics primarily as naked power, the historical roots of the state in the use of force, are, however, aspects of only one conception of politics, albeit a conception for which it is all too easy to find illustration. One of Habermas's aims has been to break through the dichotomy between the idea of political integration by means of law on the one hand and political integration by means of power on the other. The twin aim has been to rescue the rule of law from its apparent impotence and, equally important, to circumvent the celebration of the executive force of the state associated with the ideas of Carl Schmitt. For citizens of democratic states, Habermas's normative argument is potentially attractive. Yet, despite an excessive tendency to discern the incipient return of the past in post-war democratic states, the older generation's concern with the dynamics of power in the authoritarian state is not without its merits.

One of the advantages of law according to Habermas's conception of the rule of law is that it provides a substitute for deficient moral motivation. Although the law should be consistent with morally motivated action, it is sufficient if the citizen obeys the law for purely instrumental reasons. This sets his theory apart from those that place a higher priority upon the existence of civic virtue as the basis of the polity. The issue of motivation is central to Chapter 10 on 'Morality and Interests'. The older generation usually exhibited more skepticism than Habermas about the validity of universal moral norms. Yet they were not dismissive of morality, which they saw as one of those phenomena of bourgeois society that reflected both its virtues and vices. The virtue lay, they argued, not in the universal norms but in the moral sentiments and interests that underlay them. This had the advantage of identifying strong sources of motivation. But it also had disadvantages. If recourse is made to interests, then it is not long before the need for a distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable interests emerges,

or, from the perspective of a critically orientated revolutionary ambition, the distinction between true and false interests. Similarly, sentiments are not always especially discriminating. Worse still, is the possibility that the desired sentiment is simply not present. It is argued in Chapter 10 that the older generation did not have any convincing answers to these dilemmas, dilemmas of which they were aware. Yet Habermas escapes from such dilemmas only by deliberately restricting the scope of moral norms and severing the link with sentiment and interest.

Although Habermas has warned against excessive expectations of the capacities of the individual, his conception of individual identity ascribes greater resources to the individual. It is argued in Chapter 11, 'Individual and Collective Identity', that Habermas provides a better solution to the criticism of the supposed self-sufficiency of the individual that motivated the older generation. Again the historical context explains their heavy emphasis upon the diminishing scope for the individual. The real contrast, however, emerges in the speculative account of identity formation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. There, the formation of individual identity is associated with deception and self-denial in the context of a moral vacuum. The analogous account offered by Habermas is associated with mutual understanding and role-playing in a normatively laden context. Divergent biographies also lie behind the different responses to collective identity. For the older generation the emergence of national fervour was associated with manipulative strategies. This is a potentially useful corrective to the naïve assumption of naturalness of national identity. However, it leaves little space for anything between the individual and full-blown cosmopolitanism. Habermas, who has also been highly sensitive to the dangers of national fervour, allows for a constitutional patriotism that makes weaker claims upon the individual.

It is probably already clear that on most issues I find Habermas's argument more persuasive than that of the older generation. Yet the older generation, stamped as they inevitably were by a darker period of history, can, by virtue of that fact, still offer useful insights into the dynamics of power. It is also probably clear that I am broadly sympathetic to the enterprise of critical theory. The chapters that follow are an attempt to make accessible what are sometimes complex and daunting texts. I have not hesitated to offer assessments of the arguments advanced by the critical theorists, but hope that I have not allowed these to become too obtrusive.

CHAPTER 1

The Frankfurt School

The circumstances and intellectual climate surrounding the foundation of the Institute for Social Research in 1923 were prophetic in more ways than one.¹ The main force behind the Institute was the young Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy Jewish businessman who had made his fortune in the grain trade in Argentina. There was, as many later noted, some irony in the fact that a capitalist funded the creation of the first Marxist research institute to be attached to a German University. In part this paradox can be explained by the fact that Felix concealed the full extent of his ambitions from his father, emphasizing the history of the labour movement and anti-Semitism instead of Marxism.

The immediate background to Felix's initiative was the First Marxist Work Week that took place in 1922. In reality this was a discussion group consisting mainly of young Marxists, many of whom would later acquire great fame, including Georg Lukacs and Karl Korsch. It had no official connection with any political party. The topics included socialization, which had been on the political agenda of the recently established Weimar Republic and on which Weil had written his doctorate. Another theme was the relationship between Marxism and philosophy on which Korsch was working. The intention had been that this would be the first of several such discussions, but this idea sank into the background as Felix Weil turned his attention to the foundation of an Institute.

Persuading his father to provide the substantial sums of money required was only the first hurdle. Felix also had to negotiate with the Ministry of Culture and the University of Frankfurt. The former proved easier. The Ministry was dominated by social democrats though Felix's negotiating partner, Carl Heinrich Becker, was not a social democrat. He was, however, committed to reform of German Universities and especially to breaking down their high level of specialization. With this aim in mind, Becker looked

favourably upon sociology, which he understood in very broad terms as a synthetic discipline incorporating political science and contemporary history. In 1929 Felix Weil claimed that in his negotiations with the Ministry he had made no secret of the fact that the Institute would be devoted to scientific Marxism. By his own account, Felix Weil proceeded more cautiously in his negotiations with the University. The University authorities were initially enthusiastic but soon became worried by the degree of autonomy that Felix Weil sought for the Institute. At the end of protracted negotiations, Felix secured most of what he wanted. By the time they were concluded, the man envisaged as Director of the Institute, Kurt Albert Gerlach, had died at the early age of 36 from diabetes.

Gerlach's successor was Karl Grünberg. Grünberg had started as a lawyer and political economist and founded the *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* (Archive for the History of Socialism and the Labour Movement) in 1910. In his inaugural speech he counterposed 'pessimists' and 'optimists'. The former, he said, claimed that the world was in ruins, but what really lay in ruins, was not the world as a whole but their world. He meant the world of the bourgeoisie. Grünberg placed himself in the camp of the optimists who held that they were in the middle of a 'transition from capitalism to socialism'.² Yet he was not a dogmatic Marxist and did not even believe in the formation of 'schools' of thought. Under his Directorship the focus of the Institute's work followed the *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*, and some of the Institute's members published substantial works on related themes, namely Henryk Grossmann, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems* (The Law of Accumulation and Collapse in the Capitalist System) and Friedrich Pollock, *Die planwirtschaftliche Versuche in der Sowjetunion 1917–1927* (Experiments in Economic Planning in the Soviet Union 1917–1927).³ The only substantial exception was Leo Löwenthal who joined the Institute in 1925/6 to work on the sociology of literature.

Both Grossmann and Pollock had by then attracted unwelcome attention. Grossmann had been under suspicion from the outset because of his temporary membership of the Polish Communist Party. As a Polish citizen he was particularly exposed and dependent on the sanction of the authorities for his residence in Germany. This was obtained only after Grünberg guaranteed that Grossmann 'will abstain from any political activity and will devote himself exclusively to scientific work'.⁴ Grossmann had to refer back to this guarantee when the Institute in general came under suspicion. The cause of this suspicion was the announcement of the plan to establish a publishing enterprise bearing the name of Marx–Engels within the Institute's building. The application, made by Pollock, as business manager, and Weil, created a furore that culminated in a police investigation of the backgrounds of the Institute's members. The outcome was that the police concluded that