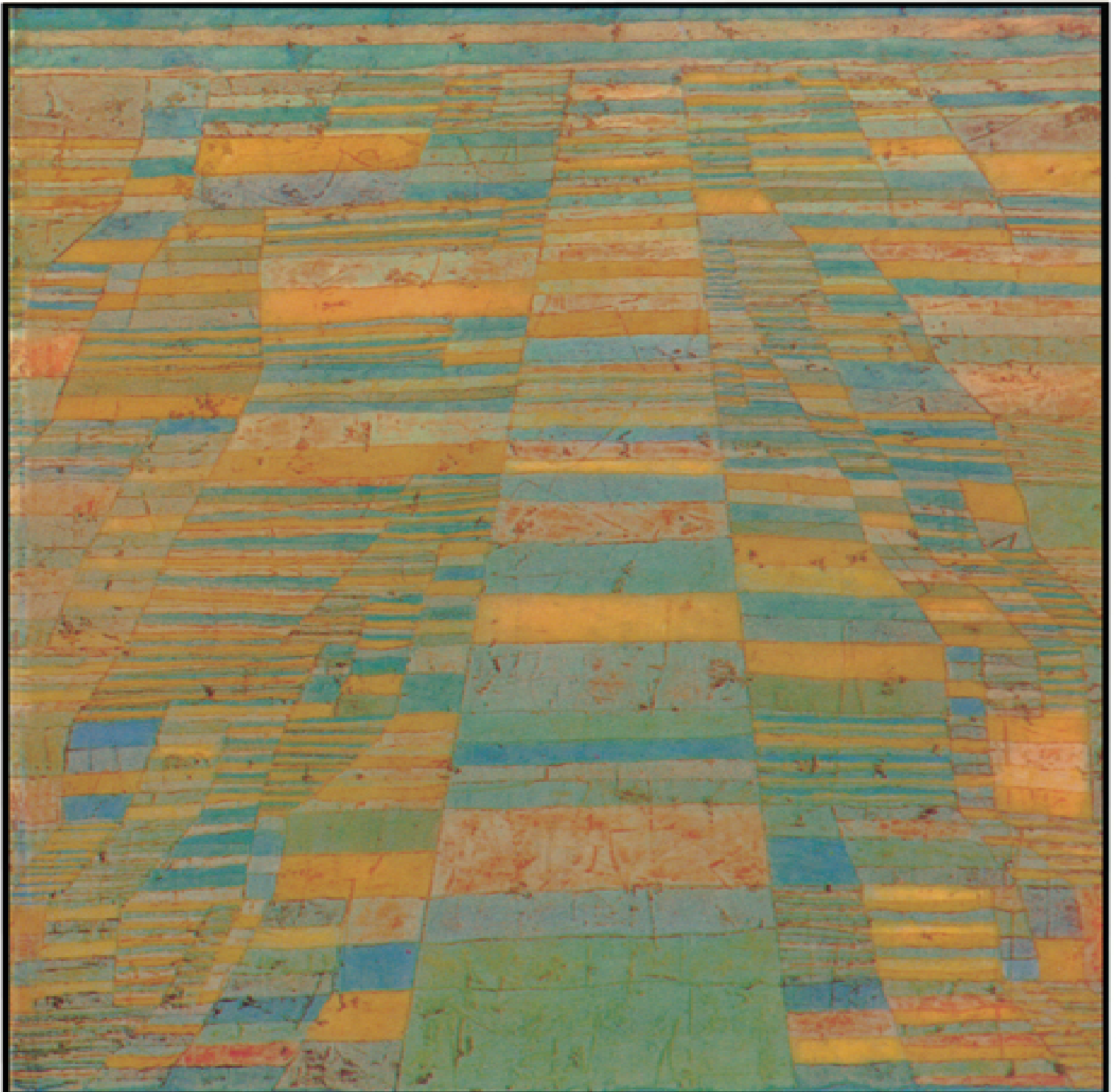


# **Introduction to Critical Theory**

Horkheimer to Habermas

**David Held**



# Introduction to Critical Theory

Horkheimer to Habermas

David Held



# **Introduction to Critical Theory**

Horkheimer to Habermas

**David Held**

Polity Press

Copyright © David Held 1980

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

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 978-0-7456-6839-0 (Multi-user eBook)

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**

# Contents

*Acknowledgements*

*Note about translation*

## **Introduction**

The historical context – The character of critical theory

## **Part One Critical Theory: The Frankfurt School**

### **1 The formation of the Institute of Social Research**

The Institute under Grünberg, 1923–9

The Institute and its programme under Max Horkheimer

The character of the Institute's projects

Emigration

The post-war years

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

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

Reflections on early twentieth century history

Capitalism and the authoritarian state

Rationalization: the rise of instrumental reason

Images of society and the prospects of revolutionary change

### **3 The culture industry: critical theory and aesthetics**

The concepts of culture and art

Affirmation and negation in 'autonomous' art

The rise of mass culture and the culture industry

The produce of the culture industry: advertising aesthetics

Examples: television, astrology and music

Examples of modern art which resist assimilation

The changing structure of ideology

Further differences among Institute members

### **4 The changing structure of the family and the individual: critical theory and psychoanalysis**

Erich Fromm

Wilhelm Reich

Concepts of human nature

Life and death in the works of Marcuse

The individual, family and society

Adorno's essays on ego weakness and narcissism

Marcuse: the obsolescence of the Freudian concept of man?

Studies on prejudice and authoritarianism

Anti-Semitism

### **5 The critique of instrumental reason: critical theory and philosophy of history**

*Dialectic of Enlightenment*: philosophical fragments  
towards a philosophy of history

The idea of reconciliation

Enlightenment and morality

Science, social science and positivism

## **6 Horkheimer's formulation of critical theory: epistemology and method 1**

Hegel

Feuerbach, Marx and materialism

The structure of critical theory

The critique of ideology

Interdisciplinary research

Theory and praxis

Post-war developments

## **7 Adorno's conception of negative dialectics: epistemology and method 2**

Differences between Horkheimer and Adorno

The critique of philosophy: initial orientation

Hegel, Benjamin and Nietzsche

Style

Negative dialectics: non-identity thinking

Negative dialectics and Marx's theory of value

'Meditations on metaphysics'

## **8 Marcuse's notions of theory and practice: epistemology and method 3**

Differences with Horkheimer and Adorno

The concept of critical theory

Stages of development



Heidegger and history  
Reason and dialectics: Hegel  
Foundations of historical materialism  
Marxian dialectic  
The integration of Freud  
Nature and natural science  
The nature of concepts: appearance and essence

## **Part Two Critical Theory: Habermas**

### **9 Introduction to Habermas**

Continuities and discontinuities with the Frankfurt school  
Habermas's project: overview of fundamental concepts

### **10 Discourse, science and society**

The public sphere and the scientization of politics  
Marx and historical materialism  
Freud, social psychology and normative structures  
Reconstruction of historical materialism  
Crises and the development of capitalism

### **11 Interests, knowledge and action**

The critique of knowledge  
Positivism and the empirical-analytic sciences  
The hermeneutic sciences  
Psychoanalysis and emancipation  
Rational reconstruction and critical self-reflection

## **12 The reformulation of the foundations of critical theory**

Universal pragmatics

Theoretical and practical discourse

Critique and practical action

The structure of norms in advanced capitalism

## **Part Three The Importance and Limitations of Critical Theory**

### **13 An assessment of the Frankfurt school and Habermas**

A reply to Marxist critics

The economy, the polity and social struggle

### **14 The concept of critical theory**

Adorno

Horkheimer

Marcuse

Habermas

Unresolved problems

*Appendix The Odyssey*

*Notes and references*

*Select bibliography*

*Index*

# 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 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>11</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 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 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 Wilhelmshaven 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 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.)<sup>7</sup> 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 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 processes.<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.

### **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 *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.

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