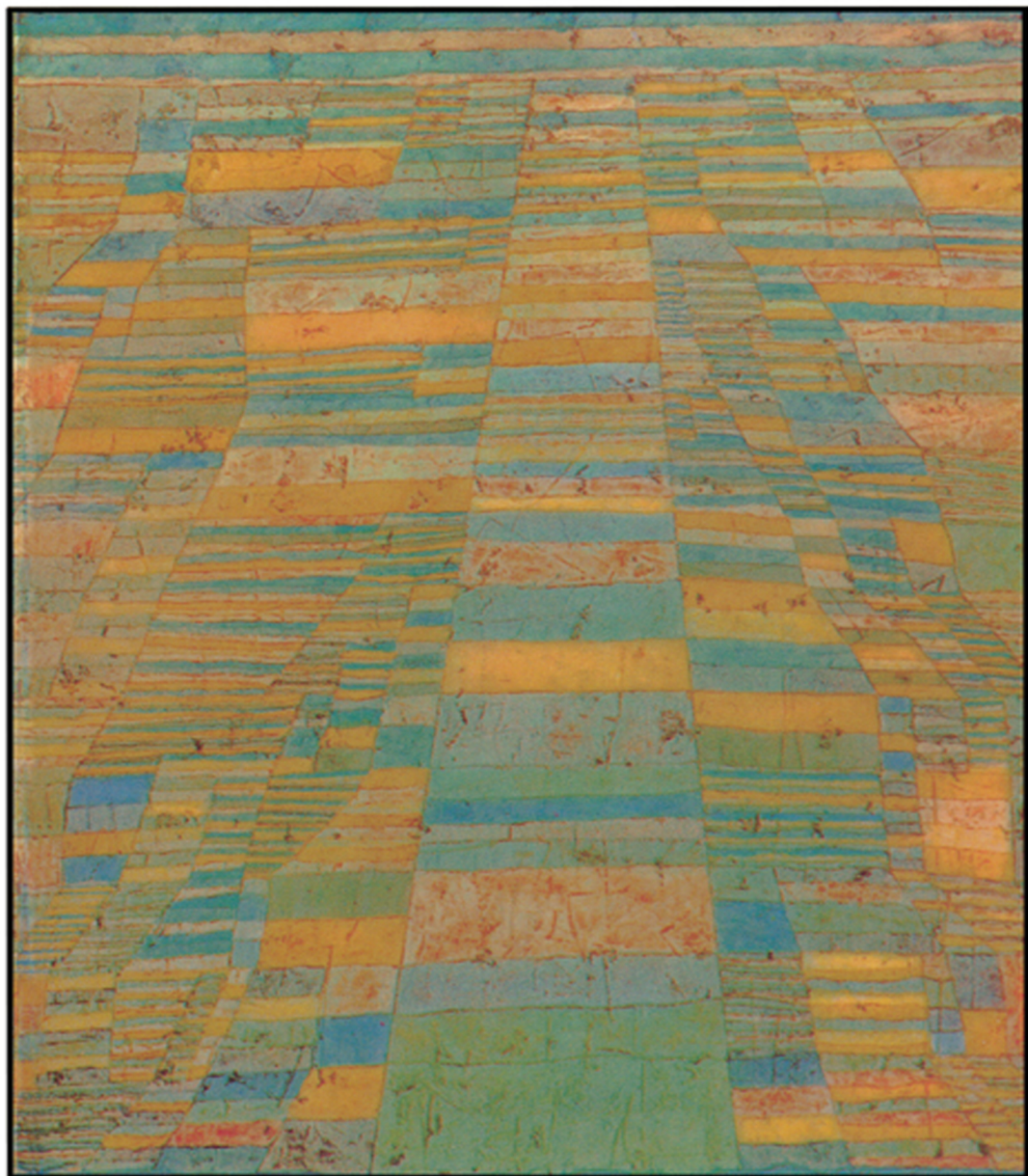


# Introduction to Critical Theory

Horkheimer to Habermas

David Held





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Polity Press

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First published by the University of California Press 1980.

First published in Great Britain by Hutchinson & Co. 1980.

First published by Polity Press in 1990

in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Reprinted 1990, 1995, 1997, 2004

*Editorial office:*

Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

*Marketing and production:*

Blackwell Publishers Ltd

108 Cowley Road

Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

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ISBN 0-7456-0769-1 (pbk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in Great Britain by Athenæum Press Ltd, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

**For Peter Held**





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# Acknowledgements

For the planning and writing of this book I am deeply indebted to Anthony Giddens. Without his generous help and criticism the quality of my work would have suffered greatly.

I would also like to express my debt to Jürgen Habermas for both the inspiration I have gained from his ideas and the time he took to answer questions.

I have, in addition, been enormously assisted by the thought and friendship of Lesley Bower, James Bradley, Paul Breines, John Forrester, Jeffrey Herf, Joel Krieger, Charles Lewis, Thomas McCarthy, Gillian Rose, James Schmidt, Larry Simon, John Thompson and Judy Wajcman. I am very grateful to Martin Albrow for his continuous concern and aid. Thanks are also due to the University of Wales, which gave me financial support while I was a Fellow of Politics and Sociology at University College, Cardiff.

Finally, my special thanks to Michelle Stanworth for her continuous help and encouragement.

## **Note about translation**

I have quoted frequently from existing English translations. When the English translation is poor I have either amended it, indicating this in brackets, or re-translated it, indicating this by reference to the German text. The German text is also indicated when quotations are made from hitherto untranslated works. The initial reference to a German work is followed by a translation of its title in brackets.

# Introduction

The writings of what one may loosely refer to as a 'school' of Western Marxism – critical theory – caught the imagination of students and intellectuals in the 1960s and early 1970s. In Germany thousands of copies of the 'school's' work were sold, frequently in cheap pirate editions. Members of the New Left in other European countries as well as in North America were often inspired by the same sources. In other parts of the world, for example in Allende's Chile, the influence of these texts could also be detected. In the streets of Santiago, Marcuse's name often took a place alongside Marx and Mao in the political slogans of the day. Critical theory became a key element in the formation and self-understanding of the New Left. Many of those committed to new radical protest movements – to the struggles against imperialism, the private appropriation of scarce resources and the many constraints on personal initiative – found in the works of this 'school' an intriguing interpretation of Marxist theory and an emphasis on issues and problems (mass culture, for instance, or the family and sexuality) which had rarely been explored by more orthodox approaches to Marxism.

Despite the break-up and repression of the movements of the sixties, the writings of critical theorists have been the subject of continuing controversy – controversy which has centred on their theoretical and political merits. Partly because of their rise to prominence during the political turmoil of the 1960s, and partly because they draw on traditions which are rarely studied in the Anglo-American world, the works of these authors are frequently misunderstood. Yet, in their writings, they opposed various schools of thought now being brought into disrepute (positivism, for example) and did so more cogently than many critics today. The critical theorists directed attention to areas such as the state and mass culture, areas which are only just beginning to receive

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the study they require. Their engagement with orthodox Marxism on the one hand, and with conventional approaches to social science on the other, provided a major challenge to writers from both perspectives. Critical of both capitalism and Soviet socialism, their writings pointed to the possibility – a possibility often sought after today – of an alternative path for social development.

In this book I hope to explicate and assess central aspects of critical theory. My intentions are threefold: first, to sketch the background and some of the main influences on critical theory's development; second, to expound, around a number of themes, its main theoretical and empirical concerns; third, to demonstrate and assess the assumptions and implications of the work of its key exponents. I have not written an intellectual history: this has, in part, been accomplished.<sup>1\*</sup> Nor have I provided an account of critical theory which examines its development year by year. Clearly, one cannot entirely escape intellectual history or chronological documentation. But my emphasis is on an interpretation and elaboration of the ideas which were at the centre of the 'school' and I have, accordingly, focused on *themes* – the themes which gave the work its distinct character. With the exceptions of the introductory chapters to Parts 1 and 2, I have concentrated in each chapter on a key area of concern to the critical theorists.

Critical theory, it should be emphasized, does *not* form a unity; it does not mean the same thing to all its adherents. The tradition of thinking which can be loosely referred to by this label is divided into at least two branches – the first centred around the Institute of Social Research, established in Frankfurt in 1923, and the second around the more recent work of Jürgen Habermas. The Institute's key figures were Max Horkheimer (philosopher, sociologist and social psychologist), Friedrich Pollock (economist and specialist on problems of national planning), Theodor Adorno (philosopher, sociologist, musicologist), Erich Fromm (psychoanalyst, social psychologist), Herbert Marcuse (philosopher), Franz Neumann (political scientist, with particular expertise in law), Otto Kirchheimer (political scientist, with expertise in law), Leo Lowenthal (student of popular culture and literature), Henryk Grossmann (political economist), Arkadij Gurland (economist, sociologist), and, as a member of the 'outer circle' of the Institute, Walter Benjamin (essayist and literary critic). The Institute's

\*Notes and references appear in a section beginning on page 409.



membership is often referred to as the Frankfurt school. But the label is a misleading one; for the work of the Institute's members did not always form a series of tightly woven, complementary projects. To the extent that one can legitimately talk of a school, it is only with reference to Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Lowenthal and Pollock<sup>2</sup> – and it is for these five men that I have reserved the term 'Frankfurt school'.<sup>3</sup> When referring to the Institute of Social Research, however, I include all those affiliated to the Institute.

Jürgen Habermas's recent work in philosophy and sociology recasts the notion of critical theory. Others who have contributed to this enterprise include Albrecht Wellmer (philosopher), Claus Offe (political scientist and sociologist) and Klaus Eder (anthropologist).

Despite a certain unity of purpose, there are major differences between the members of the Institute of Social Research and Habermas and his associates, as there are between most of the individuals within each camp. My main concern is with the thought of the Frankfurt school – with Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse in particular – and with Habermas. These four men are the central figures of critical theory. I refer to them when writing about the 'critical theorists'.

At a general level it may be said that the founders of critical theory preserved many of the concerns of German idealist thought – concerns, for example, with the nature of reason, truth and beauty – but reformulated the way in which these had been previously understood. They placed history at the centre of their approach to philosophy and society. Yet the issues they addressed went beyond a focus on the past and embraced future possibilities. Following Marx, they were preoccupied, especially in their early work, with the forces which moved (and might be guided to move) society towards rational institutions – institutions which would ensure a true, free and just life. But they were aware of the many obstacles to radical change and sought to analyse and expose these. They were thus concerned both with interpretation and transformation.

Each of the critical theorists maintained that although all knowledge is historically conditioned, truth claims can be rationally adjudicated independently of immediate social (e.g. class) interests. They defended the possibility of an independent moment of criticism. They also all attempted to justify critical theory on a

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non-objectivistic and materialistic foundation.<sup>4</sup> The extension and development of the notion of critique, from a concern with the conditions and limits of reason and knowledge (Kant), to a reflection on the emergence of spirit (Hegel), and then to a focus on specific historical forms – capitalism, the exchange process (Marx) – was furthered in the work of the Frankfurt theorists and Habermas. They sought to develop a critical perspective in the discussion of all social practices.

The work of the critical theorists revolves around a series of critical dialogues with important past and contemporary philosophers, social thinkers and social scientists. The main figures of the Frankfurt school sought to learn from and synthesize aspects of the work of, among others, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Lukács and Freud. For Habermas certain traditions of Anglo-American thought are also important, especially linguistic philosophy and the recent philosophies of science. He has sought to mediate between and integrate a variety of seemingly quite different approaches. The motivation for this enterprise appears similar for each of the theorists – the aim being to lay the foundation for an exploration, in an interdisciplinary research context, of questions concerning the conditions which make possible the reproduction and transformation of society, the meaning of culture, and the relation between the individual, society and nature. While there are differences in the way they formulate questions, the critical theorists believe that through an examination of contemporary social and political issues they could contribute to a critique of ideology and to the development of a non-authoritarian and non-bureaucratic politics.

### **The historical context**

In order to grasp the axes around which critical theory developed it is essential to understand the turbulent events which were at the root of its founders' historical and political experience. These events affected critical theory both directly and indirectly. In particular, it is worth tracing the main occurrences of the inter-war years which had a profound impact on the Frankfurt school and Habermas.

In the century up to the first world war class conflict was successfully contained by the German nation-state and by the world's other major industrial and capitalist nations. But it is clear that

what was contained was also only temporarily staved off. In the next twenty years there was an explosion of events which shook to the core many of Europe's oldest political systems. February 1917 saw the fall of Tsarism in Russia. Nine months later the Bolshevik Party seized power. The success and excitement of the revolution reverberated far beyond the boundaries of Russia. The unity of theory and revolutionary practice, central to the Marxist programme, seemed within reach.

The two years following the end of the first world war, in 1918, testified to the strength and spontaneity of the forces of change. Ten days after the naval mutinies began in Kiel and Wilhelms-haven the foundations of the German imperial system were undermined. On November 9 a republic was declared in Berlin; a coalition of Majority Social Democrats and Independent Social Democrats took office. The Majority Social Democrats were determined to follow a constitutional course toward parliamentary government and a negotiated peace settlement. A large proportion of the war-weary masses, however, shared goals which went beyond a 'republic, democracy and peace'.<sup>5</sup> A large network of workers' and soldiers' councils quickly developed, demanding far-reaching changes in the economy and the military (including socialization of a vast proportion of the means of production and the abolition of military rank). In Austria, Hungary and Italy, meanwhile, a parallel set of events was taking place. In Hungary a Soviet Republic was created after the abdication of the bourgeois government. Workers' councils were quickly formed as they were in Austria and Italy. Large-scale protests and strikes were frequent in Austria. In Italy they culminated in a general strike and extensive factory occupations (centred in and around Turin).<sup>6</sup>

The more immediate triumphs of the Russian revolutionaries were in marked contrast to the fate of the radical and revolutionary movements of central and southern Europe. Despite the devastation of the war, the strategies of revolutionary socialist movements proved inadequate against the resources and organization of the dominant classes. By the end of 1920 they had been checked. The momentum of the Russian revolution – weakened by foreign interventions, blockades and civil war – had been halted. The revolution was isolated. In the context of the fragmentation and repression of European socialist movements, the pressures of encirclement by Western and Eastern powers, the lack of

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resources as a result of the war, economic blockade and general economic underdevelopment, the Russian revolution itself began to deviate from the path Lenin had hoped to maintain. Lenin died in 1924. Three years later Stalin's victory was complete.

As the process of 'Stalinization' advanced in Russia, with the expansion of centralized control and censorship, the process of subjugating many European Communist parties to Moscow leadership was completed. (The 'Bolshevization' of the Communist International had already laid the foundation for the hegemony of Moscow in the Third International.) Within Germany, the Communist Party, the KPD, while steadily growing in membership throughout the 1920s, became increasingly ineffective. The party's very existence constituted a continuous threat to those who sought to undermine the constitution from the right. But its adherence to the 'International-Bolshevik line', along with frequent changes of strategy and tactics, the dogmatic application of a crude theory to rapidly changing circumstances and the virulent attacks on other parties of the left and on the leadership of the trade union movement, all contributed to its failure to win and organize a majority of the working class. The revolutionary slogans of the KPD often appeared empty in the context of the social divisions of the Weimar republic.

The divisions within the German working class were the product of a long and complex history. An indication of their origin can be found in the history of the Second International and the German Social Democratic Party. Marxists of the Second International had frequently presented socialism as a historically necessary outcome of the development of capitalism. The revolution was held to be on its way. But as one commentator put it, 'a revolutionary party which is content to wait for the Revolution gradually ceases to be a revolutionary party'. This was precisely what the German Social Democratic Party ceased to be. Throughout the last three decades of the pre-war years it had constantly grown in size, commanding a massive vote in the immediate post-war elections. Its rhetoric was Marxist but its programme increasingly reformist. 'If in the future', Eduard Bernstein had written in 1898, 'some event were to place the power in the hands of Social Democracy, the gaping difference between the presuppositions of our theory and reality would appear in all its full dimensions.'<sup>8</sup> In 1914, the Social Democrats – formally committed to an international struggle against capitalism – voted for the war credits requested by the Emperor. In the next

six years the party's fate was established. In 1917 the left wing of the party formed an independent group. During the two years following the war the Social Democratic leadership supervised the crushing of the radical and revolutionary movements. They now placed complete reliance on 'formalistic legality'.<sup>9</sup> They not only failed to take advantage of the opportunities to further the democratization and socialization of production in Germany but also, in the years to come, 'unwittingly', as Franz Neumann has shown, 'strengthened the monopolistic trends in German industry' and failed 'to root out the reactionary elements in the judiciary and civil service or limit the army to its proper constitutional role'.<sup>10</sup>

In the next decade conflict in Germany did not, of course, diminish. The loyalties of the working class were split between the socialist, communist and national socialist parties. The experience of the lost war, a frustrating peace settlement, massive inflation, steadily rising unemployment (with well over six million registered as unemployed in 1931), and the appearance in 1929 of the worst international capitalist crisis, intensified and complicated all forms of social and class struggle. There were only brief periods of economic recovery and political stability.

The assaults on Weimar democracy came from many sides. Counter-revolutionary forces were growing in resources and skills. From 1924 to 1933 European history was engulfed by the rapid emergence of Nazism and fascism. The liberal and democratic parties proved ineffective against the organization and determination of these forces. The Communists, although often courageous, fought mistimed battles with too small and fragmented forces. Hitler exploited his chances as did Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain. In January 1933 the Nazis seized power. Across central and southern Europe coalitions between capital, 'big agrarians', bureaucracy and the military were victorious. All independent socialist and liberal organizations were suppressed. On 22 August 1939 the Hitler-Stalin pact was signed. It was the end of an era and, for all those committed to the struggle against capitalism, a desperate irony.

### **The character of critical theory**

For those inspired by Marxism, but shaken by events of the 1920s and 1930s, there were fundamental questions to answer. It was clear that Marxists who had maintained either that socialism was

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an inevitable part of 'history's plan', or that correct social action would follow merely from the promulgation of the correct party line, had espoused positions which were misleading and far too simple. While adherents to various forms of determinism had failed to grasp the way 'men make their own history', adherents to the doctrine of the centrality of 'the party' underestimated the way the making of history was affected by circumstances 'directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'. Political events and revolutionary practice had not coincided with the expectations derived from the Marxist theory of the day. The following questions became urgent: How could the relationship between theory and practice now be conceived? Could theory preserve hope for the future? In changing historical circumstances how could the revolutionary ideal be justified? In order to understand the response of the Frankfurt school and Habermas to these issues, it is useful to look briefly at the thought of two men – Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch – whose own attempts to address these problems opened up new perspectives in Marxism. Although what follows in this book will make evident that Lukács and Korsch are by no means the only significant influences on critical theory, their writings set an important precedent for the critical theorists.

In the early 1920s Lukács and Korsch, active members of the Hungarian and German Communist parties respectively, wrote major works calling into question the dominant Marxist orthodoxies – the established doctrines of the Communist and Social Democratic parties.<sup>11</sup> The publication of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* and Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* met with a number of bitter polemical attacks. Some of the harshest criticism came from leading spokesmen of the Communist International itself.<sup>12</sup> In the years that followed neither Lukács nor Korsch found it easy to continue his efforts to reappraise Marxism. Korsch was eventually expelled from the KPD in 1926 for his 'deviations', while Lukács, threatened with similar treatment, wrote works to appease his critics. Lukács gradually capitulated to orthodoxy and moved to the Soviet Union. Korsch, after trying to maintain an independent political group, was driven by the Nazi victory into exile and isolation in Scandinavia and the United States.

These two men, however, by challenging orthodoxy and by rethinking Marxism in relation to contemporary events, created a basis for a re-examination of Marxist theory and practice. Both men believed that Marx's writings contain concepts, theories and

principles which are violated by orthodox Marxism; and both sought to elaborate and develop this dimension of Marx's enterprise. Furthermore, both believed that this process of elaboration and development requires an examination of the origins and nature of Marx's thought and an engagement with those thinkers, whether they be Marxists or non-Marxists, who can aid the process of reconstruction.

The early work of Lukács and Korsch took issue, specifically, with the 'determinist' and 'positivist' interpretation of historical materialism – with its emphasis on unalterable stages of historical development (driven by a seemingly autonomous economic 'base') and on the suitability of the methodological model of the natural sciences for understanding these stages.<sup>13</sup> The latter interpretation of Marx corresponds, they argued, to a form of thought which Marx himself had rejected – 'contemplative materialism', a materialism which neglected the central importance of human subjectivity. The traditional standpoint of orthodox Marxism, they maintained, fails to grasp the significance of examining both the objective conditions of action and the ways in which these conditions are understood and interpreted. By underplaying human subjectivity and consciousness Marxists missed the very factors which were so central in preventing the emergence of a revolutionary agent. Since Lukács's work was extremely influential on the critical theorists the way in which he developed these themes is of special interest.<sup>14</sup>

Historical materialism, on Lukács's account, has no meaning outside the struggle of the proletariat. There is no objective reality which social theorists can passively reflect upon; for at every moment they are part of the societal process as well as 'its potential critical self-awareness'. The theorist is seen as a participant in a continuous class conflict, explicating objective possibilities immanent in the dynamic of class relations.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, Marxism's claim to objectivity and truth, like that of all methods, cannot be separated from the practices of a particular social class. But, Lukács argued, 'the standpoint of the proletariat' and consequently Marxism transcends the 'one-sidedness' and distortions of other social theories and class ideologies. For the proletariat is the class on whose genesis capitalist society rests. The process of its own *Bildung* (formation, cultivation) is the key to the constitution of capitalism. As the pivot in the capitalist totality it has the capacity to see and comprehend the essential social relations and pro-

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cesses.<sup>16</sup> In Lukács's opinion, an opinion he buttressed with Hegelian categories, the 'standpoint of the proletariat', society's 'subject-object', is the only basis from which the totality can be grasped.

Lukács's position is predicated on the existence of a class whose social position is said to be unique – unique because it has the capacity both to understand and change society radically. Even if (mass) revolutionary working-class practice does not exist, one is still able to talk of its objective possibility; for it is, on Lukács's assessment, contained within the dynamic of the historical process. The purpose of theory, therefore, is to analyse and expose the hiatus between the actual and the possible, between the existing order of contradictions and a potential future state. Theory must be oriented, in short, to the development of consciousness and the promotion of active political involvement.<sup>17</sup>

One of the chief barriers to revolutionary consciousness is, Lukács contended, 'reification' – the appearance of people's productive activity as something strange and alien to them. Drawing on Marx's analysis of the structure of commodities in *Capital*, Simmel's account of the commodification of culture, and Weber's work on rationalization, Lukács attempted to show how reification permeates all spheres of life. Although reification involves a process whereby social phenomena take on the appearance of things, it is not, he stressed, simply a subjective phenomenon; rather it arises from the productive process which reduces social relations themselves to thing-like relations – reduces, that is, the worker and his or her product to commodities. Reification is a socially necessary illusion – both accurately reflecting the reality of the capitalist exchange process and hindering its cognitive penetration. Lukács's analysis sought to assess and criticize this. The problem of commodities, of reification, he argued, was 'the central structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects'.<sup>18</sup> It determined the objective and subjective forms of bourgeois society.<sup>19</sup>

It will become evident in the course of what follows that critical theorists retained many of Lukács's concerns: the interplay between history and theory, the importance of theory as a 'promotive factor in the development of the masses', the relation of production and culture, the effects of reification and the way each aspect of society contains within itself 'the possibility of unravelling the social whole or totality'. The terms in which Lukács cast many of his interests were, however, often regarded unsympathetically by the critical



theorists. For instance, they were extremely hostile (with the exception perhaps of Horkheimer in the middle 1930s) to the 'standpoint of the proletariat' as the criterion of truth.<sup>20</sup> They rejected the Hegelian language in which Lukács couched much of his argument and recast the concept of reification. But despite these differences, the impetus Lukács gave to the interrogation of orthodox Marxism and to the reworking of Marx's ideas was built upon by each of the critical theorists.<sup>21</sup> Although Lukács recanted, they continued the project of examining the origins of Marx's thought, exploring Marx's works for dimensions that had been previously neglected and assessing the relevance of the Marxist tradition in light of contemporary events.

In furthering these general aims the critical theorists drew upon a variety of intellectual currents. For example, they looked (as Lukács had done before them) to German idealism, and to Kant and Hegel in particular, to retrieve the philosophical dimensions of the Marxist tradition. Criticisms of German idealism – those of Marxists as well as of non-Marxists like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche – were explored in order to come to grips with idealist views. Marx's early works, especially the *1844 Manuscripts* (which were unavailable to Lukács), were examined both to assess Hegel's impact on his thought and to help uncover the critical basis of Marx's ideas. The contributions of, among others, Heidegger and Husserl were assessed as part of a general engagement with contemporary philosophy. For the reinvestigation of human subjectivity Freud's works were regarded as of paramount importance. Weber's writings, especially in the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization, were thought to be key contributions to contemporary sociology – especially in light of the absence of serious discussion of these and related issues in the Marxist tradition. There was also an extraordinary cross-fertilization of ideas among the members of the Institute of Social Research and among the critical theorists themselves. Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, had a major impact on each other. Benjamin's ideas had a strong influence on Adorno. Marcuse and Adorno had a lasting effect on Habermas.

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### A negative definition of critical theory

It has often been said that because the critical theorists frequently criticized the works of others, it is easier to say what critical theory is not rather than what it is. There is enough truth in this comment to allow us to begin by defining critical theory negatively. Indeed, this may help to dispel a number of common misunderstandings. Although the thought of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas is steeped in the traditions of Kant and Hegel, only selected aspects of their ideas were employed. The critical theorists rejected Kant's transcendental method and many aspects of Hegel's philosophy. For example, against Hegel's claim that history is the process of reason (*Vernunft*) coming to be in self-consciousness – that reason unfolds in practice reconciling thought and object, freedom and necessity – they sought to show the extent to which human reason is still 'unreasonable': that is, tied to material conditions and practices often only dimly reflected in human consciousness.

They all rejected a philosophy of identity. Such a philosophy implies an actual or potential unity between subject and object. They attacked what they saw as Hegel's commitment to an idealist identity theory; the historical process could not be reduced to the manifestations of an absolute subject, a World Spirit, 'developing through individual acts' towards a given or potential unity of the Idea and the world, a state in which the subject fully appropriates its other – the object. They were also critical of what one might call a materialist identity theory propagated by orthodox Marxists; history could not be read as the manifestation of economic laws inexorably moving its carriers towards socialism or communism, a state in which the subject is enveloped by the 'objective workings' of history. They all rejected dialectical materialism. They were also critical of Marxist humanism.<sup>22</sup> They did not maintain, as Göran Therborn has suggested, that society is simply 'reducible to its creator-subject, and history is the continuous unfolding of this subject'.<sup>23</sup> As Horkheimer wrote,

There can be no formula which lays down once and for all the relationship between the individual, society and nature. Though history cannot be seen as a uniform unfolding of human nature, the opposite fatalistic formula that the course of events is dominated by necessity independent of Man is equally naive.<sup>24</sup>

Hence one can find in their work numerous objections to the

abstract humanism of Feuerbach and to the positions established by philosophical anthropologists, existentialists and phenomenologists. They were united in a rejection of the positivist understanding of science and a correspondence theory of truth.

It is, moreover, wrong to characterize their work as simply replacing Marxist political economy with general concerns about social philosophy, culture and social psychology.<sup>25</sup> Neumann, Pollock and, more recently, Habermas have all written extensively on the economy, the polity and their relations. It is also an error to imply that they pursued these issues without regard for empirical research. They have contributed extensively to empirical inquiry. It is, furthermore, mistaken to suggest that the Frankfurt school's work merely comprises a series of fragments – a motley collection of writings. Horkheimer and Adorno frequently chose to express themselves through aphorisms and essays, but I shall argue that the Frankfurt school as a whole developed a systematic account of the nature of capitalist society.

Critics on the left have charged critical theory with a failure to come to terms with practical political questions. This is a complex issue and one that will be discussed later. Here it is simply important to note that for the early Horkheimer, as for Lukács, the practical role of the theorist was to articulate and help develop a latent class consciousness. In Horkheimer's later work the task of the critical theorist was often conceived as that of 'remembering', 'recollecting' or capturing a past in danger of being forgotten – the struggle for emancipation, the reasons for this struggle, the nature of critical thinking itself. But the critical theorists were not just concerned with explicating what was latent or remembering the past; they contributed new emphases and ideas in their conception of theory and practice. Marcuse's defence, for instance, of personal gratification (against those revolutionaries who maintained an ascetic and puritanical outlook); individual self-emancipation (against those who would simply argue that liberation follows from changes in the relations and forces of production); fundamental alternatives to the existing relationship between humanity and nature (against those who would accelerate the development of existing forms of technology) – all constitute a significant departure from traditional Marxist doctrines. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse never advanced, however, a rigid set of political demands. For it is a central tenet of their thought, as of Habermas's also, that the process of liberation entails a process of *self-emancipation* and

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*self-creation*. Nor did they conceive the relation of theory and practice as a given and unchanging one. Time entered into their conception of this relation as a crucial dimension; it is a historical relation – a relation determined, like all others, by a world in development and flux.

The following eight chapters, which comprise Part One of the book, provide an account of the Frankfurt school. Chapter 1 is a brief history of the Institute of Social Research. Chapters 2–5 expound critical theory's relation to political economy, aesthetics, psychoanalysis and the philosophy of history. The subsequent three chapters focus on the conceptions of critical theory of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. Part Two begins with a summary of Habermas's work and a discussion of its relation to the Frankfurt school. Chapter 10 concentrates on Habermas's social theory, while Chapters 11 and 12 explicate his approach to epistemology and methodology. In Part Three, Chapters 13 and 14 offer an assessment of the contributions and limitations of the various branches of critical theory. They also include an appraisal of some of the major objections that have been raised against the work of the critical theorists.

**Part One**

# **The Frankfurt School**



# 1 The formation of the Institute of Social Research

The Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute of Social Research), founded in Germany in 1923, was the home of the Frankfurt school. The Institute was established as a result of an initiative by the son of a wealthy grain merchant, Felix Weil, who procured the means to ensure that the Institute could develop with minimum external pressures and constraints; and, in fact, though formally attached to the University of Frankfurt, its private funds did give it considerable autonomy.<sup>1</sup>

When Horkheimer assumed the directorship of the Institute in 1930 most of the figures who later became famous as members of the Frankfurt school began to contribute to the Institute's activities. Although the orientation of the Institute changed markedly under Horkheimer's influence, the experience and concerns of its first director – Carl Grünberg, a figure relatively unknown today – were important to the overall development of the Institute.

## **The Institute under Grünberg, 1923–9**

Grünberg is considered by many to be one of the founders of the Austro-Marxist tradition. After a professorship in law and political science at the University of Vienna, he became, on appointment to Frankfurt, the first 'avowed Marxist to hold a chair at a German University'.<sup>2</sup> He was responsible for establishing and editing the first major European journal of labour and socialist history – *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* [Archive for the History of Socialism and the Workers' Movement] or *Grünbergs Archiv*, as it was often called – which transferred, with Grünberg, to Frankfurt.<sup>3</sup>

Marxism was made the inspiration and theoretical basis of the Institute's programme. The regular contacts and exchanges with the Marx–Engels Institute in Moscow (then under the directorship

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of David Ryazanov), symbolized the close ties between the Institute of Social Research and the traditions of classical Marxism. The two institutes jointly sponsored the publication of the first volume of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* [Marx-Engels Complete Edition].

Many of the scholars Grünberg brought together were deeply committed to political involvement. Among his assistants were members of the Communist Party – Karl August Wittfogel, Franz Borkenau and Julian Gumperz – as well as members of the Social Democratic Party. Karl Korsch was also active in the Institute's affairs in its early years, participating in seminars and contributing to the *Archiv*. But the Institute remained officially independent of party affiliations and was a centre for scholars of many political persuasions. As one of its members, Henryk Grossmann, wrote:

It is a *neutral* institution at the university, which is accessible to everyone. Its significance lies in the fact that for the first time everything concerning the workers movement in the most important countries of the world is gathered. Above all, sources (congress minutes, party programs, statutes, newspapers and periodicals). . . . Whoever in Western Europe wishes to write on the currents of the workers movement *must* come to us, for we are the only gathering point for it.<sup>4</sup>

However, the distinctiveness of the brand of Marxism initiated by Institute of Social Research can best be detected in Grünberg's 1924 inaugural address. In this paper Grünberg emphasized his opposition to the trend in German universities toward teaching at the expense of research and toward the production of 'mandarins' only capable of serving the existing balance of power and resources. Marxism, Grünberg argued, as a method of scientific research and as a philosophical system, must be used to counter these tendencies.<sup>5</sup>

On Grünberg's account, the object domain of historical materialism is real social events: 'social life in its ceaseless and ever-recurring transformations'. The goal of research is to grasp 'the ultimate causes of these processes of transformation and the laws according to which they evolve'. The method of research is 'eminently inductive'. But its results claim 'no absolute validity in time and space . . . only relative, historically conditioned meaning'.<sup>6</sup> In contradistinction to positions held by some members of the Second International, Grünberg's Marxism is not a straightforward monistic materialism, maintaining a simple correspondence theory of



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truth and claiming to reveal transhistorical laws. The categories of materialism, Grünberg maintained, do not grasp universal, unchanging truths; they reflect and describe a dynamic and developing society the future of which is not guaranteed. Social life, he believed, could be understood by uncovering the laws operative in a given economy. Marxism could only develop as a theory of production – as a theory of the *changing forms* of economic life.

Grünberg's Institute sought to combine concrete historical studies with theoretical analysis. His journal published articles on a multitude of topics in the history of capitalist and socialist economies and workers movements. Historians, economists, philosophers, among others, were represented in the journal and at Institute seminars. Works by as diverse figures as Ryazanov, Grossmann, Wittfogel, Korsch and Lukács were printed in the *Archiv*.

The prescription for social explanation offered by Grünberg was not, however, adhered to by the central figures of critical theory; they rejected the idea that all social phenomena were in essence a mere 'reflex' of the economic. Likewise a certain optimistic determinism which often found expression in his work, suggesting a progression in the development of social institutions from 'the less perfect to the more perfect', was not shared by most of those who later became critical theorists. But the strong emphasis Grünberg placed on historically oriented empirical research, carried out in the context of Marx's insights into political economy, was to become a crucial part of their frame of reference.

In 1929, at the age of 68, Grünberg retired. The following year Max Horkheimer was installed as the Institute's director. Within a short period of time he had a major impact on the type of work executed by the Institute's members.

### **The Institute and its programme under Max Horkheimer**

Horkheimer gathered around him a diverse group with an extraordinary array of talents. Within a few years the new entrants to the Institute included Fromm, Marcuse and Neumann, while Pollock and Lowenthal, both of whom had been members since the 1920s, took on more prominent positions. The composition of the Institute under Horkheimer corroborates Benjamin's assertion that 'one cannot say that the group . . . was founded on a specific

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field. . . . [Rather] . . . it was based on the idea that the teaching about society can only be developed in the most tightly integrated connection of disciplines; above all, economics, psychology, history and philosophy'.<sup>7</sup> In 1935 Benjamin himself became a research associate of the Institute's Paris branch and received a stipend.<sup>8</sup>

Horkheimer's inaugural address, 'The present situation of social philosophy and the tasks of an Institute of Social Research', delivered in 1931, expressed both continuities and breaks with Grünberg's programme.<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer believed, as Grünberg had done before him, in the 'dictatorship of the director': the director of the Institute should take a central role in all Institute activities. Grünberg's concern for both theoretical analysis and empirical investigations was also at the heart of Horkheimer's interests. However, Horkheimer sought to discuss the role of theory and social research in a more radically historical and theoretical mode. The main theme of his address was the relation between social philosophy and science. Horkheimer characterized social philosophy as an attempt to interpret the fate of human beings 'insofar as they are parts of a community, and not mere individuals'.<sup>10</sup> While he accepted the significance of the traditional questions of social philosophy such as the relationship between the individual and society, the meaning of culture and the basis of societal life, he rejected a purely philosophical approach to these issues.<sup>11</sup> Philosophers, he argued, have all too often treated these questions in the abstract, divorced from history and social context; the major schools naively posited either 'an abstract, isolated individual' (e.g. *Lebensphilosophie*, existentialism) or a 'hypostatized social totality' (e.g. Hegelian idealism) as the fount of life and proper object of social inquiry. Horkheimer rejected these approaches and, instead, called for 'a dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and the praxis of individual scientific disciplines'.<sup>12</sup> He held that it was necessary to reintegrate disciplines because the division of labour in the humanities and social sciences was so far advanced and their results so fragmented.<sup>13</sup> Neither philosophy nor any of the individual sciences could defend the claim that it alone could uncover 'the essentials' or 'the facts'.<sup>14</sup> I will return to the precise nature of the relationship between philosophy and science recommended by Horkheimer in Chapter 5. But it is crucial to note that he was not demanding, as has been suggested by one critic, 'the development of "social philosophy"

supplemented by empirical investigations'.<sup>15</sup> Rather Horkheimer stressed the necessity of a programme of *interdisciplinary study* in which 'philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians and psychologists must unite in a lasting working partnership . . . to do what all genuine researchers have always done: namely to pursue the great philosophical questions with the most refined methods'. In the course of working on particular problems and objects researchers must, he contended, reformulate the philosophical questions, make them more precise, and devise new methods for handling specific issues while, at the same time, 'not losing sight of the universal'.<sup>16</sup>

Horkheimer also rejected the emphasis of those who, as he put it, 'did not understand Marx'. Social phenomena cannot be deduced from material being, that is, from the economy. The Institute's members, he insisted, must explore the question of 'the interconnection between the economic life of society, the psychic development of the individual and transformations in the realm of culture . . . including not only the so-called spiritual contents of science, art and religion, but also law, ethics, fashion, public opinion, sport, amusement, life style etc.'. <sup>17</sup> More specifically they should ask: what interconnections exist in definite social groups, in definite periods of time and in definite countries, between the position of the group in the economy, changes in the psychic structures of its membership and other relevant factors which condition and affect the group's thoughts and practices.<sup>18</sup>

Three themes dominate all others in Horkheimer's address. The first, already described, suggests the necessity of re-specifying 'the great philosophical questions' in an interdisciplinary research programme. The second theme, more implicit but made clearer in later essays, is a call for a rejection of orthodox Marxism and its substitution by a reconstructed understanding of Marx's project. The third emphasizes the necessity for social theory to explicate the set of interconnections (mediations) that make possible the reproduction and transformation of society, economy, culture and consciousness. In his early writings as an Institute member Horkheimer added a note on methodology to the themes of his inaugural address.<sup>19</sup> No one method could, in his opinion, produce definitive results about any given object of inquiry. To take one type of approach is always to risk a distorted perspective on reality. Several methods, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative techniques, have to be supplemented with one another in any

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systematic investigation. But empirical work, Horkheimer emphasized, is not a substitute for theoretical analysis. For concepts like society, culture and class, indispensable to all inquiry, cannot be simply transcribed into empirical terms. They require theoretical elucidation and appraisal.<sup>20</sup>

During the 1930s and early 1940s, despite the transfer of the Institute – an outcome, of course, of the Nazis' rise to power – to Geneva (February 1933) and then to Columbia University in New York (1935), members of the Institute continued to work in political-economy, philosophy, sociology, psychology, literature, music and other disciplines. The variety of approaches were reflected in the Institute's new journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* [Journal of Social Research], first published in 1932, and in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* as the journal was later called on its publication in English, between 1939 and 1941. The term 'critical theory', the label under which so much of the Frankfurt school's work has become famous, does not reflect adequately the different disciplines represented in the journal or at the Institute. Although it is a label which Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse seemed happy to employ as a description of their own enterprises from the mid 1930s onward, 'critical theory' does not describe the approach or method of individuals such as Grossmann, Fromm and Neumann (who had a more traditional attitude to their disciplines). Nor does it identify satisfactorily all the stages in the development of Horkheimer's, Adorno's and Marcuse's own thought – the transformations, for example, in Horkheimer's theoretical perspective from an early commitment to materialism and critique to a later interest in 'quasi-religious' phenomena. Moreover, the label conceals a host of differences between Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. When employing the term it is important to bear in mind that there are several models of critical theory. While the term 'critical theory' will be applied here, its different connotations will also be expounded.

#### **The character of the Institute's projects**

The most active years of the Institute, 1930–44, coincided with the prominence of Nazism and fascism. Horkheimer had been in his new appointment for less than three years before he and the others were forced to leave Germany. The opportunities to 'promote the development of the masses' rapidly dwindled. But although there

were marked differences in the way Horkheimer and the others conceived the political implications of their work, most of the Institute's members hoped that their cumulative efforts would contribute to the making of history with will and consciousness. They intended their findings to become a material force in the struggle against domination in all its forms. The conditions they observed, and the questions which became central for the Institute members, included:

The European labour movements did not develop into a unified struggle of all workers. What blocked these developments?

Capitalism was in a series of acute crises. How could these better be understood? What was the relation between the political and the economic? Was the relation changing?

Authoritarianism and the development of bureaucracy seemed increasingly the order of the day. How could these phenomena be comprehended?

Nazism and fascism rose to dominate central and southern Europe. How was this possible? How did these movements attain large-scale support?

Social relationships, for example those created by the family, appeared to be undergoing radical social change. In what directions? How were these affecting individual development?

Areas of culture appeared open to direct manipulation. Was a new type of ideology being formed? If so, how was this affecting everyday life?

Given the fate of Marxism in Russia and Western Europe, was Marxism itself nothing other than a stale orthodoxy? Was there a social agent capable of progressive change? What possibilities were there for effective socialist practice?

Needless to say not all members of the Institute studied and addressed each issue. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse did, however, comment upon most, if not all, of these questions. It is from their work that one can most directly reconstruct the relation between themes. But there are also important connections, often not explicitly made, between most of the projects conducted at one time or another under the Institute's auspices on the one hand, and the independent work of most of the Institute's members on the other.

### Emigration

In the late 1930s and 1940s the activities at the Institute in the United States suffered disruption and a certain fragmentation. A hiatus emerged between works in philosophy and social theory (such as Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) and empirical studies undertaken by the Institute (for instance, *The Authoritarian Personality*). There was also an ever greater gap between theory and practice. Reflecting perhaps on fascist Germany and exile, Marcuse wrote, 'the divorce of thought from action, of theory from practice, is itself part of the unfree world. No thought and no theory (alone) can undo it'.<sup>21</sup>

The programme of research Horkheimer had defended in his inaugural address and in his earliest *Zeitschrift* essays could not be carried out under the changed circumstances. Emigration to New York in 1935, and to California in 1941, dislocated a number of projects. Distress and disarray followed Hitler's ascent to power, the loss of relatives and friends, and the shock of discovering a very alien culture.<sup>22</sup> A sense of disorientation was also created by a change in the audience for whom Horkheimer and the others were writing. Despite the fact that they remained relatively isolated from American social science, the longer they stayed in the United States the more their audience consisted of American social scientists (as opposed to fellow German scholars and émigrés).<sup>23</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno continued to publish most of their writings in German; the *Zeitschrift* itself was issued in German until 1939. But the change in audience eventually forced a reconsideration of the form and content of at least some of their work.

The differences between the intellectual traditions which informed German and American scholarship reinforced the feeling of dislocation. Neumann sought to express this difference when he wrote:

on the whole, the German exile, bred in the veneration of theory and history, and contempt for empiricism and pragmatism, entered a diametrically opposed intellectual climate: optimistic, empirically oriented, a-historical, but also self-righteous.<sup>24</sup>

The Institute's members often found Anglo-American philosophy lacking in depth and insight. According to Adorno and Neumann, American scholars were uncritical and overenthusiastic about the benefits of empirical research.<sup>25</sup> But the clash of traditions and approaches led to a heightening of awareness of the 'prejudices of

tradition'. As Adorno put it, he learnt 'not to take things for granted', from general concepts to methods of inquiry.<sup>26</sup> This also seems to have been the experience of Horkheimer and Neumann.

Financial problems, particularly in the early 1940s, also caused difficulties.<sup>27</sup> A number of investments had been unsuccessful. Foundation sponsorship was extremely hard to obtain. As a result, a projected study of aspects of German culture was abandoned and *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* was discontinued (1941). It is probably fair to say that many of the projects the Institute might have wanted to carry out became impractical and even unwise at this time. Martin Jay has pointed out that there was a conscious toning down of radicalism in the Institute's publications due to fear of political harassment and deportation.<sup>28</sup> But the type of research that could be realized was also constrained by the concepts of 'problems', 'issues' and 'research' held by potential sponsors. The Institute's *Studies of Prejudice* (of which the *The Authoritarian Personality* is but one volume) was financed by the American Jewish Committee.

Emigration, the change in audience and financial circumstances were not the only factors to affect the Institute's activities. I have already outlined the major events which helped to shape the historical and political experience of the Institute's members. The importance of these in the development of the Frankfurt school cannot be underestimated. Horkheimer, for example, frequently acknowledged the inadequacy of the conceptual tools he employed in the 1930s for analysis of major events in the 1940s. The optimism which he had felt during the pre-war years faded away. Critical theorists could hardly think of becoming a stimulating influence on the masses. Marcuse has expressed this view forcefully and noted some of its implications.

If the proletariat no longer acts as the revolutionary class . . . it no longer furnishes the 'material weapons' for philosophy. The situation thus reverts: repelled by reality, Reason and Freedom become again the concern of philosophy. The 'essence of man', his 'total liberation' is again experienced [only] in thought [*in Gedanken erlebt*]. Theory . . . again not only anticipates political practice, runs ahead of it, but also upholds the objectives of liberation in the face of a failing practice. In this function, theory becomes again ideology – not as false consciousness, but as conscious distance and dissociation from, even opposition to, the repressive reality. And by the same token, it becomes a political factor of utmost significance.<sup>29</sup>

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The themes covered by the Frankfurt school during this time are extensive. They include discussions of theories of capitalism, of the structure of the state, and of the rise of instrumental reason; analyses of developments in science, technology and technique, of the culture industry and mass culture, of family structure and individual development, and of the susceptibility of people to ideology; as well as considerations of the dialectic of enlightenment and of positivism as the dominant mode of cognition. As always it was the hope of Horkheimer and the others that their work would help establish a critical social consciousness able to penetrate existing ideology, sustain independent judgement and be capable, as Adorno put it, 'of maintaining its freedom to think things might be different'.

#### **The post-war years**

Horkheimer, Adorno and Pollock had resettled in West Germany by the early 1950s. Marcuse, Lowenthal, Kirchheimer and others stayed in the United States. By 1953 the Institute was re-established in Frankfurt, Horkheimer had been appointed rector of the University and Adorno had received a professorship. In 1955 Adorno became co-director of the Institute. The *Zeitschrift* was not re-established, but the Institute soon began to publish a series of *Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie* [Frankfurt Contributions to Sociology]. Horkheimer and Pollock retired in 1958. In 1969 Adorno died. Pollock's death followed a year later and Horkheimer's in 1973. Although the Institute of Social Research survived their deaths, the Frankfurt school itself, so dependent on the energy and ideas of these individuals, did not.

Horkheimer and Adorno dominated the Institute in the post-war years. Equally critical (for the most part) of developmental tendencies in capitalist and socialist societies, they maintained staunchly independent intellectual and political positions. They continued to stress an interdisciplinary theoretical approach and the use of a variety of methodological techniques in their teaching and written work. Research techniques developed in America were promulgated and employed in a number of studies, although neither Horkheimer nor Adorno ever defended their use in isolation from theoretical and critical perspectives.

In the atmosphere of post-war reconstruction and the cold war,



many key intellectuals from Germany's past were subject to attack in the press and in academia; direct lines were traced, for example, from Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to fascist ideology and from Marx to Stalinism. Horkheimer and Adorno resisted this fashion and helped to restore serious discussion of these and other thinkers. Their position, however, was not without tensions. In defending the importance of Marx and critical thinking while criticizing in an increasingly virulent manner Soviet Marxists and others who sought to actualize Marx's ideals, they risked pleasing neither conservative authorities nor radical thinkers, including many of their own students. Their independent positions on political questions led, in fact, to challenges from all these parties. It is ironic that they were attacked in the 1960s for their political pessimism and lack of practical involvement, but, after their deaths, for their supposed encouragement of 'terrorism' and political irresponsibility.

Marcuse's popularity with the New Left in the 1960s and early 1970s, especially in the United States, was in marked contrast to the fate of his ex-colleagues. Although many of his ideas were similar to those they elaborated, his unambiguous commitment to politics and social struggle meant that he became one of the most prominent (if not the most prominent) spokesmen and theoreticians of the left. It was through Marcuse's work that the Frankfurt school's criticisms of contemporary culture, authoritarianism and bureaucratism became well known. The school's concern to expand the terms of reference of the political, by drawing attention to issues such as the division of labour, ecological problems and sexism (as well as the traditional question of ownership and control), was actualized, in part, through Marcuse's influence. But considerable differences between Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno remained. The next seven chapters seek to clarify their respective positions on political and other issues.

## **2 Class, class conflict and the development of capitalism: critical theory and political economy**

In the last ten years the work of the best-known representatives of the Frankfurt school has come to be associated with two basic concerns: social philosophy and social psychology. The theoretical innovations for which they are most often recognized are their analyses of the structure of reason and technique, and of the entanglement of enlightenment, myth, domination and nature; while their best-known empirical studies relate to authoritarianism and the authoritarian personality. The texts most often cited are *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Eclipse of Reason*, *Minima Moralia*, *One Dimensional Man* and *The Authoritarian Personality*.

Sympathetic interpreters of the Institute's work have come to see these writings as amounting to a 'radical and sustained critique of bourgeois society', although developed and presented in a fragmented way. Critics have charged that these works represent a pessimistic cultural critique which does less to integrate Marxist political economy with socio-cultural and psychological dimensions than to replace the former with the latter.<sup>1</sup> The concerns of the school, still others have argued, collapsed into a 'perennial spiritualistic reaction – romantic, in the last instance – against technique and modern social organization'.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I want to show that classic Marxist themes are not simply replaced in the critical theorists' work; that class and class conflict remain important categories in their understanding of the formation of capitalism; and that it is insufficient to label their writings as just 'pessimistic' or 'romantic'. Their work contains a fairly systematic theory of the development of capitalism.

### **Marx's political economy as the foundation for critical social theory**

Despite major differences between members of the Institute in their assessment of the development of capitalism, it may be noted

from the outset that their respective analyses were informed by familiar Marxian tenets:

- 1 We live in a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production. It is a society based on exchange, a commodity society. Products are manufactured *primarily* for their realization as value and profit, and not for their capacity to satisfy human wants and desires.
- 2 The commodity character of products is not simply determined by their exchange, but by their being abstractly exchanged. Exchange, based on abstract labour time, affects the objective form as well as the subjective side of the productive process. It affects the former through its determination of the form of products and labour (labour power) and the latter through its debasement of human relationships.
- 3 The particular constellation of social relations which ensures the unity of the capitalist social process also ensures its fetishization and reification. The products of human labour are viewed as independent, 'having a life of their own', a 'natural' value. The social and material relations which result from exchange, distribution and consumption are not immediately comprehensible. They are veiled by necessary illusion – the fetishism of commodities.
- 4 Capitalism is not a harmonious social whole. Both in the realm of the production of commodities and in the sphere of illusion it is based on contradictions. The dominant relations of production 'fetter' the developed forces of production and produce a series of antagonisms. Further, the mass of workers' separation from the means of production produces direct conflict with those that possess capital. Antagonisms arise in the cultural sphere as well as in the economic. Contradictions between socially generated illusions (ideology) and actuality (performance, effects) lead to crisis. For the principles which govern production are often not those which govern wants and needs, and their multifarious expression.
- 5 A general tendency exists towards capital-intensive industries and increased concentration of capital. The free market is progressively replaced by the oligopolistic and monopolistic mass production of standardized goods.
- 6 The progressive rise in the organic composition of capital – the amount of fixed capital per worker – exacerbates the inherently unstable accumulation process. In order to sustain this process,

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its protagonists utilize all means available – including imperialist expansion and war.

Of all the members of the Institute only Grossmann maintained that a breakdown of capitalism was ‘objectively necessary’ and ‘exactly calculable’. In a number of essays published during 1928–9 and in his major work, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems* [The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System], he argued that crisis and the eventual collapse of capitalism could be predicted from an analysis of the long-run tendency of capital to increase its organic composition. Starting from a series of assumptions about population growth, the rate and quantity of surplus value, the relation of fixed to variable capital, which even sympathetic critics have called unrealistic, Grossmann calculated that the production of surplus value would eventually be inadequate to expand capital. Although a number of counter-tendencies were analysed, Grossmann was convinced about the inevitability of economic collapse.<sup>3</sup> This did not mean, however, that there would be an automatic transition to socialism. Grossmann’s thinking combined both evolutionary and revolutionary elements. As he wrote,

no economic system, no matter how weakened, collapses by itself in automatic fashion. It must be ‘overthrown’. The theoretical analysis of objective trends leading to a paralysis of the system serves to discover the ‘weak links’ and to fix them in time as a sort of barometer indicating when the system becomes ripe for change. Even when that point is reached, change will come about only through active operation of the subjective factors.<sup>4</sup>

Economic collapse does not guarantee revolution. In Grossmann’s opinion, revolution has to be made through the active intervention of the working class and by those who struggle on its behalf.

In age and spirit Grossmann was closer to Grünberg than any of those who later became prominent as members of the Frankfurt school. The two men had become acquainted well before Grossmann joined the Institute in the mid 1920s. They shared a strong interest in the theory and practice of classical Marxism. Further, Grossman’s commitment to orthodox Marxist economics, to the Soviet Union – even in the 1940s – and to settlement in East Germany (where he was offered a chair in 1949) distinguished his interests from those of Horkheimer and other members of the Institute who challenged his views. Certainly his stress on the

necessity of active, self-conscious intervention was shared by Horkheimer, Adorno, Pollock and others. But his view that breakdown is unavoidable was regarded with a great deal of scepticism.

Horkheimer's and Adorno's assessment of the developmental course of capitalism was, as will be shown below, much more ambivalent. Although this assessment relied in a number of respects on Pollock's engagement with economic analysis, the significance of Marx's contribution to the study of capitalism is continually acknowledged. This is especially clear in Horkheimer's work. In an essay published in 1937, he registered agreement with Marx's analysis of the general course of the commodity economy. Critical theory is, on this account,

in its totality, the unfolding of a single existential judgement. Crudely formulated, it states that the fundamental form of the historically given commodity economy on which [more recent] history rests, contains in itself the internal and external contradictions of [its] epoch, which it generates in an increasingly intensified form. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Throughout his early *Zeitschrift* essays, Horkheimer appears to accept most of the tenets of *Capital*. Following Marx, he also argued that it is only through the abolition of the 'economic structure which underlies all contemporary social change', that is, the dominant relations of production, that a 'self-fulfilling praxis' can be established.

Unemployment, economic crises, militarization, terrorist regimes – in a word, the whole condition of the masses – are not due to limited technological possibilities, as might have been the case in earlier periods, but to the circumstances of production. . . .

Production is not geared to the life of the whole community [to the common interest] while heeding also the claims of individuals; it is geared to the power-backed claims of individuals while being hardly concerned with the life of the community. This is the inevitable result, under the present property order, of the principle that it is sufficient for individuals to look out for themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The political task is, therefore, to 'set free' the individual from these material conditions.

In these early essays Horkheimer also defended his political aspirations by drawing upon Freud's libido theory. Freud's early formulation of the theory of human instincts implies, Horkheimer contended, that human beings share a striving for pleasure and self-preservation. Thus, there is a stratum of human existence

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which is 'an ever flowing source of stimuli'.<sup>7</sup> But the 'struggle for existence' compels the repression of these instincts. Following Freud, Horkheimer held that a crucial condition of civilization is the renunciation of activities leading to immediate pleasure and the satisfaction of needs. The sublimation of libido renders possible the development of society. It ensures sufficient 'energy' for human beings to revolutionize production and, therefore, to escape the contingencies of a hostile environment. The institutionalization of economic growth under capitalism, with its rapid development of technology and labour-saving devices, furthers this process. Horkheimer maintained against Freud that as capitalism facilitates an enormous expansion of production and the ever greater control of nature, it also undermines the necessity for the perpetual postponement of gratification. Yet it tends 'to reduce individuals to the status of mere functionaries of economic mechanisms' and enforces suffering on a massive scale. Although in his early writings Horkheimer defended the view that the proletariat could potentially undo this state of affairs, he argued that the repression experienced by its individual members could bring about feelings of guilt and/or inadequacy and increased aggression towards self and others. This process, he thought, could hinder progressive political change and contribute to a new barbarism.

Horkheimer's position entails the defence of central elements of Marxist political economy as well as of some of Freud's ideas. He sought thereby to sustain the claim that needs were emerging which represented potentially a critical and progressive political standpoint. With Marx and Lukács he suggested that it was possible for the proletariat to transcend this situation and realize a more enriching life. But as the 1930s developed the validity of this analysis was called into question.

Adorno's early views were similar to Horkheimer's. Although he did not draw on Freud's libido theory in a comparable fashion, Adorno placed certain traditional Marxian axioms at the centre of his writings and expressed throughout the pre-war and war years a growing ambivalence about the role of the proletariat.<sup>8</sup> For both men, Marx's social theory was crucial and the axioms outlined above were to remain of lasting importance in their work. However, the significance they were granted changed in time. The same can be said of the role of Marx's political economy in the thought of Pollock, Neumann, Kirchheimer and most of the other members of the Institute.

### Reflections on early twentieth-century history

The uncertainty of the epoch which began with the Russian revolution and the council communist movement and ended with fascism and Stalinism is reflected in the earliest writings of the Institute's members. Their experience and interpretation of these events helped create the motivation to develop a non-dogmatic critical theory of society. An analysis of these views provides a great deal of insight into their project and ambitions.

In one of Horkheimer's earliest and most remarkable works – a collection of aphorisms and short essays written between 1926 and 1931 – the ambivalence of the era is succinctly expressed. The collection's title is *Dämmerung*, which signifies both dusk and dawn.<sup>9</sup> The first aphorism, entitled *Dämmerung*, captures the tone of the book.

The more threadbare ideologies are, the crueller the means by which they are protected. The degree of effort and terror with which swaying gods are defended, shows the extent to which dusk [*Dämmerung*] has set in. In Europe the understanding of the masses has increased with big industry, so that the sacred goods have to be protected. . . . Whoever defends [these goods] has already [thereby] made his career: in addition to . . . systematically induced stupification, the threat of economic ruin, social disgrace, prison and death prevent this [newly established] understanding from violating the highest conceptual means of domination. The imperialism of big European states does not have to envy the stakes of the Middle Ages; its symbols are protected by more subtle apparatuses and more terrible armed guards than the Saints of the Church of the Middle Ages. The opponents of the inquisition made that twilight [*Dämmerung*] into the dawn of a new day, nor does the dusk [*Dämmerung*] of capitalism necessarily herald the night of humanity, though this seems to be threatening today.<sup>10</sup>

Four points appear of immediate interest. First, Horkheimer notes the demise of competitive, liberal capitalism and the rise of big, organized industry. Second, he suggests that with the development of capitalism and imperialism there has been an increase in class consciousness and understanding among the masses. Third, he stresses a certain potentiality for the transcendence of class-dominated institutions. Fourth, he strongly qualifies any optimistic view that might claim socialism to be imminent. There are a multitude of 'subtle apparatuses' (education, mass media, for example) and direct institutions of force (for instance, the police and military) which are working to annihilate such hopes. The 'night of

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humanity' is threatening. (There are only a few who might hold that the 1930s and early 1940s were not a realization of this insight.) Each of these themes is elaborated in *Dämmerung*.

Reflecting some forty years later on this period, Horkheimer restated his belief that

In the first half of the century proletarian revolts could plausibly be expected in European countries, passing as they were through inflation and crisis. The idea that in the early thirties a united movement of workers and intellectuals could bar the way to National Socialism was not mere wishful thinking.<sup>11</sup>

In *Dämmerung*, the pre- and post-first-world-war attempts to establish a radical democracy, based on workers' councils, appear as a major source of inspiration for his thinking. Horkheimer's conception of socialism implies a collectively controlled society which would provide the condition for the possibility of 'unfolding all individual talents and differences'. In 1940 he made clear that in his view the 'theoretical conception which, following its first trailblazers, will show the new society its way – the system of workers' councils – grows out of praxis. The roots of the council system go back to 1871, 1905, and other events. Revolutionary transformation has a tradition that must continue'.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the collection of aphorisms and essays, Horkheimer often alluded to the intensive struggles which might continue this tradition. He envisaged a society based on the socialization of the means of production, planned management and, importantly, the participation of all. But, as he later put it, the precise nature of such a society cannot and must not be stipulated in advance.

Contemporary reflection in the service of a transformed society should not disregard the fact that in a classless democracy plans cannot be forced on others through power or through routine, but must be arrived at through free agreement.<sup>13</sup>

What then did Horkheimer think of the struggle for socialism in Russia?

Although he wrote little on this topic, his early writings suggest, as do those of Pollock and Marcuse, both feelings of support and a critical concern. As he put it in 1930,

The state of affairs [in Russia] . . . is most problematic. I do not claim to know in which direction the country is going; undoubtedly there is a great deal of suffering. But whoever amongst the intelligentsia is unaware of the



breadth of exertion there or who boasts recklessly of it . . . is indeed a pathetic comrade, whose company brings no gain. Those who have an eye to the senseless injustice of the imperialistic world which cannot be explained by technical powerlessness, will regard events in Russia as the continued, painful attempt to overcome . . . terrible social injustice, or he will at least ask with a beating heart, if this attempt is still continuing. If appearances speak against it, he clings to the hope in the way in which a cancer victim does to the questionable news that a cure for cancer has in all likelihood been found.<sup>14</sup>

However, by the mid 1930s the ambivalence in attitude gave way to disappointment, disenchantment and hostility. Stalin's 'authoritarian bureaucracy' was criticized: its elitist, technocratic and destructive elements were rejected. Horkheimer's position appears thoroughly opposed to those elements of Lenin's thought, extrapolated by Stalin, which sought to defend and legitimate the exclusive role of the party as the true and only representative of the working class (and, therefore, of the future of humanity). As such, his position was close to Kirchheimer's.

In a number of essays published in the early 1930s in *Die Gesellschaft* (the theoretical organ of the SPD), Kirchheimer, while defending the need for organization and an activist, interventionist stance, criticized Lenin's notion of the party and the state.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Horkheimer, he developed a more detailed appraisal of Lenin's (and by implication Stalin's) theory and practice. In his 'Marxism, dictatorship and the organization of the proletariat' (1933), Kirchheimer pointed to a tension between Lenin's doctrine of the state (as expounded in *State and Revolution*) and his theory of the party (articulated in *What is to be Done?*). The former, he argued, is concerned with 'primitive democracy' – altering the structure of society, electing officials, dismantling the regular army, etc. – while the latter defends hierarchy, professionalism and planning. Clearly, the form of the Soviet state progressively approximated that of the party. The powers of the soviets were not developed: discipline was maintained in the face of existing mass consciousness.<sup>16</sup> Kirchheimer recognized that many factors contributed to this state of affairs, but felt that it was (at least in part) a result of 'the natural unfolding of the party structure' and its imposition upon the structure of the state. He shared Rosa Luxemburg's critique of all attempts to impose the 'principle of capitalist factory discipline' on the 'autonomous discipline of the working class'. Although he did not accept her emphasis on the

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'supreme importance of spontaneity', he did agree that to crush spontaneity was disastrous. He was extremely critical of the 'primitive purity' and 'autocratic structure' of the Soviet party and state which had 'jeopardized all chances of the development of democratic institutions' within and outside of the party.<sup>17</sup>

By the early 1940s the ironies of the Hitler-Stalin pact led Horkheimer and Adorno, working together during the war years, to subject Stalinism and fascism to many similar criticisms. While they concentrated their analysis on the latter, some of their writings stress a comparable perversion of freedom and democracy in each social system.<sup>18</sup> Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*, written in the late 1950s, is an immanent critique of the Marxism dominating Soviet society. His views have much in common with those described above. For example, Marcuse writes of Lenin,

His struggle against 'economism' and the doctrine of spontaneous mass action, his dictum that class consciousness has to be brought upon the proletariat 'from without', anticipate the later factual transformation of the proletariat from the subject to an object of the revolutionary process.<sup>19</sup>

Soviet Marxism, with its dictatorship of the 'political, economic and military bureaucracy', is not equated with a programme for genuine socialist development.

In *Dämmerung* Horkheimer also offered an assessment of the situation of those who constitute a crucial element in determining 'the future of mankind'. This is developed in a short essay called 'The powerlessness of the German working class'.<sup>20</sup> In this paper Horkheimer argued that there is a schism among the workers which undermines their capacity to act effectively.

There is today a gulf between those regularly employed and those working only by exception [occasional, part-time work] or rather those totally unemployed . . . as formerly between the whole working classes and the Lumpenproletariat. . . . Work and destitution [*Elend*] become separated . . . and are distributed amongst different carriers. . . . This does not mean that all goes well for those working . . . the misery of those working remains . . . as the condition and foundation of this society . . . but the type of active worker is no longer characteristic of those who are most in need of change. Rather [the need for change] unites a certain lower strata of the working class, a part of the Proletariat. . . . Those who have a most immediate and urgent interest in revolution, the unemployed, do not possess, as did the Proletariat of pre-war days, the capability for training

and organization, class consciousness and reliability of those who are habitually incorporated into the capitalist process.<sup>21</sup>

Horkheimer explained the growing division in the ranks of the working class in terms of developments within the capitalist economy. The dynamic process of economic concentration and centralization, generating continuous investment in labour-saving technology, is held to have produced mass unemployment. The lives of the employed – who at least have jobs, a basic income and a little security – are contrasted sharply with those who directly face the ‘horrors’ of unemployment. The effect of this is a fragmentation of the interests of the labour movement. Those who have jobs come to fear the miseries of the unemployed, the loss of a home and perhaps worse. Given the current conditions of their lives, the struggle for socialism appears full of very uncertain risks, dangers and possibly even death. For the unemployed all is already lost. They are more willing to join the revolutionary movement. However, they lack adequate theories and organization. ‘It is in the “nature” of the capitalist process of production to separate interest in socialism from the necessary human qualities to bring it about.’<sup>22</sup>

This division, Horkheimer maintained, created the basic constituencies for the SPD and the KPD; it was reflected in each party’s organization and programme. The SPD supported policies that sought to stabilize the status quo. Its strategy was defensive, because it was preoccupied with security and the protection of the jobs of the employed.

The reformist wing of the workers movement has lost in contrast to Communism the knowledge of the impossibility of an effective improvement of human affairs on a capitalist base. It has lost all elements of theory, its leadership is the exact replica of its most opinionated [*sichersten*] members: many attempt by any means to maintain themselves in their positions by sacrificing their most elementary loyalties; the fear of losing their jobs becomes progressively the only criterion of their action.<sup>23</sup>

The theoretical framework of the SPD leadership was underpinned by both pragmatism and positivism. The former shaped their day-to-day attitude. Their criterion of success, Horkheimer contended, was what works in the here and now. The latter shaped their understanding of the limits of knowledge and theory. They fetishized the ‘facts’ immediately given in observation. Their realm

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of operation was the existing state of affairs. Their programme had little relation to Marxism.

The KPD was not criticized as harshly. But Horkheimer saw in 'the party' an ever increasing tendency towards dogmatism and inflexible responses to political circumstances.

In the mental [*geistigem*] sphere the impatience of the unemployed is expressed in the mere repetition of the slogans of the Communist Party. The principles . . . are seized undialectically. Political praxis thus lacks the exploitation of all given possibilities and frequently exhausts itself in unsuccessful commands and moral exhortation [*Zurechtweisung*] of the disobedient and disloyal.<sup>24</sup>

Given the 'Stalinization' of the KPD and Horkheimer's conception of socialism, it is clear that he could not support its endeavours as a member. His dilemma – a dilemma shared by many left-wing intellectuals of the time – was almost complete. Even Grossmann, whose general political sympathies were different from Horkheimer's, was critical of the KPD. In a letter to Paul Mattick (1933), he castigated the party's growing subservience to Moscow, the incapacity of its leadership to take initiatives and its general rigidity; it had become 'a bureaucracy . . . slavishly subject to Moscow'.<sup>25</sup>

The transcendence of the gap and the tension between parties, and the superseding of the theoretical limitations of both, depended, Horkheimer argued, on the overcoming of the conditions that divided the working class. What could be done to aid this process? How could a theorist intervene? Until the late 1930s Horkheimer still felt that the thought of critical intellectuals could be a stimulating, active factor in the development of political struggles. Critical theory could help to promote a 'self-conscious and organized working class' by fostering a debate between theoreticians, the advanced elements of the class, and those in need of greater awareness about social contradictions. This debate, he held, must unfold as a process of interaction in which growing consciousness develops into a liberating and practical force.<sup>26</sup> However, already in *Dämmerung*, his writings reflected a pessimism about the success of any such intervention. The 'night of humanity' was threatening.

Adorno was in general agreement with Horkheimer's analysis. In a letter to Lowenthal written in 1934, he wrote,

I have read the book *Dämmerung* several times with the utmost attention