CHAPTER 23

CRITICAL THEORY AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES

EDWARD GRANTER

Introduction

A world haunted by ‘[u]nemployment, economic crisis, militarization and terrorist regimes’ (Horkheimer, 2002a: 213). Nations ruled by political cliques with ‘murky connections’ (Adorno, 2005: 23) to each other and to big business, or by a fusion of corporate and criminal interests (Marcuse, 1992: 35); a society of ‘rackets’ (Adorno, 2005: 45). Atomized individuals held together by a shared obsession with celebrity culture (Löwenthal, 1961: 123) and an urgent need to consume. Those privileged enough to play a fully employed role in the economy must contend with work that is ever more technologically sophisticated, yet ever more stultifying and alienating. While their productive activity and compensatory overconsumption degrades the environment in which they live (Marcuse, 1992), today’s employees must maintain a facade of positivity, must ‘smile or die’ (Ehrenreich, 2010; Adorno, 2005: 38–9), in order to ‘get ahead’. In such a society, old solidarities of class dissolve along with organized religion, despite the existence of ‘constantly increasing material inequalities’ (Adorno, 2005: 58). Not surprisingly perhaps, people look to pop culture for their sense of identity and put their faith in the ‘pseudo-rationality’ of demagogues, gurus, psychics, and fortune tellers (Adorno, 2002: 53), or the blind luck of the game show or lottery. Those who resist the domination of capital—mostly students, landless peasants, radical intellectuals, and repressed minorities—must contend with increasingly pervasive police and military intervention (Marcuse, 1970: 104).

This depiction and critique of European and American capitalism from the 1930s to the 1970s derives in large measure from the work of the Frankfurt School critical theorists. Their sweeping critique of supposedly advanced society is intentionally provocative; redolent of voluntarism and elitism for some, but for others, offering no more than the theoretical opposition that the character of contemporary capitalism itself
invites—total, personal, and uncompromising. This chapter will sketch the historical, institutional, and intellectual origins of Frankfurt School critical theory. Following this, the notion of critical theory as a specific analytical approach is introduced. This leads to an exploration of the Frankfurt critique of modern society—from Hollywood films to the politics of organization. The Freudian elements of critical theory will be explored, before the chapter moves, via an excursus on the politics of protest, to the Frankfurt School inheritance in studies of organization and society. After considering some criticisms of the Frankfurt School, the chapter concludes with reflections on the role of critical theory as social and organizational thought which is geared towards emancipation—the freeing of people from economic and ontological exploitation—and with a discussion of possibilities for Frankfurt-inspired organizational and social research into the future.

**The Marxian Inheritance**

Marx’s work is a broad-ranging analysis of the socio-economic formation we call capitalism. Power relations between social groups, organizations, and the norms and beliefs which frame them, are all targets for Marx’s critique. The scholar of social thought will also find an exploration of the relationship between the individual and the social structure. For Marx, human subjects both create this structure (through productive activity with all the interaction and cooperation this implies) and live their lives according to its opportunities and constraints. The dynamics and processes involved in both parts of this equation, creation and constraint, are largely hidden from view as we go about our everyday lives—they occupy the zone of the unconscious, the taken for granted. Marx’s work, like that of the critical theorists who followed in his footsteps, seizes on this moment of contradiction between creativity and constraint and seeks to unmask it, to render it analytically, and in so doing open up possibilities for humanity to consciously construct a world based on social justice and genuine human freedom; a socialist society.

Marx placed the production and exchange of commodities (including labour power) at the centre of his analysis. While commodities are the products of human activity, they appear to take on a life of their own, like the brooms and buckets of *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* (Shook Hazen and Ungerer, 1984). Commodities and their institutional and cultural forms become a power over and against the human subject; this production of systems of meaning which come to be seen as independent at best, and as structures of domination at worst, is referred to as ‘fetishization’. The battle to profit from controlling the production and exchange of commodities gives rise to the organizational and institutional forms of modern society, which constrain and frame human action. Marx’s aim was to provide a theoretical and empirical understanding of social reality that would expose the true relationship between people, their work, and the way the world is organized.
As for human consciousness, and the realm of ideas, law, and morality, Marx took a materialist view, asserting that it was people's material circumstances, their activity within and relation to the prevailing system of work and production, which would largely determine their consciousness of themselves in respect to overarching systems of meaning. The social scientist must proceed from an analysis of human work and organization in the first instance. Under capitalism, production is framed around a class structure where the bourgeoisie or ruling class dominate economically and politically, and the working class or proletariat are exploited and impoverished. Although this social structure had come to be seen by most as simply 'the way things are', Marx argued that it was fraught with contradictions which would ultimately destroy it. One of the key contradictions is related to the tendency for capitalism to develop great productive powers in terms of machinery and organization, but for these powers to be used not to make work and social life better for all, but to enrich a dominant minority at the cost of exploitation (Adler, 2010: 66) and increasing poverty for the rest of society.

For Marx, work in capitalist society alienates the individual worker from the products they make and from their selves as authentic human beings—as people who choose which activities should occupy their time, and which direction their life should take. Marx extended his critique of the alienation of work to relationships between people, who increasingly relate to each other on the basis of economic exchange rather than as fellow members of a cooperative social enterprise. These forms of alienation are rarely explicitly expressed, but Marx thought that in time, people would become more conscious of the contradiction between the possibilities for true and authentic work and relationships in advanced society, and of the distorted form which they have so far taken under capitalism. Marx felt that class consciousness would develop to such an extent that people would eventually choose to change the social system radically, overthrowing capitalism as a system of social, economic, political, and cultural power, and forging a socialist society based on cooperation and social justice, where social classes would be transcended by communities of individuals with control over their own destiny.

The Rise of Critical Theory

As Adler (2010: 71) and others have noted, political, economic, and social change throw up challenges to Marx’s original critique of capitalist society. The World War of 1914–18 marked the failure of European social democratic movements (Arato, 1972: 84) successfully to prevent slaughter on an industrial scale. It was followed, more promisingly in terms of progress towards socialism, by the consolidation of Bolshevik rule after the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the German Revolution of 1918 which saw socialist parties ascend to power. Germany, however, remained a capitalist country, a far cry from a socialist utopia where the fully actualized individual could emerge. More significantly perhaps, revolutionary optimism in the East was soon overtaken by civil war, political infighting, and, following the death of Lenin in 1924, Stalinist repression. Marx had
predicted intensifying class conflict leading to a truly revolutionary transformation of capitalist society, but this had failed to materialize. During the post-First World War period, capitalism appeared to be continuing an evolution from buccaneering free enterprise to a system of giant interlocking combines, able to exercise effective control over, and at times seemingly integrated with, the modern state. While this new system of ‘monopoly capitalism’ had already been implicated as one of the structural causes of the First World War, on balance it indicated a longer-term trend towards increased coordination on the part of capital, particularly at the national level. In some countries, the integration of the interests of capital with those of the state gave rise to a system of social administration and coordination in the shape of social welfare or the ‘administrative state’ (Reed, 2006: 19). In others, fascism appeared as the ultimate merging of the interests of corporate capital with those of the political elite. Even economic depression and another World War failed to shake the West’s overwhelming faith in capitalism, which now appeared to be less rather than more prone to crisis and collapse at a fundamental level.

It was in this atmosphere of disappointment for those still holding to the essential truth of Marx’s analysis that the Institute of Social Research was established in Frankfurt in 1923, under the Directorship of Carl Grünberg. It was set up with money from Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy grain merchant (Kellner, 1989: 13). Members of the institute included Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), who comprise the key figures in our appraisal, as well as Leo Löwenthal (1900–1993), Henryk Grossman (1881–1950), Friedrich Pollock (1894–1970), Erich Fromm (1900–1980), and others. Those associated with the Institute would come to be referred to collectively as the Frankfurt School.

Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse shared a similar social background. Their parents were successful industrialists (Marcuse and Horkheimer), wine merchants, and singers (Adorno). Their upper middle class upbringing did give them an appreciation for domestic comfort and a successful career trajectory, but did not preclude them from entering into subversive political milieus, or developing an almost visceral sense of social injustice, sometimes drawing on their own observations:

All of these dignified ladies and gentlemen are not only, at every single moment, exploiting the misery of others. They are producing it afresh... at the very moment when this lady is dressing for dinner, the people she is living off are starting their night shift, and at the moment when we kiss her delicate hand, because she is complaining of a headache... visits after six o’clock, even to the dying, are forbidden in the third-class hospital. (Horkheimer, 1978: 98, cited in Wiggershaus, 1994: 47–8)

While Fromm had a more orthodox Jewish background, the Horkheimers were considered somewhat conservative, and the Marcuses ‘relatively observant’ (Marcuse, 2004: 249) the Wiesengrunds (Adorno’s family) were more assimilated. His father had converted to Protestantism, and Adorno’s mother was from a Catholic background. Some have argued that the ‘Jewish dimension’ is absolutely central (Kirsch, 2009), and
certainly there would be times in the lives of Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer when the religious and cultural dimension came to the fore—both in their own philosophical musings on what it is to be human, and in their personal lives and careers. More important for our purposes is that these writers had a sense of historical specificity which led them to develop Marxist analysis in keeping with contemporary social and political conditions. Adorno wrote in 1956 that he ‘always wanted to try to produce a theory that would be faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin, while not lagging behind the achievements of the most advanced culture’ (Claussen, 2008: 233). This mix of inspiration and respectful dissatisfaction echoed the work of Lukács, who had a significant influence on the work of the Frankfurt School writers.

FROM MARXISM TO CRITICAL THEORY:

Georg Lukács

Georg Lukács (1885–1970) is best known for the 1923 book *History and Class Consciousness*. His work is framed within a dialectical understanding that posits class conflict as inherent in social progress, with the working class as the historical subject in whose hands the next phase of this progress rested. Lukács explored the material, social, and ontological conditions which appeared to forestall—for now at least—the revolutionary action of the working class.

Although Lukács held to Marx’s materialist framework, where human productive life is seen as the building block of the social world, this relationship is not seen in a mechanical, deterministic way. As Marx would have it: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx, 2008: 16). Lukács’ theoretical move was to propose a theory of mediation (Aronowitz, 1990: 56) which would explain why the consciousness of the working class did not correspond to their material conditions—that is, why their impoverishment, exploitation, and alienation had not led to true revolutionary consciousness. This theoretical move rests largely on the concept of reification. Reification describes a situation where people relate to each other not as active and autonomous individuals but as things—things whose destiny lies in the hands of a power beyond themselves. At the same time, concepts which are in fact socially constructed come to dominate individuals and their social lives. It appears as though the concept—‘the market’, or ‘the economy’ for example—rather than people, is possessed of autonomy and the power to direct the course of social development and the daily lives of human individuals. Lukács’ theory of reification is an elaboration of Marx’s work on commodity fetishism (see previous section) (Lukács, 1974: 93–4). Capitalist social relations, as crystallized in the commodity form, attain a sense of inevitability, a ‘timeless model of human relations in general’ (1974: 94–5). In this understanding, capitalism ‘maps out’ both the institutional
elements of the superstructure such as law or the state, and frames the consciousness of the working class itself.

For Lukács, the proletariat is unable to ‘take note of what is happening before their very eyes’ (Lukács, 1974: 78) because their understanding of reality is partial and distorted; their consciousness is, effectively, false (1974: 50). In Marx’s theory of alienation, the worker is separated both from the product and themselves. Similarly, for Lukács, and interestingly for scholars of work and organization, rationalized systems of production (most notably Taylorism and ‘scientific management’) had left the worker a ‘passive, deactivated spectator of the production process, and even of his own work in this process’ (Arato, 1972: 97). In a characterization reminiscent of Max Weber’s theory of rationalization, the worker, and by extension the modern individual, is ‘reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system’ (Lukács, 1974: 90). For Lukács, the factory represented a microcosm of society as a whole, a ‘concentrated form of the whole structure of capitalist society’ (1974: 90). While for Lukács and the critical theorists the sphere of consciousness and culture becomes a more important element of analysis, he understood social reality dialectically; the sphere of work and production and the sphere of consciousness must be related to each other as part of the totality of interconnected social relations.

Believing that Marxism still offered the theoretical framework best suited to a critique of capitalism (a view reinforced by Lukács’ work), but dissatisfied with increasingly ossified and even deformed official Soviet variants, the critical theorists set out to create Marxist theory that could be applied with emancipatory intent to the contemporary capitalist system—one that seemed to have developed a resilience that Marx did not foresee. Frankfurt School Marxism would be in contrast to ‘orthodox base/superstructure theories which, in one form or another and in varying degrees, adopt “modes of analysis” which, explicitly or implicitly, treat the economic “base” and the legal, political, and ideological “superstructure” which “reflect” or “correspond” to it as qualitatively different, more or less enclosed and “regionally’ separated spheres”’ (Meiksins Wood, 1981: 68, cited in Marsden, 1993: 176). The following themes, and a desire to understand the ways in which they relate to each other, would be of particular importance:

**Consciousness**: how do individuals perceive of the social structure and their position in it?

**Alienation**: ‘when am I truly myself, that is, not a tool or the product of outside powers or influences, but rather the originator of my acts, thoughts, feelings, values’ (Gorz, 1986–7: 138).

**Ideology**: how do the ideas of the ruling class become the dominant ideas of capitalist society?

**Domination**: how are new forms of domination created so that capitalism can persist through social change and challenge?

**Rationality**: what is the role of reason in capitalist domination?

**Culture and everyday life**: what role does the ostensibly apolitical sphere of everyday life and popular culture play in maintaining capitalism as a social system?
The truth is the whole, and the whole is false. (Marcuse, 1960: xiv, cited in Jay, 1984: 208)

The role of critical theory (the term was adopted during the Institute’s period of relocation at New York’s Columbia University from 1934–49) is to demystify mankind’s present situation, to critique society, from production to consumption, from individual to organization, from the standpoint of Marxism for the twentieth century and beyond. In line with Marx’s analysis, critical theory proceeds from a materialist understanding and ‘begins with the idea of the simple exchange of commodities’ (Horkheimer, 2002a: 226).

One key commodity is of course labour power, which is organized as part of a particular system or mode of production. As with Marx and Lukács, the relationships between work processes and the organizational and social frameworks which they exist within and at the same time create (Horkheimer, 2002a: 212), is a central element in the framework of critical theory. Key to understanding the work of the Frankfurt School is an appreciation that although their work proceeds from (Marx’s) political economy, it seeks to relate material fundamentals to the entirety of life in contemporary society:

The Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and breakdown are elements in a conceptual whole, and the meaning of this whole is to be sought not in the preservation of contemporary society but in its transformation into the right kind of society. (Horkheimer, 2002a: 218)

While capital’s logic appears to map out social life, is not to be understood in economically determinist terms; that is, productive life is part of culture, everyday life and consciousness, and no element is effectively prior to the other. For the Frankfurt School, the relationship between the realms of culture and consciousness, and the economic rationality of commodity capitalism, was fundamentally one of tension, since they viewed capitalism as inimical to human flourishing and therefore irrational. Mass culture and the experience of everyday life are understood not simply as proof of the triumph of capitalism, but as expressive of the fundamental contradictions between what human society in late modernity is capable of, and the continuing social injustices on which the current economic and political organization depends. In this analysis, the increasingly industrialized cultural realm serves as a veil for this contradiction—popular culture as systematized and unquestioning, but divertingly so.

Like Marx and Lukács, the Frankfurt School writers on whom the present chapter focuses adopt the concept of totality as a way of understanding the social world. They attempt to provide the “big picture” that portrays the fundamental outlines of socio-economic development and the ways in which the vicissitudes of capitalism structure social life and can in turn be replaced by a socialist society’ (Kellner, 1989: 48). This did not mean that critical theory would deal only in abstractions or metaphysics.
Quite the contrary, critical theory seeks to uncover the ‘universal in the particular’ (Bottomore, 2002: 23). What this means is that nothing is the way it is by accident. From the structure of organizations to the posters displayed in their corridors (Bertram, 2007: 8), from the nature of academic research to the hidden functions of the modern family, everything can be seen as characterized by its role (material or ideological) as part of the socio-cultural system of capitalism. Horkheimer’s analysis in ‘Authority and the Family’ is a case in point:

The totality of relationships in the present age, the universal web of things, was strengthened and stabilized by one particular element, namely, authority, and the process of strengthening and stabilization went on essentially at the particular, concrete level of the family. (2002b: 128)

Critical theory argues that we should not take anything for granted. We should not assume that social and organizational realities are just neutral expressions of the proper functioning of society, we should not accept that ‘life’s-like-that’ (Adorno, 2005: 73). Indeed, the position of the theorist in relation to social and organizational structures is highlighted by Horkheimer’s distinction between ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ (2002a). Here, the claims to objectivity of mainstream science (social and otherwise) come up against the situatedness of theorists and their theories within a social whole—a situatedness of which we tend not to be explicitly conscious. Institutions and systems of thought are not ‘naturally occurring’ phenomena, as ‘traditional theory’ might have it, rather, they are socially constructed, and the theorist should be aware of this.

The Critique of the Consumer Society

As fascism descended on Germany during the 1930s, the sense of the individual as existing within a system of total (and barbaric) domination became ever more acute. Being a Jewish Marxist clearly placed one at great risk, and the key members of the Institute left Germany first for destinations across Europe, and then the US, where they continued to focus on the fate of the modern individual under capitalism. For Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, even capitalism in its most ‘democratic’ form, as exemplified by the US, represented a ‘total system of production’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: xii) where individual life is matched against, and programmed by, the needs of advanced capitalism. The Enlightenment (and in many senses Marxian) dream of a society rationally organized for the benefit of all, had been eclipsed, with reason itself increasingly operative only in terms of efficiency or science; both in the service of capital. The administration of society by an elite comprised of interlinked political, economic, and technocratic interests is not contested by the population as a whole, because this apparatus ‘provides for [them] as never before’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: xiv) in terms of material comfort and psychological diversion.
Given the ‘ideological curtain’ (1997: xv) which veils this state of affairs, domination is not contested because it is not perceived or experienced as domination.

The critical theorists argued that for the modern individual, society as it presently exists—comfortable for some, but replete with injustice and unhappiness for many—is taken as given, experienced and understood as the natural state of affairs. In fact, in an era where ‘the flood of detailed information and candy-floss entertainment simultaneously instructs and stultifies mankind’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: xv), the domination of administered capitalism is experienced as the highest state of social and existential development—life, in the final instance, is as good as it gets. Here one can see continuity with Lukácsian concepts of false consciousness and reification. For the critical theorists, the rationality of the commodity form once again appears to frame individual consciousness itself: ‘If the standard structure of society is the exchange form, its rationality constitutes people: what they think they are, is secondary’ (Adorno, 1998: 248).

Although Adorno and Horkheimer rarely referred to Marx’s analysis of alienated labour directly (Jay, 1996: 75), the theme of alienation more broadly suffuses critical theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 298). In a world of increasingly total administration, any real sense of social connectedness is lost, and what sense of membership of a social whole exists is manufactured by capitalism itself. The primitive myths of the past—including religion—were, according to the critical theorists, increasingly irrelevant, but this already mediated sense of collective consciousness had been replaced by the idols of mass consumerism (Löwenthal, 1961) and by what they called the culture industry. Developing a focus on everyday life that was pioneered almost contemporaneously by other influential neo-Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci, critical theory draws analytical links between seemingly mundane cultural experiences and the economic and ideological structures of modern capitalism. Here, Adorno and Horkheimer are writing on the experience of listening to the radio:

> By circling them, by enveloping them as inherent in the musical phenomena—and turning them as listeners into participants, it contributes ideologically to the integration which modern society never tires of achieving in reality…It creates an illusion of immediacy in a totally mediated world, of proximity between strangers, the warmth of those who come to feel a chill of unmitigated struggle of all against all. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973: 56, cited in Bull, 2004: 254)

Discussion of the seemingly mundane, everyday experience can be transformed into analysis of the system of capitalist domination as a whole—the universal in the particular, once again.

As with Lukács, there is a notable Weberian element in critical theory. Horkheimer and Adorno posit a ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ where an increasingly rational or, more accurately, ‘administered’ society is shot through with various forms of myth. While the modern individual exists inside an iron cage of bureaucracy and administration (Weber, 1993: 113), from family life to work in the organization, the sense of the heroic individual, of triumph of the will, is maintained through the mechanized asininity of
popular culture. The preprogrammed reality of life in advanced capitalism continues to be obscured from view. And so one feels that ‘it could be you’ who holds the winning ticket to riches or fame (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: 145). The Hollywood hero, the exhausted everyman who saves the day, reminds us that life is hard, ‘but just because of that so wonderful and so healthy’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: 151).

The apparently polar elements of life in modernity—work and leisure—are merely different, in fact not that different, after-images of ‘the huge economic machinery which has always sustained the masses, whether at work or at leisure, which is akin to work’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: 127). The term ‘leisure industry’, now in common usage, takes on a retrospective irony here; the critical theorists argue that the distinction between work and leisure is illusory, since both are profit oriented, characterized by standardization, and require conformity in patterns of behaviour. Maintaining a focus on the interrelationships between work and production on the one hand, and consumption and leisure on the other, Marcuse argued that the economic success of the consumer society rested on the creation of false needs—primarily the need to consume the tawdry products on offer, no matter how unnecessary: ‘Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs’ (Marcuse, 1986: 126). The issue of who decides which needs are true and which false has been a matter of debate (see Granter, 2009: 81), and ultimately it may be ‘still the dictum of the philosopher’ (Marcuse, 1986: 126), but Marcuse and his colleagues would argue that ‘freedom from toil is preferable to toil, and an intelligent life is preferable to a stupid life’ (Marcuse, 1986: 126). As such, needs which necessitate the suspension of one’s critical faculties, and are implicated in the commitment to work in order to consume, are false, since they are needs which ultimately serve the needs of capital rather than the needs of the individual: freedom, happiness, and self-expression.

In the work organization, an increasingly mechanized and efficient system is given a veneer of sociality through ‘[t]he promotion of a friendly atmosphere as advised by management experts and adopted by every factory to increase output’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: 151). In the world of the pseudo-individual we are all ‘special’ and ‘valued’; members of a team, yes, but special nonetheless. The sporting analogy is not lost on Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 165) who note the informality of the most modern and forward thinking workplaces; the sense of ‘good fellowship of the sporting community’ masking the reality of (at best) competition, and, more accurately, interchangeability and standardization.

For Marcuse, the standardization of life in the work organization and society as a whole is masked not only by the more obvious myth-making of the culture industries, but by the degradation of language into little more than a series of buzz words; what Marcuse calls the ‘functionalization of language’ (Marcuse, 1986: 86). Sentences and phrases are ‘abridged and condensed in such a way that no tension, no “space” is left between the parts of the sentence. This linguistic form militates against meaning’ (1986: 86). Marcuse gives examples such as ‘harmless fallout’ and ‘clean bomb’—
contemporary equivalents to this might be ‘friendly fire’ or ‘smart bomb’. As these terms (the more (oxy)moronic the better) are repeated, the less meaning they have, and the more useful they are, serving the function of masking the tensions in, and often unsavoury nature of, reality more effectively. Marcuse also notes the tendency of this linguistic closing off to operate in the political sphere, and readers can choose their own contemporary examples from a range of phrases such as ‘tough choices’, ‘free market’, ‘in this together’, and ‘supporting people into employment’. In the context of the workplace one might add ‘put support structures in place’, ‘adding value’, or ‘passionate about’—phrases which, mantra-like, mean nothing, but signify a great deal, and must be repeated as part of working life’s ‘constant initiation rite’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: 153).

Although the discussion may appear to have strayed far from the writings of Marx himself, analyses such as these can be seen as an attempt to examine further his conviction that ‘the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’ (Marx, 1970, cited in Garland & Harper, 2012: 414). In this respect, the work of the Frankfurt School is particularly effective as ideology critique. Faced with a one-dimensional society (Marcuse, 1986) where that which is taken as that which should be, the critical theorists sought to understand how ideological domination had advanced to the point where ‘the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: 134). It has already been noted that the realm of ideas, of consciousness and consumption, is always understood in the writings of the Frankfurt School in relation to the sphere of labour—as part of a totality of human relations. Marcuse emphasizes the ‘place of labour in the totality of human existence. In its broadest and most primordial sense labour is grounded in the mode of being human as historical being’ (Marcuse, 1973: 29).

Marcuse’s writing on work and labour is the most explicit and extensive among the critical theorists. In Eros and Civilization (1987), published in 1955, he focuses on the instinctual drives behind what has come to be known as the work ethic, which he conceptualized as the ‘performance principle’, and argues that although humans possess an instinctual, almost libidinal drive towards pleasure, this has been repressed by modern society’s apparent need for disciplined work. Influenced not only by Freud but also by Schiller’s aesthetics, and Fourier’s utopian musings on the nature of work in industrial society, Marcuse argues that technological advance and the automation of production has made it possible for work to take much less of an onerous position in people’s lives. We should aim, according to Marcuse, to make work into an activity more reminiscent of play than toil.

**Freud and the Search for a Critical Standpoint**

In light of its title—a nod to Freud’s Civilization and its Discontents (1975)—the influence of Freud on Eros and Civilization is clear. Freud had argued that the rise of modern
society was predicated on the repression of humans’ instincts for pleasure, since these were inimical to the principles of restraint, methodical work, and monogamous reproduction (Kellner, 1984: 157) which form the cornerstones of ‘civilized’ cultures. Adopting either a creative or a contradictory approach, depending on one’s viewpoint, Marcuse takes from Freud the concept of an instinctual dimension to human behaviour and ontology, but rejects Freud’s view that this dimension must be repressed. Marcuse argues that while circumstances of underdevelopment and material scarcity might make repression necessary, as Freud had discussed, under present conditions of socio-technical development, work processes, and our social relations more generally, could be transformed into an ‘aesthetic-erotic environment’ (Kellner, 1984: 161). Marcuse’s key work on Freud, like much of his later writing, has a decidedly utopian air—involving as it does both an appeal to the inner utopia of fantasy and untrammelled instinctual yearning, and a call for the total transformation of contemporary social and cultural norms and structures. In analytical terms, the use of Freud serves a more heuristic purpose, in that it allows the concept of domination to be better operationalized for the purposes of the wider Frankfurt critique. For Marcuse, domination may have its origins in the technical division of labour and the administration of society—something which can be analysed in Marxian and Weberian terms—but a Freudian social psychology could ‘explain the internalization of domination and provide insights that could lead to its subversion and diminution’ (Kellner, 1984: 166).

Erich Fromm, an early member of the Frankfurt School until a parting of the ways in 1939, was known best for his for work on Freud. Fromm’s writing went through different stages and was related to various academic disputes with his former colleagues. Freud’s insights were also significant to the work of Adorno and Horkheimer. They were able to appeal to psychoanalytical concepts as providing firmer grounding for a sense of humankind’s essential nature than that contained in, for example, Marx’s anthropological discussions in the ‘Paris Manuscripts’ (1972). The Frankfurt School relationship to the concept of human essence was extremely complex, and in the case of Adorno and Horkheimer their efforts to pin it down were a central part of their own writing and correspondence, where their search for the foundations of the good and the true in human existence included speculations utilizing Freudian psychology. Their masterwork, Dialectic of Enlightenment, had characteristically pursued the dichotomy between internal and external nature, and like Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer focused on the particularly modern form of domination where ‘the reification of external nature and the reification of internal nature mutually entail one another’ (Whitebook, 1999: 289).

For the Frankfurt School writers, the status of instinctual, internal nature as a basis for critique was never quite resolved. While they sought a truly rational standpoint, a counterpoint from which to criticize the instrumentalist pseudo-rationality of administered society, there was always an aura of uncertainty around the appeal to some sophisticated version of ‘human nature’. Their commitment to materialism never wavered, and so the economic base, the world of work and organizations, tended to be seen as the ordinate factor in social life. Appeals to inner nature seemingly contradict this approach, but it could
be said that one of the strengths of critical theory was its attempt to add a ‘depth dimension’ that Marx—the master of the material—never supplied. In the end, a position of ‘negativity’ was the most comfortable one for Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. In Marcuse’s work, this took the form of the ‘great refusal’, the total rejection of a cultural and social constellation where domination of both internal and external nature had become almost total itself. For Adorno, freedom could only ever be defined in negative terms, since it ‘always corresponded to specific forms of unfreedom’ (Macey, 2000: 4). Adorno’s ambition to reflect negative reality through the lens of critique, thereby revealing the possibilities for its transcendence, could never be fulfilled in any truly programmatic way, which partly explains his extensive use of the aphorism as a means of social and cultural critique. The search for freedom was destined to proceed not through Archimedean revelation, but through the theoretician’s ongoing and always transitory search for the ‘flash of light between the poles of something long past, something grown all but unrecognizable, and which some day might come to be’ (Adorno, 2007: 229, cited in Wiggershaus, 1994: 607).

FROM CRITICAL THEORY TO CRITICAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES

In 1950 the Institute for Social Research had returned from New York to Frankfurt, and by the 1960s had become, under the stewardship of Horkheimer and Adorno, an important institution in the academic and public sphere of post-war West Germany. The critical theorists are often, of necessity, lumped together in accounts of their work, but intellectual biographies and discussions of their correspondence (see for example Claussen, 2008; Wiggershaus, 1994; Kirsch, 2009; Wheatland, 2009) show that they were immune neither to the financial precariousness of the academic career, nor to its familiar personal jealousies and disputes. The fact that Marcuse remained in the US is perhaps related to these factors. In the US, Marcuse’s broad but radical style of critique in works such as One Dimensional Man (originally published in 1964) appealed to a new generation of radicals who coalesced most visibly around the student movement. The work of Horkheimer and Adorno had also played a role in inspiring and providing analytical frameworks for protest and social movements, particularly in Germany.

Marcuse made several high-profile appearances as the ‘celebrated mentor of the New Left’ (Wiggershaus, 1994: 615, 622) in Germany from 1967, but Horkheimer’s and particularly Adorno’s relationship with the student movement was more difficult. As universities across the Western world erupted in protest around issues such as the Vietnam War, civil rights, and academic freedom, the critical theorists who had returned to Frankfurt found themselves caught up in a number of misunderstandings, misreading, and institutional dilemmas. These culminated in Adorno calling the police in the mistaken belief that a group of students had ‘occupied’ rooms in the Institute in January 1969. On 6 August such matters were eclipsed by the death of Adorno while on holiday in
Switzerland. As the decade ended, the radical tide of the 1960s began to recede—partly due to its success in gaining some institutional, cultural, and political changes, and partly, perhaps, due to an inevitable decline in momentum. As students became writers and academics themselves, the radical spirit of the late 1960s found new pathways for expression.

It was apparent by the late 1970s that the latter part of the 1960s had been something of a high tide for counter-hegemonic activism, and that a ‘new sensibility’ had failed to emerge from the exuberance of the counterculture. More recently, some have even argued that rather than posing a threat to capitalism, the ‘new spirit’ of informalariy and rebellion ushered in by the 1960s has in fact served to re-energise the whole enterprise (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). Still, scholars of society and organization have continued to seek out critical perspectives. Appropriately enough, given the assertion of the Frankfurt Theorists that intellectuals themselves could serve as the vanguard for social change (Horkheimer, 2002a: 214), some in the field of organizational theory began to outline an analytical programme that shared the emancipatory ideals and commitment to adapting the insights of Marx, which had inspired the work of the Frankfurt School.

Benson, in his 1977 piece ‘Organizations: A Dialectical View’, sought to steer organization studies away from positivist analyses (that is, traditional theory). Positivist approaches tend to take the status quo as given, rather than something in need of radical transformation (Benson, 1977: 1). Although the term has wider meanings both for the Frankfurt School and in the philosophy of the social sciences, it is the distinction between the non-critical and the critical which is important here. In Benson’s work, and elsewhere, central dimensions of critical theory were called into play, namely ‘social construction/production, totality, contradiction, praxis’ (Benson, 1977: 2). Organizations are seen, not in morphological terms as distinct from the social world as a whole, but as emerging from the same human interactions which Marx saw shaping the social structure. They are elements in the social totality where work and everyday life are inextricably connected. Thus, organizations cannot be analysed in isolation from the dynamic interplay of conflicts and contradictions which characterize wider social processes and phenomena. Organizations are affected by these same contradictions; be they class-based, between competing ethnic groups, or perhaps between ideological tendencies at the level of the state. State-funded health service organizations, for example, may be subject to the imperative of cost-cutting during periods of fiscal crisis, while at the same time being under ideological and cultural pressure to maintain their status as part of a socialized service, or at least be seen as such. These contradictions change over time, hence critical theory’s commitment to situating social analysis within an awareness of social change (Horkheimer, 2002a: 217). Benson’s final dimension, praxis—critical practice, in simpler terms—marks him off as one of a number of writers whose commitment goes beyond organizational analysis as an academic enterprise, and into the realm of emancipatory intent; we recall the words of Horkheimer (2002a: 229): ‘The issue, however, is not simply the theory of emancipation; it is the practice of it as well.’
Burrell and Morgan’s *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, published in 1979, provided a critical survey of the intersections between social and organizational theory, and introduced many scholars to Frankfurt School critical theory in the process. By the mid-1980s, critical scholars of organization were increasingly explicit in their explorations of the potential of critical theory both in terms of methodological and epistemological frameworks, and of the Frankfurt School’s substantive critiques of work and organization under capitalism. Neimark and Tinker (1987) illustrate the use of Adorno’s theory of ‘identity thinking’ (*Adorno, 2005: 74*) in unmasking the ideological forces behind organizational behaviour, which also underlie much mainstream writing on organization and management. According to this theory, identity thinking incorrectly assumes that the object (the thing being studied) directly equates to its concept as understood by the prevailing modes of thought: ‘Identity thinking collapses the diverse characteristics, attributes and circumstances that make “real” phenomena unique into general definitions and unitary systems of concepts’ (*Neimark & Tinker, 1987: 663*).

According to Neimark and Tinker, the complexity of organizational and social life is masked and conflicts, tensions, and power relations are left out of the picture. One example of identity thinking might be the unquestioningly positive attitude towards efficiency on the part of both managers themselves and mainstream theorists of organization (*Neimark & Tinker, 1987: 666*). While efficiency as a concept in its own right has many positive connotations, looked at critically it could be suggested that in capitalist societies ‘efficient’ actually means ‘profitable’, and is often associated (in reality if not rhetorically) with privatization, reductions in service quality to the already disadvantaged, staff cuts, work intensification, and outsourcing to parts of the world with lower wages and little history of labour organization. While efficiency is affirmed as the goal to be pursued, the costs to working conditions, safety, and social cohesion are simply excluded from the discussion; they ‘hide behind’ a concept which, all things being equal, is hard to argue with. Crucially, *non*-identity thinking, like all critical theory, argues that things are far from equal, and that the ways of presenting concepts which tend to be dominant and remain unquestioned, are the ways that best serve the interests of power.

Referencing Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, Shrivastava (1986) also depicts mainstream views of organizational behaviour as serving the interests of those who control organizations. While Neimark and Tinker focused on transaction cost theory, Shrivastava looks upon corporate strategy as a legitimating discourse for actions taken by the managers and executives who control organizations. Nodding towards the fact that much writing on strategy is heavily voluntaristic, Shrivastava argues that research and writing on the subject revolves around the ‘universalization of sectional interests’; that which is good for the corporation and its shareholders is good for society. It also tends to play down or deny contradictions and conflicts, and idealizes the goals of those already in power (again efficiency/profitability is an example), and finally naturalizes the status quo (*Shrivastava, 1986: 367*). Mainstream writing on management and organization is depicted in these accounts as counter to Horkheimer and Adorno’s assertions.
that we should never assume that knowledge is neutral, and that we should always place theories, indeed the theorist, in their actual social context.

Alvesson, writing in 1985, was explicit in his view that critical organization theory was in the first instance ‘Frankfurt-inspired’ (1985: 117). In keeping with this perspective, the position of the individual in relation to the social structure remained a central concern, with organizations featuring as a focal point—the point where individuals come together as subjects whose organizational interactions are part of the dialectical process of creating the social structure in turn. Referring back to Benson’s four principles of dialectical analysis, Alvesson argues for a focus on the organization as the point at which social contradictions meet; something of a microcosm of the social totality—a site of special sociological interest, if you will. Alvesson’s critique centres on the organization as exemplar of the technological rationality that increasingly comes to dominate social life in late modernity. Taking his cue from the Frankfurt School, Alvesson sees this rationality as far from objective. Rather, it serves primarily the priorities of the economic elite, and is antithetical to the interests of workers in organizations, and indeed to society as a whole. As it attains the status of a dominant ideology, technological rationality freezes out the critical voices of the dispossessed, even as, in organizations in particular, it increases levels of exploitation and unhappiness.

Technological rationality is above all economic in character, it is argued. This economic rationality (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992: 458) leads to an ever-increasing drive for organizational efficiency, whatever the cost to workers and society. In organizations, working life becomes more stressful, and health and family life suffer (Alvesson 1987: 231). More widely, environmental concerns are relegated to the status of ‘externality’. As economic rationality encroaches on the previously socialized sector, those who rely on the welfare state, for example, are at increasing risk of harm. Take the case of Mid Staffordshire hospital in the English Midlands. In this instance, a drive to meet financial and other efficiency targets led managers to neglect the actual needs of patients, resulting in hundreds of unnecessary deaths (Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection, 2009). The list of organizations where a blind commitment to efficiency targets has led to social harm is of course, more extensive (see for example the discussion in Ordonez et al., 2009).

Increasingly, critical scholars of organization have focused on organizational culture as a site where the contradictions between technological rationality and real human needs are managed. As capitalism evolved beyond the overtly hierarchical form of the high industrialism of the mid-twentieth century, so did managerial ideologies. Traditional conceptions of authority have given way (Alvesson, 1987: 190); in organizations, one now finds a sense of functional authority which can be legitimized as serving the wider needs of the organization while at the same time taking employees into account as valued ‘team members’. Dissent within organizations can be sublimated through creating a sense of worker autonomy, or if serious enough, couched as irrational and selfish in that it is counter to the interests, not to mention the ‘culture’, of the ‘team’.
Many organizations now seek to characterize themselves, both internally and externally, as committed to employee development and voice, to ethical practices, and to being a ‘great place to work’—indeed, this line is both accepted and reinforced by much mainstream writing and research on organizations and management. Critical scholars of management and organization, however, maintain that the underlying logic of capitalism and organizations remains the same as ever. That being so, technocratic rationality continues to dominate, and the characterization of organizations as democratic communities of fulfilled individuals could be viewed as sophisticated image management at best, or propaganda at worst.

Building on the work of scholars such as Burrell and Morgan, Alvesson, Benson, and others, as well as referring directly to the critical theory tradition, researchers continued throughout the 1990s to place corporate culture and ideology under the lens of critical analysis. By the last decade of the twentieth century, ‘critical management studies’ had begun to emerge as a field in its own right, with the publication of *Critical Management Studies* (Alvesson, 1992) and *Making Sense of Management* (Alvesson, 1996). The later publication of *Studying Management Critically* (Alvesson, 2003) served as a further milestone in the coalescence of scholars from a diversity of disciplinary areas, but all holding to the notion of organization studies as critical, rather than accepting, of the status quo.

The first generation of the Frankfurt School were not the essential touchstone for all, with their most notable ‘inheritor’ Jürgen Habermas increasingly the reference point of choice. The influence of the original Frankfurt School thinkers on Habermas is a matter of record—Habermas was born in 1929, and his post-doctoral studies were undertaken at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt (1956–9) where he worked with Horkheimer and Adorno. Somewhat predictably perhaps, it is also a matter of some debate. Certainly, Habermas has always shared the emancipatory impulse, expressed through theoretical erudition, that is critical theory’s calling card, but in many respects Habermas’s work marks a departure from that of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. A departure, and, some would argue, an advance. Habermas proposes that the ‘first generation’ critical theorists, with their thoroughgoing critique of post-enlightenment pseudo-rationality, run the risk of undermining the possibility of critique *toucourt*. How, he wondered, were ‘the first generation . . . able to step outside of the totality of repressive relations in order to be able to criticize those relations’ (Thompson, 2013: 4)? Habermas’s oeuvre has largely been dedicated to establishing foundations for a critical standpoint in a way that Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer never quite managed. His concepts of ‘lifeworld and system’—outlined in volume two of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1987)—offer a way of understanding the relationship between individual and organizational life which provides useful material to contemporary scholars of organization and society, and is complemented by his even more influential work on communicative rationality. Habermas’s work on ‘universal pragmatics’ is part of his attempt to outline strategies towards achieving a society based on rationally contested norms, with notions of unrestricted communication and ‘discourse ethics’ offering a framework for guiding this contestation.
Habermas’s significance as an individual scholar is such that a proper consideration of his work is beyond the scope of the present chapter, but interested readers may refer to Rasche and Scherer’s piece in this volume as a sensible starting point (see Chapter 8).

The legacy of the Frankfurt School has also become intertwined with that of Michel Foucault. In contrast to Habermas, Foucault would hardly be seen as working in the Frankfurt tradition; his position on the status of knowledge and the status of the subject are distinctive, and the relationship between productive forces and historical development is less explicitly expressed in his work. Still, some argue that his work owes much to both Marx (Marsden, 1993; Olsen, 2004) and the Frankfurt School, and Foucault himself noted this in a lecture in 1983 (McCarthy, 1990: 451). There is a shared focus on the fate of the individual under frameworks of meaning conditioned by post-Enlightenment ‘rationality’, in both Foucault and critical theory, and while the materialism of Marx is not always front and centre in Foucault’s work, its significance should not be dismissed entirely. Importantly, Foucault and the Frankfurt school shared an interest in social control. Although there are very significant differences in their handling of the subject, both suspect stated organizational and social aims such as ‘efficiency’ or ‘progress’ of masking the continued evolution of control and domination.

The study of control and resistance is a key plank in the critical management studies project—although much work in the area has taken a Foucauldian turn, writers such as Fleming (2009) continue to rework the Frankfurt Critique in effective and innovative ways. In the era of the digital economy and its associations with youth and individuality, increasing numbers of companies seek to characterize themselves as democratic utopias by allowing employees to display clothing and behaviours that over the decades have attained a vague sense of rebelliousness—tattoos, colourful dyed hair, etc.—but in reality have long since slipped beyond even the realm of radical chic. Rebelliousness itself is welcomed, the figure of the maverick attains hero-like status in business literature, as long as maverick behaviour extends only so far as ‘creating an innovative way of improving the customer experience’, or the like. Drawing on the work of Marcuse, Adorno, and others, Fleming sees the corporation exercising a double move in relation to non-working life; seeking to defuse its potential oppositionality by co-optation, but also drawing in its truly creative and inspirational elements so that they can be commodified as quickly as possible. Fleming examines the phenomenon of ‘simulated authenticity’ in organizations. With the archetypal post-industrial workplace, the call centre, as his empirical reference point, Fleming depicts corporate exhortations to employees to ‘just be yourself’ as a multidirectional (and insidious) move by capital in pursuit of profit, rather than some eruption of corporate counterculture. Companies create a sense of freedom, informality, and individuality that may be positive to morale at some level, if only by masking the continued existence of hierarchy and inequality. One comes across UK digital media companies who attempt to create a sense of workplace democracy by allowing employees to vote on each other’s pay progression. And yet traditional ownership structures and ultimate directorial control impart a more familiar flavour,
not to mention opacity to proceedings. In these settings, happiness at work is seen as important, and one method of measuring levels of happiness in the organization is to have employees place a ball in one of two buckets as they leave work—one for ‘happy’ and one for ‘unhappy’ (Kjerulf, 2011).

In the digital age then, it’s not difficult to stumble across examples of this sort of attempt to integrate individuality with corporate culture in the most productive ways possible. As online retailer Zappos’ website notes: ‘When you combine a little weirdness with making sure everyone is also having fun at work, it ends up being a win-win for everyone: Employees are more engaged in the work that they do, and the company as a whole becomes more innovative’. But weirdness is OK only up to a point: ‘We’re not looking for crazy or extreme weirdness though. We want just a touch of weirdness to make life more interesting and fun for everyone. We want the company to have a unique and memorable personality’ (Zappos, n.d.). Putting to one side the notion that a company can have a personality, one finds that in the new frontier of corporate freedom and authenticity, there are limits to both. Zappos is also part of the trend of companies encouraging happiness at work. This is to be encouraged partly through creating the sense of the company as ‘family’, an element of corporate culture examined by Casey (1995: 193):

> The family metaphor—that is, the bourgeois family—is the everyday shopfloor organizing principle. It is the family that ensures that everyday organizational procedures are adhered to, that authority is obeyed, and that people carry out their assigned tasks.

It is possible to see parallels with Horkheimer’s much earlier analysis in his ‘Authority and the Family’ (2002b), where the bourgeois family is posited as a key functional element in the development of modern systems of corporate and political authority.

In the happy, familial yet dynamic and innovative new corporate culture, cynicism is seen as a weakness (Fleming, 2009: 30), the ghost at the feast, or rather, at the family dinner table. There are clear parallels here with Adorno’s ‘constant initiation rite’, and of Marcuse’s sense of language closing off the possibilities of critique. This evolving grammar of ersatz conviviality has an aesthetic and affectual dynamic akin to kitsch; ‘When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme’ (Kundera, 1984, cited in Linstead, 2002: 665).

### The Frankfurt School is Dead: Critical Theory and its Discontents

New corporate ideologies are far from total in their effectiveness; it may be more of a case of ‘seeing through and obeying’ (Bernstein, 1991: 12) than sincerely ‘buying in’. For some critics however, some of them on the political left, critical theory is simply too
ready to place ordinary people in the role of dupe—a passive victim of cultural manipulation. Mica Nava, for example, argued that contrary to the apparently dismissive analyses of the Frankfurt School, people in the consumer society are as much active subjects as they are passive conformists (Nava, 1991: 157). In a similar vein, Bottomore, one of the Frankfurt School’s most strident critics, saw the concept of capitalism as a dominant ideology as overplayed, and argued that critical theory failed to take account of the ‘changing balance between acquiescence and dissent’ in society (Bottomore, 2002: 47). Bottomore has in mind the intermittent but significant struggles between the forces of capital and labour that were widespread in Europe from the Second World War, and which at times intersected with the development of mainstream political parties. This is perhaps related to the lack of empirical rigour with which the members of the Frankfurt School approached social analysis, according to Bottomore (2002: 39–41).

Bottomore has argued that the Frankfurt School ignored not only history but ‘largely ignored economic analysis’ as well (2002: 73). More recently, Hassard et al., referencing Bottomore’s foregoing assertion in passing, claim that Adorno and Marcuse have been critical of theories which privilege ‘production over other forms of actions and interaction’ (Best, 1995: 72, cited in Hassard, Hogan, & Rawlinson, 2001: 354). While technically true in the sense that the Frankfurt School writers sought to emphasize the interconnectedness of different social spheres, this comment could be taken to imply that critical theorists play down the importance of work and production in their writings. The Frankfurt School have also been criticized for their neglect of class and class conflict (Bottomore, 2002: 75–6), which was seen by some as both as an unforgivable diversion from Marxist fundamentals and as out of step with the industrial and social conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s.

It is beyond the scope of the current chapter to respond to these criticisms in detail, but it is possible to outline some possible counterpoints. In the case of the Frankfurt School’s characterization of a totally administered society of mass consumption, even sympathetic writers such as Kellner have conceded that their descriptions can sometimes come across as ‘monolithic and puritanical’ (1989: 159). As members of a bourgeois intellectual elite, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse can themselves be situated in a social context that may explain some of their apparent intellectualism (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992: 438). Further, the fact that they were writing in the era of the gulag, Nazism, and McCarthyism (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992: 440) may explain some of their more hyperbolic characterizations. It is the overall aims of critical theory, however, which most clearly relate to their apparent overstatement of social and cultural control. Their descriptions of the administered society can be viewed as sharing the rhetorical drive, indeed purposes, of Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*. Just as the spectre haunting Europe (Marx & Engels, 1996: 2) was used as a rhetorical device rather than a description of supernatural occurrences in London and Paris, so the Frankfurt diagnoses of one dimensionality should be seen more as a statement of political opposition based on prevailing tendencies in society than as a description of social life in its every instance. The critical theorists were mindful that since capitalism had succeeded in achieving a position of dominance in every realm of existence to some extent, an analysis that accounted for the full extent of this
dominance would have the most critical force. This view is partially borne out by the fact that Marcuse in particular became a figurehead for radical movements across Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, Marcuse had seen the radical potential of various radical social groups in his lifetime, and so clearly did not see dissent and resistance as totally absent. For their part, Marcuse and his colleagues could note that the role of the philosopher had always been to subject reality to critical judgement—in whichever way that they saw fit (Marcuse, 1986: 126).

The claims that critical theory fails to ground itself in empirical research, particularly in terms of economics, is open to question. The essence of the criticism, as proposed in particular by Marxists such as Bottomore, is related to the notion that Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse rejected the Marxist idea that capitalism was intrinsically prone to periodic crises driven by its economic structure. As the opening quote of this chapter illustrates, this was not the case. Where the critical theorists did differ from more orthodox Marxian analyses was in their understanding of capital's ability to manage and survive its crises. In the light of historical developments in the past 30 years, their more nuanced take on capitalism's contradictions has fared rather better than those which saw the tide turning against the bourgeoisie, locked in battle with a radicalized working class. The Frankfurt School wished to distinguish their perspectives from the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism, which had come to dominate Soviet thinking, with less than positive historical repercussions.

In more prosaic terms, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse were not economists (although fellow Institute members such as Friedrich Pollock and Henryk Grossman were), and so worked within the fields (philosophy, sociology, literature, *inter alia*) in which they were trained and felt most able to express themselves. In terms of empirical research, even Bottomore gives an account of some of the Frankfurt School's empirical enterprises, although he is quick to note (Bottomore, 2002: 20–1) that these did not always come to fruition. It should be accepted that the critical theorist's 'empirical' programme was less extensive than their more theoretical work, although it could be argued that social theory hardly needs justification as a field alongside others, and within wider disciplines. One might go further and concur with Therborn, who argues that theory is 'not a separate field or a sub-discipline, a form of research-free armchair thinking, but the guiding compass of empirical investigation' (2007: 79). Much of the Frankfurt School's work, although not empirical in the 'scientific' sense perhaps, was based on observations and experiences of everyday life in the societies about which they wrote. This distinction did cause friction with collaborators on some empirical projects. For example, Adorno's unwillingness to accept the quantification of cultural data caused a dispute with eminent social scientist Paul Lazarsfeld in 1939 (Jay, 1996: 222–3). While Lazarsfeld, a fellow émigré and ‘Viennese empiricist’ (Claussen, 2008: 178) had had more time to adapt to the demands of project-based research in the service of government and industry (who called for ‘useable data’ rather than dialectical theory), Adorno spoke disdainfully of his attempts to live the life of a ‘research technician’ (Claussen, 2008: 184).
The charge that critical theory fails to take account of political economy or the politics (indeed experience) of work and production is hard to sustain. Some commentators mistake the Frankfurt School’s dissatisfaction with Marxist orthodoxy, and their existential disdain for work in capitalist society, for a belief that work is not important as an analytical category. A spin through Horkheimer’s ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ (often seen as the founding document of Critical Theory) would reveal this to be categorically false, as would a perusal of his ‘Authority and the Family’, which relates the modern family to the development of systems of production and exchange. Indeed, the Frankfurt commitment to work and labour has recently been discussed as a productive companion to labour process theory by Bradley King (2010: 870).

Similarly, the fact that Adorno and Marcuse in particular observed an integration of the working class into the system of capitalist consumerism does not mean that the category of class was not essential to their analyses. Once again, a reading of the primary texts reveals that although the traditional working class has in empirical reality been successfully dismantled as a focus for political action, this speaks to the success of capital’s ideological machinery, rather than the disappearance of class itself:

This makes it essential to scrutinize the concept of class closely enough for us to take hold of it and simultaneously change it. Take hold of it, because its basis, the division of society into exploiters and exploited, not only continues unabated, but is increasing in coercion and solidity. Change it, because the oppressed today, as predicted by the theory, constitute the overwhelming majority of mankind are unable to experience themselves as a class. (Adorno, 2003: 97)

History has borne out many of the theses of the critical theorists. Global capitalism appears more unassailable now than ever, despite the periodic economic crises which continue to highlight its contradictions. If everyday life in the mass society holds moments of resistance as well as compliance, they have yet to seriously threaten the status quo.

## Conclusion

Although the Frankfurt School appear in critical organization studies texts less frequently than once they did, it is the case that they still offer useful critical perspectives in both epistemological and sociological terms. Scholars wishing to integrate critical theory into organization studies can draw on a great range of literature—from the primary works of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, to the early statements of intent from critical management studies and beyond. Certainly, critical theory is uniquely positioned to take account of the ways in which capitalism evolves, but this potential is currently underexplored.
Perhaps the key development since the heyday of the Frankfurt School has been the rise of neo-liberalism as an ideologically, politically, and economically dominant variant of capitalism. One can find analyses of its inherent contradictions, as well as an unmasking of its ideologies and actions as favouring the already powerful and privileged, across a number of fields, from the radical political geography of David Harvey (2010: 10, 2007), to the field of ‘financialization’ and writers such as Bellamy Foster and Magdoff (2009), Martin (2002), Kotz (2009), and others. Neo-liberalism and the rise of finance capital has been accompanied not only by growing poverty and social inequality, but by increased militarization and repression, all of which is anticipated in the Frankfurt critique (see the introductory section to this chapter). The rise of new forms of social control and repression has been charted by Nancy Fraser, who combines to great effect a Marxist inflected understanding of post-Fordist capitalism with a Foucauldian sense of how the needs of the system shape our everyday lives in increasingly invidious ways (Fraser, 2003).

The hidden dynamics of neo-liberal capitalism are also explored by researchers looking at the intersections of political economy, neo-liberal ideologies, and human rights, including writers such as Naomi Klein (2008) and Watt and Zapeda (2012) whose extraordinary dissection of the effects of neoliberalism on Mexican society takes ‘demystification’ to a frightening new level. Watt and Zapeda expose a ‘society of rackets’ so pervasive that it might surprise even the most cynical observer. In the UK, writers on social policy such as Alison Pollock (2005) and others have laid bare the ‘plot against the National Health Service’ (Player & Leys, 2011) as state and commercial interests converge to form a hidden circuit in the interests of private gain. Never have Horkheimer and Adorno’s aphoristic notions of ‘murky links’ and a ‘society of rackets’ been more pertinent, it could be argued. Schulte-Bockhold (2006) has drawn on the theory of rackets in his research on organized crime and politics, and there is scope for the further elaboration of what remains one of the Frankfurt School’s unfinished projects (Wiggershaus, 1994: 319).

In the study of work and organization, many researchers take an epistemological standpoint which is in line with critical theory, although the intellectual reference points often show that the Frankfurt School do not have a monopoly on critical sociology. In their research on changes to the managerial labour process under the pressures of ever increasing drives for efficiency, Hassard et al. quote Mills’ claim that ‘one of the great tasks of social studies today [is] to describe the larger economic and political situation in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of the individual’ (Mills, 1953: xx, cited in Hassard, McCann, & Morris, 2009: 43). This task was taken particularly seriously by our critical theorists, and a wider reading of their work among already critically minded scholars of organization can only be encouraged.

All of this scholarly work is certainly a form of critical social theory, clearly aimed at explaining how things ‘don’t just happen’. There is scope however, for a more extensive and explicit role for critical theory in the analysis of global neo-liberal hegemony and indeed across a range of issues, from public policy to working life. These critical social and organizational issues are being approached from the perspective of critical theory to
some extent, and such perspectives may yet grow in profile and impact within the field of organization studies.

For those who wish to gear their scholarship towards social justice and freedom, who believe the mechanics of domination are played out both in organizations and in so-called everyday life, and who in fact see little separation between the two in the final analysis, the attractions of critical theory are clear. They will find in critical theory an understanding of the world where the organization is not isolated but is part of a social whole, with all the ideological, economic, cultural, political, and historical conflicts that implies. In an era where organizational culture is something to be deliberately calibrated, monitored, and constructed, the analysis of the place of organizations in the ideological framework of advanced capitalism seems more necessary than ever.

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