Critical Theory

and Contemporary Europe

William Outhwaite

Critical Theory and Contemporary Society

series editor DARROW SCHECTER

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Preface

In this book, I am taking both critical theory and contemporary Europe in a broad and flexible sense. My main focus is on Europe since 1945, but the earlier history of Europe and critical theory's response to it continues to influence the current state of critical theory, which was shaped by the inter-war conjunction of fascism (and Nazism), Stalinism and liberal capitalism. I include under the rubric of critical theory any writer linked to the Institute for Social Research before and/or after the Second World War and some pursuing work recognizably in this tradition, whether or not they had or have close institutional or personal connections with leading representatives of critical theory.[1] Although Norbert Elias, for example, had no substantial contact with the Institute, his 'Studies on the Germans' (Elias, 1989) can usefully be read alongside Klaus Eder's much later book on political modernization in Germany. And although Slavoj Žižek is hostile to Frankfurt critical theory, notably to what he sees as its failure to address Stalinism (Žižek, 2001), his own work is closely related to critical theory in a broader sense. A narrower definition of critical theory would tie it more tightly to the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse in the earlier period and that of Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer and Axel Honneth in the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but in relation to Europe such a restriction would make little sense. Habermas provided in 1984 a valuable overview of the principal protagonists (including himself), while including a warning:

> The suggestive fiction of a unitary school should not divert too much energy to self-thematisation in the history of ideas. We would do better to turn to the problems themselves, to see how far one can get with the ruthlessly revisionist exploitation of the stimulative potential of such a diverse tradition of research.[2]

Critical theory began with an orientation to what has been called the 'diagnosis of the time(s)' (Zeitdiagnose), meaning in this case the political crisis in Europe and the coming World War. The term was brought to the English-speaking world by Karl Mannheim, in an essay of 1941, followed by a book with the same title.[3] The idea however has a much longer history. Hegel

wrote famously that philosophy is 'its time captured in thought',[4] and his own philosophy aimed to do this. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, written in the 1830s, suggested that the current state of (North) America showed the future for France and the rest of Europe. Max Horkheimer in 1932 launched the Institute's journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, with the remark that it was 'principally oriented to a theory of the historical course of the present epoch'.[5] The first issue opened with a short essay by Horkheimer, 'Remarks on Science and Crisis', and one by Friedrich Pollock, the Institute's financial director and Horkheimer's closest associate, on 'The Current Situation of Capitalism and the Prospects of a Planned Economy'. As Furio Cerutti noted in 1984, the original plan to integrate philosophy and social science 'was embedded from the beginning in an open-dialectical understanding of the present as history'; this soon became problematic with the rise of Nazism and the War.[6] When, a year later, the journal had to be published in France, he added that the associates of the Institute saw in theory 'a factor for the improvement of reality'.[7] As he wrote in a later essay, what distinguished critical theory from 'traditional' theory was the theorist's reflective attitude to his or her historical location as a background to their more specialized work.[8] Habermas's theorizing has been fundamentally shaped by his response to the historical context of Germany in and immediately after the Second World War, and some of his earliest work directly addressed that context. More recently, Axel Honneth has put the concept of diagnosis of the times at the centre of his own work.

Critical theory made a distinctive contribution to theorizing post-war Europe and the European crisis out of which it had emerged. The first generation theorists (notably Adorno), who had been prominent in theorizing Nazism and other crisis phenomena in the inter-war period, insisted after the War on addressing the horror of Nazism and the Holocaust, in a generally unsympathetic context. Habermas's work, too, is crucially shaped by the memory of Nazi irrationality and the regime's misuse of science and technology.[9] Unimpressed by post-war affluence in capitalist Europe and North America, where Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964) was highly influential, the critical theorists were also without illusions about Soviet socialism, about which Marcuse and others also wrote. They welcomed but also criticized the student and youth movements of 1968, having provided much of the analysis which motivated these and subsequent alternative social movements. Their neo-Marxist analysis of capitalist crisis tendencies and of advanced capitalist culture shaped the thinking of the Left worldwide.

In the 1980s, Andrew Arato and others developed a critical theory of state socialism in association with local critics; much of the most valuable analysis of post-Stalinism, for example that of the 'Budapest School' of the circle around Georg Lukács until his death in 1971, was shaped by critical theory.

This was continued in the analysis of post-communist transition after 1989, notably by Claus Offe and Ulrich Preuss in Germany and Arato in the United States. Meanwhile a third wave of critical theory was being developed by Axel Honneth, Seyla Benhabib and others, also addressing contemporary social issues such as European xenophobia. Habermas has been increasingly concerned with the future of the European Union (EU) and other issues of contemporary relevance in his work from the mid-1990s to the present, and critical theory has inspired much contemporary work on deliberative democracy and the question of a European public sphere.[10]

Notes

1 For a similarly broad approach, see, for example, Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. As in a fast food stall, there are Hamburgers as well as Frankfurters: Jan Phillip Reemtsma's Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung has done important work on controversial historical and contemporary issues and publishes a journal, *Mittelweg 38*, and a book series. There is also an Institut für kritische Theorie (InkriT) in Berlin, linked to the Marxist journal *Das Argument*.

2 Jürgen Habermas, 'Drei Thesen zur Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule', in Axel Honneth and Albrecht Wellmer (eds), *Die Frankfurter Schule und die Folgen*, Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung: Symposium 1984, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1986, p. 11. See also Albrecht Wellmer's contribution in the same volume, pp. 25–34.

3 Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Times: Wartime Essays of a Sociologist*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1943.

4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, Preface, various editions.

5 Max Horkheimer, 'Vorwort', *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 1(1), 1932, p. III.

6 Furio Cerrutti, 'Philosophie und Sozialforschung. Zum ursprünglichen Programm der kritischen Theorie', in Axel Honneth and Albrecht Wellmer (eds), *Die Frankfurter Schule und die Folgen*, Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung: Symposium 1984, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986, p. 257.

7 Max Horkheimer, 'Vorwort', *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, II(2), 1933, p. 161.

8 Max Horkheimer, 1937, 'Traditionelle und kritische Theorie', *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, VI(2), pp. 245–94. Various translations.

9 See Matthew Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, for a comprehensive discussion of Habermas's work in the context of contemporary issues.

10 I am grateful to a number of friends who read earlier versions of this text. Any errors are of course mine. I was unfortunately too late to take account of the excellent book by Christian Fleck, *A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

Contents

1

Theorizing the European crisis of 1914–45

Although the Institute for Social Research had been founded in 1923 and officially inaugurated as an independent research institute attached to the University of Frankfurt in 1924, it was only in 1930, when Max Horkheimer became Director, that what we now know as critical theory became its dominant approach. The early orientation of the Institute had been solidly Marxist (there was initial discussion of calling it an 'Institute for Marxism') and its founding members were all close to the German Communist Party. The Institute's first director, Carl Grünberg, identified himself and the Institute at the opening ceremony with 'the view . . . that we are in the midst of the transition from capitalism to socialism' (Dubiel, 1994: 5; see also Jay, 1973; Bottomore, 1984). While the economists and economic historians Henryk Grossmann, Karl-August Wittfogel and Friedrich Pollock remained from the earlier period, under Horkheimer's directorship the Institute's centre of gravity shifted from economics to a broader interdisciplinary approach, inspired by a similarly broad conception of philosophy focussed on the understanding of the contemporary world.

By now, as well as the unexpected and ambiguous success of the Bolsheviks in Russia and the failure of revolutionary Marxism to take root elsewhere in Europe, the contemporary scene was marked by two other phenomena: the economic crisis of 1929, and the strength of the German form of fascism (national socialism). The Institute members began an empirical investigation of workers' consciousness in 1929 directed by Erich Fromm. Its initial results contributed to their awareness of the gravity of the situation, which in turn saved them and the Institute itself when the Nazis came

to power.[1] Fromm's study may have been inspired in part by a contemporaneous ethnographic inquiry into white collar workers in Berlin by Adorno's close friend Siegfried Kracauer, later famous for his book on German cinema 'From Caligari to Hitler'. Although Fromm's material was not published as a book until 1980, it fed into the Institute's *Studien über Autorität und Familie* of 1936.[2] The focus on authoritarianism was continued in the US study of *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno and others,[3] unpublished studies of anti-Semitism towards the end of the War[4] and the post-war German *Gruppenexperiment* (1955).[5] These related projects, briefly discussed below, pick up from earlier work on the German working class[6] and combine a neo-Marxist approach with an attention to psychological dynamics.

In Kracauer's brilliant study he repeatedly distances himself from 'vulgar-Marxist' categories of class and ideology, a 'roof nowadays riddled with holes'.[7] Anti-capitalist intellectuals, he complains, concentrate only on manifest outrages and neglect the misery of everyday life. 'How is everyday life to change, if even those whose vocation is to stir it up pay it no attention?'[8] Walter Benjamin, in an enthusiastic response, described Kracauer as a 'rag-picker at daybreak'.[9] 'And it is not as an orthodox Marxist, still less as a practical agitator, that he dialectically penetrates the existence of employees, but because to penetrate dialectically means: to expose.'[10]

Kracauer wrote in April 1930 to Adorno:

> The situation in Germany is more than serious . . . We are going to have three or four million unemployed and I can see no way out. A disaster is hanging over this country and I am convinced that it is not just capitalism. That capitalism may become bestial is not due to the economy alone.[11]

Although Fromm, in his retrospective introduction to his own study, is rather dismissive of Kracauer's,[12] the two can be seen as complementary. Fromm and his associates used a (rather over-long) questionnaire, submitting the responses however to a qualitative and, to use a later term, 'symptomatic' reading.

> . . . we relied on the basic rule in psychological work that the individual's statements about their thoughts and feelings, however subjectively honest, can not be taken literally but need to be interpreted. Or to put it more exactly: it is not *what* someone says which is important but *why* he says it.[13]

It is worth noting here that this interpretative approach to empirical research is continued in all the Institute's subsequent work.

Of the nearly 600 respondents, roughly two-thirds were manual workers and the rest mostly white-collar employees, drawn from urban centres in and south of Frankfurt and northwards to Berlin and the Rhineland. They were mostly communist, left socialist Unabhangige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (USPD) or social democrat supporters, with 7 per cent supporting the bourgeois centre and right parties and only 3 per cent the Nazis, a third of them white-collar workers. Despite this strong support for the political left and centre-left, broadly representative of the country as a whole,[14] Fromm was concerned about the weakness of many respondents' political beliefs and the inconsistency between their formal political responses, reflecting the line of the respective parties, and other attitudes to authority in the family, gender issues etc. A simple contrast between conservative authoritarians and leftist 'liberals', as we would now say in America, was not sustained, nor was there much of a link between these two positions and a petty-bourgeois or proletarian class position respectively.

> Although the Left had the political loyalty and votes of the great majority of workers, it had largely not succeeded in changing the personality structure of its adherents in such a way that they could be relied upon in critical situations. (Fromm, 1984: 228)

Even more worryingly, a significant proportion of socialists, and a somewhat smaller (p. 230) proportion of communists, displayed authoritarian attitudes:

> These people were filled with hate and anger against everyone who had money and who appeared to enjoy life. That part of the socialist platform which aimed at the overthrow of the propertied classes appealed to them. On the other hand, items such as freedom and equality had not the slightest attraction for them, since they willingly obeyed every powerful authority they admired; they liked to control others in so far as they had the power to do so. Their unreliability finally came into the open at the point where a programme such as that of the National Socialists was offered to them. This programme not only corresponded with the feelings which had made the Socialist programme attractive but also appealed to that side of their nature which Socialism had not satisfied or had unconsciously opposed. In such cases they were transformed from unreliable leftists into convinced National Socialists. (Fromm, 1984: 43)

This is a retrospective judgement, probably made in 1937–38, but it is complemented by the analysis of the handful of Nazi respondents in the study. Their preferred reading matter was not, as one might have expected, nationalist

or militarist literature but rather leftist social criticism, reflecting the populist emphasis of Nazism before it attained power (Fromm, 1984: 139).

The pessimistic nature of this analysis may explain the Institute's hesitancy to publish in the late 1930s what material had been successfully rescued from Germany. Some of it appears however in Fromm's contribution to *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (1936). Horkheimer, increasingly under Adorno's influence, fell out with Fromm, who was eased out of the Institute in 1939, taking the materials with him (Bonss, 1984: 2). Most of the Institute members' analyses of the crisis were in fact completed in exile or after the return of the Institute to Frankfurt in 1950; it remains of course a major topic of critical theory up to the present.

Herbert Marcuse, who had been part of the Institute since 1932 and worked in its Geneva office, relocating to New York in 1934, was not so much eased out as kept at arm's length for over two decades by Horkheimer, again under Adorno's influence.[15] Marcuse published in 1934 one of the Institute's earliest analyses of totalitarianism and other articles in the *Zeitschrift*, and contributed to *Studien über Autorität und Familie*. Horkheimer, having invited him to join him in California in 1941 to work on a project on dialectics later encouraged him to seek other work; he joined the Office of Strategic Services in Washington in 1942 and worked there for the rest of the War.

The dialectics project continued with Adorno

It was in fact people associated more with the Institute than with the critical theory project in a narrower sense who were most active in the analysis of fascism and Nazism in the early stages. The Sinologist Karl August Wittfogel, who had joined the Institute in 1925 and was its only active Communist, abandoned a planned trip to China in order to work instead on fascism and Nazism. From 1931 until his arrest in 1933 he published a massive flow of articles in the communist press and completed a lost book on Nazism.[16] Of the articles reprinted by the Kommunistischer Bund in 1973, one is a crude expression of the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands' (KPD's) 'social-fascism' line,[17] but the next, under the pseudonym Hans Petersen, emphasizes the origin of Nazism in 'petty bourgeois political activists rather than capitalist interests.[18] Wittfogel also secured a scoop by getting hold of an early programme of the Italian fascists which had immediately been suppressed.[19]

Having rejoined his Institute colleagues in New York in 1934 and working at the Institute of Pacific Relations there, Wittfogel contributed to the *Studien*

über Autorität und Familie and occasionally to the journal, but not to subsequent Institute projects. He became strongly anti-communist and his *Oriental Despotism* (1957) presented communist totalitarianism in the Soviet Union, and incipiently in China, as a natural successor to Asiatic despotism. Already in the winter of 1937–38, at an Institute seminar, he had claimed that the Soviet Union needed a second revolution to restore popular power over the bureaucracy (Ulmen, 1978: 209). According to Ulmen (1978: 211), Wittfogel only once used the term 'critical theory', which he defined as aiming at a holistic understanding of society. Although this is not very different from Horkheimer's original formulations, Wittfogel did not share the suspicion of systems and theoretical closure that came to define the work of Horkheimer and Adorno.

Another former active communist who had held a scholarship from the Institute and published an article on the history of science in the first issue of the *Zeitschrift* was Franz Borkenau, whose book, *The Totalitarian Enemy*, (London, Faber, 1940), was an early example of theories of totalitarianism. For Borkenau, 'The German–Russian pact . . . has brought out the essential similarity between the German and the Russian systems.'[20] The Institute had published his book in Paris in 1934 but, as Wiggershaus notes,[21] without endorsing it in Horkheimer's preface.

Franz Neumann, also a member of the Institute in New York, had better luck than Wittfogel: his book on Nazism, *Behemoth* (1942) was extremely influential in the United States. Neumann, like Wittfogel, had been politically active, in his case ending his Weimar career as principal lawyer to the SPD. Fleeing to London, where he took another undergraduate degree and a PhD with Harold Laski, he was invited to New York by the Institute. Here he was employed as a lawyer and lecturer and published two articles in the *Zeitschrift* but was denied the permanent attachment that he had been promised.[22] When *Behemoth* was almost complete, Horkheimer wrote encouragingly to Neumann that 'This publication will document the fact that our theory is still the best guide through the maze of present-day social conditions.'[23] He followed this up after publication with a mild reproach that Neumann had neglected 'some anthropological issues'.[24] As Keith Tribe has shown, *Behemoth* is in fact rather far from the dominant perspectives in the Institute.[25]

Another associate of the Institute kept very much at arm's length was the legal and political scholar Otto Kirchheimer. Kirchheimer had already published substantial works on the subversion of the Weimar constitution throughout the history of the republic; in exile in Paris he worked on criminal and constitutional law and published in Germany in 1935 a pseudonymous critique of the law and state of the Third Reich. Invited to New York as a research assistant, he edited a manuscript that became the Institute's first English-language publication[26]

and published a number of articles in the *Zeitschrift* on the Nazi legal order and a still influential article on 'the structure of political compromise' (1941).[27] Like Neumann, he later had a successful academic career in New York.

Against all this output, that of the core members of the Institute, Horkheimer, Pollock and, from 1938, Adorno, seems for a long time rather thin.[28] Horkheimer's *Dämmerung* (1934), published in Switzerland under a pseudonym, contained some observations on the contemporary scene up until 1931 but no sustained analysis.[29] With the exception of his article on 'Science and Crisis' (1932), his work until *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and his contemporaneous studies of anti-Semitism are concerned almost entirely with purely philosophical topics. The same is true of Adorno's work on philosophy and on music, coinciding with his collaboration on the radio research project. Pollock, the business manager of the Institute, wrote little except two articles in the final volume (1941) of the *Zeitschrift* (by then appearing in English as *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*). Leo Lowenthal worked exclusively on literature until the later stages of the war, when he collaborated on the work on anti-Semitism and authoritarianism. Finally, Felix Weil, whose money had founded and sustained the Institute, published review articles on the New Deal and on the German arms economy.

For the US public, it was *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) that was the core of critical theory's contribution to the analysis of the European crisis. The Institute itself, while engaging actively in contract research on anti-Semitism and related issues, did little to address the aspects of the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of war which were of greatest concern. Horkheimer is renowned for the remark that 'he who does not wish to speak of capitalism should be silent about fascism'.[30] The Institute spoke of capitalism, while often in euphemistic language, without having much directly to say about fascism.

If, however, Adorno had been slow to address Nazism as a whole,[31] he made up for this in the post-war years. The Institute's first large research project, begun in 1950 with support from the US High Commission for Germany (HICOG), was a study of contemporary German attitudes to the Third Reich and the subsequent Occupation, involving what was called a *Gruppenexperiment* and would now be called a focus group methodology. The stimulus for the group discussions was a fictional letter to his home newspaper by an Allied soldier stationed in West Germany. Topics covered were attitudes to democracy, war guilt, Jews, the West, the East, rearmament and to Germany and Germans. As with Fromm's Weimar study, the results were somewhat alarming. To quote Wiggershaus:

> The attitudes of those taking part in the discussions . . . were largely negative, not only towards the Soviet Union but also towards the Western

> powers. Approximately two thirds of the speakers expressed ambivalent attitudes to democracy . . . [and] . . . half of the speakers rejected any shared guilt for the atrocities of the Third Reich. Two statistical groups stood out in particular for their negative qualities: farmers and academics [i.e. participants with higher education; the translation is misleading here]. The farmers all without exception denied any share in national guilt; the academics denied it virtually without exception. Of the farmers who expressed views about the Jews, more than three-quarters proved to be radically or considerably anti-Semitic. The academics . . . were noticeably withdrawn on the subject of the Jews. Of those who did express an opinion, over 90 per cent were radically or considerably anti-Semitic.[32]

The leading sociologist René König, while strongly supporting publication of the book, thought that the implications of the results were too 'devastating' for it to be wise to print full summaries of the discussions.[33] It could be argued that the stimulus letter was likely by its nature to evoke defensive responses, but the authors reject this suggestion,[34] and the stimulus letter, presented in its definitive version (after various revisions in the early stages of the study) on pages 501–3, does seem extremely measured in its positive and negative judgements.

Chapter 5 of the study, by Adorno,[35] is a detailed qualitative discussion of 'Guilt and Defence' (Abwehr) and points in particular to 'the rigid rejection of any feeling of guilt' as 'the symptom of an extremely dangerous social psychological and political potential'.[36] The authors note however that attitudes to democracy had become more positive over the period between the research for the study and its publication.[37] Even in the case of 'our national socialist participants', it was generally not possible to determine whether what was at issue was 'the residue of fascist ideology or the expression of a persisting anthropological disposition'.[38]

The results may have further encouraged Adorno to emphasize the theme of 'working through the past' in his influential lectures and radio broadcasts. In 1950 he had already published an article in the *Frankfurter Hefte* on the 'resurrection' of German culture after the War.[39]

Before returning to settle in Frankfurt, Adorno and Horkheimer had already written a good deal in the 1940s on the European tragedy. This writing was partly shaped by the Institute's projects on anti-Semitism but was foreshadowed by Horkheimer's essay on 'The Jews and Europe', published just after the War began in 1939 but completed nearly a year earlier. As Wiggershaus notes, 'It was his first essay on the topic of fascism, and the first on fascism by anyone in the Horkheimer circle since the articles by Pollock and Marcuse

in 1933 and 1934.'[40] Horkheimer had however written a short forward to an article on the planned economy, including the following claim:

> Humanity does not in any sense have a choice at present between the liberal economy and the totalitarian state order, since the one necessarily turns into the other, precisely because the latter today best serves the liberal demand for the continuation of the private ownership of the most important social resources.[41]

Wiggershaus goes on to conclude:

> Marcuse, the critic of ideology, Fromm, the social psychologist, Mandelbaum and Meyer, the economists, and Horkheimer, the social philosopher, were thus all united in their agreement with the dominant communist interpretation of the period, according to which fascism was both the logical consequence of liberalism and the form of political domination which monopoly capitalism adopted.

In 'The Jews and Europe', writing more boldly, Wiggershaus suggests, than he would have done in English for a US audience that Horkheimer had again immediately made a link with capitalism.

> Anyone who wants to explain anti-Semitism must intend national socialism . . . The new anti-Semitism is the emissary of the totalitarian order into which the liberal order has developed. One must go back to the tendencies of Capital . . . Anyone who does not want to talk about capitalism should also be silent about fascism.

This essay, published in German in the last issue printed in Paris, had been followed by a whole series of analyses in English of Nazism, making up, or failing to make up, for lost time.

Fascist rule in Europe, and specifically in Germany, evoked a triple response from the critical theory tradition. First, there was a need to explain it, if what Horkheimer had called in a preface 'conceptual thinking' (begreifendes Denken) was to mean anything. The Institute's official position, if it can be called that, was the fairly orthodox communist view, represented by Horkheimer's essay just cited, that monopoly capitalism, under certain circumstances, secured its continuation by authoritarian means. If explanations in this form were seen to be inadequate (and, as we have seen, others linked more loosely to the Institute had attempted to go further), Horkheimer and Adorno had provided, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a kind of explanatory