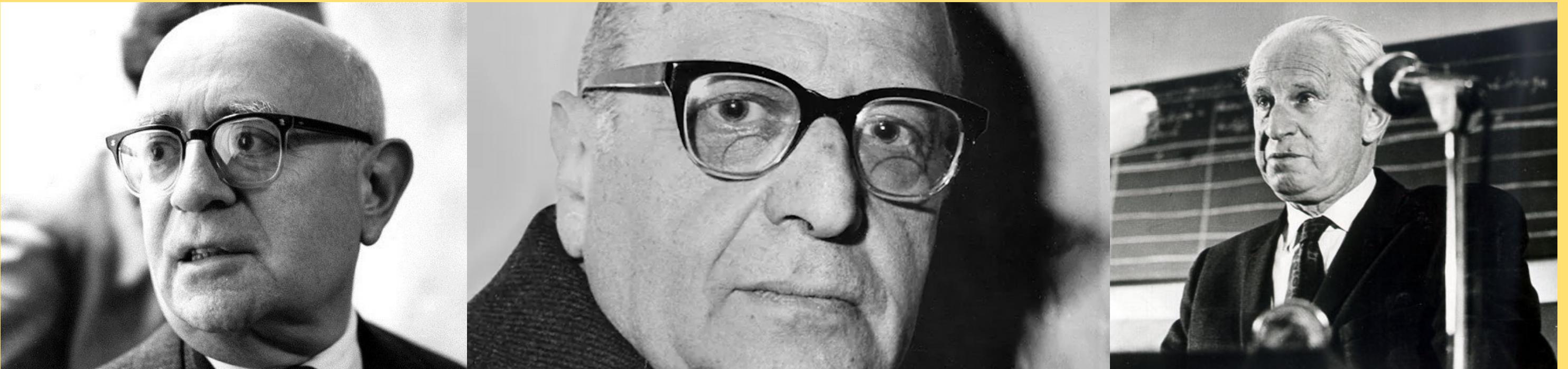


WEEK

2

INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THEORY





AGENDA

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

Reviewing the foundation and importance of The Institute of Social Research

ADORNO & HORKHEIMER

- The Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947)
- Psychology, Mass Production, & Culture

HERBERT MARCUSE & HIS LEGACIES

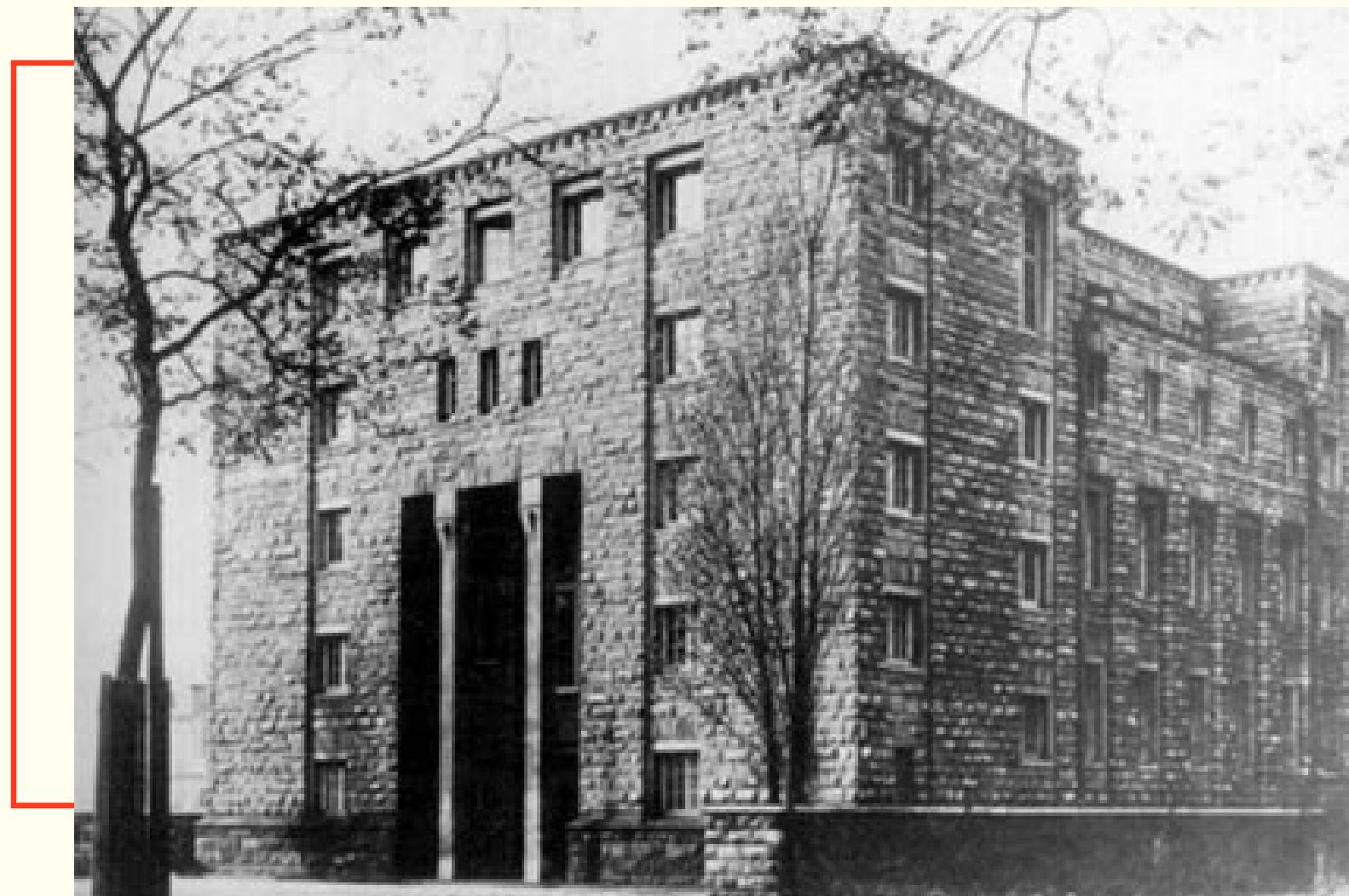
- *Eros and Civilization* (1955)
- Philosopher of the New Left

WALTER BENJAMIN

- The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH, EST. 1923

- The Frankfurt School was founded just before the outbreak of WWII and was a collection of theorists and philosophers who came to the conclusion that the Modern era had not been accurately theorized yet
- Specifically, they were critical of Marx's predictions about the socialist revolution (especially as Stalinism developed)
- In founding the school, the Frankfurters sought to create adequate social theories that would not only describe how Marx was incorrect but deduce from his writings what could be applied to multiple societies
- In other terms, a theory is a set of ideas or a model that can be applied to multiple circumstances and the Frankfurters wanted to find within the writings of Marx, Weber, and Freud the sets of theories that they could use to describe or critique their modern society.
- This is characterized in the 1920s and 1930s as the break between Western Marxism and Soviet Marxism.





THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH, EST. 1923

- Whereas Soviet Marxism had a clear and specific mode of coming into being (the cultural secretary of the USSR, Mikhail Bakhtin would write what was and was not considered Marxist), Western Marxism emphasized ideological inquiry and critique.
- Ideology critique presumes that each piece of culture (book, film, etc.) has preceding it or informing it a particular ideology and it is the critic's duty to unveil this ideology.
- “Traditional and Critical Theory,” Max Horkheimer defined the “critical theory of society” as:
 1. “a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life”;
 2. a theory which condemns existing social institutions and practices as “inhuman”;
 3. a theory which contemplates the need for “an alteration of society as a whole.”
- Like the Sino-Soviet Split, Western Marxism largely relies on Marx's writings (rather than the Soviet interpretation of Marx's writings) as their theoretical jumping-off points. They sought to use his writings not necessarily as political documents but as interpretive theories of society and history (read him like a philosopher rather than a revolutionary). They then asked the question 'does this still apply' 'if so, how' and 'if not, what can we offer in its place'
- Horkheimer: "Thus the critical theory of society begins with the idea of the simple exchange of commodities. . . . The theory says that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates those tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation of the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism"



THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

- "directed above all against the 'barbary' of Nazi Germany (DE 1). The critique takes its cue from the oppression and physical atrocities perpetrated by the regime and seeks to explain these in terms of the wider philosophical background."
- The particular ills identified by Horkheimer and Adorno include the "mythification" of philosophy by thinkers such as Borchardt, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, and Klages, and the use of Nietzsche to justify the Nazis' moral nihilism. In addition to this, the authors' criticism broadens to include features of American capitalism, notably racketeering and other monopolistic abuses, on the one hand, and "amusement" – that is, the ideological dumbing-down of culture perpetrated by Hollywood and the entertainment industry – on the other.
- The authors combat these trends in two ways. One is, as the title of the book indicates, a critical investigation of the notion of "enlightenment." This discussion, which embraces a general analysis of the dangers implicit in enlightenment and specific investigations of two of the fields where enlightenment fails, namely the "culture industry" and anti-Semitism, is the thematic mainstay of the book.



THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

- "in some ways the most striking measures, even though they are described as "excursions," are two adverse readings of classic cultural resources, namely of the *Odyssey* and of de Sade. The *Odyssey* is used to demonstrate that, contrary to German attempts to assimilate heroic culture to myth and legend, the emergence of social actors, of market exchange, and of *homo oeconomicus* is a conscious concern of pre-Hellenic culture, depicted with skill and subtlety by Homer in the *Odyssey*. The essay on de Sade is concerned with the collapse of morality under the impact of enlightenment. The authors seek to demonstrate that the formalized 'I' envisaged by Kantian epistemology reduces to a procedural and ultimately vacuous concept of right action."
- The failure of "Enlightenment" lies in its inability to see that the relation between subject and object is one of mutual giving and taking. The model of a false Enlightenment is provided, above all, by Kant. In Kant's philosophy, the subjects of knowledge and of morality become extensionless centers, abstract geometrical points of reference in systems where truth and falsity are determined exclusively by formal considerations.



THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

- For Horkheimer and Adorno, truth involves awareness of the role taken in it by the subject, not as a paranoid tyrant projecting some rigid system on nature and humankind, but as the actor in a dialogical exchange with reconciliation, not dominion, as its goal. Consciousness, accordingly, has a "course" (DE 160; HGS v, 224). It happens in time, and can vary with the unique events and individuals it engages with. True thinking, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is recognizable precisely in that it can abandon and supersede any previous convictions and conclusions. It does not stand on its imagined insights, but is essentially negative towards its own achievements. Consciousness projects systems, deductions, and conclusions, but reflection is always ready to relativize those conclusions once more. Reflection knows the individuality of the knower and of the known, so it is always ready to revise a stand-point as soon as it has reached it. Anything else is 'madness.' "



THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

- The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s underlying theme is that of alienation. Alienation is the Marxist, psychotherapeutic, or indeed romantic notion that humankind is estranged from the natural world...human beings are doing violence to nature, and ultimately to themselves. Workers spend their lives trapped in occupations they hate, creating products nobody needs and which destroy the environment...Human value is reduced to the values of the marketplace: you are what you earn. The supposed "liberation" represented by the modern epoch boils down to a change from one kind of slavery (being owned by the feudal lord) to another (being enslaved to the need to earn a wage). The consequences of this alienation are self-consuming: the more human beings struggle to maintain their artificial hell, the more they are beset by problems engendered by the struggle itself.
- Finally, they introduce "The Culture Industry", where they argue that popular culture is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods—films, radio programs, magazines, etc.—that are used to manipulate mass society into passivity. Consumption of the easy pleasures of popular culture, made available by the mass communications media, renders people docile and content, no matter how difficult their economic circumstances. The inherent danger of the culture industry is the cultivation of false psychological needs that can only be met and satisfied by the products of capitalism; thus Adorno and Horkheimer especially perceived mass-produced culture as dangerous to the more technically and intellectually difficult high arts. In contrast, true psychological needs are freedom, creativity, and genuine happiness, which refer to an earlier demarcation of



HUSSERL & PHENOMENOLOGY

- The overestimation of science called forth a reaction that appeared justified in the wake of the war. The question of science receded before a crisis of civilization that demanded an explanation of an entirely different sort. Husserl provided the method that would be employed for this purpose by phenomenologists and existentialists such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.
- Husserl called his approach “phenomenology” because he was interested in describing as accurately as possible the “phenomena” of experience. Consider, for example, our perception of an object such as a table. As we walk around it, we see it from different angles. Each perception is a presentation of the self-same table, but each is different.
- We assume normally that the perceptions are held together by the “fact” that they are all attached to a real table out there in the world. Husserl did not entirely disagree, but he argued that this assumption made it impossible for us to appreciate the actual process of organizing perspectives and holding them together in our consciousness. To gain an understanding of the mental process in which consciousness perceives the table in and through its perspectives, we need to suspend the “natural attitude” and attend to the “immanent” structure of experience.
- What is then revealed is the “intentional correlation” of acts of consciousness with their objects. What appears on the one side as an act such as knowing is essentially bound up with an object, the known, and so also for seeing and the seen, remembering and the remembered, and so on. From the phenomenological standpoint acts of consciousness create meaning in experience. The multiple perspectives on the table come together as what we call a “table” and constitute it as such.



INTRODUCING... HEIDEGGERIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

- Husserl's phenomenology led him beyond these initial considerations to a startling paradox. We usually think of consciousness as "in" the mind. In our everyday common sense understanding, the mind is an object in the world that is connected somehow to another object, the body. According to this objectivistic model, we explain our encounter with objects, such as the table, as an interaction between two things in the world, light rays striking the retina. But, Husserl claimed, this causal account does not get us to experience itself. That requires the suspension of the natural attitude with respect to mind and body as well as things.
- Heidegger applied Husserl's method in a new way that bared not just ordinary perception but our human existence as persons. This proved a rather more interesting enterprise. Heidegger began by criticizing Husserl's continual reliance on the language of consciousness. The subject of experience is no kind of mind, even in Husserl's modified formulation. Rather, it is an existing individual, a whole acting self, essentially engaged with a world of objects it encounters in use. Meaning emerges in these encounters.
- The intentional correlation now holds together human being and world in a unity Heidegger called "being-in-the-world." Note that "world" in Heidegger's sense does not refer to nature but rather to something like our notion of a "world of the theatre," a "Chinese world," or the "way of the world." There can be many such worlds, none merely subjective or private, but none absolute and unique either. These worlds are each a meaningful context of action rather than the sum of existing things. Significantly, "world" in this sense cannot be understood without reference to an acting and



HEIDEGGERIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

- Heidegger went on to argue that our way of being in the world is fraught with tension. The things of experience are not simply “out there” waiting for us to find them. For them to be “revealed” as meaningful, we must be drawn to them, preoccupied from out of our concerns. Worlds are thus a function of the future we project for ourselves and the salient objects that emerge on our path to that future. But we are not absolutely wedded to any one future, to any one world. Insofar as we are persons, we are necessarily in a world, but there is no ultimate reason why we must be in this particular world rather than another one with different meanings and structures.
- This indeterminacy is a source of metaphysical anxiety, a kind of existential doubt. There is a gap between self and world into which questions can slip. We are capable of interrogating our world and ourselves. This is no mere accident of our being but is our essential defining characteristic. Heidegger went on to argue that these phenomenological truths are obscured in average, everyday experience. Ordinarily, human existence is sociable and conformist. This “inauthentic” relation to self and world tends toward a leveling down and forgetfulness. Individuals neither doubt nor affirm their own experience but act according to what “they” normally do. They say this, they do that, and so say and do I. I forget that I am a questioning being, a being to whom experience belongs personally and inseparably.
- both Husserl and Heidegger hold that individual experience is an ontological foundation more basic than the nature of natural science. Knowledge in all its forms is derivative not merely in the sense that its claims are validated in experience, but more fundamentally, in that the very act of making claims presupposes the subject’s belonging to a meaningful world. Both Husserl and Heidegger thus deny that a naturalistic explanation of reality can account for the totality of being. There will always be a vital remainder, the very fact of a meaningful world revealed in experience. Marcuse accepted this heritage of phenomenology and challenged the hegemony of science in modern culture and its practical basis, which he called



HEIDEGGER + MARX = MARCUSE

- Heidegger had attempted to uncover ultimate structures of the world as such, leaving the particulars of specific worlds to the side as sociological details. When in the later parts of *Being and Time* Heidegger did refer to these details, he raised them to a higher plane by identifying specific worlds with national communities of meaning, carriers of tradition.
- Marcuse argued that in so doing, Heidegger obscured the divisions within communities. Indeed, from a Marxist standpoint, class divisions are ultimately more significant than nationality since modern capitalism destroys tradition and replaces it with a society based on self-interest. Authenticity in this situation becomes a matter of seizing the historical moment along with one's class in the affirmation of human possibilities against the deadening routines of the existing society.
- *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, was published in 1932.² It is a remarkably rich and complex interpretation of Hegel strongly influenced by Heidegger. But it also departs from Heidegger in addressing the issue of history primarily in terms of Hegelian and Marxist notions of labor as the human power to produce worlds.
- In Hegel's text labor is for the most part only loosely and metaphorically related to actual work in the usual sense of the term. Labor is understood as the act of negating the given reality in the creation of objects or institutions that reflect various aspects of human reality. But despite the vagueness of Hegel's reference to labor, Marx made the most of it and saw in him an important predecessor. Marcuse's appreciation of this Marxist take on Hegel is implicit throughout his thesis, but he gives it a Heideggerian twist.
- This is plausible because labor also plays a role in *Being and Time*. An initial analysis of tool use forms the background to the notion of being-in-the-world. And as Marx would enthusiastically appropriate and narrow Hegel's concept of labor, so Marcuse would adapt Heidegger's concept of worldhood to mesh with his own Marxist approach. The world created by labor is in fact the Heideggerian world of experience awaiting and preparing the authentic act of the human subject whose world it is.



HEIDEGGER + MARX = MARCUSE

- Heidegger worked out his theory of temporality most fully in relation to the individual human being and failed to explain clearly and persuasively how history is constituted at the collective level.
- Here Hegel and Marx offer an important complement and corrective to Heidegger. For them the future is a collective project that emerges from social tensions that themselves reflect different projects borne by different social groups. The progressive projects realize potentials in the present that reflect developing human capacities. This notion of potential became the basis for Marcuse's later theory of the "two dimensions" of society, the dimension of everyday facts and the dimension of transcending possibilities that lead on to higher stages of historical and human development. With this reinterpretation of Hegel, Marcuse prepared his new concept of revolution adequate to the crisis of twentieth-century German society.
- In "Philosophy and Critical Theory", Marcuse defined his version of critical theory. His emphasis was on the fundamental human values that ground the project of critical theory. These values, such as freedom, had been well explicated in conceptual terms in the tradition of Western philosophy, but for the most part philosophy seemed incapable of envisioning how they might actually be realized in social life. Marcuse summarized the commitment of critical theory to this task. Critical theory is identified by:
 1. "concern with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence";
 2. "concern with the potentialities of man and with the individual's freedom, happiness and rights...[F]reedom here means a real potentiality, a social relationship on whose realization human destiny depends";
 3. "the demand that through the abolition of previously existing material conditions of existence the totality of human relations be liberated."



MARCUSE: PROPHET OF THE NEW LEFT

- Taken at its best, the counterculture celebrated a rejection of endless consumerism, of rigid nuclear-family suburban lifestyles, of sexual repression—especially for women, of the fear of intoxication (except for alcoholic excess, still today the one officially approved recreational drug in American culture), of hypocritical churchgoing, and of the social ideologies that affirmed war, racism, and inequality. Without a doubt, the counterculture had its own darker side, in drug excess, in persistent male domination, in “communes” where the old games of leaders and followers were reproduced, in the failure to bridge the racial divide in America or to take up the cause of the poorest and most exploited social strata.
- As a California resident Marcuse had a front-row seat, as it were, witnessing both the triumph and the denouement of this movement. But by 1968 Marcuse was more than a local figure. He had become a household name around the world—when he was already seventy years old!—in the double context of the growing resistance against the war in Vietnam and the “cultural revolution” represented by the student movement on university campuses and the streets of major cities not only in America but also in Europe, Latin America, and Japan.
- For those who knew him one of the most remarkable features of his transformation into a leading figure of the new social movements was the contrast between his position and that of his former colleagues in the Frankfurt School. At the very time Marcuse’s book *One-Dimensional Man* became the “official text” at training sessions for the antiwar activists of the Students for a Democratic Society, Horkheimer and Adorno were nervously hunkered down inside their office building in Frankfurt, distancing themselves from those in the streets who were rallying in their name.

WALTER BENJAMIN

- “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), by Walter Benjamin, is an essay of cultural criticism which proposes and explains that mechanical reproduction devalues the aura (uniqueness) of an objet d’art. That in the age of mechanical reproduction and the absence of traditional and ritualistic value, the production of art would be inherently based upon the praxis of politics.
- Written during the Nazi regime (1933–1945) in Germany, Benjamin’s essay presents a theory of art that is “useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art” in a mass-culture society.
- The subject and themes of Benjamin’s essay: the aura of a work of art; the artistic authenticity of the artefact; its cultural authority; and the aestheticization of politics for the production of art, became resources for research in the fields of art history and architectural theory, cultural studies and media theory.

