



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on August 23, 2022

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The Frankfurt School

The remote and desolate Argentine Pampas might seem an unlikely source for a global revolution, but one hundred years ago they produced a man who created a movement that today holds the entire Western world in its thrall. The millions of mindless “wokesters,” the enforcers of political correctness and the cancel culture, and the lost souls who have succumbed to the so-called new morality that has convulsed the West since the 1960s, all trace their origins to the person of Felix Weil, a German-Argentine student who happened to be an heir to one of the world’s greatest fortunes a century ago. Though Weil is not today a household name, it was he — and his immense wealth — that gave birth to an influential institute that attracted in its day many of the most influential radical Marxists, and ultimately fueled a cultural revolution across the West that continues to reverberate and corrode a century later.



Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt am Main, Germany (Photograph: Frank C. Müller, Frankfurt am Main / Wikimedia Commons)

Felix Weil was born in Buenos Aires, son of Hermann Weil, an extremely wealthy grain exporter, and Rosa Weil, a wealthy heiress in her own right. By the time he came of age, young Felix had not only become a Marxist revolutionary, he also controlled a vast sum of his parents’ wealth. At the University of Tübingen and then the University of Frankfurt, Weil studied political science, his radical inclinations deepening all the while. As early as 1918, Weil was caught up in the revolutionary fervor that swept over Germany after the end of World War I, participating in at least one weapons seizure during an uprising in Frankfurt. No doubt in part because of his great wealth, Weil soon became acquainted with a number of leading radical Marxist revolutionaries and even prominent Communist Party members, including Karl Korsch and Max Horkheimer. In 1920 Weil was also recruited as a spy by the Soviet communists, and returned to Argentina for a year to spy on his native country and report on labor and



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other conditions to the Soviets.

Moreover, sometime during the period of 1918-1920, when communist revolutions in Russia and Hungary were the talk of European intellectual circles, Weil appears to have come up with a novel idea: create what is now styled a “think tank” consecrated to Marxist theory.



Originator: Wealthy German-Argentine Marxist Felix Weil bankrolled the founding of the Institute for Social Research, informally known as the Frankfurt School. (Newscom)

It is easy to forget, at this distance in time, that western and central Europe in the early 1920s were still largely hostile to Marxism. The Spartacus League — the German Communist Party — attempted to seize power in January 1919 under cover of the broader German revolution and the creation of the Weimar Republic, but was suppressed. The brief communist takeover of Hungary, led by Béla Kun, Sándor Garbai, György Lukács, and others, lasted only 133 days in 1919 — although the bloodletting that stemmed from widespread purges of Christians and other dissenters advertised to the rest of Europe the horrors that lay in store for any country that succumbed to Marxist blandishments. The failure of Marxist revolutionaries to make any headway outside the Russian Empire left the revolutionary Marxist underground in central and western Europe somewhat in disarray, wondering why the long-promised workers’ revolution had failed to materialize.

Felix Weil and his considerable circle of radical acquaintances had begun believing that the orthodox communist view of Marxist dogma was incomplete, and needed further study to be perfected. And while most of Weil’s revolutionary associates could do little more than write pamphlets and deliver soapbox stemwinders, Weil had the resources to effect institutional change. If he could persuade authorities at the University of Frankfurt to lend their support, he could create an institute with actual clout in the German and European academy, an organization whose legitimacy would not be questioned because of its ties to the academic establishment.

A New Marxist Institute

Weil found sympathetic ears among the administrators at the university, and in 1923, the coyly named Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) was established as an affiliate of the University of Frankfurt.

Around the same time — whether before or after the founding of the Institute is unclear — Weil



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organized a weeklong retreat, the “First Marxist Workweek,” designed to set the agenda for the new Marxist institute. Among the attendees were several of Europe’s leading communist theorists and subversives, including both György Lukács and Karl Korsch. Lukács, it will be recalled, had been one of the leaders of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic. In that capacity he had been appointed people’s commissar for education and culture, and was the impetus behind the Hungarian “red terror,” urging the destruction of all the “oppressor” classes and personally presiding over executions.

Despite these inconvenient peccadilloes, Lukács is lauded today for his role as the preeminent Marxist philosopher during the Stalinist era, and in particular for his being perhaps the most consequential originator of what is now labeled “Western Marxism” (as contrasted with both Soviet and Chinese Marxism). Lukács, like many other disenchanted Marxists outside the nascent Soviet Union, had come to believe that Marx, while correct in principle, had committed a strategic error by vesting all hope for a revolution in the proletariat. It was plain to Lukács and other Western radicals (such as Italian Antonio Gramsci) that the traditional Marxist emphasis on the “base” or “substructure” — i.e., the productive, worker-controlled economy that supplied all goods — would not be sufficient to create a successful “workers’ revolution” in affluent Western capitalist countries. Workers in such countries, Lukács was convinced, were sufficiently well-off, thanks to the trickle-down benefits of capitalism, that they would not be likely to revolt in sufficient numbers to overthrow the existing power structures. The key to a successful revolution, therefore, lay not in the “base” but instead in the “superstructure,” i.e., in all the institutions and organs of culture tasked with maintenance of the shared value systems responsible for public support.

The “superstructure” included not only religions, churches, schools, the media, and mass culture such as music and movies, but also the most fundamental of all cultural institutions, the family. These all, taken in concert, served to maintain almost unshakable popular support for the status quo, and presented the ultimate defense against the radical Left. In acknowledgment of this, both Soviet and Chinese Communists undertook bloody “cultural revolutions” to purge their respective societies of every vestige of traditional culture. Religions were destroyed root and branch, art was brought under strict state control, and families were shattered by state-enforced collectivization, with China even going so far as to limit by decree the number of children parents could bear.

Lukács’ own conduct in Hungary had shown that, like any true radical, he was willing to shed any amount of blood to achieve his ideological goals. But as a practical revolutionary, he also understood that, unlike Russia and China, the West had already been enriched and improved by capitalism to such a degree that the ignorant and largely apathetic masses of serfs whom Marxists had been able to exploit in Russia and the Far East no longer existed in the West. Therefore, a “Cultural Revolution” in those countries would have to precede the violent overthrow of the capitalist system. And this could only be achieved by changing popular beliefs and moral standards. The focus of Western Marxism, accordingly, became the study of every element of the superstructure, with a view to devising strategies for tearing it down.

Lukács and Korsch, owing to their Communist Party membership, were too extreme to become closely associated with the institute. But their influence loomed large over the fledgling organization as it began recruiting Marxist intellectuals who would articulate the doctrines and strategies of what, in latter decades, has been characterized as a “culture war” aimed at the destruction of traditional Western civilization.



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“Critical Theory”

The direction of the Institute for Social Research crystallized primarily under the leadership of one man, Max Horkheimer, a Marxist philosopher tapped to be the institute’s director in 1930 and the chief originator of a polemical and research method pioneered by the Frankfurt School that came to be known as “critical theory.” In principle, the approach favored by critical theory required the critiquing of all assumptions, customs, values, and institutions, but in practice it meant critiquing and attacking only institutions and values endemic to Western Christian civilization, including — but not limited to — sexual morality, religious doctrines, family and marriage structures, and educational standards. Accordingly, the institute under Horkheimer grew into what the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy characterizes as “an inter-disciplinary body comprising specialists in such fields as philosophy, economics, political science, legal theory, psychoanalysis, and the study of cultural phenomena such as music, film, and mass entertainment [intended to be the] western European equivalent to the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. The intellectual labor of the Institute in Frankfurt thus explicitly aimed at contributing to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism.”

Pivotal to the growth of this inter-disciplinary amalgam of Marxist talent and the development of “critical theory” were a cadre of young intellectuals, recruited by Horkheimer, whose work was to define the output of the Frankfurt School — and its far-reaching influence in Western universities and other cultural institutions — for decades to follow. By the mid-1930s, the institute counted among its faculty the likes of philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno, philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse, psychologist Erich Fromm, and social theorist Friedrich Pollock (who had been associated with the institute since the First Marxist Workweek), among many others.

Under Horkheimer’s guidance, the Frankfurt School came to deviate more and more from orthodox Marxism with its insistence on rigid economic determinism, concluding that the more fundamental basis of class oppression lay in social phenomena like religion, mass entertainment, and education. As a result, they came to see capitalism (which they loathed no less than traditional Marxists did) as far more flexible, adaptable, and capable of averting its own demise indefinitely, unless actively sabotaged at the cultural and social level — this in contrast to the moribund decadent capitalism predestined to succumb to the weight of an inevitable revolt of the proletariat as envisioned by traditional Marxists and communists. One eventual conclusion drawn by the Frankfurt School was that Soviet communism was an oppressive distortion of “real” Marxism, no less to be shunned than capitalism. For the Frankfurt School, the real Marxist revolution was to be carried out piecemeal, with the primary objective of destroying Western culture root and branch before any political revolution could be successful. The Frankfurt School professed to be less interested in the oppressive economic regimentation embodied in the Soviet *kolkhozes* than in emancipating the West from the alleged restraints of its Christian past.



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Philosopher-commissar: György Lukács was one of the originators of “Western Marxism” and a philosopher who strongly influenced the Frankfurt School. He also was one of the leaders in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, serving as commissar of Education and Culture as well as an officer in the Hungarian Red Army.

The Frankfurt School might have remained just another circle of European leftist radicals, had it not been for the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. The Nazi regime forced the closure of the institute, and its members, including the director Horkheimer, fled abroad, first to Switzerland and later to the United States. And it was in America that Horkheimer and his associates found a vast new field of opportunity for sowing the seeds of their brand of Marxist radicalism.

In Columbia University’s internationalist president Nicholas Butler, Horkheimer found a sympathetic ear, and the institute was reestablished at Columbia University during World War II with Butler’s blessing. Once the war ended, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock returned to Germany, where the institute was formally reestablished in 1955. Fromm and Marcuse, however, opted to stay in America, where they found popular acclaim as leaders of the American Left that emerged on university campuses in the 1950s and 1960s.

“Father of the New Left”

Of all of Horkheimer’s recruits, the most influential, at least in the New World, was without question Herbert Marcuse. Having worked for the Office of Strategic Services (the predecessor to the CIA) in the 1940s, the Marxist Marcuse was well-connected with American political as well as academic elites. In the academic world, Marcuse moved with ease among America’s elite universities, moving from Columbia University to Harvard in 1952, and then on to Brandeis University two years later, where he remained until 1965. In that year he moved to the West Coast, settling in at the University of California-San Diego until 1970. During all this time he wrote prolifically and accumulated radical disciples such as Angela Davis and Abbie Hoffman. His enormously influential writings and students have earned Marcuse the moniker “Father of the New Left.” He was, in a very literal sense, the originator of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as of the “woke” and “politically correct” movements of our time.

In his most influential book, *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse set forth a critique of modern capitalist



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technological society, the arguments of which have become familiar to the point of cliché, but which in the 1960s were still largely unfamiliar to an American society unacquainted with the cadences of radical Marxism. Consumerism, Marcuse argued, is both hegemonic and totalitarian, allowing venal capitalists and technocrats to brainwash and control citizens of so-called free societies just as surely as Soviet communists had done. Under such a consumerist regime, a small group of individuals were empowered to dictate tastes and consumer preferences to the rest, resulting in a society in which people were unable to distinguish wants from genuine needs, and which led to a massive misallocation of resources for the purposes of irrational and unrestrained consumption. These sorts of arguments are the stock in trade of every leftist agitator and campus radical in our time, and have thoroughly penetrated public discourse thanks to nonstop repetition in the news media, the classroom, and popular entertainment. As a result, many Americans even on the so-called Right have become persuaded of the need to deride consumerism and “corporate greed.” But 60 years ago, most Americans still appreciated the miracle of the free markets and the blessings associated with the high standard of living that “capitalism” and “consumerism” produced.

In addition to his railing mischaracterizations of free market economics and the wealth it produced, Marcuse was also — like Fromm and others of the Frankfurt School — an avowed enemy of traditional morality. Sexual morality, he argued in *Eros and Civilization*, is merely a tool of repression enjoined by civilization. The goal of modern industrial society ought to be emancipation of the sexual instincts, or, as Marcuse famously put it, “the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the political fight.” Marcuse himself always considered *Eros and Civilization* to be his most important book and, indeed, it was the sourcebook for both the sexual revolution of the ‘60s and ‘70s and the “gay liberation” movement that came later.

Marcuse understood that his ideas would meet with resistance from those unwilling to cast away their Western and Christian heritage without a fight. He resented the fact that, under conditions of tolerance and free speech, his ideas would meet with strong rhetorical opposition. Accordingly, he proposed, in his famous essay “Repressive Tolerance,” that the universal tolerance of free expression was no longer to be given countenance. Instead, only ideas supportive of leftist ideology should be tolerated; all dissenting voices, inasmuch as they represented the “oppressive” system Marcuse and his colleagues sought to overthrow, should be stifled — or, as we are now wont to say, “canceled.”



Refuge: Columbia University campus in the early 20th century. It was here that Max Horkheimer,



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Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and others of the Frankfurt School found an academic home during World War II. After the war, Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Frankfurt and reopened the Institute for Social Research, but Fromm and Marcuse remained in the United States, where they spent the rest of their lives spreading the ideology of cultural Marxism.

Frankfurt's Influence

The impact of the Frankfurt School upon Western culture cannot be overstated. Many key conceits of the modern-day Left and cancel culture received their first impetus from the influence of Marcuse, Fromm, and others. The sexual revolution, the widespread disparagement of consumerism and the free market, the mistaken view that all of Western civilization is founded on oppression, and the systematic campaign to silence dissenting voices on the Right — all had their origin in the Frankfurt School's critical theory.

While the Frankfurt School has long since been exceeded in extremism by newer movements both academic and social — not only the misnamed “woke,” but also the postmodernism of Foucault and Derrida, as well as the critical race theory (merely the Frankfurt School's critical theory applied specifically to racial issues) of Ibram X. Kendi and others — it will be forever notorious for its role as the most important incubator of Western Marxism and the counterculture that grew out of it.

Ironically, the most significant remaining Frankfurt School representative, Jurgen Habermas, has seemingly deviated from the institute's radical roots. In the 1950s, Habermas was an assistant to Adorno himself, and supported a wide range of radical causes, including the creation of the European Union. But he also believed strongly in nonviolence, which ultimately alienated him from the core of leftist radicalism. Today, Habermas — in stark contrast with the founders of the Frankfurt School — professes open admiration for Christian civilization and its achievements. “Christianity, and nothing else,” Habermas has stated bluntly, “is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization. To this day, we have no other options. We continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is postmodern chatter.”

Had his mentors and predecessors come to similar conclusions, the cultural history of the 20th century might have followed a very different path.



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