

## Chapter 4



# Critical Theory

## The Frankfurt School and Habermas

A persistent hope for many of the Marxist theorists you will encounter was that the proletariat would eventually come to their senses and overthrow oppressive capitalist society. By the 1920s, a number of Western theorists had started to despair that this would ever occur. In fact, the 1917 socialist revolution in the semifeudal Russian state seemed to call into question the original Marxist analysis of capitalism. Many social theorists felt a return to the drawing board was in order to try to discover why the revolution was delayed, despite the persistence of inequality and alienation, and what could be done to alter the situation in order to usher in the change to a new socialist state. This was the central focus for the work of the theorists examined in this chapter.

Some social theorists have maintained their optimism about an eventual socialist transformation despite the revelations of less desirable or equitable conditions under former socialist regimes in the twentieth century. But in the view of many Western social theorists at the beginning of the twenty-first century, capitalism seems to have won, and they see little point in pursuing an old, discredited nineteenth-century dream of an equitable, planned society. However, the view from many of the countries in Africa, or Central Asia, or the Russian Republic itself, as well as among the dispossessed in capitalist states, is less celebratory about the triumph of capitalism. Consequently, it is worth considering the explanations offered by the critical theorists as to why the twentieth-century proletariat failed to transform the world as well as reflecting on the possibility that a revolutionary class can still be identified in the twenty-first century.

### The Institute of Social Research

The Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt was established in 1921. This was a period of turmoil and instability in Germany and in Europe in general. Despite these conditions, the revolution anticipated by many Marxist

theorists did not occur. What did transpire was an increasing conservatism that in Germany culminated in the misnamed National Socialist regime.

The establishment of the Institute was made possible by an endowment from a wealthy German expatriate, Hermann Weil, who lived in Argentina. Weil had made his fortune shipping grain to Europe. His son, Felix Weil, was sent to the University of Frankfurt, where he obtained a doctorate in political science. While at Frankfurt, Felix Weil became associated with various radical groups, and he conceived the idea of an independent research institution for Marxist studies and the study of anti-Semitism (Jay, 1973:31–32). Felix Weil persuaded his father to endow the Institute, and Felix himself was associated with the venture until the onset of World War II, when he returned to Argentina to look after the family business.

In the 1930s, anti-Semitism was increasingly evident in Germany, fueled by the National Socialist fascists. One of the major research tasks for the Institute was the analysis of anti-Semitism as well as research into social and cultural conditions for an emancipated, equitable society. The Institute's financial independence was fortuitous when, in the 1930s, the Jewish members of the Institute were forced into exile. The Institute relocated to Columbia University in 1934 under the directorship of Max Horkheimer. Thus, the "revolutionary and Marxist" research Institute resettled in "the center of the capitalist world, New York City" (Jay, 1973:39).

Various theorists were associated with the Institute in addition to Max Horkheimer, including Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, Friedrich Pollock, Karl Wittfogel, Walter Benjamin, and Erich Fromm. The work of these theorists was voluminous and comprised a number of perspectives. For example, Lowenthal was interested in literature, Adorno in music, Pollock in the intersection of capitalism and the state, and Fromm in a synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Although everyone associated with the Institute shared a critical Marxist perspective, they did not embrace a singular theoretical stance or necessarily endorse a common view of revolutionary practice. Consequently, the reference to these critical theorists as the **Frankfurt School** is somewhat misleading because they did not represent a singular focused group (Held, 1980:15).

Max Horkheimer became director of the Institute in 1930. At his installation he emphasized that the Institute would be a place where "philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians, and psychologists must unite in a lasting working partnership . . . to pursue the great philosophical questions with the most refined methods" (Held, 1980:33). The Institute's major research focus was on alienation and domination in modern capitalist society. The Institute's research was to be **supradisciplinary** not interdisciplinary. That is, research and theoretical approaches were to transcend separate disciplinary positions to create a "supradisciplinary social theory" (Kellner, 1989:7).

The supradisciplinary nature of the research was framed by the conviction that Marxist theory was an "open-ended, historical, dialectical theory that required development, revision, and modification precisely because it was . . . a theory of contemporary socio-historical reality which itself was constantly developing and changing" (Kellner, 1989:11). The Institute's researchers saw their

task as urgent because of the emergence of fascism and the lack of working-class revolutionary fervor despite the recurrent crises of capitalism.

The reassessment of Marxist theory and practice focused especially on the question of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse had reached the conclusion in the 1930s that the traditional Marxist focus on a revolutionary working class had to be reformulated because false consciousness had such a grip on that class, penetrating the “innermost layers of human personality,” that class-based or even individual emancipatory action was impossible in the immediate social and political context (Agger, 1979:14). This pessimism about the revolutionary potential of the working class persisted especially after the onset of World War II.

After the Nazis came to power in 1933, Horkheimer, along with other Jewish faculty members, was dismissed from the University of Frankfurt. The collection of brilliant minds at the Institute was dispersed. Most of the theorists at the Institute had Jewish backgrounds, and most of them thought of themselves as assimilated. Whatever their beliefs about assimilation, they were abruptly disabused of the notion with the rise of National Socialism, and most of the Institute members wisely chose exile. They left for Switzerland, France, Great Britain, and the United States.

Max Horkheimer went to New York, where he was joined by Pollock and Adorno. Fortunately, the private endowment from the Weil family allowed the Institute to remain relatively financially secure during the years of exile and its initial reconstitution in New York. In essence, Horkheimer, Pollock, and Adorno represented the Institute during the years of exile. In the 1940s, the three went to Los Angeles and remained there until their return to Frankfurt in 1950. Other Institute exiles found various positions. Marcuse, for example, worked for the Office of Strategic Services and the State Department, after which he went to Brandeis in 1954 and then to the University of California, San Diego, in 1965.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter we concentrate on the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm. The outline of their ideas sets the foundation for the examination, later in the chapter, of a contemporary critical theorist, Jurgen Habermas.

### ***The Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School***

We had set ourselves nothing less than the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944:xi)

**Max Horkheimer (1895–1973)** Max Horkheimer’s father was a manufacturer in Stuttgart, and Horkheimer had commercial training before doing his military service. As part of that training, with his friend Friedrich Pollock, he went to Brussels and London in the years 1913–1914 to learn French and

<sup>1</sup>One of the theorists who went to France, Walter Benjamin, committed suicide after the outbreak of World War II and the establishment of the puppet fascist regime in Vichy France.

English.<sup>2</sup> After 1918 he attended the universities of Munich, Freiburg, and then Frankfurt, where he obtained his doctorate in 1922 with a thesis on Kant. He became a lecturer in 1925 at the Institute for Social Research, and in 1929 he was appointed to the new chair of Social Philosophy at the Institute. He became director of the Institute in 1930.

**Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno (1903–1969)** Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno was born in Frankfurt, the son of a successful Jewish merchant. His mother had had a successful singing career prior to her marriage, and the name Adorno was from her side of the family. She was the daughter of a German singer and a French army officer; her father's background was Corsican and Genoese. Apparently in response to Pollock's concern that there were too many Jewish-sounding names on the Institute's roster, Adorno dropped the Wiesengrund part of his name when he was in the United States (Jay 1973:22).

His mother's sister was an accomplished concert pianist who lived with the family, and Adorno's family encouraged him to take up the piano and study composition at an early age. This interest in music continued in his theoretical work on the nature of the culture industries in capitalist society (Adorno, 1984). Adorno attended the University of Frankfurt and obtained his doctorate with a thesis on Husserl's phenomenology in 1924. In 1925 he went to Vienna to study composition with Alban Berg, and it was here that he came to appreciate the atonal experiments of Schönberg. He returned to Frankfurt in 1928 and in 1931 became associated with the Institute, becoming a full member in 1938.

**Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979)** Herbert Marcuse was born in Berlin to a prosperous, assimilated Jewish family. In 1918, after his military service, he was associated with the Social Democratic Party and the revolutionary Soldiers Council in Berlin. In 1919, he left the Social Democratic Party in protest over what he saw as the betrayal of the proletariat (Jay, 1973:28).

Marcuse went on to study philosophy at the universities of Berlin and Freiburg and obtained his doctorate in 1923 with a thesis on literature. Marcuse then spent six years as a bookseller and publisher in Berlin, returning to Freiburg in 1929 to study with the philosophers Husserl and Heidegger. He left Freiburg in 1932 largely because of political differences with Heidegger, whose right-wing views clashed with Marcuse's Marxist views. On Husserl's recommendation, however, he became a member of the Institute in 1933.

**Erich Fromm (1900–1980)** Erich Fromm was born in Frankfurt and was brought up in an intensely religious household (Jay, 1973:88). His Orthodox Jewish parents both came from families of rabbis. In his early twenties, Fromm,

<sup>2</sup>Pollock accompanied Horkheimer and Adorno into exile in New York, and he was indispensable in maintaining the viability of the Institute despite the dispersal of most of its members. In particular, Pollock was responsible for "arranging the mundane details of their lives to allow Horkheimer the maximum time for his scholarly pursuits" (Jay, 1973:7).

along with Leo Lowenthal, who also became associated with the Institute, was active in a religious group formed around Rabbi Nobel at the largest Frankfurt synagogue. Fromm's orthodoxy lessened after his analysis in 1926 in Munich, although he never renounced his religion (Jay, 1973:89).

Fromm's doctorate, under Alfred Weber at Heidelberg, was on *Jewish Law: A Contribution to the Sociology of the Jewish Diaspora*. It was at Heidelberg that Fromm met Freida Reichmann, a Jewish psychoanalyst, who later became his wife. Fromm went on to train at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and opened his own practice in 1927. In 1929 the Frankfurt Institute of Psychoanalysis was opened, and Fromm and his wife both became lecturers at the new Institute. In 1930 Fromm became director of the Social Psychology section at the Institute of Social Research. His interest in combining Marx and psychoanalysis appealed to Horkheimer and others. But by 1940 Fromm's association with the Institute came to an end, largely because of Horkheimer's disagreement with Fromm's criticisms of Freud.

### ***Central Theories and Methods of the Frankfurt School***

The theoretical backgrounds of the various members of the Institute were varied, but for most of them the work of Hegel (filtered through the work of Georg Lukacs), Marx, Weber, Nietzsche, and Freud was important. The critical stance involved the development of theory that described and analyzed the present society in relation to its past and, in doing so, enabled those who were oppressed to realize the forces that caused their oppression. In addition, the analysis would show how this oppression could be overcome with new, emancipatory conceptualizations and practices.

The critical theorists were concerned with the way in which the promise of Enlightenment rationality had been subverted in modern society. The major problem for modern society was, according to Horkheimer, the fact that "Reason has liquidated itself as an agency of ethical, moral, and religious insight" (1947:18). Reason had become rationalization that, as Max Weber had pointed out, led to a bureaucratized, controlling state rather than a liberated, equitable society.

**Reason and Objectivity** Horkheimer distinguished between objective and subjective reason. **Objective reason** referred to reason as an instrument for determining social ends. Objective reason was a "force not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world—in relations among human beings and between social classes, in social institutions, and in nature and its manifestations" (1947:4).

**Subjective reason** was simply concerned with "means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for the purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory." Subjective reason is instrumental reason, and it "attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable," just, or equitable (1947:3). Consequently, when the subjective version of reason holds there is no "reasonable" basis upon which to make ethical choices, "The acceptability of ideals, the criteria for our actions and beliefs, the

leading principles of ethics and politics, all our ultimate decisions are made to depend upon factors other than reason" (1974:7).

The focus on subjective, or instrumental, reason as evidenced in positivist science meant that reason could be as easily used by the Nazi extermination industry as by institutions concerned with the elimination of poverty and suffering. Subjective or instrumental reason involved elevating the scientific "classification of facts and the calculation of probabilities" as the only "authority." In terms of subjective reason, the "statement that justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression is scientifically unverifiable and useless," as meaningless as the statement that "red is more beautiful than blue" (Horkheimer, 1947:24).

The critical theorists maintained that disinterested, objective research was impossible because facts and values could not be separated and the researcher was always a part of the social situation being investigated. More specifically, positive methods were rejected on the basis that positivism's "exclusive faith in mathematics" was "philosophical technocracy" (Horkheimer, 1947:59). Horkheimer and Adorno maintained that positivism saw the world only in terms of "facts and things" and failed to connect these facts and things with social, and individual, needs and desires (Horkheimer, 1947:82).

Critical theory, on the other hand, not only understood the "various facts in their historical development" but also saw through the "notion of fact itself" as an historical and thus relative phenomenon. The "so-called facts ascertained by quantitative methods, which positivists are inclined to regard as the only scientific ones, are often only surface phenomena that obscure rather than disclose the underlying reality" (Horkheimer, 1947:82). The task of the critical theorist was to reveal the real conditions underlying the "facts" and, in doing so, provide a blueprint for an alternative, emancipatory reality.

The analysis of social conditions was an ethical enterprise for critical theorists. Horkheimer maintained that the Kantian ethical universals of duty and good will were abstractions that did not address the changing social context of human needs. Human nature is "continuously influenced and changed by a manifold of circumstances," and there is "no formula that defines the relationship among individuals, society, and nature for all time" (Horkheimer, 1935:152–153). The only ethical ideal should be happiness, because human beings "cannot escape from the longing for happiness and the fear of death" (Horkheimer, 1935:155).

Horkheimer believed that the transition from the hopeful promise of Enlightenment objective reason into modern subjective, instrumental reason was not an accident and could not "arbitrarily at any given moment be reversed" (1947:62). Hegel had pointed out that reason changed historically, but a progressive dialectical change toward freedom was not guaranteed. As Marcuse pointed out, the central category of the dialectic was negation (1960:449). Negation could mean that the "unreasonable becomes reasonable and, as such, determines the facts; in which unfreedom is the condition of freedom, and war the guarantor of peace" (Marcuse, 1960:vii).

Reason, in modern society, was instrumental in "sustaining injustice, toil, and suffering"; at the same time, the exercise of reason was still the best hope

for the future (Marcuse, 1960:450). For example, Marxian theory took shape “as a critique of Hegel’s philosophy . . . in the name of Reason,” and in modern society it was only through constant critique that “Reason,” and thus individuals, could come to understand the contradictions of social life and devise ways to transcend them (Marcuse, 1960:xii–xiii).

**Emancipatory Theory** Like Marx, the critical theorists emphasized that theoretical critique was not simply a way of making sense of the “facts”; it was also a way of helping individuals to see and understand what “is” and, in doing so, see what “might be.” Methodologically, critical theory overcame the breach between theory and practice, ideas and reality, and in this way was true to its Marxist heritage.

Marx had pointed out that capitalism was a “union of contradictions. It gets freedom through exploitation, wealth through impoverishment, advance in production through restriction of consumption,” so that the “very structure of capitalism is a dialectical one: every form and institution of the economic process begets its determinate negation and the crisis is the extreme form in which the contradictions are expressed” (Marcuse, 1960:311). If enlightenment and progress mean “freeing . . . man from superstitious belief in evil forces, in demons and fairies, in blind fate—in short the emancipation from fear—then denunciation of what is currently called reason is the greatest service reason can render” (Horkheimer, 1947:187). **Negative critique** “salvage[s] relative truths from the wreckage of false ultimates” (Horkheimer, 1947:183) and leads to the understanding of these contradictions because it rejects “the absolute claims of prevailing ideology” as well as “the brash claims of reality” by demonstrating their relativity (Horkheimer, 1947:182).

Theoretical critique was seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for revolutionary change. Although theory remained primary—as Marcuse (1960:322) put it, “Practice follows the truth, not vice versa”—change required an agent. But for the Institute theorists, finding an agent under the conditions of monopoly capitalism was a problem. The alienation of the proletariat envisaged by Marx seemed to have been subverted by the ability of capitalism to satisfy an abundance of needs. The result was an “increasing distance between the consciousness of the working class and the critical individual who acts in its name” (Benhabib, 1986:157). The absence of revolutionary working-class consciousness, the entrenchment of monopoly capitalism, and the consolidation of the authoritarian state generated increasing pessimism about the possibility of emancipatory transformation in the immediate future.

Critical theorists pointed out, however, that although capitalism might satisfy many proletariat needs, increased consumption did not necessarily translate into human satisfaction and happiness, and it certainly did not compensate the proletariat for the alienation of their labor power. Capitalism, and especially monopoly capitalism, regulated consumption according to what was profitable, not according to human needs. Capitalism duped consumers into believing that they were exercising real choices among items and that these items would satisfy their needs.

Although the consumer is, so to speak, given his choice, he does not get a penny's worth too much for his money, whatever the trademark he prefers to possess. The difference in quality between two equally priced popular items is usually so infinitesimal as the difference in the nicotine content of two brands of cigarettes. (Horkheimer, 1947:99)

Even if the consumer suspected that the choice was an illusion, this would not guarantee the production of revolutionary consciousness because of the pervasiveness of reification. **Reification** refers to the process of domination whereby the products of human labor take on the appearance of things external to, and uncontrollable by, human beings. For example, economic fluctuations are often blamed on the operation of "the market." But the market is not some abstract, inevitable force; it is *people* making decisions about money, commodities, and trade.

Georg Lukacs, a friend of Max Weber, had earlier developed the theory of reification. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), Lukacs suggested that the proletariat were prisoners of bourgeois ideas that encouraged the belief that capitalism and alienated labor were "natural"—that is, an inevitable part of abstract market forces that individuals could not control. Consequently, for Lukacs, it was the task of vanguard intellectuals to overcome this reification by educating the proletariat as to their "real" position in the relations of production and showing how the proletariat could control their destiny.

To the critical theorists, reification was both an objective process, being a part of the exchange relations of capitalism, and subjective because it was embedded in belief and understanding. Reification was false consciousness that was "self-inflicted alienation"—the alienation that a person and social class did to themselves (Agger, 1979:150). Consequently, it was the duty of critical theory to help generate revolutionary consciousness and practice among the proletariat.

**Fromm and Freud** Simple economic determinism was not the motor of revolutionary transformation. Culture, or ideology, embedded in the consciousness, also played an important part in producing distorted personalities who reproduced the conditions of domination. This realization made Freud's work useful to critical theory because it provided an explanation for false consciousness as well as an explanation for the authoritarian personality types of modern society. Freud's libido theory also held out the promise that total domination might be subverted by the fact that basically human beings desire freedom (Alford, 1987:26).

Erich Fromm was central to the incorporation of Freud into the work of the critical theorists. Fromm maintained that psychoanalysis was compatible with Marxian historical materialism because it uncovered the unconscious forces controlling behavior. Irrational behavior had its origins in social life—in religion, customs, politics, and education.

Marxists have usually assumed that what works behind man's back and directs him are economic forces and their political representations. Psychoanalytic study shows that this is much too narrow a concept. Society



consists of people . . . equipped with a potential of passionate strivings. . . . This human potential as a whole is molded by the ensemble of economic and social forces characteristic of each given society. These forces . . . produce a certain social unconscious, and certain conflicts between the repressive factors and given human needs which are essential for sane human functioning (like a certain degree of freedom, stimulation, interest in life, happiness). . . . revolutions occur as expressions of not only new productive forces, but also of the repressed part of human nature, and they are successful only when the two conditions are combined. (1965:37–38)

The psychoanalytic focus on the family was important to critical theory because it was through the family that a society put its stamp on the individual personality. Specifically, it was through the family that society reproduced the class structure. In addition, it was the family that produced the authoritarian personality type that underlay anti-Semitism.

Investigations into the way in which economic and political structures affected the psychic life of individuals resulted in the Institute projects *Studies on Authority and Family*, conducted in Germany in the 1930s, and *Studies in Prejudice*, conducted in the United States in the 1940s. The work *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), also explored the social and historical basis for the development of the authoritarian personality and the origins of fascist society.

### ***Nature of Society, Humans, and Change***

**Modern Capitalist Society** The critical theorists focused primarily on the nature of modern Western society and the historical development of capitalism. A key transformation was seen to be the replacement of individual competitive capitalism with monopoly and state capitalism (see Chapter 5). With state capitalism replacing liberal capitalism after World War II, the critique of society could no longer be simply a critique of political economy.

It is no longer the norms of a bourgeois public sphere, of the liberal marketplace and of the liberal state, practicing the rule of law, to which critique can appeal. . . . Emancipatory norms are no longer immanent in public and institutional structures. Instead, they have to be searched for in the unredeemed utopian promise of culture, art, and philosophy (Adorno), or in the deep structures of human subjectivity that revolt against the sacrifices demanded by an oppressive society (Marcuse). (Benhabib, 1986:180–181)

The transformation to state capitalism is marked by the development of mass culture and the extension of social domination into the psychological as well as the economic experiences of human beings. It represents the triumph of instrumental rationality that Weber discussed. **Instrumental rationality** is concerned only with matching effective means to selected goals and thus acts as a mechanism of repression in modern society. This dehumanized exercise is contrasted with a rationality, or reason, that is concerned with the human

values of happiness and justice. Horkheimer remarked that even after the defeat of fascism, the

hopes of mankind seem to be farther from fulfillment today than they were even in the groping epochs when they were first formulated by humanists. It seems that even as technical knowledge expands the horizon of man's thought and activity, his autonomy as an individual, his ability to resist the growing apparatus of mass manipulation, his power of imagination, his independent judgement appear to be reduced. Advance in technical facilities for enlightenment is accompanied by a process of dehumanization. (1947:vi)

Weber's fears about a bureaucratized, impersonal world of "icy darkness" seemed to the critical theorists to have been realized, making it difficult to conceive of ways in which emancipatory change could be effected.

The irony is, as both Marx and Weber understood, that technological "progress" enabling human beings to control the natural world becomes "progressive enslavement" as technology and science become the singular determinants of human needs (Marcuse, 1964:144).

The fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress. On the one hand the growth of economic productivity furnishes the conditions for a world of greater justice; on the other hand it allows the technical apparatus and social groups which administer it a disproportionate superiority to the rest of the population. . . . Even though the individual disappears before the apparatus which he serves, that apparatus provides for him as never before. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944:xiv)

In the early years the critical theorists subscribed to Marx's idea that technology could be harnessed for the satisfaction of human needs in a positive rather than a negative manner, but in the aftermath of the Holocaust this optimism was abandoned.

The real individuals of our time are the martyrs who have gone through infernos of suffering and degradation in their resistance to conquest and oppression, not the inflated personalities of popular culture, the conventional dignitaries. . . . The anonymous martyrs of the concentration camps are the symbols of humanity that is striving to be born. The task of philosophy is to translate what they have done into language that will be heard, even though their finite voices have been silenced by tyranny. (Horkheimer, 1947:161)

The technological expertise the Nazis brought to bear on the elimination of whole sectors of humanity was produced by "modern" human beings. It seemed that in modern society, "conscience and personal responsibility decline 'objectively' under conditions of total bureaucratization . . . where the functioning of the apparatus determines—and overrides—personal autonomy" (Marcuse, 1970:50). The "fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress," and even though the "individual disappears before the apparatus which he serves, that apparatus provides for him as never before. In an unjust state of life, the im-

potence and pliability of the masses grows with the quantitative increase in commodities allowed them" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944:xiv–xv).

Horkheimer pointed out that the modern celebration of the "individual" is ironic. The Enlightenment dream of "machines doing men's work has now come true," but it is "also true that men are acting more and more like machines" (1974:26). False needs, satisfied by the culture industry and the increasing proliferation of commodities, extend the reach of capitalist domination. For example, the "real you" is defined in relation to the clothes you wear, the car you drive, even the toothpaste you use. Fromm (1955:133) pointed out, "We drink labels. With a bottle of Coca-Cola we drink the picture of the pretty boy and girl who drink it in the advertisement, we drink the slogan of 'the pause that refreshes'. . . least of all do we drink with our palate." Individuality is subverted by technology in the "one-dimensional society" of enslaved consumers and mass culture audiences (Marcuse, 1964). Freud's insights on subjectivity were important to critical theory because of the decline of autonomous individuality, and with it the possibility of critical reflection on society that might lead to emancipatory practice.

**Human Nature** Human beings are inseparable from society because the individual "is *real* only as part of the whole to which he belongs. His essential determination, his character and inclination, his avocation and view of the world all have their origin in society and in his destiny in society" (Horkheimer, 1947:9–10). The isolated individual is an illusion: "The most esteemed personal qualities, such as independence, will to freedom, sympathy and the sense of justice, are social as well as individual virtues." Consequently, the "emancipation of the individual is not an emancipation from society, but the deliverance of society from atomization . . . that may reach its peak in periods of collectivization and mass culture" (Horkheimer, 1947:135). As society changes, individual personalities change, and the "realization that young men and women today are, at bottom, different even from what they were at the beginning of the century" means that the notion of an unchangeable human essence must be discarded (Horkheimer, 1947:13). Human needs, "including sexuality," have an "historical character" (Marcuse, 1970:59).

The significance of the historical nature of human nature lies in the way repressive social forces penetrate the psyche. In advanced industrial societies, these repressive forces penetrate ever more deeply, leading to the "obsolescence of the role and autonomy of the economic and political subject" (Marcuse, 1970:59). Specifically, it is the loss of a "personal private realm" that weakens the "consciousness and conscience" and thus decreases the autonomy and rationality of the individual (Marcuse, 1970:50).

Adorno and Horkheimer used Homer's epic of Odysseus's voyage from Troy to Ithaca, which illustrated man's domination of nature, to trace modern psychic repression. They pointed out that domination of nature was necessary for man to become human, but it also marked the beginnings of man's self-repression (1944:46). A key event in Odysseus's voyage was his escape from the lure of the Sirens. Odysseus had to pass between Scylla and Charybdis while listening to the song of the Sirens. Scylla and Charybdis had the right to capture

whatever came between them. They were assured of their prize because no mariner could resist the seductive songs of the Sirens. The Sirens represented the sensuous, natural world—the world of the Freudian id. Odysseus cunningly found a way to resist the temptation of the Sirens. He put wax into the ears of his rowers so they could not hear the songs and had himself bound to the mast so that he could hear the songs but could not succumb to the lure. Odysseus “has found an escape clause in the contract, which enables him to fulfill it while eluding it” so that he “as subject need not be subjected” to the Sirens (1944:59).

Odysseus was able to dominate nature, but at the price of repressing his own instinctual inner nature. He was therefore the prototype of the bourgeois whose deferment of pleasure was critical to the success of rational capitalism. Odysseus’s strategy also reinforced his domination over his men, who could not hear the songs and who had to rely on Odysseus’s judgment. “The oarsmen . . . are each yoked in the same rhythm as the modern worker in the factory,” and their impotence, like that of modern workers, was not simply a “stratagem of the rulers, but the logical consequence of the industrial society into which the ancient Fate . . . has finally changed” (1944:37). In the long run, the taming of nature resulted in a “bourgeois commodity economy,” and the conditions were established for a “new barbarism” (1944:32).

The repression of instinctual nature, necessary for individual and social progress, resulted in a transition from what Freud called the **pleasure principle** to the **reality principle** (Marcuse, 1966:12).

<i>Pleasure principle</i>	<i>Reality principle</i>
Immediate satisfaction	Delayed satisfaction
Pleasure	Restraint of pleasure
Joy (play)	Toil (work)
Receptiveness	Productiveness
Absence of repression	Security

The result of the transition was that the “curse of irresistible progress” became “irresistible regression” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944:36).

Adorno and Horkheimer became increasingly pessimistic about the possibility of any collective emancipatory project after the 1940s. Marcuse (1966), however, suggested that instinctual repression allied with supremely efficient technological rationality could be a source of liberation. That is, too much repression would invariably mean an eventual rebellion against those repressive forces.

**Social Change** Marcuse suggested that Freud’s libidinal repression was not a singular, static phenomenon, but varied in relation to changes in society. In modern society, repression is excessive. Basic repression has been superceded by surplus repression. **Surplus repression** occurs because capitalism can produce an abundance that can liberate humans from scarcity, but “the closer the real possibility of liberating the individual from the constraints once justified by scarcity and immaturity, the greater the need for maintaining and streamlining these constraints lest the established order of domination dissolve” (Marcuse,

1966:85). Surplus repression is repression in the interest of domination rather than in the interest of the development of civilized human beings.

Surplus repression can be undermined by the fact that the “quantitative reduction in labor time and energy leads to a qualitative change in human existence” and the “expanding realm of freedom becomes truly a realm of play” (Marcuse, 1966:222–223). In time the “distinction between rational and irrational authority, between repression and surplus-repression, can be made and verified by individuals themselves.” If people do not currently make this distinction, this “does not mean they cannot learn to make it once they are given the opportunity to do so” (Marcuse, 1966:225).

The escape from the “iron cage” can be accomplished by a “**great refusal**”—the refusal to “buy into” the consumer society. Marcuse believed that this refusal would not be made by the proletariat because they have been co-opted by the ability of advanced capitalism to satisfy consumption needs and produce the semblance of the “good life” (Marcuse, 1964:18). The great refusal will be made by the “substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” who exist outside democratic society and whose opposition is “revolutionary even if their consciousness is not” (1964:256). It is when these individuals start “refusing to play the game” that the “beginning of the end” is in sight (1964:257).

Marcuse was hopeful that the various counterculture movements of the 1960s indicated the beginnings of the great refusal. For Marcuse, love and sexual freedom were the routes to social transformation. As individuals come to recognize the excessive rationalization of society, there would be a reversion to childhood polymorphous sexuality that modern, post-Oedipal genital sexuality represses. The body would become an “instrument of pleasure,” and this would hasten the disintegration of “the monogamic and patriarchal family” (Marcuse, 1966:201). Marcuse’s optimistic forecast of sexual revolution as the motor of social transformation was made before STDs, including AIDS, were recognized as serious problems.

Adorno, Horkheimer, and even Marcuse realized that “transformation is objectively necessary but the need for it is not present among precisely those social strata who are defined as agents of transformation” in Marxist theory (Marcuse, 1970:99). Nonetheless, resistance was imperative, whether it took the form of a great refusal or some other form, because the “new fascism . . . will be very different from the old fascism.” The new fascism will undermine democracy by repressive legislation, supported by the masses, that will “cut back . . . existing civil and political liberties” (Marcuse, 1970:100). Some theorists today maintain that this is precisely what has occurred in the late twentieth century in Western societies and that the vital sociological question remains, who can resist? If it is not the working class, maybe resistance can emerge from feminists and racial minorities.

### ***Class, Gender, and Race***

**Class** The critical theorists recognized the class divisions in modern society but provided no systematic analysis of class (Kellner, 1989:229). They were more

concerned with the way in which Marxian class politics had been subverted by psychological as well as economic repression. A key institution in psychological repression was the family. Fromm pointed out that the family was the "medium through which the society or the social class stamps its specific structure on the child, and hence the adult. *The family is the psychological agency of society*" (1988:483).

The research *Studies on Authority and the Family*, undertaken by the Institute in the 1930s, examined the nature of the family and the psychic repression it generated under industrial capitalism. Critical theorists pointed out that the family was not a natural, unchanging form, but changed in response to external social and historical conditions. The patriarchal, bourgeois family was the particular form developed in relation to the needs of industrial capitalism. It was the ideals of this family form that tended to prevail and entrench subjective domination.

*Studies on Authority and the Family* was based on an empirical study of the attitudes and beliefs of German workers. Three thousand questionnaires were distributed to workers asking them their views on "the education of children, the rationalization of industry, the possibility of avoiding a new war, and the locus of real power in the state" (Jay, 1973:116).

An important methodological innovation was used in this research. The answers were recorded verbatim and then analyzed "the way a psychoanalyst listens to the associations of a patient"—that is, key words were taken as an indication of the "underlying psychological reality beneath the manifest content of the answers" (Jay, 1973:117). The study revealed discrepancies between beliefs and personality traits. The research found that approximately 10 percent of the respondents exhibited authoritarian characteristics, and about 15 percent anti-authoritarian views, with the majority being highly ambivalent.

Horkheimer and Adorno found that under state capitalism the patriarchal, bourgeois family was the foundation for the authoritarian personality. The Oedipal conflict, involving the rejection of the mother in favor of the father's authority, was the means for the child to learn to accept the authority of society. The "rational" adaptation of the child to the father's authority was internalized to produce a strong ego and superego, or conscience, adapted to the needs of capitalist society.

The self-control of the individual, the disposition for work and discipline, the ability to hold firmly to certain ideas, consistency in practical life, application of reason, perseverance and pleasure in constructive activity could all be developed, in the circumstances, only under the direction of the father whose own education had been won in the school of life.  
(Horkheimer, 1982:101)

It is clear that the child referred to was a male child. In the early stages of capitalist, bourgeois society, the authority of the father provided the son with an object against which to rebel. This rebellion produced individual autonomy and the ability to resist domination. However, with the transformation of liberal, entrepreneurial capitalism to state capitalism, the father's economic power and family authority declined. The child still experienced the Oedipal complex but

came to realize that the father did not embody total power and authority. The child then sought a father-substitute in order to develop a strong, autonomous self. But the only father-substitute was the abstract authority of instrumental reason, with the result the child became the “mass individual, a heteronomous social atom who is narcissistic, materialistic, and sadistic” and unable to resist domination (Jagentowicz Mills, 1987:98). The child learned that not “the father but the playmates, the neighbors, the leader of the gang, the sport, the screen are the authorities on appropriate mental and physical behavior” (Marcuse, 1970:52).

The foundations for capitulation to an authoritarian, fascist leader were found in the psychic fallout from these transformed family relations. From their research into the family lives of German workers, the critical theorists concluded that the “German working class would be far less resistant to the right-wing seizure of power than its militant ideology would suggest”—a conclusion borne out by the general enthusiasm for National Socialism (Jay, 1973:117).

**Gender** Horkheimer and Adorno focused on the problems for the male child in state capitalist families. The mother, “as representative of nature,” was, in the early stages of bourgeois capitalism, a source of security and comfort for the male child. Women in general were “the enigmatic image of irresistibility and powerlessness” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944:71–72). The mother provided a refuge from the father’s authority, and her unconditional love was a source of emotional sustenance that provided the child with a vision of an alternative, utopian reality—a vision of instinctual Eros in contrast to rational authority, the pleasure principle as opposed to the reality principle.

This idyllic situation, according to the critical theorists, changed as women entered the productive sphere and many of their socialization tasks were taken over by other institutions. The mother ceased to offer a refuge from the authoritarian world of the father because she became more and more like a man. For Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as Marcuse, this was a negative step. For example, Marcuse believed that the feminine principle, based on the “promise of peace, of joy, of the end of violence” natural to women, was the foundation for emancipation of both men and women (1972:77).

*The celebration of the feminine principle was a blind spot in the work of the critical theorists.* The principle merely restated the gender dichotomies that support capitalist patriarchy (Jagentowicz Mills, 1987:116). The mother might represent the promise of liberation for sons, but this promise did not extend to daughters. Daughters, in the Freudian account, had to reject the mother in favor of the father in order to develop a mature femininity. At the same time, like their mothers, daughters must embody the same liberatory promise for men.

There was some nostalgia for the nineteenth-century bourgeois family among the critical theorists. They saw the destruction of this family form as the destruction of the sphere of love, and thus of any possibility of resistance to the instrumentality of mass society. But the emotional support it offered its male members obscured the damage this family form did to mothers and daughters. Adorno and Horkheimer concluded that “Fatherlessness creates a mass individual or an authoritarian personality” but a motherless society meant a “loss of

a vision of the future lived in freedom," a society "without love or hope" (Jagentowicz Mills, 1987:109). A motherless society was one that was primed for anti-Semitism, and for racism in general.

**Race** Horkheimer and Adorno argued that "race is not a naturally special characteristic" but was a potent sign in certain social contexts (1944:169). Anti-Semitism, for example, projected repressed fears and wants onto the despised other, most especially the fear of impotence in the face of overwhelming social and economic forces. They saw Nazism as a "psychological problem, but the psychological factors themselves have to be understood as being molded by socio-economic factors" (Fromm, 1941:208).

In capitalist society, anti-Semitism was economically important to the bourgeoisie because it concealed the nature of domination in productive relations. Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out that Jews had historically been denied access to manufacturing so they often found their livelihood in commercial and financial enterprises. Thus, "commerce was not their vocation but their fate" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944:175). The actual nature of productivity in these occupations was often concealed, and the merchant and banker appeared to profit on the backs of productive workers. They were, however, simply middlemen who concealed the reality of the capitalist manufacture's appropriation of surplus wealth. The Jew became the "bailiff of the whole system and takes the hatred of others upon himself" (1944:174). Under monopoly capitalism, wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few and the middleman role became redundant. The Jew, however, remained a handy scapegoat for the resulting economic problems that monopoly capitalism produced.

Jews, and others who were similarly stigmatized, were easy targets for persecution. They could be used to expiate the social dislocations of capitalism as well as the unconscious antisocial forces that were barely repressed under systems of instrumental domination.

In the 1940s, an ambitious study dealing with prejudice, and specifically with anti-Semitism, was launched in the United States.<sup>3</sup> *Studies in Prejudice* was a five-volume collaborative work, with Adorno and the members of the Berkeley Public Opinion Study Group, R. Nevitt Sanford, Daniel Levison, and Elsie Frankel-Brunswik, as the main researchers. Horkheimer was the overall coordinator of the project. The main theoretical underpinning for the discovery of the subjective manifestations of prejudice came from psychoanalysis.

The studies employed both qualitative techniques, such as interviews, and quantitative techniques. The five studies were *Dynamics of Prejudice*, which examined the personality traits and prejudicial attitudes of war veterans; *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder*, which consisted of case studies of psychotherapy patients who demonstrated anti-Semitism; *Prophets of Deceit*, which examined the techniques of mass persuasion; *Rehearsal for Destruction*, which described the historical origin of anti-Semitism in Germany; and *The Authoritarian Personality*, which examined the correlations between prejudice and personality traits.

<sup>3</sup>The study was funded by the American Jewish Committee.



*The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950) was specifically concerned with outlining the personality traits of the potentially fascist individual. Extensive questionnaires and interviews were conducted, and an F scale was developed that measured anti-Semitism and antidemocratic attitudes. The study concluded that prejudiced individuals had distinctive personalities as a result of their socialization. Prejudiced, antidemocratic personalities came from authoritarian families in which conformity was the rule, discipline was strict but often arbitrary, and any deviations from rigidly held but conventional values were severely punished. The authoritarian personality had a strong resemblance to the sadomasochistic personality discussed by Fromm in the earlier *Studies on Authority and the Family*.

*The Authoritarian Personality* revealed the familial psychosocial dynamic of authoritarianism and prejudice, but “the authoritarian family did not produce authoritarian children solely because of what it did—provide a model for arbitrary domination—but equally for what it could not do—protect the individual against the claims made on his socialization by extra-familial agencies” (Jay, 1973:247). As Fromm (1955:237) pointed out, “Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism have in common that they offered the atomized individual a new refuge and security. These systems are the culmination of alienation.” Prejudice was a persistent social problem because the authoritarian personality type was as much a product of society at large as it was of family dynamics.

Adorno concluded *The Authoritarian Personality* with the observation that if “fear and destructiveness are the major emotional sources of fascism, *eros* belongs mainly to democracy” (Adorno et al., 1950:976). Education, therefore, had to be tied to democratic politics if prejudice was to be curtailed and *eros* furthered.

After the Second World War, Horkheimer reflected on the situation of German Jews and concluded that the trauma of the Nazi era had yet to be overcome. He believed that protection from repeating the past lay in knowledge of that past and, more important, in education that made individuals “critical in the face of demagogy” so that they could distinguish “demagogy from a truly rational politics” (1974:117–118).

### ***Other Theories and Theorists***

We have concentrated on four key members of the Institute because of space limitations, but several other important theorists were associated with the Institute in its early years. Among them were Leo Lowenthal and Walter Benjamin, who were interested in a sociology of literature; Karl Wittfogel, whose interest was in comparative sociology; Karl Mannheim, who developed the sociology of knowledge; and Paul Lazarsfeld, who became important to communications research in U.S. sociology (see Chapter 2). In addition, Adorno produced a considerable amount of work on art and culture, specifically critiques of mass culture.

The major focus for the diverse work of the critical theorists was on **domination** in capitalist and, during the war years, fascist society. They suggested that because domination penetrated into the innermost core of the personality, domination was often unrecognized and unrealized. This made it difficult to conceptualize how the world should be; that is, it made it difficult to mount a rational critique of the present and formulate possibilities for an emancipated future.

### *Critique and Conclusions*

A major criticism of the critical theorists is that they simply replaced economic analysis with cultural analysis and, in doing so, weakened, if not eliminated, the possibility of revolutionary praxis on the part of the proletariat. But the critical theorists from the outset maintained that the former division between political economy (base) and culture/ideology (superstructure) no longer held in twentieth-century society. The two were critically interconnected, and it was the interconnections that made emancipation difficult. The focus on ideology, culture, and the damaged psyche in a capitalist society was part of a continuing concern with how capitalism changed historically and how the impulse to a better world could be promoted. After the 1930s, however, Adorno and Horkheimer became pessimistic about the possibility of radical transformation, and neither participated in any direct way with the radical student protests of the 1960s.

Another criticism of critical theory is that it remained a philosophical, unscientific enterprise that did not come to grips with the “real” conditions of modern repression and domination. This criticism has some validity, but it should be recalled that the immediate postwar situation of the original Institute members could not, and did not, approximate those of the 1930s origins. After the Institute’s reconstitution in Germany, the work of critical theory remained focused on revealing the structures of domination underlying the seeming benevolence of state capitalism. This focus influenced the work in the critical theoretical tradition of students such as Jurgen Habermas.

### **Jurgen Habermas (1929– )**

Jurgen Habermas was born in Gummersbach, near Düsseldorf, and grew up during the Nazi regime and the Second World War. The early experience of the Nazi era had a profound effect on his thinking. As a teenager, Habermas was shocked by the Nuremberg trials and the “discovery of the horrors of the Nazi regime” (Bernstein, 1985:1). In the 1950s he became concerned about the “continuities between the Nazi regime and the emergent West German state” (Outhwaite, 1994:2). His work has been a search for a social framework that can ensure that fascism will not reappear.

Habermas studied philosophy at Göttingen, Zurich, and Bonn. He obtained his doctorate from Bonn in 1954. For a couple of years he was a journalist, and from 1956 until 1959 he was Adorno’s assistant at the Frankfurt Institute. In 1961 he was appointed Professor of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Heidelberg. He returned to the Institute in 1964, where he assumed Horkheimer’s Chair in Philosophy and Sociology.<sup>4</sup> In 1971 he assumed the directorship of the new Max Planck Institute for the Study of the Conditions of

<sup>4</sup>Horkheimer had not been very supportive of Habermas when he was a student. Kellner (1989:207) suggested that this was because Horkheimer became more conservative after his return to Germany and he found Habermas’s work too left wing. Adorno, however, did support Habermas for the Chair position.