Chapter 1

Habermas and Frankfurt School critical theory

The Frankfurt School

Habermas is best known in the English-speaking world as the author of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, of various essays on discourse ethics, and of *Between Facts and Norms*, the works in which, roughly speaking, his social, moral, and political theory respectively are developed. Habermas is also known as the leading light of the second generation of Frankfurt School theorists, and his work is best understood as the fruit of an ongoing response to the critical theory of the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists.

The Frankfurt ‘school’ as it has come to be known, was a group of philosophers, sociologists, social psychologists, and cultural critics who worked in the period before and after the Second World War for the privately financed Institute for Social Research, based in Frankfurt. These thinkers, who published their work in the Institute’s *Journal for Social Research*, worked loosely speaking within a common paradigm; that is, they shared the same assumptions, asked similar questions, and were all influenced by the dialectical philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) and Karl Marx (1818–1883). The modern German tradition of dialectical philosophy in which they worked, sometimes called Hegelian-Marxism, was by no means the dominant one at the time. They were an intellectual minority, opposed to the reigning
European tradition of neo-Kantianism, and the Anglo-Austrian tradition of logical empiricism. This is how the retrospectively adopted talk of the 'Frankfurt School', and of Frankfurt School theory, should be understood.

Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), the patrician director of the Institute, was chiefly responsible for developing the paradigm of ‘critical theory’ during the 1930s.

In Horkheimer’s view, critical theory was to be a new interdisciplinary theoretical activity which supplemented and transformed the dialectical philosophy of Hegel and Marx with insights from the relatively new discipline of psychoanalysis, from German sociology, anthropology, and less mainstream philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Arthur Schopenhauer.
The resultant approach had four chief characteristics: it was interdisciplinary, reflective, dialectical, and critical.

The Frankfurt School were among the first to approach questions of morality, religion, science, reason, and rationality from a variety of perspectives and disciplines simultaneously. They believed that bringing different disciplines together would yield insights that were unobtainable by working within narrow and increasingly specialized academic domains. Thus they challenged the widespread assumption of the time that the empirical approach of the natural sciences was the only valid one.

Unlike what Horkheimer called ‘traditional theory’, which included almost everything from mathematics and formal logic to natural science, critical theory was reflective, or inherently self-aware. A critical theory reflected on the social context that gave rise to it, on its own function within that society, and on the purposes and interest of its practitioners, and so forth, and such reflections were built into the theory.

Together with its interdisciplinarity, the reflectiveness of critical theory was supposed to unmask what the Frankfurt School theorists considered to be the ‘positivist’ illusion afflicting traditional theories (such as the natural sciences), namely that the theory is just the correct mirroring of an independent realm of facts.

That dualist picture of knowledge encouraged the belief that facts were fixed, given, and unalterable, and independent of the theory. Critical theorists rejected that picture in favour of a more Hegelian, dialectical conception of knowledge, according to which the facts and our theories are part of an ongoing dynamic historical process in which the way we view the world (theoretically or otherwise) and the way the world is reciprocally determine each other.

Finally, Horkheimer maintained that a critical theory should be critical. This requirement comprised several distinct claims.
Generally it meant that the task of theory was practical, not just theoretical: that is, it should aim not just to bring about correct understanding, but to create social and political conditions more conducive to human flourishing than the present ones. More specifically, it meant that the theory had two different kinds of normative aim, diagnostic and remedial. The goal of the theory was not just to determine what was wrong with contemporary society at present, but, by identifying progressive aspects and tendencies within it, to help transform society for the better.

When the political climate of Nazism made it impossible for its members (almost all of whom were of Jewish descent) to continue their work in Frankfurt, the Institute was temporarily relocated, first to Geneva and then to the United States, where they encountered at first hand a social phenomenon that was new to them, a consumer society in hock to a Fordist model of industrial capitalism and mass production. They were struck in particular by the way in which culture had been industrialized by big Hollywood film companies, broadcasting media, and publishing firms. These giant monopolistic corporations exerted subtle techniques of manipulation and control which had the effect of making people accept and even affirm a social system that, behind their backs, thwarted and suppressed their fundamental interests. For example, the predictable happy endings of Hollywood ‘B’ movies provided ersatz satisfactions for mass audiences. Instead of being critical of social conditions that prevented them finding true happiness, they vicariously experienced the fictional happiness of their screen idols. Culture unwittingly played the role of an advertisement for the way things are. Horkheimer and his younger colleague Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), referred to this phenomenon as the ‘culture industry’.

It formed a vital part of a wider tendency of capitalist society to create and transform people’s needs and desires to the extent that they actually desired the dross that was manufactured for them, and
they ceased to want to lead fulfilling and worthwhile lives. Analysis of these phenomena furnished insights into the ways in which the consciousness of subjects could be manipulated by advertising and other means to create what the Frankfurt School theorists thought of as a false state of reconciliation. False reconciliation was brought about by the belief that the social world was rational, conducive to human freedom and happiness, and unalterable, when in fact it was deeply irrational, an obstacle to human freedom and happiness and alterable. A century before, under rather different circumstances in Prussia, Hegel had argued that a true reconciliation had been reached, namely in those social and political conditions that rational subjects could accept and affirm, because, all things considered, they satisfied their deepest interests. The Frankfurt School, under the influence of Marx and with their experience of the twentieth century, turned Hegel’s optimism upside down.

By the time Horkheimer returned to Frankfurt in 1949, both he and Adorno had become more pessimistic about the chances of realizing
the practical goal of critical theory – a radical transformation of society. This pessimism was grounded theoretically in the analysis set out in their famous co-authored *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947, but first published in 1944 as a mimeograph entitled *Philosophical Fragments*).

Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s analysis of Enlightenment sets the agenda for the subsequent development of critical theory. They began from the Hegelian assumption (shared by Marx) that human beings shape or determine the world around them through their mental and physical activity – or as Marx would say, through their intellectual and manual labour. Then they added an historical thesis that by the 18th century instrumental rationality, namely the calculation of the most efficient means for achieving a given end or desire, had become the dominant form of knowledge. The historical process of enlightenment privileged natural scientific and technologically exploitable forms of knowing above all others. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the natural sciences, which make testable generalizations and predictions about external nature, are a covert form of means/ends reasoning. Anthropologically speaking, science is just an instrument that furthers man’s fundamental need to master and control his environment. Technology and industry are the extension and application of this instrument.

Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the industrialized and bureaucratized modern world is formed by a process of rationalization. The 20th-century social world is the result of the actions of human beings, whose faculty of reason has atrophied to a mere calculus of the most efficient means to a given end. The increasing mathematization and objectification of nature has led to the demise of mythical and religious world views. At the same time, the concepts by which human beings come to know their world arise from specific historical and social circumstances. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that institutional life is increasingly formed by science and technology, that is by instrumental rationality. Modern
forms of sociality (institutionalized forms of instrumental rationality) give rise in their turn to instrumental concepts, representations, and ways of thinking about the world: they generate a scientific, calculating, and functional mindset. A vicious spiral ensues in which instrumental rationality becomes exclusive and total.

There is a sinister aspect to the assumption that science and rationality serve man’s underlying need to manipulate and control external nature: that domination and mastery are very close cousins of rationality. Not only science and technology, but rationality itself is implicated in domination. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, even primitive forms of rationality, like magic, are incipient forms of man’s domination over nature and over other human beings. For magicians cast their spells in order to bring nature under control, and their having magic powers creates social hierarchies.

Ironically, then, the very process of enlightenment which was, according to 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, and Kant, supposed to liberate man from nature and to lead to human freedom and flourishing, rebounds upon him. Gradually, as industrialization and capitalism take hold in the 19th century, human beings are subjected to ever more pervasive networks of administrative discipline and control, and to an increasingly powerful and untameable economic system. Instead of liberating man from nature, the process of enlightenment imprisons man, who is himself a part of nature. Instead of economic plenty, there is misery and poverty. Instead of moral progress, there is regression to barbarism, violence, and intolerance. This is the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ that informed Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s understanding of their social world and influenced their diagnosis of its faults.

In the eyes of the young Habermas, this unwarranted pessimism blunted the critical aim of social theory. If their diagnosis was true, if enlightenment, which was supposed to bring human beings
liberty and plenty, was, from its very inception, also destined to bring them unfreedom and misery, critical social theory was caught in a bind. For social theory is itself a form of enlightenment, on Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s very broad understanding of that term: it is a theory that should lead both to greater understanding of the social world and to its practical amelioration. In which case, as Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledge in the Preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, enlightenment is both necessary and impossible: necessary because humanity would otherwise continue hurtling towards self-destruction and unfreedom, and impossible because enlightenment can only be attained through rational human activity, and yet rationality is itself the origin of the problem. This was the *aporia* that led Horkheimer and Adorno to become ever more circumspect about the concrete political aims of critical theory. (*Apora* is a Greek word meaning literally ‘no passage’ and figuratively ‘perplexity’.) Adorno’s faith in the capacity of any theory to guide social, political, or moral emancipation soon waned to the point that he considered almost any collective political action to be premature, arbitrary, and futile. The difference between Habermas and his teachers is that while they thought the *aporia* was real, he thought it resulted from a flaw in their analysis.

**Habermas’s initial response**

Habermas’s first major work, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Investigation of a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), is a constructively critical response to Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s conception of critical theory. Though something of a *cause célèbre* in West Germany in the early 1960s, it was not translated into English until 1993. It attempts to resolve the problems of first-generation Frankfurt School critical theory, while remaining true to its original spirit and retaining some aspects of its diagnosis of social ills.

*Structural Transformation* remains true to the original paradigm in several ways. First, it is interdisciplinary, combining insights from
history, sociology, literature, and philosophy. Second, it aims to locate the progressive, rational aspects of modern society and to differentiate them from the regressive, irrational ones. Third, like Horkheimer and Adorno before him, Habermas employs the method of *immanent criticism*. One can also call it internal, as opposed to external criticism. The critical theorists think this approach derives from Hegel and Marx. In some respects it is closer to the Socratic mode of argumentation, which assumes the position of the interlocutor, for the sake of argument, without actually endorsing it, in order to point out its incoherence and untruth.

Whatever its origins, the critical theorists aim to criticize an object – a conception of society or a work of philosophy – on its own terms, and not on the basis of values or standards that transcend it, in order to bring its untruth to light.

*Structural Transformation* is an immanent criticism of the category of ‘the public sphere’ – a phrase that translates the German word *Öffentlichkeit*, which can mean publicity, transparency, and openness. According to Habermas, the ideals of the historical Enlightenment – liberty, solidarity, and equality – are implicit in the concept of the public sphere and provide the standard of immanent criticism. For example, 18th- and 19th-century bourgeois society can be criticized for not living up to its own ideals. Equally, West German society can be criticized for having fallen short of the inclusive, equal, and transparent society foreshadowed by those ideals. Thus *Structural Transformation* cleaves to the theoretical and practical aspirations of the original paradigm of critical theory: to understand the social world and to guide social change by illuminating potentials for social change.

However, Habermas provides a significantly different historical diagnosis of the social, political, and cultural situation to Horkheimer and Adorno. Although he does not openly criticize them until nearly two decades later, long after their deaths, Habermas thought that their account of rationalization was too one-sided and pessimistic, and that their concept of the dialectic of
enlightenment lacked both empirical and historical justification and conceptual coherence. His own work attempts to rescue the original idea of critical theory by combining a more nuanced and justifiable history of the Enlightenment with a more coherent model of social theory.

**The concept of the bourgeois public sphere**

*Structural Transformation* charts the emergence of a reasoning public out of the literary public of the salons, clubs, and coffee houses of 18th-century Europe, and then depicts its gradual decline and disintegration. Habermas’s narrative is quite detailed and betrays an extraordinary range of reference.

At the beginning of the 18th century, the establishment of civic rights guaranteeing the individual freedoms of association and of expression and the emergence of a free press gave rise to physical spaces such as coffee houses and salons and to literary journals, in which citizens could enter into free public discussion. They were fora in which people voluntarily came together and participated as equals in public debates. These arenas were autonomous in two senses: participation in them was voluntary, and they were relatively independent of the economic and political systems. Members of the public sphere did not just transact economically through exchange and contract in the pursuit of individual profit and self-interest. The public sphere consisted in voluntary associations of private citizens united in a common aim, to make use of their own reason in unconstrained discussion between equals. Soon, a shared culture developed that, among other things, helped the participants to discover and to express their needs and interests and to form a conception of the common good. According to Habermas, a normative notion of public opinion crystallized around the conception of the common good that was established in these fragile but sheltered arenas of public discourse.

As the authority and influence of the public spread, so gradually public opinion began to function as a check on the legitimacy of the
powers of unrepresentative and closed government. By checking whether laws and policies were in the common good, the public could effectively test their legitimacy. Though the public sphere came to exercise a political and social function, however, it cannot be identified or associated with any particular political institution. It was an informal sphere of sociality located somewhere between bourgeois civil society and the state or government.

The public sphere as idea and ideology

Habermas's critical theory, as expounded in *Structural Transformation*, is a variant of immanent criticism known as the criticism of ideology, or ideology criticism. In order to understand what this is, we first have to examine the notion of ideology. Adorno defines ideology as 'socially necessary illusion' or 'socially necessary false-consciousness', and the young Habermas accepts something like the same definition. Ideologies are on this view the false ideas or beliefs about itself that society somehow systematically manages to induce people to hold. But ideologies are not ordinary false beliefs, such as my false belief that there is tea in my cup when there is coffee. Rather, ideologies are false beliefs that are very widely assumed to be true, because virtually all members of society are somehow made to believe them. Moreover, ideologies are functional false beliefs, which, not least because they are so widespread, serve to shore up certain social institutions and the relations of domination they support. This is the sense in which ideologies are socially necessary.

Ideology in this sense can fulfil social functions in various different ways. It may make what is in fact a social and man-made institution, and hence an institution that is in principle alterable, appear to be fixed and natural. Or it may make an institution that in fact serves the interests of a narrow class of people appear to serve the interests of everyone. If everyone, for example, believes that economic laws exist naturally and independently of human beings, then workers are more likely to accept low wages in return for their labour, rather than to see this exchange as a structural injustice in
need of reform. Ideology criticism, then, is a type of immanent criticism that exposes these socially necessary illusions, and thereby, it is hoped, makes the object of criticism – here the illusion-forming social structure – more fluid and susceptible to change.

According to Habermas, the concept of the public sphere is both an idea and an ideology. The public sphere is a space where subjects participate as equals in rational discussion in pursuit of truth and the common good. As ideas, openness, inclusiveness, equality, and freedom were beyond reproach. In reality, though, they were simply ideologies or illusions. For in practice, the participation in the public sphere that existed in the coffee houses, salons, and the literary journals of 18th-century Europe was always restricted to a small group of educated men of means. Property and education were the two unspoken conditions of participation. In reality, the majority of poor and uneducated people, and almost all women, were excluded. Consequently, the idea of the public sphere remained merely Utopian, an inclusive and egalitarian vision of society worthy of pursuit, but never fully realized. The concept of the bourgeois public sphere remained ideological in the second sense too. For the notion of the common good or common interest to which the shared culture of the literary and reasoning public gave rise presented what were in fact the interests of a small group of educated men of means as the common interest of all humankind.

The critical point of Habermas’s approach is to show that the idea of the bourgeois public sphere was, despite all this, more than a mere illusion, for it was in principle open: whoever had independent wealth and education was, regardless of standing, status, class, or gender, entitled to participate in public debate. No one was excluded in principle from participation in the public sphere, though many were in practice. The ideal of a universally accessible, voluntary association of private people, coming together as equals to engage in unconstrained debate in the pursuit of truth and the common good was Utopian to be sure, but it was a Utopia that
was, and still is, worth pursuing. And for a brief while, in the 18th century, this Utopia not only gained intellectual currency, but began to be realized, fleetingly and partially, in social and political reality.

**Decline of the public sphere**

The second part of *Structural Transformation* charts the disintegration and decline of the public sphere. As newspapers and magazines gradually acquired a mass circulation, so they become absorbed into giant capitalist corporations that operated in the private interests of a few powerful individuals. Public opinion gradually lost its dual autonomy along with its critical function. Instead of fostering the formation of rational opinion and reliable beliefs, the public sphere in the 19th and 20th centuries became an arena in which public opinion could be stage-managed and manipulated. The mass-media newspapers, magazines, and bestseller novels became, along with radio and television broadcasts, consumer items, which instead of promoting freedom and human flourishing actually began to stifle it. To be sure, the state, economic, and political institutions became ever more skilled at winning public acclamation and support, and therewith the appearance of legitimacy. However, this support consisted in the private opinions of servile, uncritical, and economically dependent consumers, rather than in a healthy public opinion forged through reasoned public debate.

This rather grim view of the development of 20th-century Western capitalist society was consistent with much of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s account of the way the culture industry created an increasingly homogeneous mass of docile and uncritical consumers. Habermas also adopts the Frankfurt School’s rather pessimistic analysis that monopoly capitalism and welfare-state liberalism in the United States led ultimately to a diminution of human freedom, and to the hollowing out of democratic politics, and did not provide a fruitful alternative to the fragile social order of Weimar Germany that capitulated to Nazism.
For all that, Habermas is much clearer and more positive than Adorno and Horkheimer ever were about the path that should have been taken. The public sphere which in fact declined and fragmented should have deepened, broadened, and continued to exert a critical and legitimating function on the political and economic systems, pushing them into arenas of democratic control. Habermas concludes *Structural Transformation* with what is in the final analysis a hopeful speculation that such a development might still be forthcoming, on the basis of existing spheres of publicity internal to organizations such as political parties. Given the right political and social conditions, the ever-widening gap between the idea of the public sphere and social and political reality might be closed again.

**Habermas’s conception of critical theory**

Habermas is interested in the concept of the public sphere because he sees it as the origin of the ideal of a democratic politics, and as the ground of the moral and epistemic values that nourish and maintain democracy – equality, liberty, rationality, and truth. Habermas’s work always differed from that of his Frankfurt School mentors in that his deep concern for individual freedom was always wedded to an interest in the fate of democratic institutions and in the prospects for the renewal of democratic politics. Accordingly, he takes a much keener interest in the concrete institutional structure of democratic society than either Horkheimer or Adorno. In his view, critical theory had to say something about what kinds of institutions are needed to protect individuals against the attractions of political extremism, on the one hand, and the depredations of a burgeoning capitalist economy, on the other.

Adorno, like Marx before him, says little or nothing about what a good or rational society should look like, and like Michel Foucault (1926–1984) after him, is highly suspicious of institutions in general. The practical aim of Adorno’s critical theory is to equip individuals with the capacities that would enable them to resist integration into the fateful homogenizing institutions of capitalist
society. The most important of these is individual autonomy, understood in something like Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) sense of Mündigkeit (sometimes translated as maturity) – the capacity to use one’s own reason and think for oneself. For Adorno, though, Mündigkeit is linked to emancipation in an entirely negative way: emancipation in the current situation can only mean resistance to the established order, the capacity to say ‘no’, to refuse to adjust or adapt to current social reality. Habermas, by contrast, wants to identify the social and institutional conditions that foster autonomy: emancipation means the creation of truly democratic institutions capable of withstanding the corrosive effects of capitalism and the state administration.

*Structural Transformation* therefore gives a picture of enlightenment that is much less bleak and pessimistic than *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the latter, rationality itself is both the fateful cause of domination and the way to its possible undoing. Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s theory is self-consciously aporetic; it throws a little light on a situation from which there is no way out. Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, by contrast, holds up the ideal of free rational discussion between equals as one that, though presently unfulfilled, is nonetheless worthy of pursuit.