

Department of Philosophy
PHIL 481B/2023, Topics in Philosophy: the Frankfurt School
Tuesdays and Thursdays 16:05—17:25
Birks 205
Professor Alison Laywine, a.laywine@mcgill.ca
Leacock 918, 514-398-1671

§1 Our Topic and Program for the Term

The topic of this course in the winter term 2023 is the so-called ‘Frankfurt School’. There are a couple of different ways to get a fix on this school. The first is historical and institutional.

The Frankfurt school was a group of people who worked at the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung). The Institute was founded in 1923 at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main by Friedrich Pollock and Felix Weill: both held doctorates from the university; both had interests in Marxism and socialism; both had significant organizational talents. To boot, Weill had some money that he put up as the Institute’s endowment. Pollock and Weill hoped that the Institute would promote theoretical research into the questions raised by Marxism and socialism. In 1930, Max Horkheimer was made director of the Institute. Horkheimer had the same interests and talents as Weill and Pollock. That is important, because the Institute and its then personnel were already threatened by the rise of national socialism. Pollock and Horkheimer arranged for the Institute to be moved: it set up shop in Geneva in 1933; in 1935, it moved to New York City where it became associated with Columbia University. During the period of exile, Horkheimer was active in funding and recruiting talented researchers, including Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Hans Mayer, Otto Kirchheimer, Erich Fromm and others. Horkheimer also had a talent for assigning significant and interesting research topics for the people he recruited. These topics covered the range of themes now associated with the Frankfurt School: for example, the critique of enlightenment and reason, the application of Freudian ideas for understanding the rise of totalitarianism. After World War II, the Institute returned to Frankfurt. The ‘Frankfurt School’ would not have been possible without the peculiar combination of intellectual and organizational talents of Horkheimer and his associates.

The second way to get a fix on the Frankfurt School is to reflect on the intellectual program to which its associates contributed one way or another. Often it is said that members of the Frankfurt School were trying to formulate ‘critical theory’ from different angles. But what, we will ask, is that? Members of the school wrote on such a wide range of questions and issues that one might doubt whether ‘critical theory’ is any one thing. In the *Idea of a Critical Theory*, Raymond Geuss claims that a critical theory is one that gives us insight into our true interests and that can therefore guide us in our actions so that we may free ourselves from the oppressive forces that had blinded us to our true interests.

It is definitely worth thinking about Geuss’ general characterisation of a critical theory. But, in the first instance, the program of this course will be to get to know some of the many *different* things the Frankfurt School could historically stand for. To that end, our strategy will be twofold: we will confront the views of certain members with radically different takes on certain issues (see §2), and we will raise obvious challenges to other views many of them held (see §2).

§2 Division of the Course into Units

In the spirit of the program announced in the preceding paragraph, our course will be divided in two main units (there will be a third unit, if time permits – something that will depend on the pace of classroom discussion, which I cannot predict.)

Unit One: in the first unit, we will take up a topic that was a central concern to Horkheimer, Adorno and later Habermas, namely the nature and limits of reason and enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno spoke of a ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ and the ‘eclipse of reason’. Their concern was both philosophical and historical. They argued that philosophical and political debates during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that called into question feudal, superstitious, and religious ways of thinking and that advocated for a reorganization of human life and enquiry under the authority of reason undermined itself. How? By eliminating from consideration any use of reason other than that

which we might call 'instrumental', i.e., the use of reason calculated to discover the best means for achieving our ends. In other words, little by little, the enlightenment plea for a life based on reason put aside and shut down all rational consideration of which ends are in themselves and objectively better for human beings. This had the effect of making all ends equal in importance – a relativism of values that had the historical and philosophical effect of dehumanizing human life, contrary to the explicit self-understanding of the enlightenment. To get a fix on the case made by Horkheimer, Adorno, we will read excerpts from Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* (1947). We will also read statements of what Horkheimer and Adorno took to be different contributions to the 'dialectic of enlightenment': we will critically examine perhaps the most radical and historically significant statement in favour of instrumental rationality, namely Max Weber's *Politics as a Vocation* – and contrast it with a vigorous attempt at a defence of non-instrumental rationality, namely by Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*. Along the way, we will consider how Habermas takes on Weber. And we will consider a completely different take on these issues, namely that of Georg Lukács in the *Destruction of Reason*. Lukács denies that there was anything like a 'dialectic of enlightenment' or 'eclipse of reason'. It is not that enlightenment ideals somehow undermined themselves. On the contrary, reactionary forces unleashed by the class struggle, as understood by Marx, Engels and Lenin, deliberately took up irrationalism in philosophy as a way of intellectually pleading for their interests. The contrast between Lukács, on the one hand, and Horkheimer and his colleagues, on the other, is instructive: though the Frankfurt School took Marx seriously, the idea of a 'dialectic of enlightenment' is not especially Marxist. It may well be the expression of some kind of idealism. But what kind?

Unit Two: in the second unit of the course, we will take up a significant puzzle. Many members of the Frankfurt School took Freud and Freudian ideas very seriously – perhaps more seriously, in fact, than Marxist ideas. As early as the school's Geneva period, Horkheimer was trying to enlist colleagues to work on a Freudian analysis of the origin of authoritarianism in the German family. That research program was later taken up by Adorno and his associates in the 1950 study of the authoritarian personality; and, of course, Freudian ideas are at the centre of Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. This aspect of the Frankfurt School is a puzzle for at least two reasons. The first is that Freud's application of psychoanalytic ideas to a whole society is the shakiest part of his work. But, second of all, it reveals how socially conservative Freud was. If a critical theory is supposed to emancipate us, as Geuss claims, it is hard to understand what role Freud could play in it. In this part of the course, we will read excerpts from different works of Freud: the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *Moses and Monotheism*, *Civilization and its Discontents*. Then we will try to understand the use made of Freud's ideas by different members of the Frankfurt School. We will focus on Marcuse and Adorno.

Unit Three: if we have time, we will read samples of Frankfurt writings on the arts. Adorno was an accomplished musician. We will try to make sense of his work on Gustav Mahler. (Warning: Adorno's writings are a very difficult slog: that is why I say, 'we will *try* to make sense' of it.) Here we will find an interesting contrast case with the later Marcuse's critique of pop culture (in *One-Dimensional Man*). There is what we might call a 'high-brow' aspiration in Frankfurt writings on the arts. But how is it possible that Marcuse, who decries pop-culture, could become a 'pop-culture' philosophy? There is something odd here. Again, if we have time, we will consider the contrast case of Lukács who was a very fine literary critic. We will examine his theory of the novel.

§3 Where to Find the Readings

I will post PDF scans of the readings in the Content section of our Mycourses page.

§4 Method of Evaluation

20% of the final grade will be for constructive participation in class discussion, and that will presuppose both that students enrolled in the class regularly come to class and have kept up with the readings. 10% will be for a final paper proposal due on March 6th. 10% will be for your assessment of a final paper proposal by one of your classmates. 50% of the final grade will be for a final paper on a topic of your choice in consultation with me. The paper is due on April 1st. 10% of the final grade will be for an oral examination on your final paper.