Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School

I. Psychoanalysis and Advertising

Background and Context of Frankfurt School

Advertising and Propaganda

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)

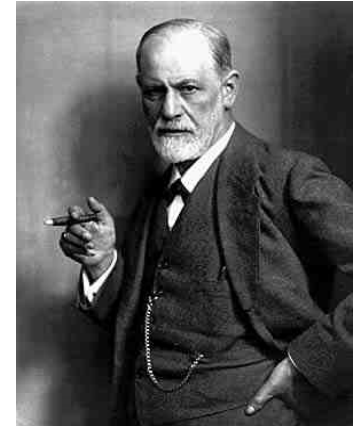4. Morality derived from repressive childhood upbringing
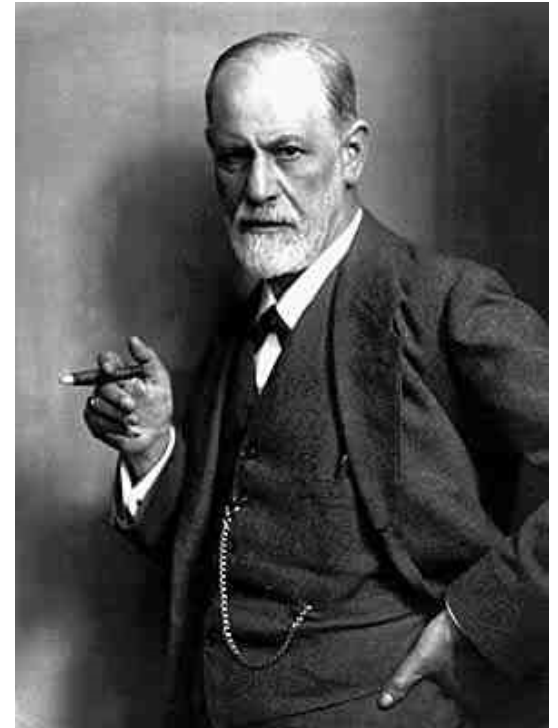
(1856-1939)

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.
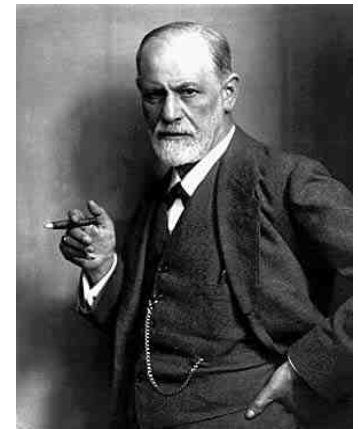
Wilhelm Reich

- 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.
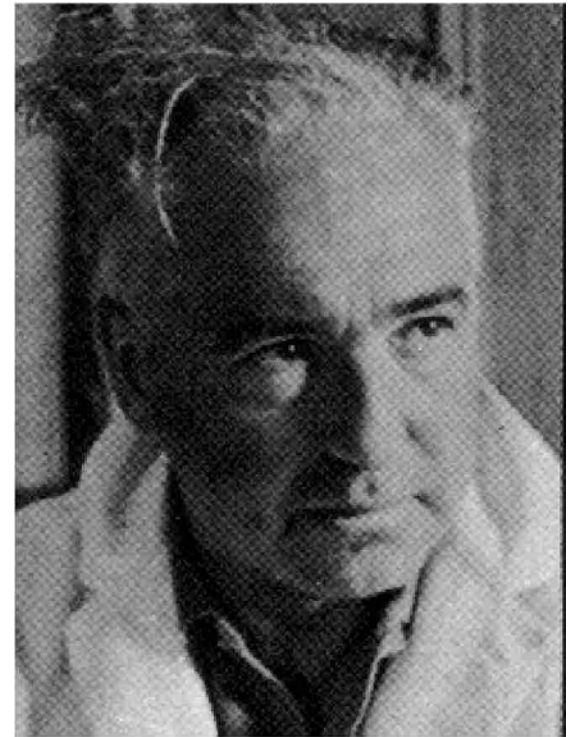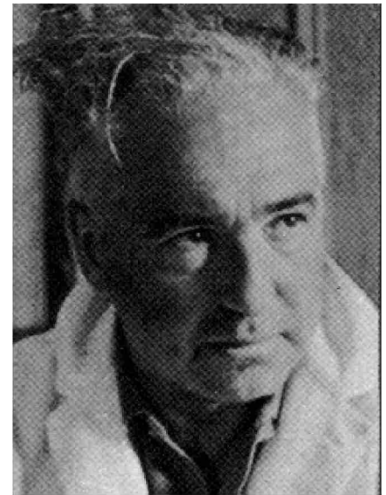

(1897-1957)

Wilhelm Reich

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.
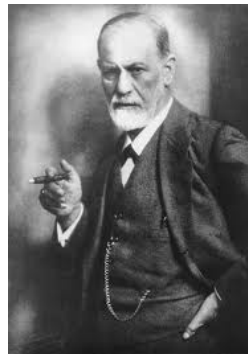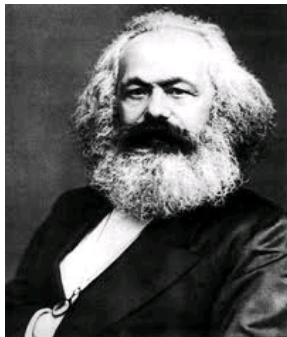
The Frankfurt School

- 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.
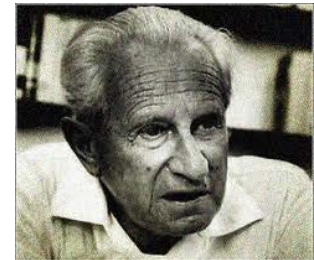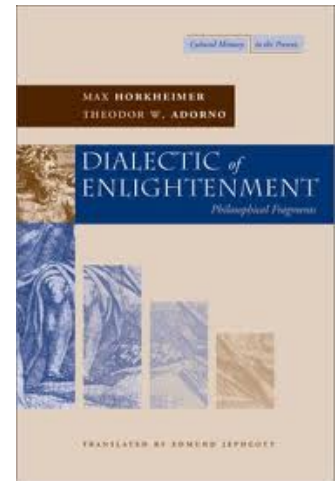
Horkheimer

Adorno

Benjamin

Fromm

Marcuse

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!

Horkheimer

Adorno

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.”**
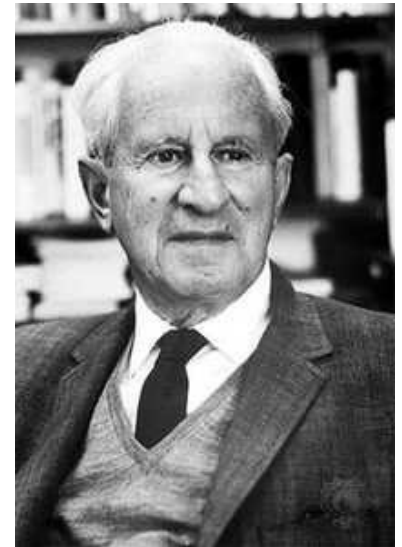
(1898-1979)

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.
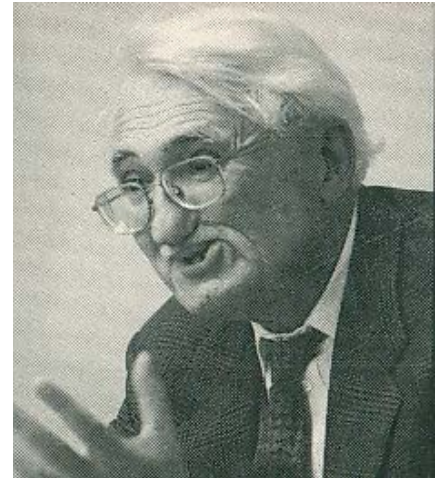
Facts and Norms

FACTS	NORMS/VALUES
What *is*	What *should* be; *ought*
Descriptive	Prescriptive
Technological, Instrumental rationality	**teleological**

- 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*.
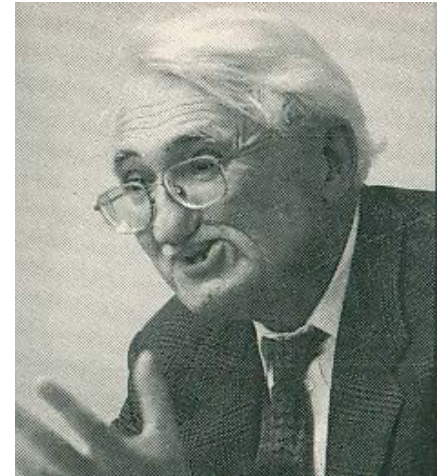
Two Types of Criticisms

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. <u>Internal critique</u>: "Yes, we should eat at the best tasting restaurant, but Burger King is better"
2. <u>External critique</u>: "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
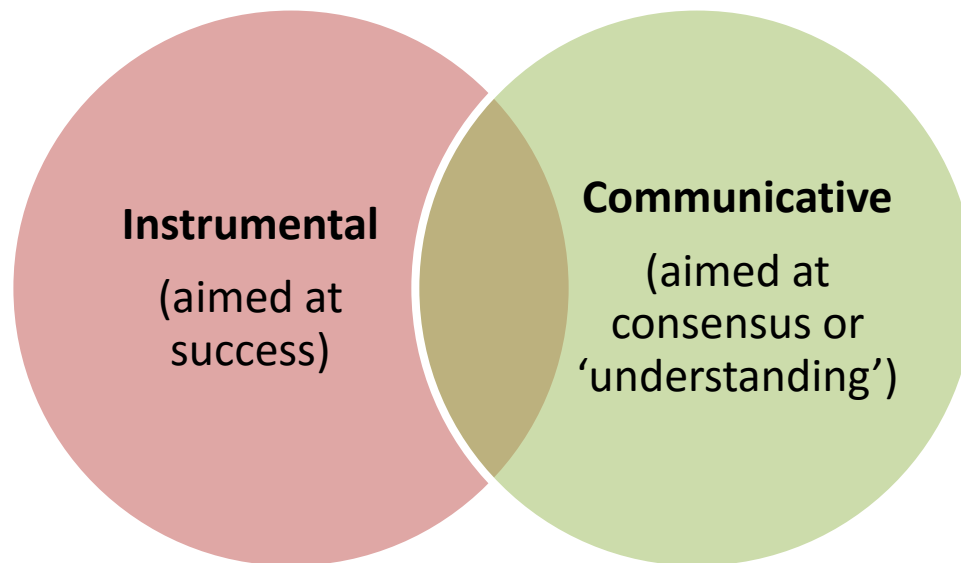
Types of Action

Action Orientation/→ Action Situation	Oriented to Success	Oriented to Reaching Understanding
Nonsocial	*Instrumental action*	--
Social	*Strategic action*	*Communicative action*

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.

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"NICE TIE, DALRYMPLE! I WANT YOU TO ORDER ONES FOR ALL MY YES-MEN!"

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).
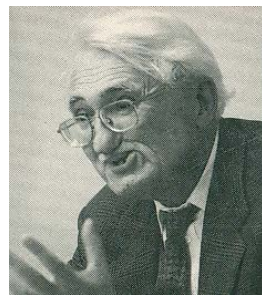
Legitimation Crisis

➢ **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.