The Consequences of Exile for the Development of Critical Theory

While the experience of exile may not be the formative event in the history of Critical Theory, it may be one of the most important “re-formative” events. The original formulations and preoccupations of Critical Theory were products of the German Revolutions of 1918 and 1919, as well as the Weimar Republic. Max Horkheimer and his early associates in Frankfurt had been traumatized by their experiences of the Great War, inspired by the hopes raised by the Council Movement and frightened by the Freikorps’ repression of that same movement. In fact, it was largely this dramatic succession of events that led nearly all of the Frankfurt School’s eventual members to abandon organized politics and to situate themselves among the ranks of the Weimar Republic’s independent, non-aligned Left. When they came together under Horkheimer’s directorship at the Institut für Sozialforschung in 1931, a sense of disillusionment with the failed promise of the Weimar Republic animated their efforts to develop a comprehensive theory of contemporary society. Toward this end, they followed Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács in a wider effort to re-examine and reassess some of Karl Marx’s central assumptions, particularly regarding class consciousness and false consciousness. Thus, the early Frankfurt School participated in the rediscovery of the Young Marx, the re-examination of Marx’s debts to Hegel, and the innovative use of Freudian psychoanalysis to grapple with a Weimar working class that seemed to undermine hope in a revolutionary subject guided by reason (Abromeit, 2011; Jay, 1973; Wiggershaus, 1994).

The Frankfurt School’s exile in the United States did not end any of these investigations that remained central to the aims of Critical Theory. Rather, the experience of exile sharpened their perspectives and led them to recognize greater breadth and depth to the original problems that they had begun to investigate in Germany. Recognizing that the United States had its own problems with authoritarianism (Adorno, et al., 1950; Institut für Sozialforschung, 1936; Komarovsky, 1940; Löwenthal and Guterman, 1949; Munroe, 1942), bureaucratization (Pollock, 1941), racism (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947; Institute for Social Research, 1945), conformity (Fromm, 1941), and mass society (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947; Marcuse, 1964), such experiences inspired them to expand their understanding of these phenomena and to begin contemplating the deeper historical, psychological, political,
and socioeconomic roots of such transcontinental problems—eventually leading to some grim critiques of modernity culminating in “totally administered” and “one-dimensional” societies. Similarly, alienation, one of the oldest subjects of the Frankfurt School’s work, was also understood and conceptualized in new ways. In this case, however, the change came from the actual experience of exile, as opposed to a dynamics that could be observed in the United States. Exile was traumatically alienating for every member of the Frankfurt School, but it also granted an intensified awareness and understanding of one of the most pervasive phenomena in the late capitalist world (Adorno, 1951).

While many students and historians of Critical Theory have been tempted to take members of the Frankfurt School at their word regarding their isolation and marginality in the United States, more recent research has uncovered numerous attempts at participation within American intellectual life, as well as attempts at assimilation to the expectations of American scholars and intellectuals. While the Institut für Sozialforschung had incorporated empirical work with its theoretical analyses of contemporary society since its inception, they had never been forced to contend with the kind of inductive positivism that shaped the methods and techniques of most American sociologists or, for that matter, to conduct limited investigations aimed at practical solutions to social problems. With time they eventually were not only able to partially adapt themselves to these new epistemological assumptions, but they also were able to successfully find and collaborate with American sociologists more open to their qualitative and critical methods. This eventual compromise between Critical Theory and American sociology enabled the Frankfurt School to achieve its first notoriety and academic recognition in the United States, and also equipped the Institut für Sozialforschung with the reputation and scholarly tools for their successful return and postwar work in Germany.

**Coming to America**

Little mystery surrounds the Frankfurt School’s motivations for relocating to America—they were a small part of a larger wave of émigrés and refugees fleeing Nazism. The strategies and manner by which the Institut für Sozialforschung secured academic support for their transatlantic move is another story. For Cold Warriors (Feuer 1980, 1982) and their contemporary conservative offspring (Jay, 2010), the Frankfurt School preyed on liberals and “fellow-travelers” at Columbia University to infiltrate America and to spread “Cultural Marxism.” Such conspiracy theories lack any credibility, because they ignore Horkheimer’s strict ban on political activism in America (or even intellectual engagement regarding political issues) and more importantly disregard the actual reasons for Columbia University’s interests in the Institut für Sozialforschung.

During the late 1920s, members of Columbia’s Sociology Department were becoming increasingly alarmed by their declining prestige. Columbia, with the appointment of Franklin Giddings, had been the birthplace of academic sociology in the United States (Davids, 1968; Hoxie, 1955), but many feared that the department’s towering reputation was being surpassed by Robert Park and the other pioneers of community studies at the University of Chicago. The reason attributed to this change in fortunes was the funding and practice of empirical research at Chicago. For years, sociologists had been struggling to emulate the natural sciences, but Chicago had led the way in making this breakthrough in the United States (Turner and Turner, 1990). While Columbia’s sociologists were determined to compete, this would require generous funding from the university and outside sources to attract empirical researchers and to pay for empirical studies. As the department began to set their plan in motion, first by enticing Robert Lynd to join the faculty, the Depression hit and forced all future expenditures to be postponed. The years following the Crash of 1929 proved
to be counterproductive for the department. Instead of being able to set higher sights for themselves, the sociologists struggled in vain to defend their budget and faculty. The department actually shrank during the early 1930s because the university refused to replace the members who had died or retired. Consequently, when a request arrived from the Institut für Sozialforschung, Columbia’s Sociology Department viewed it as an opportunity that could not be passed up (Wheatland, 2009: 37–43).

The Institute’s request for affiliation with Columbia University must have looked very enticing. Lewis Lorwin, one of Columbia’s most recent success stories in the field of social science, was one of their strong backers. Lorwin, who became one of the chief architects for the New Deal, worked at the Brookings Institute and regularly visited Geneva’s International Labor Office, where he contemplated a study of international labor that was not to begin until 1935. The Institute also had strong connections to the International Labor Office and probably came to Lorwin’s attention in this way. A formal connection was not made until Horkheimer had begun considering a move to the United States. The Frankfurt School’s one associate fluent in English, Julian Gumperz, sought Lorwin’s advice and received his enthusiastic support. Because Lorwin would only have known about the Institute for Social Research through the International Labor Office, he was only aware of their empirical studies of unemployment. This work overlapped with his own interests at that time, and he must have viewed Horkheimer’s group as kindred spirits. Lorwin suggested that the Institute pursue an affiliation with the University of Chicago, the Brookings Institute, or Columbia University. Based on his knowledge of Columbia’s troubles and perhaps out of loyalty to his old school, Lorwin recommended Columbia most strongly. Lorwin then made Robert Maclver and Robert Lynd—the two leading figures in Columbia’s Sociology Department—aware of the Institut für Sozialforschung and his enthusiasm for their work (Wheatland, 2009: 43–60).

Maclver and Lynd were excited about the Institute’s credentials. They petitioned the university to offer housing and a loose affiliation for the Institute, which would have satisfied both entities simultaneously. An affiliation with the Institut für Sozialforschung cost Columbia nothing except for access to a rundown building on 117th Street. Because the Institute had its own financial resources, Horkheimer was willing to pay for the restoration of the building, the moving costs, and to continue financing the salaries of the Institute’s members. In return, Horkheimer was guaranteed that the group’s organizational and intellectual autonomy would be preserved; Columbia would not interfere in the Frankfurt School’s affairs.

Working among American Sociologists

The Institute for Social Research, as part of the larger “intellectual migration,” participated in a crucial moment in the history of transatlantic ideas (Coser, 1984; Fleming and Bailyn, 1969; Heilbut, 1997; Hughes, 1977). Prior to 1933, the sociological discipline was largely divided by the Atlantic Ocean into Continental and Anglo-American traditions. Although both approaches shared common origins in the social scientific ideas of the Enlightenment, they grew apart during the nineteenth century and remained largely autonomous until the Second World War (Callhoun, 2007; Callinicos, 1999; Swingewood, 1984). Generally speaking, Continental sociology remained focused on the speculative and historical issues that marked the discipline’s birth, while its Anglo-American sibling developed an early confidence in evolutionary models of social development and concerned itself with the methodological quest to model itself on the natural sciences (Neumann, 1953). When Hitler and the Nazis seized power in Germany and then began to threaten the rest of Europe, they forced many of Continental sociology’s leading figures into exile. Although some remained
at home and only underwent an interior retreat, the majority fled to the last bastions of political and intellectual freedom—Great Britain and the United States. By electing to uproot themselves through physical emigration, the social scientific refugees physically united the formerly divided world of sociology and enabled the rise of a hybrid approach that combined the two traditions.

By the early 1930s, when the “intellectual migration” began, most American social scientists had acquired a great deal of experience with large-scale social surveys and were striving to model their discipline more closely on the natural sciences. Many of the country’s leading figures were increasingly interested in statistics, empiricism, and the conquest of increasingly complex social problems. The theoretical assumptions of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer were widespread in the United States, and the impact of more speculative thinkers was minimal. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber were largely unknown, and Simmel’s work, which had received a very limited and idiosyncratic reception, only affected Chicago and other Midwestern schools of sociology that emulated the community studies pioneered by the University of Chicago (Hinkle and Hinkle, 1954). Meanwhile back in Europe, Continental sociology had its own share of Positivists, but the majority of its practitioners remained preoccupied with grand speculative issues. Most Continental social scientists therefore remained unaware of the empirical innovations that were being pioneered by Anglo-American sociologists. The discipline on the Continent was beset by internecine theoretical feuds, which limited efforts to professionalize, and without the same abundance of financial support from both public and private sources, Continental sociologists were unable to carry out research investigations on the same scale as Americans (Ringer, 1997; Swingewood, 1984). The “intellectual migration” changed all of this by bringing both traditions together, but the synthesis formed a sociological canon that became tied to America’s postwar hegemony. Anglo-American and Continental sociology were reunited, but the resulting merger served as a tool of American diplomacy and ideology during the Cold War (Park and Turner, 1990: 167–171; Seidman, 1994; Szacki, 1974: 502). The legacy of the “intellectual migration,” however, did not end with the ascendancy of American empiricism and Parsonian Functionalism. In a complicated turn of events, many of the same refugee sociologists that had helped bring the two sociological traditions together also provided the ammunition that shattered the postwar amalgamation (Wheatland, 2009: 199–203).

Before exploring the Frankfurt School’s role in this series of transformations, we must specify what we are referring to when we speak of the “intellectual migration” and its impact on the field of sociology. In some respects, the term can be misleading because it conjures up the image of European ideas being imported into the United States. When it comes to the history of sociology, however, the migration of ideas was definitely a two-way street. Anglo-American ideas had as great an impact on the European immigrants as the speculative Continental tradition had on Americans. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, there were Americans who played leading roles in the unification of sociological thought. The term “intellectual migration” in no way minimizes their impact. In fact, Talcott Parsons, the leading American architect of postwar sociology, began his efforts to merge the two traditions before Hitler ever came to power. The presence of Continental refugees in the United States aided such work and perhaps created the conditions for Functionalism’s successful reception after the war.

The Continental sociologists who fled to America functioned largely as ambassadors and translators for their branch of the discipline. The hurdles that these exiles faced in the United States were enormous, and few thinkers, consequently, were able to enjoy notoriety and success in America. Language barriers, cultural differences, and a tight job market represented some of the obstacles that the refugees faced. They left their families and secure professional positions behind in Europe, and they entered a foreign environment that
required professional savvy and careful diplomacy. It’s not surprising that such pressures made some of them excessively defensive and protective. Nevertheless, these European émigrés provided many American social scientists with their first intimate introductions to the works of Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Tönnies, and Mannheim, as well as to other related social thinkers such as Marx and Freud.

The Frankfurt School’s first years at Columbia University provided Horkheimer and his colleagues with a “splendid isolation” that they initially sought in exile. For nearly five years, the Institute was able to concentrate much of its attention on its journal—which increasingly became the dominant vehicle for the kinds of interdisciplinary work that Horkheimer had envisioned since the beginning of his directorship. While these articles were developed and then arranged in ways to reflect on the key historical and sociological trends of the interwar era, they generated limited interest among Columbia’s sociology faculty who shared neither the philosophical, nor the sociological orientations of early Critical Theory.

Columbia’s social scientists were, by contrast, keenly interested in the empirical work being directed in the United States by Erich Fromm. During its first five years on Morningside Heights, the Institute continued and even expanded research on authority, the family, and unemployment. Fromm busily collaborated on these American projects with members of Columbia’s Sociology department, their graduate students, and gradually with a network of social psychologists across the United States. Rapidly, Fromm became the most prominent figure from the Frankfurt School at Columbia. This notoriety was not a problem for the Institute for Social Research as long as Fromm remained a trusted member of Horkheimer’s inner circle. But once Fromm and Horkheimer had a falling-out over serious intellectual and material concerns, the Institute for Social Research found itself in a precarious position. Once Fromm was gone, all hopes that the Frankfurt School might establish itself as a cutting-edge, empirical research organization at Columbia seemed unlikely to its former supporters angered by Fromm’s acrimonious departure (Friedman, 2013: 63–96; McLaughlin, 1998, 1999; Wheatland, 2009: 64–94).

Worsening the Institute’s situation on campus was a bitter feud that erupted within the Sociology Department between its two leading figures, Robert MacIver and Robert Lynd. Lynd, who fancied himself a radical and sought to utilize empirical sociology for political purposes, had published a short treatise entitled Knowledge for What? on the aims and promise of social science. MacIver reviewed the book and attacked Lynd’s ambitions, as well as his veneration for empiricism. The two fired responses back and forth to one another, and their department became split. On the one hand, MacIver rallied the department’s social theorists and political conservatives, while on the other hand, Lynd attracted fellow Progressives and others sharing interests in empirical research. This atmosphere was extremely precarious for the members of the Institute for Social Research. As the group’s finances shrank in the Recession of the late 1930s, Horkheimer struggled to improve relations with Columbia. Politically, the Institute for Social Research was a natural ally for Lynd and his camp, but intellectually their sociological orientation was closer to MacIver. Instead of choosing sides, Horkheimer attempted to navigate between the two and unintentionally alienated both himself and his colleagues from each of the two factions (Wheatland, 2009: 89–90).

At the same time that the Frankfurt School’s star was fading at Columbia, the fortunes of their former colleague, Paul Lazarsfeld, were on the rise. Lazarsfeld came to America on a Rockefeller fellowship in 1933. For political reasons, he decided to stay in the United States and had little trouble finding a position at the University of Newark, where he established his own center for empirical social research. Lazarsfeld was one of the visionaries who revolutionized the field of empirical sociology. In fact, Horkheimer, who was already familiar with Lazarsfeld, contacted him soon after the arrival of the Institute in America.
A friendly relationship was re-established between the Frankfurt School and Lazarsfeld’s group in Newark. Fromm even hired Lazarsfeld to handle the empirical research and interviewing connected with the Institute’s Newark study. In a reciprocal gesture, Lazarsfeld hired members of the Horkheimer group to assist his research team when a grant was received for the study of radio in 1937 (Wheatland, 2005).

The radio study, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, was a major coup for Lazarsfeld. It gave his group at Newark instant credibility and placed them at the forefront of empirical social research in the United States. Soon after work began, Princeton lured the Lazarsfeld group away from Newark, but Robert Lynd, a long-time friend of Lazarsfeld, managed to top Princeton a few years later by offering Lazarsfeld space in Manhattan. The arrangement was remarkably similar to the Frankfurt School’s arrangement with Columbia’s Sociology Department. Although members of Columbia were invited to serve on the board of directors overseeing the radio project, Lazarsfeld remained autonomous and was permitted to use one of the university’s old buildings.

From the moment of its conception, the radio project made great strides. Lazarsfeld developed a myriad of methods for evaluating and measuring the listener’s reception of the medium. The empirical nature of these methods, however, became a strain for members of the Horkheimer group working on the project. In fact, Theodor W. Adorno’s objections are well known to students of Critical Theory and serve as an anticipation of later critiques of Positivism in the social sciences. Lazarsfeld, being the guiding force behind the project, remained undeterred, and members of the Frankfurt School were politely requested to conform to his wishes or leave the research team.

Soon after their self-imposed banishment from Lazarsfeld’s team, the Frankfurt School managed to find funding for a research project that could showcase their methods and ideas. The large grants came from the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Labor Committee, and they led to the publication of the famous Studies in Prejudice. Although the books received a vigorous reception in the United States for years after their publication, many observers on Morningside Heights felt that Studies in Prejudice was too little too late. Columbia had waited a long time for the Institute to fulfill its perceived potential (over fifteen years from the arrival of the Frankfurt School in the United States until the publication of the Studies in Prejudice). And although members of the Sociology Department frequently entertained plans of incorporating the Frankfurt School and its staff into the faculty, the Institute failed to produce the collaborative empirical work that everyone had expected. In the meantime, Paul Lazarsfeld had proven himself to be one of the most important and productive empirical sociologists in the world. Once Columbia had the financial ability to make an offer to an empirical research team, their choice was to incorporate Lazarsfeld’s Bureau of Applied Social Research into the university (in 1944). This meant adding Lazarsfeld to the faculty, but the rest of the Bureau paid for itself through outside grants and contract work. In retrospect, it seems clear that Columbia’s sociologists had expected the Frankfurt School to accomplish Lazarsfeld’s feat (Wheatland, 2009: 81–94).

The Frankfurt School’s reception among American sociologists during the “intellectual migration” fits somewhere between the prominent contributions to the rise of a postwar sociology made by Paul Lazarsfeld and the more isolated, interlocutory roles played by figures such as Hans Gerth or Kurt Wolff. During its first years in America, the Institute for Social Research pursued its marriage of social philosophy and empirical research in relative isolation. The Institute’s members feared the political repercussions of academic notoriety, and they had the financial resources to enjoy the autonomy that accompanied obscurity. The impact of financial setbacks on the group’s aims necessitated a shift away from this “splendid isolation.” At the same time that the Frankfurt School introduced its American reading public to Critical Theory, which was presented as an alternative to Anglo-American empiricism and
FRANKFURT SCHOOL & THE EXPERIENCE OF EXILE

Positivism, the Institute for Social Research adopted many of the same techniques that they were attacking. When their first speculative and qualitative research proposals were rejected for their lack of scientific rigor, the Frankfurt School altered their approach and adopted a greater compromise between Continental Theory and Anglo-American empiricism. At the same time that the Institute’s social philosophy stridently rejected accommodation with Anglo-American Positivism, the Frankfurt School recruited numerous American advisors to help them amend their own work on anti-Semitism in order to assimilate to the expectations of potential US supporters. Although their synthesis (Studies in Prejudice) did not enjoy the same degree of influence in the United States as Robert Merton and Paul Lazersfeld’s marriage of Functionalism and empirical research, the Institut für Sozialforschung returned to Germany as ambassadors of American social science (Jacobs, 2015: 43–110; Wheatland, 2009: 257–263; Ziege, 2009).

Living among the New York Intellectuals

Nostalgia for home and the accompanying fears of political persecution caused members of the Frankfurt School to enter New York warily—and such anxieties were entirely warranted. Like other German exiles of the early 1930s, the Institute was investigated both by the FBI and German-speaking detectives from the New York City police, first as possible fifth-columnists and later as Marxists (Wheatland, 2009: 73 and 272). Under other circumstances, the staff of the Institut für Sozialforschung might have been able to recognize the unique environment and opportunities that existed in New York City. For years, New York served as the primary point of entry for European immigrants arriving in America. As a consequence, New York also became the central passageway for European ideas entering the United States. Europe’s intellectual traditions, however, were not simply assimilated by the inhabitants of the city. Instead, a unique process of cultural blending took place. The result was an unusual atmosphere unlike any in the “New World.” Manhattan became a mixing bowl and an intellectual battleground for ideas, culture, and intellectuals. The Institute for Social Research, therefore, entered an environment that potentially was more open to their legacy than perhaps any location outside of Europe. Furthermore, the Frankfurt School arrived in an urban landscape that was teeming with vitality. New York’s intellectuals shared similar interests—they were captivated by modernism, as well as innovative approaches to the culture and politics of the left. The Institute for Social Research, therefore, overlooked an enormous number of potential allies that their new home offered. By choosing to remain silent about some of the major political questions of the day and by concealing their Marxism almost completely, the Frankfurt School unwittingly abandoned the opportunity to play a larger role in New York’s intellectual universe. The intellectual atmosphere in New York may have held great promise for the group—but Horkheimer remained unwilling to risk the possible repercussions of political activism or even political engagement with the major topics of the era (Bender, 1987).

As the members of the Institute attempted to prove their worth at Columbia University, a remarkably similar coterie of writers took shape among the “little magazines” of Greenwich Village—the so-called New York Intellectuals. Although they diverged more sharply with the passing of time, there is a surprising correspondence between the two groups during the 1930s and early 1940s. The New York Intellectuals and the Frankfurt School inhabited a strikingly similar intellectual terrain employing their “dialectical imaginations” to symmetrical sets of interconnected issues such as Marxism, alienation, conformity, mass culture, aesthetic theory, modernism, and totalitarianism. Sharing such a vast array of resemblances, the question of influence is not only reasonable but also essential (Brick 1986; Jay, 1986: 28–61; Jumonville, 1991; Sumner, 1996; Teres, 1996; Wald 1987; Wilford, 1995).
The Frankfurt School and the New York Intellectuals embraced both the modernist avant-garde and the socialist vanguard (similarly rejecting Marxian Orthodoxy). The key difference between the outlook of both groups involved their relationship to Marxian theory. While the Frankfurt School's inspiration was drawn from the tradition of Western Marxism, the New York Intellectuals embraced Trotskyism and the Pragmatic Marxism of Sidney Hook. Meanwhile, the Frankfurt School's relationship to modernism was completely integrated within their intellectual worldview. Modernism was not simply the most advanced stage of artistic endeavor (as most of the New York Intellectuals initially saw it), but it was a reaction to advanced capitalism, commodity fetishism, and reification. For some members of the Institute, modernist aesthetics functioned as a negation of the social status quo and evoked Stendhal's notion of "une promesse de bonheur." For others (particularly for Adorno), modernism represented the last vestiges of autonomous subjectivity struggling against the omnipresent reification of the totally administered society. Although these insights about modernism attracted some of the New York Intellectuals, the majority of the New York Intellectuals grew to view the institute with suspicion as they underwent a process of deradicalization during the Second World War and the Cold War.

Relations between the two communities arose from necessity. With the increasing pressure of American acceptance, the Institute sought collaborators and translators. They turned to New York's ranks of graduate students and bohemian intellectuals. Many of those recruited to assist them were major figures within the community of New York Intellectuals, and these initial contacts functioned as interlocutors for other figures from the world of the New York Intellectuals. Meyer Schapiro and Sidney Hook were among the first to meet with members of the Institute in a series of discussions regarding dialectics and pragmatism (Wheatland, 2009: 101–134). Moses Finkelstein (later M.I. Finley), Benjamin Nelson, George Simpson, Daniel Bell, Lewis Coser, Nathan Glazer, and Irving Howe all worked with members of the Frankfurt School as translators, research assistants, and editors. They collaborated on articles for the temporary English editions of the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, they aided with grant applications, and they assisted members of the Institute in the five-volume Studies in Prejudice. These contacts, in particular, led to numerous introductions between the Frankfurt School and the New York Intellectuals (Wheatland, 2009: 142–153).

Studies in Prejudice also led to substantive contacts with the writers and editors at Commentary. The magazine, which was sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, became one of the first nonacademic venues to promote the Frankfurt School's AJC-sponsored research regarding anti-Semitism. Such promotion is perhaps not surprising, but the relationship expanded to include other shared topics of interest. Thus, Leo Löwenthal published a translation of an essay on Heine that had been written prior to his exile, while Franz Neumann and Arkady Gurland wrote articles contemplating the future of postwar Germany (Wheatland, 2009: 153–158).

More significantly, Dwight Macdonald and the group that became connected with the magazine Politics were initially so captivated by the Institute's approach to the topic of mass culture that Macdonald sought to translate as much of the Institute's work as Horkheimer would allow. Horkheimer refused to accept the offer due to his distaste for Macdonald's Trotskyism, but Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, and many others connected with Politics became major promoters of the Institute's writings on mass culture. Through their exposure to the writings of the Frankfurt School, Macdonald and his colleagues at Politics began to see mass culture less as a form of propaganda and more as a distinctly new development in the history of art and culture. The Frankfurt School equipped the Politics circle with a more nuanced understanding of both the constitution and reception of mass culture. Thus, it functioned as an effective propaganda tool for the same reason that it had been commercially embraced. Late capitalist audiences, ironically, found escape from the tedium of their daily lives by
Frankfurt School & The Experience of Exile

seeking distraction in mass culture. Thus, the new mass art forms represented a regression for the receptive audience, as well as a regression by its producers (Wheatland, 2009: 158–188).

In the end, only the most stubborn radicals within the community of New York Intellectuals continued these flirtations with Critical Theory. Although writers such as Macdonald, Howe, and Coser began experimenting with the Institute’s Western Marxist emphasis on negation, they could not entirely accept the tragic conception of history that became the central assumption of Critical Theory’s late period. The majority of the New York Intellectuals, by contrast, grew to increasingly reject and oppose the thought of the Institute. To young radicals of the anti-Stalinist left, the Horkheimer Circle was one of many new curiosities in New York. Anyone interested in Central European social theory spent time attending the Institute’s Tuesday seminars on Morningside Heights, as well as the lectures offered through the emerging New School’s University in Exile. While such contacts were invaluable to the cosmopolitan mind-sets of figures such as Philip Rahv, William Phillips, Elliot Cohen, Will Herberg, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, and Seymour Martin Lipset, the war represented a crucial impetus for change. Much has been written about the New York Intellectuals’ conversion to neoconservatism. Despite the objections voiced by many figures within this coterie and in spite of such protestations, the relations of this group to the Frankfurt School do illustrate this political transformation. The war caused many New York Intellectuals to rethink their relationships to the United States, aroused patriotism among many in the group, and led most to equate Nazism and Communism through the concept of totalitarianism. As a result of these transformations, the majority of the New York Intellectuals grew suspicious of the Frankfurt School and the Institute’s silence regarding Stalin. For those not put off by such concerns, the Frankfurt School remained an important inspiration because of their continued thought and writing on modernism, mass culture, conformity, and alienation in the contemporary world.

Teaching among the New Left

The 1960s was the most important and confusing moment in the history of the Frankfurt School in America. Embraced by the New Left of both Europe and the United States, the Flaschenposte that had been written with little hope of reaching any audience arrived in the hands of an entirely new generation searching for answers to the problems of a nuclear age and expanding globalization. To most members of the Frankfurt School, the unexpected fame that they experienced in later life was soon overshadowed by disappointment with the movements with which their reputations had become entwined. The New Left was short lived, and its self-destruction was as disturbing as it was shocking. The same generation of students who had rejected the apathy of the 1950s by embracing the antinuclear and civil rights movements transformed into a counter-culture, became, more disturbingly, violent, urban guerillas in the span of only a decade.

Despite the fact that most of the Frankfurt School’s writings were precipitated by the threat of Nazism, the Institute’s vision of totalitarianism provided the student movement with conceptual frameworks for dissecting contemporary society. Thus, the Critical Theory of society that was fashioned in the Weimar Republic was taken up by the New Left throughout Europe and the United States to construct a comprehensive theory of the Cold War landscape. To meet this aim, young scholars beginning in the late 1960s began to publish, translate, promote, and comment on the writings of the Frankfurt School. Ironically at the very moment that the Institut für Sozialforschung achieved the highest point of recognition and reception in the United States, its identity and coherence was highly problematic. In 1968 at the height of the student movement, the Institute existed as only a shadow of its former self. The consequent rise of Critical Theory that began in the 1960s was a theoretical
reconstruction. As the historical record was assembled into a comprehensive picture of the group as it had existed in the 1930s and 1940s, the notion of a “Frankfurt School” was born. Ironically, it bore little more than a historical relationship to the institution existing in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

By the late 1960s, only Adorno remained formally connected to the Institut für Sozialforschung. Horkheimer and Pollock had retired, Neumann and Kirchheimer were deceased, Fromm had been away from the Institute for nearly thirty years, and Löwenthal and Marcuse were teaching in the United States. Furthermore, the views of most of the Institute’s members had changed over the years. They clearly foresaw the rise of globalization, and their attitude toward contemporary society grew increasingly tinged with nostalgia for the simpler world of Europe’s grand bourgeoisie. While some have been tempted to label this shift in the Frankfurt School’s postwar outlook as conservative, their rejection of the emerging New Left had more to do with the shallowness and anti-intellectualism of New Left radicalism. Most members of the original Frankfurt School saw little political content behind the angry rhetoric of late-1960s activists. The one notable exception among the former members of the Institute was Herbert Marcuse, and Marcuse’s support of the student protesters would temporarily transform the image of the entire Frankfurt School (Wheatland, 1990: 267–280).

Marcuse’s relationship to the US student movement is exceedingly complex. The late 1960s was a confusing time, and Marcuse, like so many other observers of his generation, was prone to waffle. Unlike his former colleagues from the Institute, Marcuse viewed the New Left as a highly significant development. In his eyes, the student activists represented an alternative to the repressive anthropology of late capitalist civilization that he had explored in his interpretations of Freud. At times, the “counter culture” appeared to manifest promising examples of non-repressive existence—a revolution of joy, play, and freedom. At other times, however, he grew discouraged by the lack of political commitment, seriousness, and intellectual rigor. As the war in Vietnam incited increasingly fervent discontent among the youth of America, Marcuse became a proponent of “repressive tolerance” and “counter-violence.” Although he never explicitly condoned the tactics of the Black Panthers and the Weathermen, he consistently emphasized the systemic violence of the American state (which he openly compared to Nazi Germany) and suggested that this justified a myriad of student reactions. Such statements were and continue to be provocative. Although he generally remained pessimistic about the prospects for the future, Herbert Marcuse, to speak in the language of the time, had come a long way over the course of the 1960s. He remained loyal to his concept of the anthropological transformation of man and he continued to see the intellectual adoption of a “new sensibility” as the chief goal of revolution. But he had made an important shift from social theory to political opposition. Marcuse did not lead the student movement down this path. Rather, they led the way for him. In the final analysis, this touted “guru” of the New Left was a better student than he was a teacher.

Such a major conceptual shift—from pure theory to radical practice—cannot be taken lightly. Marcuse must have had compelling reasons for making such a departure from his previous thought. In part, one of the reasons was obvious. Like so many other opponents of the Vietnam War, Marcuse began to identify with the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. In joining so many other anti-war intellectuals and activists, however, Marcuse demonstrated the impact of the New Left on him. The American SDS (student for a democratic society) and the other radical organizations that he associated with in Western Europe influenced him. In the process, they became evidence for the intellectual and cultural transformation that he had imagined. At the same time and perhaps more importantly, they became his utopian ideal (Wheatland, 2009: 296–334).

While Herbert Marcuse may not have had as large or substantial impact on the New Left, he had a profound and productive impact on the graduate students and professors who
taught during the Vietnam era. Marcuse’s co-option by the American mass media of the 1960s made him a celebrity and simultaneously marginalized his message by depicting him in the guise of a “guru.” Nevertheless, celebrity is not created without numerous unintended consequences. Fame has the ability to both empower and disempower those caught up in its dynamism. It is important to keep in mind that if Marcuse’s name had never been splashed across the pages of newspapers and glossy magazines and if he had never been interviewed on television, his work might not have gained as much attention as it did within the US academy—which was much better equipped to comprehend it, to criticize it, and to build upon it.

The academic reception of the Frankfurt School took place amid the ruins of the New Left. While the student movement imploded, the intellectuals allied with it generated widespread scholarly interest in the Frankfurt School. In the same way that the members of the Institute found inspiration in the writings of Hegel and the young Marx to sift through the wreckage of the failed revolutions of 1918–1919, young American intellectuals gravitated to Critical Theory to make sense of the ruins of the New Left. The contributions to intellectual history, philosophy, and sociology were substantial. Young, American scholars surveyed the intricate terrain of Continental thought and accomplished a task that no members of the Frankfurt School were able to achieve in their lifetime—equipping a US audience with the tools necessary to appreciate Critical Theory on its own terms. Members of the Institute had transcended their isolation in the United States, but the results were assimilated versions of Critical Theory. The US scholars of the Frankfurt School, by contrast, generated a renaissance in the Institute’s forerunners and Critical Theory by providing Americans with new appreciations of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Freud, and Lukács. In the transatlantic history of ideas, perhaps no period was as fruitful for the importation of German social, philosophical, and cultural thought into the United States as the period following the demise of the New Left. Unlike the intellectual migrants of the 1930s and 1940s, the conditions were ideal and the interlocutors were abundant for the transatlantic passages of the 1970s and 1980s.

References


203


Further Reading


