



## **CULTURAL MARXISM AND CRITICAL THEORY: AN INTRODUCTORY SKETCH**

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### **Introduction**

This article provides an introductory sketch of Cultural Marxism and Critical Theory. It discusses the disappointment of economic Marxists over the failure of the workers of the world to unite for revolution. It presents the diagnosis of that failure by Cultural Marxists. The diagnosis identified obstacles to revolution, especially the family and Christianity, but also republican government, the nation-state, reason, and free speech. The obstacles were cultural, so Marxism needed to shift from economics to culture to destroy the obstacles and make ready for revolution. It explains “the long march” through the institutions of Western civilization and the search for a surrogate for the proletariat which turned out to be students and minorities.

Along the way this article looks at the founding of the Frankfurt School, a half dozen Frankfurt School theorists including three major ones who came to America, two examples of Cultural Marxism’s influence in pornography and socialist feminism, and how Cultural Marxism creates a self-assuring feedback loop.

### **Obstacles to Economic Marxist Revolution**

When Marx called for revolution saying, “Workers of the world unite,”<sup>1</sup> the workers did not unite.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” Karl

Since laborers would not revolt, Marxism needed a modification. Lenin provided the first modification: the revolutionary vanguard party. The party would provide workers with political consciousness and revolutionary leadership to depose capitalism. Hence the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. But still, the workers of the world did not unite.

Why had Marx thought they would unite? Economic Marxism applied Hegel's master-slave dialectic to economics. The bourgeoisie masters oppress and exploit the proletariat slaves. Capitalists rob the labor value of goods and wealth from workers. That should have been reason enough, Marx thought, for the workers of the world to unite.

Why didn't they? Later Marxists diagnosed the obstacles to revolution. The obstacles include:

- The family
- Christianity
- Republican government
- Nation-states
- Reason
- Free speech

Each of these is an impediment to forcing people into dependence upon a totalitarian Marxist state. Consider the failure of one of Marx's important predictions. He said if continent-wide war came to Europe, that would be a catalyst for the proletariat to revolt. When World War I broke out, however, people's loyalties to nation-states held. Once more, the workers of the world did not unite. Marxists concluded that for revolution to come, the nation-state must go.

## **Creation of the Frankfurt School**

Since the workers of the world did not unite even with the modification of Marxism that added the revolutionary vanguard party and even with World War I, Marxism needed more modifications.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a defined school of Marxist thought developed to round out the diagnosis of the proletariat's failure and prescribe a cure. It would become known as the Frankfurt School. Its origin was in the *Erste Marxistische Arbeitwoche* (First Marxist Work Week). The idea for the work week was conceived by Felix Weil. The success of the meeting led to the founding of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) affiliated with the University of Frankfurt am Main, initially funded by Weil's father Hermann Weil. Note the irony that the Marxists required capitalist funding.

The Institute developed Critical Theory which is the underlying philosophical base of Cultural Marxism. Then a number of Frankfurt School Marxists came to the United States to launch Cultural Marxism in America.

In Critical Theory, each element of each obstacle to the proletarian revolution undergoes criticism and indictment. The criticism finds master-slave oppression everywhere. Whereas in Economic Marxism the enslavement and oppression are economic, in Cultural Marxism, the myriad oppressions are of many kinds. For example, the family has marriage, husbands, wives, parents, and children. Whereas in Economic Marxism capitalism is the oppressive system, in Cultural Marxism, Critical Theory makes marriage into an oppressive regime. The masters – husbands and parents – oppress and exploit women and

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Marx and Friedrich Engels, Jones, Gareth Stedman, ed., *The Communist Manifesto*, new ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2002).

children. Since patriarchy is an obstacle to revolution, Cultural Marxism must clear the way for revolution by abolishing patriarchy, redefining or eliminating marriage, and nationalizing children.

Critical Theory finds master-slave oppression in Christianity, republican government, nation-states, free market enterprise, and free speech — for starters.

Critical Theorists synthesized and resynthesized Marx and Freud. This brought a focus on two of the obstacles that caused the failure of the proletariat to revolt: the family and Christianity. Adding Freudianism to Marxism revealed the relation between, for example, fatherhood and the nation-state. To get rid of the nation-state the pre-revolution would have to abolish fatherhood. Abolishing fatherhood would kill two birds with one stone: the family and the nation-state.

## **A Half Dozen Frankfurt School Theorists**

As one way to sketch the development of Cultural Marxism and Critical Theory, let's look briefly at a half dozen of its founding theorists: Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Antonio Gramsci, and Herbert Marcuse.

Of these, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse came to the United States to launch Cultural Marxism and Critical Theory in America. As we will see, these were some of the “big guns” in the Frankfurt School.

### **Max Horkheimer**

Max Horkheimer was the first director of the Institute for Social Research. In 1937 he published the institute's ideological manifesto, an essay titled “Traditional and Critical Theory.” The role of traditional theory was only to understand and explain society. In contrast to that, a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.”<sup>2</sup>

Horkheimer said workers would not unite for revolution because of their involvement in production and the successes of capitalism. He said that something needed to be substituted into the place of workers in Marx's theory. He looked for a surrogate for workers to unite for revolution. The search for the useful surrogate for the proletariat would continue into the 1960s. Once found, the surrogate is a key element of Cultural Marxism.

In 1934 Horkheimer moved to New York. He accepted an offer from Columbia University to relocate the Institute to one of their buildings. In 1941 he moved to the Los Angeles area. The Institute operated on both coasts of the country.

### **Erich Fromm**

Erich Fromm, a Frankfurt School psychoanalyst, saw the family as the primary means by which the values of the masters are imprinted onto people's minds. By blending historical materialism with psychoanalysis, he justified reclassifying societal norms as pathologies. For example, masculinity and femininity are not objective sexual differences. They are pathologies. They exist only because they are enforced as artificial social constructs.

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<sup>2</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum Publishing Corp., 1982), 244.

## George Lukács

Georg Lukács was appointed Deputy Commissar for Culture in the communist dictatorship established in Hungary following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. He let loose what he called “cultural terrorism.” He wanted to show that Sigmund Freud’s idea that sexual liberation can manipulate and control individuals also could work against an entire population. His government program included sex education in Hungarian schools. The program taught that monogamy was outdated, women should abandon sexual mores, and people should give rein to free love and promiscuity. Many Hungarian youth became sexual predators.

The dictatorship collapsed for multiple reasons, a significant one being the revulsion of the proletariat by the attack on traditional values. Not only did the workers not unite. They opposed the revolution. Lukács fled to Vienna, then Moscow, and later returned when the Soviet Union occupied Hungary. He returned to Hungarian government via Soviet occupation.

Lukács developed the foundation for Cultural Marxism to fuse form in art with the history of class struggle. In *History and Class Consciousness*,<sup>3</sup> Lukács identified Christianity as both the primary obstacle to revolution and the primary oppressor in the master-slave regime.

## Theodor Adorno

Theodor Adorno said that reason itself is oppressive. The Enlightenment and science both inhibited revolution because of their use of reason. This foundational influence in Cultural Marxism accounts for the irrational methods it uses and the futility of trying to reason with Cultural Marxism.

Adorno moved to the United States in 1938 to help launch the Frankfurt School’s program in America. He worked at Princeton and the University of California Berkeley. He returned to the University of Frankfurt in 1949.

Having thrown off reason, Adorno catapults past Fromm’s pathology of the family to the family being inherently psychotic. In 1950 he, with others, published *The Authoritarian Personality*.<sup>4</sup> This book asked the question, what makes a fascist. He ranked personality traits on the “F-scale,” that is, the fascist scale. According to Adorno, positive feelings about parents can’t be simply that. Instead, that is superficial. The superficiality hides negative feelings about outsiders. The family is a repressive regime that conditions people to respond to father figures. The result is dangerous patriotism and fascism.<sup>5</sup> People who are insecure and anxious about their relations with their families make progressives. They have revolutionary personalities.

That sort of talk sold in Germany, but not so much in Great Britain and the United States. The Frankfurt School adopted a shift in language for American consumption of their revolutionary program. They removed references to Marxist studies upon which their

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<sup>3</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Verso, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Note the hypocrisy of the Frankfurt School. While identifying fathers as fascist repressors, they took funds from Weil’s father to found their Institute.

theories were based. They changed terms like “revolutionary personality” to “democratic personality” which gave revolution a more domesticated feel.

Cloaking their empirically unfounded theories in a veneer of science, they introduced a perverted use of the medical term “phobia” to condemn anti-revolutionary thought. Instead of phobias being neuropsychological conditions toward which medicine is sympathetic, now phobia is the pathological bigotry of a fascist. This rhetoric was used to paint prejudice and racism as pathologies endemic to the mythical white Christian majority in America. Parenthood, pride in one’s family, traditional attitudes about sex, traditional roles of men and women, and love of one’s country now are phobic pathologies. If you are guilty of any of these sins, you are phobic, so there is no use and no moral requirement in approaching you with reason.

## **Antonio Gramsci**

Antonio Gramsci called the reasons for the failure of global Marxism “hegemonies.” The hegemonies existed in the existing cultural framework of self-governing societies. Those needed to be *progressively* eroded. The erosion would make people less self-reliant and more reliant on the state. The gradual process would pass through socialism as an intermediate phase and then onward to communism. Dependence would disable republican self-government.

To accomplish this, Gramsci developed the idea of “the long march.” Past attempts at worker revolution failed because they made one frontal push and succumbed to the hegemonies. That strategy needed to be replaced by multiple avenues instead of one, infiltration instead of frontal attack, and progressive destruction of the hegemonies from within. Cultural Marxism would advance through theatre, literature, art, newspapers, magazines, radio, universities, law, mass media, and so on. The terrain was wide. It would take time. Terrain and time made for the long march.

Primary attention in the long march would be given to education. Cultural Marxism would rely on capturing young impressionable minds first. Marxists would raise a generation or two who had known little else than their Critical Theory.

## **Herbert Marcuse**

Herbert Marcuse taught at Columbia University, Brandeis University, and the University of California at San Diego. He completed the translation of Marxism into cultural terms. He became the Frankfurt School’s most widely read spokesman. He remained in the United States after Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Germany. He became a guru of “the New Left.”

Recall that back at the beginning of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer began the search for the surrogate for the proletariat, the substitute for the working class to accomplish revolution. Marcuse discovered the surrogate: students and minority groups.

To recruit minorities for revolution as surrogates of the proletariat, Marcuse invented another piece of Critical Theory, the criticism of “repressive tolerance.” He acknowledged that republics and liberal democracies were tolerant of minorities. But he alleged that the tolerance, contrary to appearance, truly was repressive. It lulled minorities into embracing their continuing enslavement. Tolerance was a weapon of domination. Repressive tolerance needed to be replaced with a new “liberating tolerance.” Liberating tolerance would be vigilantly and coercively intolerant of the political right, traditionalism, conservatism, and any opposition to socialism. It would use subversion and revolutionary violence.

A prime target of liberating tolerance is free speech. Free speech allows the false

consciousness of the sleeping victims to continue because it gives voice to the masters in the repressive regime. Because only Marxist consciousness is awake to the truth of the master-slave dialectic, revolutionary minorities have the right to suppress opposing speech. What we know today as “political correctness,” “cancel culture,” and “safe spaces” originated with Marcuse in such of his writings as his 1965 essay, “Repressive Tolerance.”<sup>6</sup>

Under the Critical Theory of liberating tolerance, the meaning of ordinary language is criticized. For example, the word “racism” no longer means belief in the superiority of one’s race. Now it means the combination of prejudice and power. Superficially, that does not sound like a shift. But note that the added element of power means minorities cannot be guilty and the majority cannot avoid guilt. The possession of power is both indictment and conviction awaiting only punishment.

Under liberating tolerance, there never can be two sides to any story. There always is only one story and always the same story. For example, no minority can have any negative behavior. Any negative behavior is just more proof of oppression and the guilt of the oppressors. In the circular nonlogic of Critical Theory, rioting and destruction prove that oppression caused rioting and destruction. You are not woke if, when you look at rioting and destruction, you do not see oppression and the oppressors. Just the use of the word “riot” is hate speech.

Perhaps Marcuse’s most important work is *Eros and Civilization*,<sup>7</sup> first published in 1955. By yet another resynthesizing of Freud and Marx, Marcuse proposes a sexually non-repressive society. The book influenced subcultures of the 1960s, the gay liberation movement, and is a seedbed of ideology for transgenderism, polyamory, and a myriad of other sexual movements. Human beings cannot liberate themselves without ridding society of all conventional sexual mores.

## Two Examples of Influence

The influence of Cultural Marxism was rapid. Let’s consider a couple examples: pornography and socialist feminism.

### Pornography

By the end of the 1960s, Andy Warhol’s film *Blue Movie* became the first adult erotic film with explicit sex to be given wide theatrical release in the United States. The film’s original title was to be simply, “F\*ck [sanitized for general audiences].” He unwittingly shot it on a type of film that was not meant for the lighting he was using. The film turned blue and the title changed to *Blue Movie*. It is one of the first films in the so-called Golden Age of Porn. It helped inaugurate “porno chic” with porn being publicly discussed by celebrities and film critics.

*Blue Movie* was followed by *Mona*, *Deep Throat*, *Behind the Green Door*, *The Devil in Miss Jones*, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, and *Last Tango in Paris*.

Cultural Marxist influence in law produced the 1973 decision of the U. S. Supreme Court in *Miller v. California*.<sup>8</sup> In typical Cultural Marxist fashion, the Supreme Court redefined

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<sup>6</sup> The essay may be found in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

<sup>8</sup> *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973).

words and censored anyone else's say about the meaning of those words. Legislatures and voters had defined "obscenity." The Supreme Court arrogated to itself the place of the people and their representatives by taking over and monopolizing the definition of "obscenity." Now voters and legislators have no say. The only say allowed is the one which unleashed the ubiquitous flood of pornography we have today and have had for a long time. Pornography is a front in Cultural Marxism's long march to destroy the family.

## **Socialist Feminism**

The same year as *Blue Movie* was released, the Chicago Women's Liberation Union was formed. The Union stated its purpose as liberation from "the systematic keeping down of women for the benefit of people in power." By 1972 its socialist character was overt with the Hyde Park Chapter of the Union's publication of the pamphlet *Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement*. The pamphlet was circulated nationwide.

Socialist feminism expanded feminism from public issues like equal pay for equal work to the private sphere of the home. With women as a supposed minority serving as a surrogate for the unreliable proletariat, patriarchy serves as surrogate for capitalism to foment revolution. The Union founded chapters across the nation and moved into the educational sphere. The object was to destabilize the family for Cultural Marxism's long march.

## **Feedback Loop**

By moving into a diverse array of cultural realms, Cultural Marxism is able to establish a self-proving feedback loop. What students hear at school and in the university is reinforced at the movie theatre, in church, in news media, in literature, on television, by the law, and in popular culture. After one generation, the bulk of the population is self-assured of victim status, the evils of a rogue's gallery of oppressors, and the righteousness of liberation tolerance to silence any opposition.

The feedback loop and Critical Theory's liberating tolerance generate the cancel culture. To condemn white supremacy and the oppression of Black Americans, protesters deface a statue of abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier, call for removal of a statue of Abraham Lincoln, vandalize a statue of Jimi Hendrix, deface a monument to an all-Black regiment of Union Army soldiers, and intimidate Black tour guides of DC Black Tours at a monument built entirely with Black funding to educate about Black experience and contributions to American society.

That is what Cultural Marxism has done to education. People do not know who Abraham Lincoln was, who John Greenleaf Whittier was, or who Jimi Hendrix was. Even with a Black tour guide of DC Black Tours explaining a Black monument to them, protesters cannot understand what the tour guide is telling them. Critical Theory's criticism of language and reason has accomplished this. The emotion of victimhood has no ears.

## **Conclusion**

This has been only an introductory sketch. Christians need to learn more about Cultural Marxism and Critical Theory. We need to learn why anarchists ally with LGBTQ+ campaigners to brand us homophobic and transphobic on Monday, and then ally with anti-gay Islamists to brand us islamophobic on Tuesday. That does not make sense to us, but it does to them, and it is working for them.