

Chapter VI

Further Readings on the Frankfurt School

by

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This is the sixth and final chapter in the Free Congress Foundation's book on Political Correctness, or – to call it by its real name – cultural Marxism. It is a short bibliographical essay intended not as an exhaustive resource for scholars but as a guide for interested citizens who want to learn more about the ideology that is taking over America.

As readers of the earlier chapters in this book already know, to understand Political Correctness and the threat it poses it is necessary to understand its history, particularly the history of the institution most responsible for creating it, the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School, or the Institute for Social Research as it was formally known, was established at Frankfurt University in Germany in 1923. This fact alone is important, because it tells us that Political Correctness is not merely a leftover of the American student rebellion of the 1960s.

Another fact from that long-ago year, 1923, is equally significant: the intended name for the Frankfurt School was the Institute for Marxism. The Institute's father and funder, Felix Weil, wrote in 1971 that he "wanted the Institute to become known, and perhaps famous, due to its contributions to Marxism as a scientific discipline..."¹ Beginning a tradition Political Correctness still carries on, Weil and others decided that they could operate more effectively if they concealed their Marxism; hence, on reflection, they chose the neutral-sounding name, the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung). But "Weil's heartfelt wish was still to create a foundation similar to the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow – equipped with a staff of professors and students, with libraries and archives – and one day to present it to a German Soviet Republic."² In 1933, this disguised "Institute for Marxism" left Germany and reestablished itself in New York City, where in time it shifted its focus to injecting its ideology into American society.

The most readable English-language history of the Frankfurt School is Martin Jay's book, The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, 1923 - 1950 (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1973 – new edition in 1996). This book is in print in paperback and can be ordered through any bookstore. The reader should be aware that Jay's book is, in the words of

¹ Martin, Jay. The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, 1923 – 1950 (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996) p. 8.

² Rolf Wiggershaus, The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance, trans. by Michael Robertson (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995) p.24.

another work on the Frankfurt School, a “semiofficial’ history³, which is to say that it is largely uncritical. Like virtually all other English-language authors on the Institute, Jay is on the political left. Nonetheless, the book provides a solid factual introduction to the Frankfurt School, and the reader should have little trouble discerning in it the roots and origins of today’s Political Correctness.

In his first chapter, “The Creation of the Institut für Sozialforschung and Its First Frankfurt Years,” Jay lays bare the Institute’s Marxist origins and nature, and equally its efforts to conceal both: “The original idea of calling it the Institut für Marxismus (Institute for Marxism) was abandoned as too provocative, and a more Aesopian alternative was sought (not for the last time in the Frankfurt School’s history).”⁴ Of the Institute’s first director, Carl Grünberg, Jay writes, “Grünberg concluded his opening address by clearly stating his personal allegiance to Marxism as a scientific methodology. Just as liberalism, state socialism, and the historical school had institutional homes elsewhere, so Marxism would be the ruling principle at the Institut.”⁵ Jay’s first chapter also introduces the Institute’s critical shift that laid the basis for today’s Political Correctness, a.k.a. cultural Marxism: “if it can be said that in early years of its history the Institut concerned itself primarily with an analysis of bourgeois society’s socio-economic substructure, in the years after 1930 its prime interest lay in its cultural superstructure.”⁶

The second chapter, “The Genius of Critical Theory,” gets at the heart of the “Critical Studies” departments that now serve as the founts of Political Correctness on American college campuses. All of these are branches and descendants of the Critical Theory first developed in the 1930s by the Frankfurt School. The term “Critical Theory” is itself something of a play on words. One is tempted to ask, “OK, what is the theory?” The answer is, “The theory is to criticize.” Jay writes, “Critical Theory, as its name implies, was expressed through a series of critiques of other thinkers and philosophical traditions...Only by confronting it in its own terms, as a gadfly of other systems, can it be fully understood.”⁷ The goal of Critical Theory was not truth, but praxis, or revolutionary action: bringing the current society and culture down through unremitting, destructive criticism. According to Jay, “The true object of Marxism, Horkheimer argued (Max Horkheimer succeeded Carl Grünberg as director of the Institute in July, 1930), was not the uncovering of immutable truths, but the fostering of social change.”⁸

The central question facing the Institute in the early 1930s was how to apply Marxism to the culture. The title of Jay’s third chapter gives the answer: “The Integration of Psychoanalysis.” Here, Jay’s book falls down to some extent, in that it does not offer a clear understanding of how the Institute integrated Marx and Freud. The answer appears to be that Freud’s later critiques were made conditional on a capitalist, bourgeois order: a revolutionary, post-capitalist society could “liberate” man from his Freudian repression.

³ Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, ed., The Essential Frankfurt School Reader (Continuum, New York 1997) p. vii.

⁴ Jay op. cit., p. 8.

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

⁸ Ibid., p. 46.

Here again one sees key aspects of Political Correctness emerging, including a demand for sexual “liberation” and the attack on “patriarchal” Western culture.

If the precise nature of the blending of Marx and Freud is left open by Jay, his next chapter makes the blend’s application clear: “The Institute’s First Studies of Authority.” The Institute left Germany for New York in 1933 because the Nazis came to power in Germany. Not surprisingly, one of the Institute’s first tasks in New York was to oppose Nazism. It did so largely by concocting a psychological “test” for an “authoritarian personality.” Supposedly, people with this authoritarian personality were likely to support Nazism. Both the concept and the methodology were doubtful at best. But the Institute’s work laid down an important tool for the left, namely a notion that anyone on the right was psychologically unbalanced. And it marked a key turning for the Institute in the birth of Political Correctness in America, in that the empirical research the studies demanded was done on Americans. Ultimately, the result was Institute member Theodor Adorno’s vastly influential book, The Authoritarian Personality, published in 1950.

Jay’s fifth chapter, “The Institute’s Analysis of Nazism,” continues the theme of the “authoritarian personality.” But his sixth, “Aesthetic Theory and the Critique of Mass Culture,” provides an answer to the question of why most “serious” modern art and music is so awful. It is intended to be. Theodor Adorno was the Institute’s lead figure on high culture – he began life as a music critic and promoter of Schönberg – and his view was that in the face of the “repressiveness” of bourgeois society, art could only be “true” if it were alienating, reflecting the alienated society around it. Jay quotes Adorno: “A successful work...is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure.”⁹

Adorno despised the new mass culture – film, radio, and jazz – in what seems to be a case of missed opportunity: today, the entertainment industry is the single most powerful promoter of Political Correctness. Another key Frankfurt School figure, Walter Benjamin, did see the potential: “he paradoxically held out hope for the progressive potential of politicized, collectivized art.”¹⁰ At some point, someone – the question of who lies beyond the boundaries of Jay’s book – put Benjamin’s perception together with the Frankfurt School’s general view, which Jay summarizes as “the Institut came to feel that the culture industry enslaved men in far more subtle and effective ways than the crude methods of domination practiced in earlier eras.”¹¹

In the remainder of the book, Jay traces the (sort of) empirical work of the Institute in the 1940s, which was beset by the same problems as their earlier survey “research,” and follows the Institute in its return to Frankfurt, Germany after World War II. But by this point, the reader will already have the picture. He will have seen how Marxism was translated from economic into cultural terms; discerned the themes of

⁹ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 211.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 216

sexual liberation, feminism, “victims” and so on that make up today’s Political Correctness; and found in Critical Theory the origins of the endless wailing about “racism, sexism and homophobia” that “PC” pours forth. One key piece of history is missing: “an analysis of Marcuse’s influential transmission of the Frankfurt School’s work to a new American audience in the 1960s,”¹² as Jay puts it in his epilogue. Also, Jay curiously passes over with only the most minimal discussion the effective move of the Institute, in the persons of Horkheimer and Adorno, to Los Angeles during the war. Did the connections they built there play any role in injecting the Frankfurt School’s philosophy into American film and, after the war, television? Jay does not touch upon the subject.

But for the reader new to the Frankfurt School as the source of today’s Political Correctness, Jay’s The Dialectical Imagination offers a solid base. The book concludes with an extensive (though not annotated) bibliography of works by and about the Frankfurt School.

As to other accessible works about the Frankfurt School, the definitive modern work in German has recently been translated into English: The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance by Rolf Wiggershaus, (translated by Michael Robertson, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, first paperback edition 1995). This covers much of the same ground as Martin Jay’s book, although it also follows the Institute from its post-war return to Germany up to Adorno’s death in 1969. Wiggershaus is more detailed than Jay, and, although he too is on the left politically, he is more critical than Jay. In the book’s Afterword, Wiggershaus offers a brief look (and a hostile one) at some German conservative critiques of the Frankfurt School. A picture emerges that will seem familiar to Americans entrapped in the coils of Political Correctness:

Since the publication in 1970 of his book The Poverty of Critical Theory, Rohrmoser has promulgated, in constantly varying forms, the view that Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer were the terrorists’ intellectual foster-parents, who were using cultural revolution to destroy the traditions of the Christian West. Academics such as Ernst Topitsch and Kurt Sontheimer, who saw themselves as educators and liberal democrats, followed in Rohrmoser’s footsteps. In 1972 Topitsch, a critical rationalist who was Professor of Philosophy in Graz, had stated that behind the slogans of “rational discussion” and “dialogue free of domination” there was being established at the universities “a distinct terrorism of political convictions such as never existed before, even under Nazi tyranny.”¹³

¹² Ibid., p. 287; Herbert Marcuse joined the Institute for Social Research in 1932.

¹³ Wiggershaus, op. cit., p. 657.

Additional works on the Frankfurt School include:

- The Frankfurt School by T.B. Bottomore (Tavistock, London, 1984). Another history written by a sympathizer; you are better off with Jay or Wiggershaus.
- “The New Dark Age: The Frankfurt School and ‘Political Correctness’” by Michael Minnicino, in *Fidelio*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter 1992 (KMW Publishing, Washington, DC) One of the few looks at the Frankfurt School by someone not a sympathizer, this long journal article explains the role of the Institute for Social Research in creating the ideology we now know as “Political Correctness.” Unfortunately, its value is reduced by some digressions that lack credibility.
- Angela Davis: An Autobiography by Angela Davis (Random House, New York 1974) Angela Davis, a leading American black radical and Communist Party member, was described by Frankfurt School member Herbert Marcuse as “my best student.” She also studied in Frankfurt under Adorno. This book shows the link between the Institute for Social Research and the New Left of the 1960s through the eyes of a key participant.
- The Young Lukacs and the Origins of Western Marxism by Andrew Arato (Seabury Press, New York, 1979). The author is, as usual, a sympathizer, but this work shows the key role Lukacs played in the thinking of the Frankfurt School and, later, the New Left.
- The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute by Susan Buck-Morss (Free Press, New York, 1977). An important book on the relationship of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory to the New Left.
- Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas by David Held (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980). Yet another history by a fan of the Frankfurt School, but valuable for its discussion of the impact of Nietzsche on key Frankfurt School figures.

Beyond these secondary works lies the vast literature produced by members of the Frankfurt School itself. Some key works were written in English, and many of those written in German are available in translation. As is usually the case with Marxist works, the prose style and vocabulary are often so convoluted as to make them almost unreadable. Further, the refusal of the Frankfurt School to make its own future vision plain led many of its members to write in aphorisms, which adds yet another layer of impenetrableness.

One work, however, is of such importance that it must be recommended despite its difficulty: Eros and Civilization by Herbert Marcuse (Beacon Press, Boston, first paperback edition in 1974 and still in print). Subtitled A Philosophical Inquiry into

Freud, this book holds center stage for two reasons. First, it completes the task of integrating Marx and Freud. While the Marxism is *sotto voce*, the whole framework of the book is in fact Marxist, and it is through the framework that Freud is considered. Second, Eros and Civilization and its author were the key means of transmission by which the intellectual work of the Frankfurt School was injected into the student rebellion of the 1960s. This book became the bible of the young radicals who took over America's college campuses from 1965 onward, and who are still there as faculty members.

In brief, Eros and Civilization urges total rebellion against traditional Western culture – the “Great Refusal” – and promises a Candyland utopia of free sex and no work to those who join the revolution. About two-thirds of the way through the book, Marcuse offers this summary of its arguments:

Our definition of the specific historical character of the established reality principle led to a reexamination of what Freud considered to be universal validity. We questioned this validity in view of the historical possibility of the abolition of the repressive controls imposed by civilization. The very achievements of this civilization seemed to make the performance principle obsolete, to make the repressive utilization of the instincts archaic. But the idea of a non-repressive civilization on the basis of the achievements of the performance principle encountered the argument that instinctual liberation (and consequently total liberation) would explode civilization itself, since the latter is sustained only through renunciation and work (labor) – in other words, through the repressive utilization of instinctual energy. Freed from these constraints, man would exist without work and without order; he would fall back into nature, which would destroy culture. To meet this argument, we recalled certain archetypes of imagination which, in contrast to the culture-heroes of repressive productivity, symbolized creative receptivity. These archetypes envisioned the fulfillment of man and nature, not through domination and exploitation, but through release of inherent libidinal forces. We then set ourselves the task of “verifying” these symbols – that is to say, demonstrating their truth value as symbols of a reality beyond the performance principle. We thought that the representative content of the Orphic and Narcissistic images was the erotic reconciliation (union) of man and nature in the aesthetic attitude, where order is beauty and work is play.¹⁴

Marcuse continues after this summary to lay out the erotic content of the “reality beyond the performance principle,” i.e., a new civilization where work and productivity were unimportant. “The basic experience in this (aesthetic) dimension is sensuous rather than conceptual,”¹⁵ that is, feelings are more important than logic: “The discipline of aesthetics installs the *order of sensuousness* as against the *order of reason*.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (Beacon Press, Boston, 1955), p. 175-176.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 181.

“In German, *sensuousness* and *sensuality* are still rendered by one and the same term: *Sinnlichkeit*. It connotes instinctual (especially sexual) gratification...¹⁷ No longer used as a full-time instrument of labor, the body would be resexualized... (which) would first manifest itself in a reactivation of all erotogenic zones and, consequently, in a resurgence of pre-genital polymorphous sexuality and in a decline of genital supremacy. The body in its entirety would become an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed – an instrument of pleasure. This change in the value and scope of libidinal relations would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family.”¹⁸

This in a book which Marcuse dedicated to Sophie Marcuse, his wife of fifty years!

It is easy to see how this message – “If it feels good, do it” – published in 1955 resonated with the student rebels of the 1960s. Marcuse understood what most of the rest of his Frankfurt School colleagues did not: the way to destroy Western civilization – the objective set forth by George Lukacs in 1919 – was not through abstruse theory, but through sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. Marcuse wrote other works for the new generation that spawned the New Left – One Dimensional Man (1964), Critique of Pure Tolerance (1965), An Essay on Liberation (1969), Counterrevolution and Revolt (1972). But Eros and Civilization was and remains the key work, the one that put the match to the tinder.

Other central works by members of the Frankfurt School include:

- The Authoritarian Personality by Theodor Adorno (Harper, New York, 1950). This book is the basis for everything that followed that portrayed conservatism as a psychological defect. It had enormous impact, not least on education theory.
- Dialectic of Enlightenment by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (trans. by John Cumming, Verso, London, 1979). A complex philosophical work written during World War II largely in response to Nazism (and extensively devoted to discussions of anti-Semitism), this work seeks to find a kernel of “liberating” reason in the ruins of the Enlightenment.
- Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life by Theodor Adorno (trans. E.F.N. Jophcott, New Left Books, London, 1974). A book of aphorisms, almost entirely incomprehensible, but the effective conclusion of Adorno’s work.
- Escape from Freedom by Erich Fromm (Farrar & Rinehart, New York, 1941, still in print in paperback) Fromm was the Institute’s “happy face,” and this book was often required reading at colleges in the 1960s. The thesis is that man’s nature causes him to throw his freedom away and embrace fascism unless he “masters society and subordinates the economic machine to the purposes of human happiness,” i.e., adopts socialism. At this point Fromm was in the process of

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 182

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 201.

breaking away from the Institute and his subsequent works cannot be considered as part of the Frankfurt School corpus.

- Eclipse of Reason (Oxford University Press, New York, 1947). Essentially a sequel to Dialectic of Enlightenment, the book is heavily the work of Adorno and other Frankfurt School personages, although only Horkheimer name appeared on it. Its contents are based on a series of lectures Horkheimer gave at Columbia University in 1944. The prose style is surprisingly readable, but the contents are odd; there is throughout a strong nostalgia, which was normally anathema to the Frankfurt School. The key chapter, “The Revolt of Nature,” reflects a strange Retro anarchism: “The victory of civilization is too complete to be true. Therefore, adjustment in our times involves an element of resentment and suppressed fury.”
- Critical Theory: Selected Essays by Max Horkheimer (trans. Matthew O’Connell, Seabury Press, New York, 1972). The essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory” is especially important.
- The Essential Frankfurt School Reader, ed. By Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (Continuum, New York, 1982, in print in paperback) Not an introduction to the Frankfurt School, but rather a reprinting of Frankfurt School essays not available elsewhere, this book is more useful to the specialist than the novice. Nonetheless, both the editors’ lengthy introductions and some of the essays are useful (once again, the editors are solidly on the Left politically, and their style is as heavy as that of the Frankfurt School’s members).

This small bibliography will be enough to get an interested reader started; the full literature on and by the Frankfurt School is immense, as the bibliographies in Jay’s and Wiggershaus’s books attest. What has been missing from it, at least in English, is a readable book, written for the layman, that explains the Frankfurt School and its works in terms of the creation of Political Correctness. This short volume is at least a start in filling that gap.