

# Frankfurt School Critical Theory

*Institute for Social Ecology Online Seminar*



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Frankfurt School Critical Theory is a notoriously challenging and rich body of work; it is also a foundational philosophical influence on social ecology. These transdisciplinary thinkers developed penetrating analyses of a wide array of topics spanning capitalism, fascism, modernity, reason, science and technology, nature, culture, mass media, aesthetics, the left, and more. FSCT's unorthodox Marxist approach has carved out an enduring niche on the left and some sectors of academia, but has also been incorporated into the right's "Cultural Marxism" conspiracy theory, which identifies these mostly Jewish leftists as the nefarious masterminds of the decline of western civilization. This nine-unit seminar will introduce participants to the core concepts, thinkers, and texts of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, exploring the tradition's ongoing relevance for contemporary political and theoretical questions.

The course is organized around seven units comprised of selected readings and video lectures that introduce the texts and central issues under consideration. All course materials are accessible via the PowerSchool/Haiku course portal – the password for the video lectures is DeterminateNegation; all the texts are downloadable. There are two optional discussion forums to continue conversations between classes. There are no grades or written assignments for the course; certificates of course completion available on request.

## Course Outline

Unit 1	What is Critical Theory? Peter Staudenmaier
Unit 2	Reason, Modernity, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment – Peter Staudenmaier
Unit 3	Adorno's <i>Negative Dialectics</i> – Sebastian Tränkle
Unit 4	Art, Aesthetics, Culture Industry – Sebastian Tränkle & Robert Zwarg
Unit 5	Adorno, Marcuse and the New Left – Robert Zwarg
Unit 6	Feminism and Critical Theory – Barbara Umrath
Unit 7	The Radicality of Critical Theory: Capitalism, Culture and Civilization – Marcel Stoetzler
Unit 8	Critical Theory and Postcolonialism – Blair Taylor
March 9	Walter Benjamin – Saladdin Ahmed

## Unit Descriptions and Readings

### **1. What is Critical Theory? Peter Staudenmaier**

The group of thinkers now known as the Frankfurt School presented a radical critique of modern society in all its forms. Drawing on philosophy, sociology, economics, psychology, cultural criticism, and a wide range of other fields, the "critical theory" developed by the Institute for Social Research offered a prescient and profoundly unsettling analysis of the horrors of the twentieth century, an analysis that retains its critical potential today. This introductory session will survey the history of the Frankfurt School and the principal ideas of its members, with an emphasis on "the power of negative thinking" in making sense of a thoroughly distorted world.

*Readings:* Theodor Adorno, "Critique" (1969); Herbert Marcuse, "A Note on Dialectic" (1960).

Peter Staudenmaier teaches modern European history at Marquette University and is a long-time faculty member at the Institute for Social Ecology.

### **2. Reason, Modernity, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment – Peter Staudenmaier**

With their obscure yet famous magnum opus *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in the midst of World War II, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno put forward a notoriously difficult but remarkably fruitful philosophical interpretation of the catastrophic state of the modern world. The book is sometimes seen as the foremost expression of Frankfurt School thinking from the 1930s through the 1960s. Our discussion of its arguments will revolve around the twin

concepts of reason and modernity, examined through a critical lens, while exploring what this text has to say to the challenges of our own time.

*Readings:* Max Horkheimer, "The End of Reason" (1941); Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment" from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

### **3. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* – Sebastian Tränkle**

Published on the eve of the 1968 student protests, Adorno opens his *Negative Dialectics* with nothing short of a reversal of Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment of its realization was missed." Doing justice to this major work in one session is impossible – not only due to the lack of an acceptable English translation. We will therefore concentrate on Adorno's reasons for shifting the focus from political practice to philosophical theory. Itself a consequence of socio-historical insights, we will trace the conceptual movement of the book, i.e. of negative dialectics. We will start with Adorno's materialist critique of epistemology. By both revealing "identity thinking" as a mode of social domination and countering it with a concept of genuine experience, however, such a critique transcends the merely philosophical relevance of philosophical discourse. We will read negative dialectics as an attempt to salvage the idea of critical theory and the possibility of radical practice in the midst of the catastrophic 20th century, in particular after Auschwitz.

*Readings:* Theodor W. Adorno, "Preface," "Introduction" and from "III. Meditations on Metaphysics" the sections: "1. After Auschwitz" and "2. Metaphysics and Culture," in (for lack of better options): *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton, London: Routledge 1973.

Sebastian Tränkle is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Philosophy Department of Freie Universität Berlin, where he also earned his PhD. He has a book developing a materialist critique of language from the works of Adorno and Hans Blumenberg, as well as an edited volume on Adorno's Aesthetic Theory, scheduled for publication in 2020.

### **4. Art, Aesthetics, Culture Industry – Robert Zwarg & Sebastian Tränkle**

In this session, we will discuss one of the most intensely debated issues in Critical Theory, the role of culture and the arts. As the standard narrative goes, in the late Sixties Critical Theory (especially Theodor W. Adorno) retreated into the realm of aesthetics and was, almost from the get-go, uncomprehending and dismissive of popular culture. In the session, we will read and discuss one of the most famous chapters in Adorno/Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the chapter on the "culture industry." Our inputs will discuss the aesthetic background of the chapter, its general thrust and how it is a reflection of both American and European experiences.

*Readings:* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry," from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

### **5. Adorno, Marcuse and the New Left – Robert Zwarg**

This session will tackle the relationship between the New Left and the Frankfurt School (on both sides of the Atlantic) via two canonical pieces written in direct response to the political events of the 1960s which display two different (yet not unrelated) approaches. It is generally known that,

despite many fruitful encounters and enthusiastic readings, the student movement and the Critical Theorists were sometimes at odds in their political evaluations. Adorno, who famously called the police in 1969 after students had occupied the Institute for Social Research, is widely remembered as a critic of the protesters while Marcuse is usually thought of as more sympathetic to the movement. We'll critically evaluate these debates and discuss their value for political analysis today.

*Readings:* Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia on Theory and Practice"; Herbert Marcuse, "[Essay on Liberation](#)" (Chapters III and IV)

Robert Zwarg is a research assistant at the German Literature Archive in Marbach and the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin. His research deals with 20th Century intellectual history, in particular the Frankfurt School tradition in Germany and the United States.

## **6. Feminism and Critical Theory – Barbara Umrath**

Although feminists have engaged with Critical Theory from the early days of second-wave feminism, questions of gender, family, and sexuality are routinely omitted when discussing the first generation of the Frankfurt School. This session will look at how these topics were understood and analyzed by various theorists working in the tradition. Particular attention will be paid to the analysis of the "masculine character" of the bourgeois subject from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the role of gender relations within their studies on authoritarianism. We will critically assess these reflections, asking not only in what respects the Frankfurt School must be considered wanting from a contemporary feminist perspective, but also how it might productively inform recent feminist debates.

*Barbara Umrath* earned her PhD in sociology with a book on gender, family, and sexuality in first generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory. She has been active with various feminist groups for many years, and is currently a researcher with the Institute for Gender Studies at the University of Applied Sciences Cologne (TH Koeln), Germany. [barbara.umrath@th-koeln.de](mailto:barbara.umrath@th-koeln.de).

*Readings:* Marasco, Robyn. "Already the Effect of the Whip": Critical Theory and the Feminine Ideal. *Differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 17 (1), 88–115, 2006.

Umrath, Barbara. "A Feminist Reading of the Frankfurt School's Studies on Authoritarianism and Its Relevance for Understanding Authoritarian Tendencies in Germany Today." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117 (4), 861–878, 2018.

## **7. The Radicality of Critical Theory: Capitalism, Culture and Civilization – Marcel Stoetzler**

This session will explore some of the ways how Frankfurt School Critical Theory can inform interventions in current political/theoretical debates. One focus will be the concept of dialectics: sometimes things are the opposite of what they are, and sometimes things are what they are by way of being the opposite of what they are. The second focus will be how the perspective

expressed in works like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* determines what kind of critique is directed at capitalist modernity, and how this influences questions of race, gender, civilization, revolution, antisemitism, anti-imperialism and fascism.

*Readings:* Stoetzler, Marcel (2019). [‘The masochism of civilization’](#), *A Contrary Little Quail*

-- [‘On the possibility that the revolution that will end capitalism might fail to usher in communism’](#), in: *Journal of Classical Sociology* 12:2, pp. 191-204

-- (2005). [‘Subject Trouble: Judith Butler and Dialectics’](#) in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31:3, pp. 343-69

-- [‘When Nothing is Produced’](#), in *mute, culture and politics after the net* 2:13, pp. 82-91

-- (2018). ‘Critical Theory and the critique of anti-imperialism’, in Best, Beverley; Werner Bonefeld; Chris O’Kane (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, vol. 3, 1467-1486.

Marcel Stoetzler is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Bangor University, UK. He works on social and political theory, intellectual history and historical sociology. He is an editorial board member of [Patterns of Prejudice](#) and a fellow at the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Manchester and the Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, London.

## **8. Critical Theory and Postcolonialism – Blair Taylor**

This session will examine Frankfurt School Critical Theory in light of postcolonial/decolonial theory. It will consider the critique that FSCT is Eurocentric and/or race-blind, explore theoretical tensions between dialectics and identity, and discuss the fraught relationship between universality and particularity in theory and praxis. While postcolonial critique has become increasingly fashionable in contemporary academia, what insights does FSCT offer for a politico-theoretic interrogation of postcolonial theory?

*Readings:* Amy Allen, Chapter 1 of *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (2015); Bruce Baum. “Decolonizing Critical Theory” (2015); Blair Taylor, “Ruthless Critique or Selective Apologia: The Postcolonial Left in Theory and Practice” (2018).

Blair Taylor completed his PhD in political science at the New School for Social Research. His research centers on social movements, ecology, far right politics, antisemitism, and postcolonialism. He is program director of the Institute for Social Ecology and lives outside Seattle, where he organizes with West Sound Democratic Socialists of America.

## **9. Walter Benjamin – Saladdin Ahmed**

Walter Benjamin’s association with what has become known as the Frankfurt School is disputable, but he had a significant influence on some of its members, including Theodor Adorno. While Benjamin has received more attention after his death in 1940, the academy remains selective toward his work. When he is studied, it is more often than not for his work on aesthetics, yet it takes an active effort to separate those works from his philosophy as a Marxist thinker. For this session, we will focus on the theses “On the Concept of History” to discuss his unique contribution to Marxian philosophy as critical theorist.

*Readings:* Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," translated by Harry Zohn. In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 389-400. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.

Saladdin Ahmed is the author of *Totalitarian Space and the Destruction of Aura* (SUNY, 2019). He is currently visiting assistant professor of political science at Union College in Schenectady, New York. He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Ottawa.