Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School
I. Psychoanalysis and Advertising

Background and Context of Frankfurt School
Edward Bernays

- The “Father of Public Relations”
- Nephew of Sigmund Freud
- PR was invented as "peacetime propaganda." Bernays was inspired by the mass persuasion of the public during WWI.
History of Advertising

- Information does not drive behavior.
- Bernays helped transform advertising from a means of conveying information into an art of manipulation.
- Because facts do not always persuade, businesses needed to appeal to people's emotions. Products were now seen as a means of expressing one’s inner self to others.
“Torches of Freedom”

- Bernays helped make smoking by women socially acceptable
- Smoking was associated with power and independence
- “Torches of Freedom” suggests that to be against smoking is to be against women’s right to vote!
The Birth of Consumer Culture

• Advertising helped transform America into a NEEDS culture into a DESIRE culture.

• Consumerism is necessary to avoid **UNDER-CONSUMPTION**: to grow the economy, more stuff has to be produced, which means that people have to buy more stuff, which can’t happen if people don’t *desire* more stuff!
The Birth of Consumer Culture

• President Herbert Hoover’s “Happiness Machines”
• Consumerism is necessary for a healthy economy and stable political order
• People must be made happy and docile
Sigmund Freud and the ‘Repressive Hypothesis’

Freud’s ‘Discoveries’
1. Linked Childhood to adult behaviors
2. Libido and infantile “sexuality”: infants reach towards pleasure and away from pain
3. Repression causes pathologies (e.g. neurosis)
4. Morality derived from repressive childhood upbringing

(1856-1939)
Sigmund Freud and the ‘Repressive Hypothesis’

Implications:

● Unconscious forces drive most of our behavior

● Our behavior is not generally the result of rational calculations, or based on information alone. Emotion plays a major role in decision making.
Civilization and its Discontents

• Freud argued that Human Nature is inherently violent and aggressive, and that sublimation of these primal instincts is necessary for civilization to continue.

• Sublimation occurs when primary sexual energies are repressed, and then redirected towards artistic or cultural ends.
Wilhelm Reich

- Student of Freud’s
- Contrary to Freud, Reich argued that **Human Nature** is inherently peaceful, loving, and affectionate.
- Rather than repression and redirection of the primary drives (sublimation) being necessary for peaceful coexistence, Reich argued that such repression *was the cause of* violent and pathological tendencies in humans.

(1897-1957)
Reich sought answers to the following questions:

1. What explains fascism?
2. Why are children more emotional than adults?
3. What is the biological function/purpose of emotions?
Reich’s ‘Discoveries’

1. Muscular and Character Armor
   – Our personalities reflect in part the chronic tensions we hold in our bodies

2. Primary versus Secondary Drives
   – Our primary drives/desires are to reach out towards pleasure, affection, and love. These often get chronically unsatisfied or blocked, and we develop secondary drives, like obtaining money, or becoming famous, etc.

3. Sexual Emotional Energy and “Function of the Orgasm”
   – His most famous and controversial claim was that the purpose of the sexual orgasm was the release of chronic in-built tension. The release of this muscular “armor” (tension) would concur with a psychological release of our character structure. We would become more spontaneous and caring.
II. Critical Theory
Critical Theory Overview

Focus:

• The use of reason to critique the ways in which reasoned, critical thought is suppressed in culture and in institutional practices
• Reason used to dominate rather than to liberate individuals/groups
• Highlight the irrational character of the established rationality
The Frankfurt School

• The Frankfurt School tried to assimilate the psycho-analytic writings of Freud with Marxian political economy, in an attempt to explain why the revolutions had not occurred. They turned to a theory of culture and ideology to account for the failure of socialist revolutions in the West.
The Frankfurt School

• The ‘first generation’ of Frankfurt School theorists included Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, among others.

• Habermas is the leading intellectual figure in the Frankfurt School, belonging to its second generation of theorists.
Dialectic of Enlightenment

• Enlightenment thought was intended to emancipate humanity.
• It accomplished this through science and technology, which entailed the domination of nature.
• Instead of freeing humanity, technology has been used to dominate both nature and humanity!
Herbert Marcuse

• Psychoanalyst, Sociologist, and Philosopher; a leader of the student protest movements in the 1960s.
• His most famous book is *One Dimensional Man:*
  – Agreed with Freud that some repression of our instincts was necessary, but argued that there existed in society *surplus repression,* or more repression than is technologically necessary to keep the society running.
  – Freedom is repressed through a process he refers to as "*repressive desublimation.*"
Jürgen Habermas

• Associated with the ‘2nd generation’ of Frankfurt School theorists
• Opposes technological determinism.
• Growth of productive forces doesn’t necessarily emancipate
• Therefore, emancipation requires critical reflection
• Wants to liberate us from external constraints on speech and thought.
## Facts and Norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTS</th>
<th>NORMS/VALUES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What <em>is</em></td>
<td>What <em>should be</em>; <em>ought</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technological, Instrumental rationality</td>
<td>teleological</td>
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- Is there a ‘rational’ way to determine the ends we pursue? Or is this just a matter of opinion, faith, values, etc.?
- Habermas says yes, there is a way to rationally determine whether a value or opinion is rational!
Habermas and Legitimacy

According to Jürgen Habermas, social relationships are legitimate to the extent that they are based on free, unconstrained, and open communication among all of participants and include all of those affected. He refers to this as the ideal speech situation.
Two Types of Criticisms

1. INTERNAL CRITIQUE
   • Accepts the moral criterion of evaluation of a justification, but rejects the collective decision (or relationship) as falling short of this criterion, or even being incompatible with it.

2. EXTERNAL CRITIQUE
   • Rejects the value implied in the justification and offers an alternative moral criterion of evaluation.
Two Types of Criticisms

- **Example:** “We *should* eat at McDonald's for dinner, because the food tastes good.”
  - Claim = “We should eat at McDonald’s”
  - Warrant = “Because the food tastes good”
  - Implied normative criterion: Taste

1. **Internal critique:** “Yes, we should eat at the best tasting restaurant, but Burger King is better”

2. **External critique:** “No, we should eat at the healthiest restaurant”
Claims and Warrants

• To argue is to evaluate claims on the basis of their warrants.

  1. Claim- a statement about what is, or what should be;
  2. Warrants- reasons or evidence that supports the claim

• What counts as evidence depends on the nature of the claim (see next slide)
3 criteria for evaluating the *validity* of claims

- All statements fall into three categories, based on how that statement’s *validity*-claims can be *evaluated*:
  1. **Objective; The external world**: Truth
  2. **Subjective; The internal world**: Sincerity
  3. **Normative; The social world**: Rightness (morality)
Continuum of Social Relations

Explicit and Open Communication
Agreement/Disagreement
Justification/Criticism

Violence/Coercion:
No attempt to communicate or to reach agreement through argument
Types of Action

- Two ‘models of action’: instrumental vs. communicative:
  1. *Instrumental* = using someone else
  2. *Communicative* = forming a *common* will

![Venn Diagram]

- **Instrumental** (aimed at success)
- **Communicative** (aimed at consensus or ‘understanding’)

# Types of Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Orientation/Action Situation</th>
<th>Oriented to Success</th>
<th>Oriented to Reaching Understanding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonsocial</td>
<td><em>Instrumental action</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td><em>Strategic action</em></td>
<td><em>Communicative action</em></td>
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</table>
Bridging the Fact-Value Divide

• According to Habermas, to understand any statement means you can evaluate its validity (truth, sincerity, or rightness).

• **Evaluation is inherent to understanding.** For Habermas, the *primary intent of every communication is that the intent of the communication be understood*. Therefore, to understand a normative statement implies we can evaluate it in some way (e.g. by examining the arguments pro and con).

• What is important for Habermas is that normative statements can also be evaluated on a rational basis. He thus attempts to bridge the divide between **facts and norms** (aka facts and values).
Bridging the Fact-Value Divide

• Habermas tells us that social interaction consists of communication, and that the social decisions (aka “collectively binding decisions”) are valid to the extent that they are arrived at through a process of free and open (unconstrained) communication.

• His theory doesn’t tell us whether the content of any particular decision is valid or invalid, but rather, his theory attempts to show us how we can determine whether the means by which we arrive at collective decisions are valid or invalid.
Bridging the Fact-Value Divide

• ‘Seriously intended agreement is an end in itself’

• Agreement = power that rests on the forceless force of conviction, or, the ‘force of the better argument’.

• The strength of a consensus is measured on its claim to ‘rational validity’, not its success in achieving goals.
Bridging the Fact-Value Divide

• How do we know which coercion is rationally legitimate?
  – What kind society could be rationally legitimated? Every society has to use some coercion. It has to have laws, etc.

• It must serve general interests.
  – Must find universal moral rules that apply to every rational person.
  – Example: all human beings share a common interest in preventing deadly diseases and environmental devastation.

• All coercive mechanisms must be legitimate in the eyes of all (or most) of all those capable of participating in a rational discourse about it. = “Universal pragmatics”
Structural Violence and Distorted Communication

• “Structural violence” = unperceived blockages to communication, which does not manifest itself as force.
  – Agreements (consensus) can *appear* to arise from unconstrained, unblocked communication (‘ideal speech situation’), and therefore *appear* to give rise to legitimate power, when in reality, it arises from blocked, constrained communication and is therefore illegitimate.
Structural Violence and Distorted Communication

• A speech situation is deformed if it is coerced.

• Example: your boss asks you, “Do you like my new tie?” (You can’t say no!) This is coercive, and deforms and distorts communication. This is a kind of coercion for Habermas.
Structural Violence and Distorted Communication

• In short: Habermas thinks that people are deluded about their objective interests, because of ‘distortions’ in communication, i.e. b/c of *ideology.*

• *Is this just another version of ideology-critique?*  YES (but with a ‘communicative’ twist).
Legitimation Crisis

- **Legitimation crisis** = state unable to sustain the mass loyalty of its citizens
  - Interrelated economic and political *steering* problems in the capitalist system/society

**Examples:** 1960s, hippies, London Riots, 2011

- Why do youth today distance themselves from the norms of society? Symptomatic of problems with socialization of children.
Public Sphere and ‘Colonization of Life-World’

- Freedom to engage in political discussion and informal communication core to democratic society

- **Civil society**: Private individuals/citizens coming together in, and as a public

- Today, **public sphere colonized by economic interests**: communication is restricted
Criticisms and Evaluation of Habermas

• Habermas as new critique of Censorship.
• **Central dilemma:** Habermas’ theory implies a capture of the state to eliminate old bourgeois limitations on public discourse, but this would impose new systems of domination.
• *To do what it must to establish equality, it will undermine the freedom it espouses.*
• Habermas therefore doesn’t want to spell out explicitly the political command implications of his theory, because he is troubled by the historical failures of communism/socialism. So he confines his project to the level of theory alone.