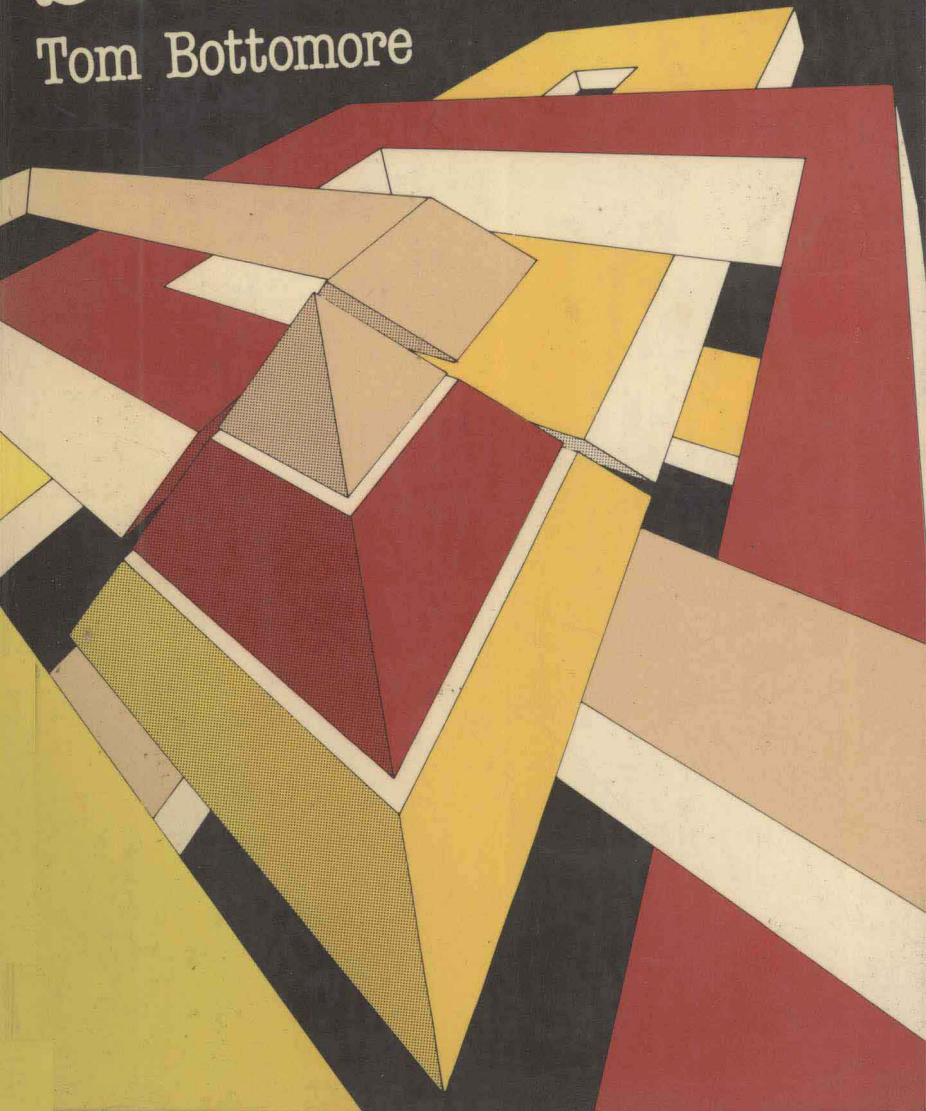


**KEY SOCIOLOGISTS** Series Editor: Peter Hamilton

# The Frankfurt School

Tom Bottomore



# THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

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Professor Bottomore was President of the British Sociological Association (1969-1971); President of the International Sociological Association (1974-1978); and author of numerous previous books including *Political Sociology* (1979) and *Sociology and Socialism* (1984).

## Editor's Foreword

The Frankfurt School of German social theory has exerted a considerable influence over the sociology of the last two generations. Originally a centre for the study of Marxist theory brought into being in the first years of Weimar Republic Germany, the work of its principal figures has nonetheless always had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with mainstream Western Marxism, right through from the early writings of Max Horkheimer in the 1930s to the very recent work of Jürgen Habermas. However, the development of a distinct 'critical theory' of society by Horkheimer and Adorno and its reworking by later Frankfurt theorists constituted a (sometimes tenuous) thread of ideas and concepts which gave the Frankfurt School an important role in the expansion of modern sociology. Despite the somewhat paradoxical rejection of Marxist concepts by many Frankfurt School writers, it was especially instrumental in the renaissance of Marxist sociology which took hold in the late 1960s.

Having remarked the gulf which separates much Frankfurt School work from mainstream Marxist theory, it is also interesting to note the striking parallels between the deep cultural pessimism of Max Weber's sociology—especially in its treatment of the rationalization processes of modern societies—and the thoroughgoing critique of bourgeois culture and intellectual thought developed by Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse as the main element of critical theory



from the 1930s to the 1960s. As Tom Bottomore makes clear in drawing this parallel, the Frankfurt School thinkers were led by their pessimism into a retreat from Marxian social theory, and then towards an essentially philosophical and neo-Hegelian critique of ideology. Perhaps best seen as 'radicals in despair', Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno were responsible for a theory of capitalist society which emphasized its cultural manifestations above all other aspects. Caught in a climate of cultural loss and decline which must be linked to their experience of the rise of Fascism in Germany, the 'critical theory' developed by these men during this period was overwhelmingly concerned with the mounting irrationality of social and cultural values, and their reflection in the ideas of positivism and 'scientism'. Herbert Marcuse's version of 'critical theory' shares many of these aspects of *Ideologiekritik* conducted not from empirical observation but philosophical speculation, despite the fact that he preferred to stay on in the USA after the School returned from exile there in 1950, and was thus open to the influence of the strong empirical traditions of American social thought. His *One-Dimensional Man* (certainly his best known work) thus remains firmly within the contemplative cast of Frankfurt School work, its nature as a *philosophical* critique of advanced capitalism perhaps explaining why its great popularity did not lead to any significant attempts at extension or empirical demonstration of the thesis which it contains.

If Tom Bottomore's book gives the impression that the work of the Frankfurt School theorists has been largely sterile – for both Marxism and sociology – it also indicates some of the reasons why ideas which have received so much scholarly attention fall short of their promise. Indeed, it is of some significance that there has been such widespread interest in the ideas of the principal Frankfurt School theorists, for their work clearly struck a chord at a time when 'philosophical' interpretations of Marxist concepts were at the height of their popularity. It is not accidental that interest in the work of the School 'took off' – for want of a better word – after 1968 in the English-speaking world. The promise of an 'intellectualized' and culturally sophisticated quasi-Marxism had undeniable appeal.

But if Frankfurt School 'critical theory' has come to appear as a form of social theory more and more separate from Marxism since the 1960s, this is in part because of a return to structuralist and historical conceptions of Marxian theory themselves formulated to counter the excessively philosophical tenor of critical theory. With that process, as Tom Bottomore shows in this masterful book, went an increasing tendency for younger critical theorists such as Haber-

mas to situate their work explicitly between philosophy and sociology. Whether such a strategy could ever be effective is open to question, especially since it has not implied any greater attention being paid to historical processes or to the empirical test of critical theory's tenets.

Tom Bottomore provides us in this book with a strikingly effective summary of the main features of the rise and decline of the Frankfurt School. This is a critical evaluation of the contributions of the main protagonists of 'critical theory', and its conclusions will in some ways be controversial. But in situating the failure of the Frankfurt School to generate a coherent paradigm of Marxist social theory in the refusal of its main figures to reach down from the high plane of philosophical contemplation to the murky waters of history and empirical facts, Tom Bottomore has undeniably touched the core of the matter.

Peter Hamilton



# Introduction

The Frankfurt School is a complex phenomenon, and the style of social thought which has come to be principally associated with it – ‘critical theory’ – has been expounded and interpreted in a variety of ways. The institutional basis upon which the school developed was the Institute of Social Research, officially established on 3 February 1923 by a decree of the Ministry of Education, and affiliated with the University of Frankfurt. But the Institute itself was only the major, enduring outcome of several radical projects undertaken in the early 1920s by Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy grain merchant. Thus, in the summer of 1922 he had organized the ‘First Marxist Work Week’, attended among others by Lukács, Korsch, Pollock and Wittfogel, where much of the discussion was devoted to Korsch’s forthcoming book, *Marxism and Philosophy*. Weil had intended to arrange further meetings of this kind, but when the idea of creating a more permanent centre of Marxist studies emerged he redirected his efforts and his financial resources to this project.[1]

The founding of the Institute took place in the particular conditions produced by the victory of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the defeat of the Central European revolutions, notably that in Germany; and it can be seen as one response to the need felt by left wing intellectuals to reappraise Marxist theory, and especially the relation between theory and practice, in the new circumstances. In

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this sense the Institute formed part of a wider movement of thought which has come to be known as 'Western Marxism', characterized on one side by diverse, predominantly philosophical and Hegelian reinterpretations of Marxist theory in relation to the advanced capitalist societies, and on the other, by an increasingly critical view of the development of society and the state in the USSR.[2] However, in its early phase the Institute did not constitute a distinctive school; as Jay has noted: '... the notion of a specific school did not develop until *after* the Institut was forced to leave Frankfurt (the term itself was not used until the Institut returned to Germany in 1950)'.[3]

In effect, it is possible to distinguish four distinct periods in the history of the Institute and the Frankfurt School. The first is that between 1923 and 1933, when the research carried on at the Institute was quite varied, and was in no way inspired by a particular conception of Marxist thought such as became embodied later in critical theory. Indeed, under its first Director, Carl Grünberg, who was an economic and social historian, closely related in outlook to the Austro-Marxists,[4] a considerable part of the Institute's work had a strongly empirical character. Grünberg himself summed up his conception of Marxism as a social science in his inaugural address (1924), in which he argued that 'the materialist conception of history neither is, nor aims to be, a philosophical system ... its object is not abstractions, but the given concrete world in its process of development and change'. Under Grünberg's directorship, until his retirement in 1929 following a stroke, this was indeed the course taken by many of the Institute's researchers; thus Wittfogel was engaged in his study of the Asiatic mode of production (a part of which was published in 1931 as *Economy and Society in China*), Grossman developed his analysis of the economic tendencies of capitalism, published as *The Law of Accumulation and Collapse in the Capitalist System* (1929), and Pollock undertook a study of the transition from a market to a planned economy in the Soviet Union, *Experiments in Economic Planning in the Soviet Union, 1917-1927* (1929).

The second period is that of exile in North America from 1933 to 1950, when the distinctive ideas of a neo-Hegelian critical theory were firmly implanted as the guiding principle of the Institute's activities. This reorientation of ideas and research interests actually began a few years earlier, influenced particularly by the appointment of Horkheimer as director of the Institute in July 1930. As Jay has noted, with reference to Horkheimer's inaugural address on 'The Current Condition of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an

Institute of Social Research' (1931), '... the differences between his approach and that of his predecessor were immediately apparent'.[5] Philosophy, rather than history or economics, now came to occupy a pre-eminent place in the Institute's work, and this tendency was reinforced when Marcuse became a member in 1932 and Adorno in 1938 (following a looser association with the Institute since 1931). At the same time the Institute developed a strong interest in psychoanalysis,[6] and this remained a prominent element in its later work. In exile the leading members of the Institute, under Horkheimer's direction, began to elaborate their theoretical views in a more systematic way, and a distinctive school of thought gradually took shape.

By the time the Institute returned to Frankfurt in 1950 the principal ideas of 'critical theory' had been clearly set out in a number of major writings, and the 'Frankfurt School' began to exert an important influence upon German social thought. Its influence later spread throughout much of Europe – especially after 1956, with the emergence of the 'New Left' – and also in the United States where many of the Institute's members (in particular Marcuse) had remained. This was the period of the Frankfurt School's greatest intellectual and political influence, which reached its peak in the late 1960s with the rapid growth of a radical student movement, though it was Marcuse rather than Horkheimer (who had by then retired to Switzerland) or Adorno (who had become considerably less radical during his exile in North America and in the changed circumstances of postwar Germany) who then appeared as the leading representative of a new form of Marxist critical thought.

From the early 1970s, in what can be regarded as its fourth period, the influence of the Frankfurt School slowly declined, and indeed with the death of Adorno in 1969 and of Horkheimer in 1973 it had virtually ceased to exist as a school. In its last years it had departed so widely from the Marxism which originally inspired it that in Jay's words '... it forfeited the right to be included among its many offshoots',[7] and its whole approach to social theory was increasingly contested by new, or revived forms of Marxist thought. Nevertheless, some of the central conceptions of the Frankfurt School have made their way into the work of many social scientists (both Marxist and non-Marxist), and they have also been developed in an original way by Jürgen Habermas, in a renewed critique of the conditions of possibility of social knowledge, and in reappraisals of Marx's theory of history and of modern capitalism.

In the following chapters I shall be concerned with the last

three of the four periods I have distinguished, examining first the body of ideas which originally constituted the Frankfurt School, then the development and diffusion of those ideas in the school's heyday, and lastly the fate of the ideas in the post-Frankfurt era. This leads to some concluding reflections on the significance of the Frankfurt School, and its derivatives, for the sociological theory of the present time, and on its relation to any conceivable Marxist sociology in the future.

## NOTES

- [1] For a fuller account of the founding of the Institute, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1973), chap. 1.
- [2] 'Western Marxism' has generally been treated as a body of thought emerging in the 1920s and having its greatest influence in the 1960s, which had its source in the writings of Korsch, Lukács, Gramsci and some members of the Frankfurt Institute (in particular, from 1950 onwards, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse). See, for varying interpretations of it, Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York, Seabury Press, 1979); and Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, New Left Books, 1976). More comprehensively regarded, however, Western Marxism includes other, very different, forms of Marxist thought, and notably that of the Austro-Marxist School, which flourished from the turn of the century until 1934 and has recently attracted renewed attention. See Tom Bottomore and Patrick Goode (eds), *Austro-Marxism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978), Introduction.
- [3] Jay, *op. cit.*, p. xv.
- [4] For a brief account of Grünberg, see Bottomore and Goode, *op. cit.*, Introduction, pp. 9–10.
- [5] Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- [6] Thus Erich Fromm became a close collaborator in the early 1930s, but his increasingly critical view of Freudian theory, and his attempt to give psychoanalysis a more sociological dimension, led to disagreements, and he severed his connection with the Institute in 1939.
- [7] Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

# 1

## The Formation of the School

Horkheimer, in the address delivered on the occasion of his official installation as director of the Institute in January 1931, indicated clearly, while paying tribute to the work of his predecessor, that the Institute was about to take a new direction. 'Social philosophy' now emerged as its main preoccupation; not in the sense of a philosophical theory of value which would provide a superior insight into the meaning of social life, nor as some kind of synthesis of the results of the specialized social sciences, but rather as the source of important questions to be investigated by these sciences and as a framework in which 'the universal would not be lost sight of'.<sup>[1]</sup> In subsequent essays of the 1930s Horkheimer developed his conception of the role of philosophy primarily through a criticism of modern positivism or empiricism (the terms are used interchangeably), and in particular that of the Vienna Circle. His argument in one important essay, 'The latest attack on metaphysics' (1937), proceeds on two levels. First, in a framework of ideas derived from the sociology of knowledge, he asserts the connection between a style of thought and the situation of a social group, though unlike Karl Mannheim, for example, he does not attempt to analyse the precise filiations be-



tween thought and socio-historical conditions. Thus, he simply claims that 'neo-romantic metaphysics and radical positivism alike have their roots in the present sad state of the middle class' (*Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York, Herder & Herder, 1972, p. 140), and again, 'the entire system of modern empiricism belongs to the passing world of liberalism' (*ibid.*, p. 147).

At another level Horkheimer undertakes a criticism of positivism as a theory of knowledge or philosophy of science, especially in relation to the social sciences, on three main points: (i) that it treats active human beings as mere facts and objects within a scheme of mechanical determinism; (ii) that it conceives the world only as immediately given in experience, and makes no distinction between essence and appearance; and (iii) that it establishes an absolute distinction between fact and value, and hence separates knowledge from human interests. Horkheimer contrasts with positivism a 'dialectical theory', in which 'individual facts always appear in a definite connection', and which 'seeks to reflect reality in its totality'. Furthermore, dialectical thought 'integrates the empirical constituents into structures of experience which are important . . . for the historical interests with which dialectical thought is connected. . . . When an active individual of sound common sense perceives the sordid state of the world, desire to change it becomes the guiding principle by which he organizes given facts and shapes them into a theory. . . . Right thinking depends as much on right willing as right willing on right thinking' (*ibid.*, pp. 161-2).[2]

Horkheimer pursued this argument in his best known essay of the 1930s, 'Traditional and critical theory' (1937), which should perhaps be regarded as the founding document, or charter, of the Frankfurt School. 'Traditional theory' is there interpreted as the implicit or explicit outlook of the modern natural sciences, expressed in modern philosophy as positivism/empiricism; and Horkheimer is above all concerned with the diffusion of this conception of theory in the 'sciences of man and society [which] have attempted to follow the lead of the natural sciences' (*ibid.*, p. 190). The opposed kind of social thought, 'critical theory', rejects the procedure of determining objective facts with the aid of conceptual systems, from a purely external standpoint, and claims that 'the facts, as they emerge from the work of society, are not extrinsic in the same degree as they are for the savant . . . critical thinking . . . is motivated today by the effort really to transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built'