FRANKFURT SCHOOL (Institute of Social Research)

The Frankfurt School (Institute für Sozialforschung) was founded in 1923 by Felix Weil and fellow students Max Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollack, and was originally endowed by Weil’s father. Its early members included Leo Lowenthal, Henryk Grossman, Julian Gumperz, Franz Borkenau, Karl August Wittfogel, and Carl Grünberg, its first director. These were the sons of a largely assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie in Frankfurt who, following the example of the highly energized and diverse student movements after Germany’s loss in WWI and the subsequent failure of socialist revolution there, desired avenues for transformative research and discussion outside the boundaries of traditional universities. Though Hegelian and Marxist in general orientation, the Institute pursued a non-dogmatic and often frankly utopian project aimed against the apparent conjunction in the twentieth-century of Max Weber’s “rationalization” of social relations and Georg Lukács’s “reification” of thought. Later members included Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, A. R. L. Gurland, Paul Massing, Paul Lazarsfeld (later director of the Radio Research Project at Princeton University), Mirra Komarovsky, and Karl Landauer, who was also director of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute in the 1930s. Walter Benjamin, whose essays on politics, literature, film and the messianic possibilities legible within commodity culture would find an enthusiastic readership after WWII, received Institute funding. Landauer, Fromm and Marcuse introduced a distinctly Freudian inflection of Marxism, which would continue through the Institute’s later publications on authoritarianism, law, anti-Semitism, prejudice, tolerance, and (via Marcuse) a revision of Freud that conjoined socialist economic and political transformation with sexual liberation. Theodor W. Adorno was the leading aesthetic thinker of this group. His notion of the “culture industry” of late capitalist society argued that various arts packaged for a consumer public, from the radio symphonies programmed by Arturo Toscanini in the 1950s to Hollywood movies and jazz music, produced a cultural conformity no less stultifying than the Soviet bureaucratization of art. Most members of the Frankfurt School left Germany before WWII, and the Institute re-grouped at Columbia University in 1936. But by 1950, when Adorno, Horkheimer and Pollock returned the Institute to Germany, many others had resigned to take academic positions in the United States. A subsequent generation of Frankfurt School thought, with Jürgen Habermas at its center, rejected the earlier equation of social rationalization and philosophical reification, along with the entire project of a “philosophy of consciousness” that had been advanced by the Institute’s “critical theory.” For Habermas, only a theory of “communicative action” dedicated to elucidating the implicit rules that allow for rational debate to occur in the first place held out any promise. In Habermas’s more social-democratic formulation and in contrast to the utopian ideals of his predecessors, the managerial or instrumental imperatives of modernity could not, and should not, be expunged. Instead, the political need was to guarantee that the mechanisms of administration, technology, and economics did not colonize the “life-world” of more traditional practices, from philosophy and the arts to morality and religion.

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