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11 Philosophical *Flaschenpost*: Critical Theory and the Transatlantic History of Postwar Philosophy

Abstract: This essay examines Max Horkheimer's provocative engagements with U.S. philosophers, such as Sidney Hook and Ernest Nagel. These efforts spectacularly failed to achieve their desired goals—a fruitful relationship between the Frankfurt School and prominent American philosophers in New York—and instead resulted in permanent animosity. In retrospect, Horkheimer's strategy for winning the support of his new American contacts may seem misguided and doomed, but he was correct to see the common ground between Critical Theory and Marxian pragmatism—even if his rhetorical tactics were risky and misguided. The essay attempts to make sense of Horkheimer's failed gambit, and also seeks to demonstrate how other, more peripheral members of the Frankfurt School, such as Herbert Marcuse, Franz L. Neumann and Erich Fromm, had greater success in gaining traction among U.S. philosophers and social scientists. Their efforts would prove to be more significant in establishing a foundation for Critical Theory's American philosophical reception in the 1960s.

In a letter of June 29, 1940, Max Horkheimer eloquently developed one of the metaphors that became central to the history of Critical Theory in the United States. Writing to the actress and screenwriter Salka Viertel, Horkheimer despaired: “In view of everything that is engulfing Europe and perhaps the whole world our present work is of course essentially destined to being passed on through the night that is approaching: a kind of message in a bottle” (Horkheimer 1995b, 726, translated by the author). In my book, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, I advised readers to abandon this metaphor—to smash the bottle so to speak. In light of the archival research that I had completed, Horkheimer's statement seemed a poetic exaggeration—largely, because there had been an attempted engagement with U.S. thought and culture in the 1930s and 1940s, some of which was quite successful. And yet, there may be something to the Flaschenpost metaphor when describing Critical Theory's encounter with U.S. philosophy. Before examining Horkheimer's failed engagements with his U.S. counterparts, it is important to elucidate the opportunity that did exist and that motivated his continued efforts.

Horkheimer and his colleagues were right in seeing some shared affinities between the Marxian Pragmatism of Sidney Hook and their own work.¹ Operating in the shadows of the Second International, the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein, and the Russian Revolution, another mediated position needed to be found by Hook and the Frankfurt School—navigating between the dialectical materialism subscribed to by orthodox revolutionaries, the accommodation politics of mainstream socialist parties, and the vanguard strategies of the Bolsheviks. The Frankfurt School and Sidney Hook returned to the writings of Marx and the Hegelian legacy that inspired him in order to locate alternatives to the forms of Marxism that were popular in the 1930s. Following in the footsteps of Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács, the Frankfurt School and Hook tried to re-orient Marxism as a social scientific and philosophical method rather than as a doctrine or as a mere political tool for political reform (or coup d'état). Both Hook and the Institute for Social Research, thus, understood Marxism as a socio-philosophical methodology that united philosophy together with social scientific analysis for the purpose of promoting rational and progressive social change through action.

In light of this shared affinity and Horkheimer's repeated attempts to engage with U.S. philosophers in the late 1930s and early 1940s, one must view the early transatlantic, philosophical history of Critical Theory as both a failure, as well as a missed opportunity. There were possibilities for collaboration and the reception of Critical Theory among the NY Intellectuals and among the more left-leaning members of the Vienna Circle, and yet Horkheimer and the philosophers of the Frankfurt School chose a path that in retrospect seems to have doomed their engagements. Methodologically, the Frankfurt School had a markedly different vision of Marxism than Sidney Hook and his friends, and thus the efforts at philosophical engagement led to antagonisms rather than collaboration.

Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School's encounters with Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel, Meyer Shapiro and Otto Neurath, both in person and in print, need to be seen within the context of the Institut's larger ambitions during the mid-1930s—as part of a quest to refine and clarify its methodology. While the Frankfurt School continued to pursue the goal of a comprehensive theory of contemporary society, which Horkheimer had announced as the group's primary goal in his inaugural address as director of the Institut für Sozialforschung in January 1931, he saw his individual contribution to the larger work of the Frankfurt School as an effort

¹ In addition to being an early participant in the circle around *Partisan Review*, Hook also served as an intellectual and political mentor to the New York Intellectuals. During the 1930s, Hook distinguished himself as perhaps the foremost American authority on the writings and legacy of Karl Marx. As such, Hook helped the New York intellectual community grapple with the intricacies of Marxian theory and the dialectic.

at clarifying dialectical logic.² Because Hegel's philosophy, together with its reinterpretation by Karl Marx, lay at the heart of the Frankfurt School's approach to social research, a clarification of dialectical logic held the promise of elucidating the complicated relationship between social philosophy and sociology that formed the basis of their methodology.

From the inception of this work on dialectical logic, Horkheimer began with an effort to sort out the differences between Hegel and Marx. As Horkheimer explained in a letter to his primary sociological collaborator, Erich Fromm, written in 1934,

Currently all my interest is focused... on the conceptual foundations of dialectical logic... I have been preoccupied primarily with the difference between the idealist and materialist dialectic. A particularly important aspect of this difference is the role of the ego... When the materialist turns his attention to the ego, he poses questions that can only be answered scientifically, particularly those relating to the social determinants at a given historical moment. The idealist, on the other hand, rejects this additional complication of the inquiry and attempts to determine the ego more or less speculatively. The transformations, which the ego undergoes, are viewed as *necessary steps of knowledge*. In this way individual insights can be integrated into a theory of the ego as independent and uninfluenced by external factors, and knowledge gains the sacred meaning that it possesses in idealism... The idealist is constantly guided in this thought process by the ideal of attaining a standpoint that is no longer particular and he measures individual insights according to a state, in which human consciousness is *no longer conditioned*, insofar as his knowledge—not necessarily quantitatively, but in terms of what is essential—grasps “the totality.” Thus, idealist philosophy and thought in general is dominated, right down to the smallest steps of its arguments, by an illusion: the spurious concept of an absolute ego... The materialist, on the other hand, negates particular insights by consciously placing them in relation to the given historical situation, which must be practically overcome. (Horkheimer 1995a, 177–188; and see Abromeit 2011, 306 for the English translation)

At the moment that Horkheimer conveyed these insights to Fromm, his conception of Idealism and the flaws with the Idealist conception of the ego were limited to Kantian and Hegelian Idealism. Without the insights of historical materialism, the concepts created by the Kantian and Hegelian egos were self-alienated. Kant's and Hegel's idealist egos distorted conceptions of themselves resulting in similar misrepresentations of their perceptions and historical understandings of the world. Marxism corrected these flaws by making the materialist ego self-reflexively aware of the material conditions shaping itself and its awareness of the world.

2 See Wiggershaus (1994, 177–191) and Abromeit (2011, 301–335).

This letter to Fromm is useful for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that Horkheimer was more critical of Hegel and Hegelian dialectics than many of his contemporaries, especially Hook, recognized. Second, it sets the stage for Horkheimer's subsequent efforts to refine his dialectical logic throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Beginning, as we see with Kant and Hegel, Horkheimer systematically subjected all of the other philosophical schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to both historical materialist and immanent critiques. While he rejected the various manifestations of *Lebensphilosophie*, phenomenology and irrationalism out of hand as retreats into metaphysics with ominous implications for the emergence of Fascism, Nazism and all other modes of contemporary authoritarianism, his analyses of Neo-Kantianism, Pragmatism, and Logical Positivism uncovered forms of self-alienation as problematic as what he had identified in this critique of Kant and Hegel. Horkheimer, thus, placed himself on a path toward telling American Marxists and other left-leaning intellectuals that they were victims of false consciousness. It was a scorched-earth approach to philosophical debate—by seeking to undermine the foundations of their philosophical and social scientific positions, Horkheimer sought to gain converts to “Critical Theory.”

The first publication that articulated a sustained critique of Logical Positivism, as well as the influence that it was beginning to exert over Americans, was “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics.” In an effort to situate his critique of Logical Positivism and its influence on American Pragmatism within the present moment, Horkheimer began with a historical materialist analysis. While he noted the incredible capacity of contemporary science to “offer the most advanced knowledge of nature,” he noted that many of its findings ironically sustained the appeal of the reactionary metaphysics that had given rise to Fascism and Nazism. As Horkheimer explained,

With science alone, mirroring as it does the chaotic reality in nature and society, the dissatisfied masses and thinking individuals would be left in a dangerous and desperate state. Neither their private nor their public store of ideas can do without a covering-over ideology. For this reason, it was necessary to maintain science and metaphysical ideology side by side. (Horkheimer 1989a, 133–134)

The new authoritarianism of the 1920s and 1930s and the metaphysics that sustained it, in Horkheimer's view, was thus a symptom of larger crises within advanced, monopoly capitalism, which scientific inquiry made abundantly evident—but which the public was not willing to see or admit.

Despite the fact that Logical Positivism and the other manifestations of neopositivism were situated as opponents of this reactionary metaphysical revival (Horkheimer 1989a, 139–141), Horkheimer's immanent critique leveled the accusation that the Logical Positivists only partly and half-heartedly combated the present cir-

cumstances, because they did not fully challenge the contemporary moment, as his own philosophical approach did. As Horkheimer explained,

With respect to the future, the characteristic activity of science is not construction, but induction. The more often something has occurred in the past, the more certain that it will in all the future. Knowledge relates solely to what is and to its recurrence. New forms of being, especially those arising from the historical activity of man, lie beyond empiricist theory. Thoughts which are not simply carried over from the prevailing pattern of consciousness, but arise from the aims and resolves of the individual, in short, all historical tendencies that reach beyond what is present and recurrent, do not belong to the domain of science. (Horkheimer 1989a, 144)

Logical Positivism, with its devotion to contemporary applications of the scientific method, could not adequately challenge the new authoritarianism, despite its intentions, because it failed to fully confront the crises afflicting the present economic, social, political, and cultural status quo. These deficiencies not only made Logical Positivism insufficient for accomplishing many of its stated political aims, but they also doomed it to present distorted observations and analyses of present society. As Horkheimer explained,

The conception that science establishes and classifies given data with a view to predicting future facts and that such a function exhausts the task of science, isolates knowledge and fails to remedy that isolation. The consequence is a ghostlike and distorted picture of the world. The empiricists, however, fail to see that this is the case. (Horkheimer 1989a, 154–155)

The conception and application of science touted by the Logical Positivists was thereby self-alienated and represented a further manifestation of the pervasive false consciousness that suffused contemporary society and culture.

If Horkheimer advocated neither metaphysics nor Positivism, then what did he present as an alternative that would accomplish the aims that he articulated throughout “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics?” While his language lacked the precision that was later evident in “Traditional and Critical Theory,” Horkheimer made a preliminary attempt to explain his alternative. He wrote:

Since the development of a higher spontaneity hinges on the creation of a rational community, it is impossible for the individual to simply decree it... The prerequisite of this goal is that the individual abandon the mere recording and prediction of facts, that is, mere calculation; that he learn to look behind the facts; that he distinguish the superficial from the essential without minimizing the importance of either; that he formulate conceptions that are not simple classifications of the given; and that he continually orient his experiences to definite goals without falsifying them; in short, that he learn to think dialectically. (Horkheimer 1989a, 181)

Contemporary defenders of Otto Neurath and his vision of Logical Positivism, like Andreas Vrahimis, fail to appreciate the self-reflective nature of the methodology articulated by Horkheimer. By concentrating on the substance of Horkheimer's critique of Logical Positivism and not the (albeit vague) formulations of an alternative methodology, contemporary commentators, like Vrahimis, falsely accuse Horkheimer of mistakenly thinking that he could fashion a "standpoint above science" from which he could critique it (Vrahimis 2022, 135–160). Such a critique of Horkheimer echoes those formulated by Sidney Hook back in the 1930s and 1940s and similarly relies on a common strategy that had been used to dismiss Hegelian philosophy and its metaphysical residues. The problem with this critique (as articulated by Hook and by Vrahimis) is that it fails to recognize the self-reflexive dimension of Horkheimer's methodology. Rather than formulating a transcendent "God's-eye view" *above* the present situation, Horkheimer saw his methodology as a self-conscious burrowing from *within* contemporary society—a kind of *immanent* "mole's-eye view."³

Part of what hindered Horkheimer's effort in "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics" was his lack of precision in establishing the basis for his alternate philosophical and social scientific methodology. This same weakness was also evident in the face-to-face encounters that took place between members of the Frankfurt School and Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel, Meyer Shapiro and Otto Neurath.⁴ Looking back on these meetings with Horkheimer and the other members of the Institute, Hook recalled his insistence that "either the dialectical method was synonymous with what passed ordinarily as scientific method or that it was a kind of hocus pocus" (Hook 1980, 177). Hook and his American colleagues demanded clarification and concrete examples, which Horkheimer and the other members of the Institute struggled to provide.

To more clearly articulate his position, as well as to broaden his critique to include the adoption of Positivist and Pragmatist methods within the social sciences, Horkheimer attempted to refine and expand his argument with the publication of a true, programmatic statement of the Frankfurt School's practice of dialectical logic and its social scientific applications. The result was Horkheimer's famous article "Traditional and Critical Theory."

While the new article drew an explicit connection between Positivism and Pragmatism, Horkheimer repeated essentially the same epistemological criticisms

³ The formulation of self-reflexive critical social science as a "mole's-eye view" has been inspired by Geo Maher's reflections on post-colonial theory. See Maher (2022).

⁴ See Wheatland (2022, 110–122).

that had appeared in “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics”—just in more provocative terms. As Horkheimer wrote,

Among the various philosophical schools it is the Positivists and the Pragmatists who apparently pay most attention to the connections between theoretical work and the social life-process. These schools consider the provision and usefulness of results to be a scientific task. But in reality this sense of practical purpose, this belief in the social value of his calling is a purely private conviction of the scholar... The scholar and his science are incorporated into the apparatus of society; his achievements are a factor in the conservation and continuous renewal of the existing state of affairs, no matter what fine names he gives to what he does. (Horkheimer 1989b, 196)

Despite the fact that Logical Positivists, like Neurath, and Pragmatists, like Hook, shared similar views regarding the constitution of contemporary society, their focus on utility disclosed the fact that both philosophical schools were un-self-reflexive products of a monopoly capitalist society and thereby contaminated by its ideology. As Horkheimer stated more explicitly than he had previously, “The false consciousness of the bourgeois savant in the liberal era comes to light in very diverse philosophical systems” (Horkheimer 1989b, 198). The truth claims made by Positivism and Pragmatism were epistemologically flawed (self-alienated), because these claims were distorted by the ideology of monopoly capitalist society.

While his critique was not particularly new, he did break new ground in seeking to provide the specificity that had been absent in his prior attempts to articulate an alternative philosophical and social scientific methodology that would address the concerns expressed by his American interlocutors. While “traditional theory” uncritically accepted the ideology and social realities of monopoly capitalism, Horkheimer insisted that “critical theory” could begin with the questioning of the autonomous ego at the core of Positivist and Pragmatic epistemologies. As Horkheimer explained,

Bourgeois thought is so constituted that in reflection on the subject which exercises such thought a logical necessity forces it to recognize an ego which imagines itself to be autonomous. Bourgeois thought is essentially abstract, and its principle is an individuality which inflatedly believes itself to be the ground of the world or even to be the world without qualification, an individuality separated off from events. The direct contrary of such an outlook is the attitude which holds the individual to be the unproblematic expression of an already constituted society... Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature. The subject is no mathematical point like the ego of bourgeois philosophy; his activity is the construction of the social present. Furthermore, the thinking subject is not the place where knowledge and object co-

incide, nor consequently the starting point for attaining absolute knowledge. (Horkheimer 1989b, 210–211)

By adopting a critical stance toward subjectivity itself, Horkheimer articulated the first step in his negativistic self-reflexive, self-critical methodology that held the promise of eventually overcoming the false consciousness afflicting both Positivism and Pragmatism. In his view, the Positivists and the Pragmatists, with their naïve belief in the autonomous subject, created a false narrative of scientific objectivity and imagined that they studied the world from the “God’s-eye view” that they falsely attributed to him.

Unlike Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács, who were important influences on both Sidney Hook and the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer drew a distinction between his Critical Theory and their Western Marxist approaches to philosophy. While Hook, like Korsch and Lukács, continued to see the subject position of the proletariat as crucial for the social, political, economic, and intellectual liberation from the Bourgeoisie, Horkheimer rejected the subject-object identity theory inherent in this hope (Horkheimer 1989b, 213–214). Rather, Horkheimer saw the liberation from false consciousness as an activity to be pursued by the critical intellectual. As Horkheimer explained,

The social sciences take human and nonhuman nature in its entirety as given and are concerned only with how relationships are established between man and nature and between man and man. However, an awareness of this relativity, immanent in bourgeois science, in the relationship between theoretical thought and facts, is not enough to bring the concept of theory to a new stage of development. What is needed is a radical reconsideration, not of the scientist alone, but of the knowing individual as such... The classificatory thinking of each individual is one of those social reactions by which men try to adapt to reality in a way that best meets their needs. But there is at this point an essential difference between the individual and society. The world which is given to the individual and which he must accept and take into account is, in its present and continuing form, a product of the activity of society as a whole. The objects we perceive in our surroundings—cities, villages, fields, and woods—bear the mark of having been worked on by man. It is not only in clothing and appearance, in outward form and emotional make-up that men are the product of history. Even the way they see and hear is inseparable from the social life-process as it has evolved over the millennia. The facts which our senses present to us are socially performed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity, and yet the individual perceives himself as receptive and passive in the act of perception. (Horkheimer 1989b, 199–200)

Only a “critical theory,” through its thoroughgoing negativity toward the status quo and all of its complex consequences, possessed the potential for liberating human

beings from the pervasive forms of reification reinforcing the false consciousness of monopoly capitalist ideology.

The obvious question is why did Horkheimer select such a high-risk strategy in these two crucial articles and in his personal dealings with American philosophers? Horkheimer could have taken a more diplomatic approach in presenting the work of the Frankfurt School to US colleagues. He could have sought to build more cordial and constructive relations by emphasizing the common ground that the Institute shared with American scholars and academic institutions. The Frankfurt School had already practiced such diplomacy when pursuing the successful affiliation to Columbia University's Sociology Department that was finalized in 1934. In fact, their new Columbia colleagues appear to have mistaken them for a cutting-edge center for empirical sociology. Rather than presenting their work as a challenge to prevailing sociological trends and methodologies in the United States, the Frankfurt School endeavored to demonstrate how much their work shared in common with American social research.⁵

Such diplomacy was notably absent in the Frankfurt School's approach to American philosophers. By contrast, Horkheimer sought a winner-take-all debate with his philosophical colleagues. The obvious down-side to this more confrontational approach to U.S. philosophers seems obvious. By potentially offending guests, such as Hook, Nagel, Shapiro and Neurath, through subjecting their philosophical positions to immanent and historical materialist critiques, Horkheimer risked transforming the Frankfurt School's most likely U.S. philosophical sympathizers into enemies. Not only did he accuse them of epistemological self-delusion, but he also accused them of ideological blindness and political naivety. If the Frankfurt School understood how to successfully navigate U.S. academic and American intellectual networks, why did they not replicate their successful strategy that had been deployed to American sociologists?

While Horkheimer largely outsourced the responsibility for the Institute's initial networking efforts with American sociologists, Horkheimer took personal responsibility for the Frankfurt School's approach to U.S. philosophers. The Institute for Social Research was a multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to the analysis of contemporary society. As such, each member had areas of specialization. For example, while scholars such as Erich Fromm and Franz L. Neumann spearheaded work within the social sciences, colleagues such as Leo Löwenthal, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno concentrated on contemporary culture. Although all members of the Institute had training in philosophy, the expert within the field was initially Horkheimer, who was later supported by Herbert Marcuse

⁵ See Wheatland (2009, 35–60).

and Theodor W. Adorno. Thus, Horkheimer personally shaped the strategy used in the Frankfurt School's approaches to American philosophers. While Horkheimer's handling of the Frankfurt School's interactions with US philosophy in the 1930s and 1940s seems bewildering when taken at face value, his approach makes sense when considered in light of his own development as a philosopher.

As John Abromeit detailed in his superb intellectual biography of the young Horkheimer, his philosophical orientation, which remained strikingly consistent once formed, arose from his confrontations with Schopenhauer, Neo-Kantian Positivism, Phenomenology, and Marxism.⁶ His views developed in critical opposition to the major philosophical trends that he encountered as a student.

Like so many other Germans of his generation, Horkheimer's intellectual formation was shaped by the First World War. It helped to illuminate the authoritarianism and brutality that lay beneath the surface of Wilhelmine society. In response, Horkheimer developed the aesthetic sensibilities of a radical Bohemian and developed a life-long fascination with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer.

As Horkheimer commenced his university studies, his identification with aesthetic radicalism diminished and his interest in Marxism flourished. Although Horkheimer stayed clear of organized political movements, he supplemented his formal education in philosophy and Gestalt psychology with participation in Marxian student reading groups. Thus, Horkheimer eschewed the revisionist Socialism of the SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*), as well as the Leninism of the emergent KPD (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*). At the same time that his extra-curricular reading and discussions provided him with a capacious knowledge of Marxian theory, his academic studies familiarized him with both Positivism and phenomenology. Horkheimer's philosophical mentor, Hans Cornelius, was a specialist in Neo-Kantianism and its intersection with Gestalt psychology, but he was also a keen student of mathematics, physics, biology and the arts. In fact, his philosophical commitment to Positivism was deeply enriched by his knowledge of these other fields, and he encouraged Horkheimer to follow in his own footsteps. Cornelius, also, encouraged Horkheimer to briefly study with Edmund Husserl to gain exposure to phenomenology.

Horkheimer did, indeed, accept the guidance of Cornelius. He accepted Cornelius's training in Positivism within philosophy and the social sciences and traveled to audit lecture courses with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Privately, however, Horkheimer developed a critique of this formal, philosophical education that was shaped by the lingering influence of Schopenhauer combined with his developing knowledge of Marx and Hegel. As Alfred Schmidt has observed,

⁶ See Abromeit (2011, 27–184).

Horkheimer's thinking maneuvers from the outset between two fronts: against meaning-constitutive, dogmatically proclaimed metaphysics, and against anti-conceptual positivism, which abstractly denies any meaning whatsoever that extends beyond the here and now. For Horkheimer, just as thought cannot be restricted to immediate utility, so there can be no pure desire for knowledge, removed from material reality. Those who pretend to pursue a 'disinterested striving for truth' are laboring under an ideologically loaded 'philosophical delusion.' Thought pursued 'for thought's sake' has 'lost its sense, which is to be a means of improving the human condition.' Moreover, such a 'pursuit of truth' contradicts its own claims inasmuch as 'it necessarily replaces truth with a phantom: the absolute, i.e. transcendental truth.' (Schmidt 1993, 27)

The conception of philosophy that Horkheimer developed during his years as a university student took shape as an immanent, historical materialist critique of the Positivism, Phenomenology and metaphysics that he had studied with his formal mentors, and this critique was inspired by the extra-curricular reading from the same period. It would appear that Horkheimer sought to guide his American colleagues through a similar philosophical conversion experience.

Horkheimer's correspondence from the late 1930s and 1940s makes clear that he understood the magnitude of his miscalculation and failure with American philosophers. At least part of the problem, he attributed to his lack of ability with English and American academic language. As Horkheimer explained in a letter to Friedrich Pollock,

... in addition to the usual dullness and naivety of such documents, our presentations express a certain perplexity due to our inability to master the English style of thinking and writing... With regard to myself, I become more and more aware of my utter inability to do such things. This language has developed into a tool by which you can point to things which you already know. It does not enter into an interaction with the object. Never is the word understood as reflecting the nature of the object, nor is the experience of the object shaped by the intellectual potentialities inherent in the particular word expressing the object. The relation of the word and thing, of the sentence and the subject matter, is a purely mechanical one. Speech must be to the point. In our case this means that we must show how far we have revealed new facts or organized old ones in such a way that the knowledge gained by them can be put to a new use. Wherever the tool of language and style has been adapted so well to reality, the scientific and business methods of speaking and writing are so highly developed that each empty promise to deliver new facts or new uses or to show new pragmatic possibilities is immediately noticed in how you express yourself... Industrial monopolism which has superseded the poor old, half natural techniques of buying and selling in all fields, has changed the character of language altogether. It has eliminated the last metaphysical elements. A man who would take ideological statements at their surface value, whether he would do so in

order to believe them honestly once and for all, or to refute them as lies, would not be an idealist, but would simply misunderstand the meaning of the words.⁷

Self-censorship was a related, but somewhat different, source of linguistic troubles in the United States. Members of the Frankfurt School famously wrote and spoke in “Aesopian language.” Fearing political persecution in America, just as they had suffered in Germany, Horkheimer forbid members of the Frankfurt School from involving themselves in political activity and subjected their work to careful censorship of overtly Marxist terminology (Marcuse and Habermas 1978–1979, 129–130). Although it is easy to mistake such concerns as paranoid, one must remember the political circumstances facing a group of German-Jewish émigrés during the 1930s and 1940s. The Institute was a frequent target of government investigations, and its members were aware of them. During the early years at Columbia, the offices on 117th Street were visited by German-speaking, New York police detectives searching for Nazi sympathizers within the German community (Löwenthal 1995, 747–752). Later the Institute was frequently monitored by the FBI resulting from anonymous accusations regarding Communist sympathies among the group’s members.⁸ The sheer bulk of the FBI files suggests that Horkheimer had good reason to forbid political activity. Harsher repercussions likely would have resulted had Horkheimer’s warnings been ignored. Nevertheless, Horkheimer limited the Frankfurt School’s ability to express itself and its approach to philosophy by limiting the manner in which its members articulated and deployed the Marxian concepts underlying their thought.

While Horkheimer’s efforts with American philosophers never recovered from his initial missteps and a true intellectual migration of Critical Theory to the world of American philosophy did not commence until the rise of the Frankfurt School’s fame in the 1960s, the ground for this later U.S. philosophical reception of Critical Theory was indirectly laid by more marginal members of the Institute, like Herbert Marcuse, Franz L. Neumann, and Erich Fromm. In one way, the work that they did to prepare the way for the eventual American reception of Critical Theory was entirely consistent with the methodological visions promoted by Horkheimer in the 1930s. Although the work of Neumann and Fromm did not fit

7 Horkheimer to Friedrich Pollock, November 28, 1943, Max Horkheimer Archiv, series IX, box 86, document 10b. Frankfurt am Main.

8 Heavily redacted evidence of these investigations is contained in the files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington D.C. See FBI subject files on Theodore Adorno (file numbers 100–106126–12; 100–106126–24; and 100–106126–30), Erich Fromm (file number 105–112622), Max Horkheimer (file number 61–7421), and Herbert Marcuse (file number 121–24128). These materials were obtained by a request from the FBI through the Freedom of Information Act.

comfortably within the field of philosophy and was better suited to political theorists, sociologists, and psychologists, it remained aligned with the methodological vision that Horkheimer developed. In articulating his formal articulation of a “Critical Theory,” Horkheimer made an important contribution to the invention of social theory. In this sense, one can make the claim that Horkheimer, by expanding the domain of philosophy in the 1930s, did make room for his colleagues, Neumann and Fromm to more diplomatically and successfully find an audience and to begin to develop the types of collaborations that had been originally sought in the 1930s.

Herbert Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution* merits its own reception history. Perhaps no work by a member of the Frankfurt School accomplished more philosophical heavy-lifting on behalf of the promotion of Critical Theory in America. In part, the book was inspired by the frustrations that Horkheimer experienced in the late 1930s. Part of the struggle that Horkheimer encountered in articulating the Frankfurt School’s methodology resulted from American perception of the work of Hegel. When the Institute arrived in America, many American scholars, like John Dewey, George Santayana and Carl Mayer, had grown to see the philosophy of Hegel as hopelessly reactionary and proto-Nazi.⁹ Because so much of the Frankfurt School’s methodology traced its roots back to Hegel, this perception was an obstacle for the case that they made on behalf of Critical Theory.¹⁰ In the aftermath of their failed encounters with Sidney Hook, it became apparent to Marcuse that this image of Hegel needed to be combated by carefully explaining Hegelian philosophy to a U.S. audience. *Reason and Revolution* was dedicated to this cause, and it succeeded in accomplishing its author’s ambitions. Because of its novelty, density, and complexity, however, its effects were not seen immediately. Instead, *Reason and Revolution* slowly gained an audience of Americans curious about Hegel, Marx and the connections between the two—and this audience was ready to examine Critical Theory on its own terms when the global student movement brought the Frankfurt School to international, popular attention. By rehabilitating Hegel and his methodology, Marcuse was able to refashion the foundation on which Critical Theory had been built thereby altering the way it was received in the 1960s and 1970s by American philosophers and intellectual historians.

Franz L. Neumann, by contrast, produced work in the 1940s that served as an object lesson for American scholars in the social sciences and humanities who sought to take issues like ideology and power more seriously in a monopoly capitalist world. He avoided the epistemological controversies that Horkheimer pro-

⁹ See Dewey (1915), Santayana (1916), and Mayer (1942). Also see Harrelson (2012–2013) and Kaag and Jensen (2017).

¹⁰ The challenge was acknowledged by contemporary US reviewers of *Reason and Revolution*. See Herz (1942).

voked by diplomatically articulating the methodology for his works of the 1940s in a manner that antagonized no one. Instead, he emphasized how much his thought shared in common with trends within American academia enabling his work to stand on its own merits and to function as an inspiration for American readers.

In a rare transcript of a discussion protocol from 1941, Neumann explicitly pondered the questions surrounding the Frankfurt School's methodology and the challenges to its American acceptance while still a member of the Institute.¹¹ Horkheimer set the terms of the discussion by characterizing the small and uncertain opening he thought available for securing support from American foundations. They were evidently no longer satisfied with "empiricism" alone, he noted, but increasingly recognized the importance of "theoretical viewpoints." Yet American social science in general—and presumably the evaluators for the foundations—also insisted that theoretical claims were "hypotheses" that required verification by empirical research, a methodological conception that was antithetical to that of the Institute. The primary question of the consultation was whether the group could explain its method so as to overcome the obstacles and to seize the opportunity that Horkheimer foresaw.

Strikingly, Horkheimer's opening statement at the 1941 discussion was interrupted by Neumann twice. As soon as Horkheimer said that they were expected to supply an explanation of their method, Neumann interjected that the explanation must not appear Marxist. Moments later when Horkheimer referred to the empirical testing of hypotheses expected of them, Neumann moved the discussion towards an examination of this conception. Making his own assessment of American social scientific trends, Neumann stated that "[T]he general consensus is that it is necessary to have a working hypothesis, but it is not known how this can be discovered" (Horkheimer et. al. 2012). Julian Gumperz, Felix Weil, Herbert Marcuse, and T. W. Adorno all disputed Neumann's characterization. Each of Neumann's challengers fell back on the Empiricist, Positivist and Pragmatist stereotypes that had been common in the Institute since Horkheimer's "Traditional and Critical Theory"—in an effort to be unbiased, Americans avoided hypotheses altogether or they developed functional hypotheses aimed at achieving limited but instrumentalist goals. Citing the examples of Thorsten Veblen, Robert Lynd, and Max Lerner, Neumann made the case that things were changing and that the Institute's old stereotypes of "traditional theory" had to be reconsidered—and thus a clearer statement of the Institute's methodology was necessary (Horkheimer

11 See Horkheimer et. al. (2012).

et al. 2012).¹² Following Neumann's lead, Horkheimer declared that "[I]t would never occur to us to construct a hypothesis because we find a quite specific state of the question [*Fragestellung*] already given... We would rather revert to certain conceptions of society that we already possess" (Horkheimer et al. 2012). In an effort to anticipate the likely American skepticism to Horkheimer's impulse to simply defend Critical Theory, Neumann tried to imagine the objections of US social scientists: "what is correct about the theory on which you base yourselves? To come to such an understanding with the American who does not accept the theory is very difficult" (Horkheimer et al. 2012).

Neumann imagined a statement of methodology less strident and less philosophical than Horkheimer and the other members of the Institute were advocating. As Neumann suggested,

This is not about working out our own method but about the question, "How do I tell it to the children?" Until now we have been satisfied to say that we seek to integrate all the social sciences. That does not suffice. The question is whether we can present our method so as to attack the hypothesis-fact problem. We distinguish ourselves from sociology in that we view phenomena as historical phenomena, which Americans do not do. We must emphasize that we are not engaged in sociological but in social-scientific work, and we must explain this. The difference is enormous, and we must show this. (Horkheimer et. al. 2012)

History, as Neumann noted years later in his autobiographical contribution to a collection of essays dedicated to reflecting on the intellectual migration of European thought to the United States,¹³ was the key to allowing the European social theorist to gain traction in America.¹⁴ It avoided the thorny question of Marx, and yet developed an epistemological vocabulary true to the Institute's theory that simultaneously could be readily explained and defended to U.S. scholars. Neumann contended that persons like himself, trained in the German tradition, were able to achieve two things. First, they brought skepticism about the ability of social science to engineer change. But more important, they attempted to "put social sciences research into a theoretical framework" (Neumann 1953, 24). By overstressing the significance of empirical data collection and ignoring theory, Neumann argued that Americans made themselves vulnerable to the following criticisms:

¹² It is important to note that Neumann had reviewed some of these new social scientific trendsetters that he directly referenced in the "Methods Discussion." See Neumann (1939a) and Neumann (1939b).

¹³ See Neumann (1953).

¹⁴ Historians of sociology confirm Neumann's insight about the value and appeal of historicism in 1940s America, especially as publicized by the Institute's influential ally, Robert S. Lynd. See Steinmetz (2007).

... that the predominance of empirical research makes it difficult to see problems in their historical significance; that the insistence upon mastery of a tremendous amount of data tends to transform the scholar into a functionary; that the need for large sums to finance such enterprises tends to create a situation of dependence which may ultimately jeopardize the role of the intellectual as I see it. (Neumann 1953, 24)

Despite these reservations, Neumann did see some merits in the American approach—"the demand that scholarship must not be purely theoretical and historical, that the role of the social scientist is the reconciliation of theory and practice, and that such reconciliation demands concern with and analysis of the brutal facts of life" (Neumann 1953, 24–25). For Neumann, the full understanding of the "brutal facts" required that they be put in a context of a historical theory that comprehended both past developments and present potential for the future, and the knowledge of the "brutal facts" precluded an illusory projection of that future. Even theoretically unsatisfactory empirical inquiry could be adapted for purposes of the more critical view, as long as the "facts" it examined did in fact bear on the course of development.

Neumann's classic book, *Behemoth*, is an object lesson in the approach to methodology that Neumann envisioned and for which he advocated. *Behemoth* analyzed the "brute facts" of the contemporary moment by accumulating empirical data that was interpreted in relation to its theoretical and historical working "theses" about late capitalist society. While *Behemoth* relied on a combination of American and European research techniques, it avoided the challenge of "telling it to the children" by way of avoiding any discussion of its own methodology. The closest that Neumann came to disclosing the book's methodology arose when he told his readers that it was essential to examine the ideology of National Socialism in relation to its underlying factual realities. As Neumann wrote,

When we read Plato and Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Marsilius of Padua, Hobbes and Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, we are fascinated as much by the inner beauty of their thinking, by their consistency and elegance, as by the way their doctrines fit in with sociopolitical realities. The philosophical and sociological analysis go hand in hand. National Socialist ideology is devoid of any inner beauty... The immediate and opportunistic connection between National Socialist doctrine and reality makes a detailed study of the ideology essential. Ordinarily, we must reject the notion that sociology can determine the truth or falsity of a system of ideas by examining its social origin or by associating it with a certain class in society. But in the case of national socialist ideology, we must rely on sociological methods. There is no other way of getting at the truth, least of all from the explicit statements of the national socialist leaders. (Neumann 1944, 37)

Neumann articulated a social theoretical methodology in harmony with Critical Theory. While avoiding the provocative attacks against Positivism and Pragmatism

that Horkheimer believed were necessary, Neumann elected to not antagonize his readers. Rather he amassed a wealth of social facts to demonstrate that National Socialism had no coherent political theory and to show that the Third Reich could not be called a state. *Behemoth* was an immanent critique of Nazi ideology that was painstakingly supported by a historical materialist analysis of German society from the Wilhelmine Empire up through the Second World War. Its novel approach to social research was deeply influential to important mid-century social researchers, like C. Wright Mills, who shaped the mindsets and attitudes of young readers of the 1960s who would re-discover the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School.¹⁵ Through the inspiration of Critical Theory that came through the example of *Behemoth*, Mills taught a young generation of Americans that American society was not what it appeared and that the status quo of the 1960s needed to be more critically interrogated if a better society was to be possible. The readers of C. Wright Mills became some of the first U.S. readers and practitioners of Critical Theory during its second American wave in the 1960s and 1970s. It was this new generation of students of Critical Theory who rediscovered it and began applying it to American philosophy.

Although Erich Fromm is often forgotten by most students and scholars of Critical Theory, he was perhaps the most important figure within the Frankfurt School during the 1930s and had the largest reception by a U.S. audience. Like Franz L. Neumann, who only overlapped briefly with Fromm at the Institute, Fromm was a more astute reader and observer of trends within American academia. As a practicing psychoanalyst and sociological researcher, Fromm developed relationships with the emerging Neo-Freudian network in the United States and closely monitored the work of American social scientists grappling with issues comparable to the Institute's studies of authoritarianism and political attitudes among working class people during the Great Depression. Thus, Fromm was positioned to become a key strategist in finding a U.S. home for the Institute for Social Research and was integral in preparing the written materials that were shared with American colleges and universities. Unlike Horkheimer, Fromm did not deride empiricism and, in fact, relied on empirical social science to support his integration of psychoanalysis and sociology.¹⁶

Once the Frankfurt School relocated to Columbia University, the entire staff of the Institute taught courses within the extension school, participated in the sociology department's faculty seminars, and hosted their own seminars that were open to interested faculty and graduate students throughout New York, but

¹⁵ See Geary (2009) and Miller (1994).

¹⁶ See Wheatland (2009, 43–60).

Erich Fromm was the only figure from the Institute who welcomed American collaborators to join in its ongoing research. Thus, Columbia faculty, like Robert Lynd, Robert MacIver, Theodor Abel, Charles Beard, and Samuel Lindsay, became closely involved with advising and assisting the Frankfurt School, while graduate students, like Mirra Komarovsky, Moses Finkelstein, and Benjamin Nelson, joined Fromm's research teams and helped translate Institute writings into English. Fromm even initiated collaborations between the Institute and scholars at other social research institutions in the New York area (such as Paul Lazarsfeld at the University of Newark and Ruth Monroe at Sarah Lawrence). As a result, Fromm rapidly emerged in the eyes of most Americans as the public face of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s.¹⁷

A complicated set of intertwined factors led to Fromm's acrimonious split with the Frankfurt School in 1939. Correspondences suggest that part of the problem arose from Horkheimer's jealousy, money problems, and growing mistrust of Fromm, but this was deepened by significant intellectual differences over the Institute's adherence to psychoanalysis. Fromm's integration of psychoanalysis and sociology, as well as his contacts with Neo-Freudians, such as Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan, helped to precipitate Fromm's questioning of psychoanalytic drive theories. While his colleagues within the Frankfurt School remained convinced by the biological determinism and universality of human psycho-sexual development, Fromm grew to emphasize the mediating and decisive role played by society and social experiences. Theodor W. Adorno's arrival in New York and his presence within the Institute intensified these tensions.¹⁸

Following Fromm's break with the Frankfurt School, his relationships with American scholars and public intellectuals deepened. No longer constrained by Horkheimer's cautiousness and jealousies, Fromm grew closer to Neo-Freudians, like Horney and Sullivan, and became a regular presence within the "Culture and Personality Movement," which enabled him to share his ideas and gain inspiration from cultural anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir.¹⁹ These relationships proved to be crucial as Fromm continued work on a project begun in 1936. Fromm sought to elaborate and develop many of the ideas that formed the core of his articles and studies undertaken with the Institute for Social Research—his conception of social character and the role that the family and other societal institutions played in its formation, his reflections on matriarchal and patriarchal societies, and particularly his explorations

¹⁷ See Wheatland (2009, 43–81, 142–158).

¹⁸ See Friedman (2013, 56–62), McLaughlin (2021, 70–71), and Wheatland (2009, 81–87).

¹⁹ See Friedman (2013, 76–78).

of authoritarianism and sado-masochism in the era of monopoly capitalism. The result was his book, *Escape from Freedom* (1941). With the assistance and inspiration of his American friends, *Escape from Freedom* resonated with a wide reading audience in the United States and has sold more than five million copies since the date of its publication. It made possible not only Fromm's widespread introduction to the American public, but also may represent the first accessible and widely-read articulation of Critical Theory in the United States. While his former colleagues from the Frankfurt School privately differed with him on some of the book's central findings relating to psychoanalysis, as well as his nostalgic position toward the medieval, pre-modern world that Fromm derived from Jacob Burckhardt and Johan Huizinga, Fromm's focus on modern consciousness, alienation, reification, authoritarianism, and the transformation of classical bourgeois society precipitated by the rise of monopoly capitalism were unmistakably aligned with the early Critical Theory of both Horkheimer and the Institute. This should come as no surprise, of course, because Fromm had been crucial in helping the Frankfurt School develop these early positions in what came to be called "Critical Theory."

Like Neumann, Fromm was careful to avoid fully articulating the role that Marxism played within his thought. A careful reader familiar with the writings of the Young Marx and Western Marxism would easily detect it, but it would be hard for other readers to discern. Fromm also chose a more diplomatic strategy in presenting the relationship between his own approach to social research and those that he was encountering in the United States. In a manner similar to Neumann's *Behemoth*, Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* represented an integration of European social theory and the American empirical approach to the social sciences that was justified and explained through another vague evocation of history. In a passage in which Fromm succinctly articulated his central methodology and its connection to his conception of the social character, Fromm wrote:

But man is not only made by history—history is made by man. The solution of this seeming contradiction constitutes the field of social psychology. Its task is to show not only how passions, desires, anxieties change and develop as a *result* of the social process, but also how man's energies thus shaped into specific forms in their turn become *productive forces, molding the social process*. (Fromm 1969, 28)

For Fromm, the self and society functioned in a symbiotic relationship. While he could have disclosed his debt to Marx and the conception of historical materialism, Fromm recognized that he might reach more readers by foregoing such explicit references and instead by describing his approach to social research in simpler, albeit less precise, language.

Until the meteoric rise of Herbert Marcuse in the mass media during the Spring of 1968, Erich Fromm was the best-known figure from the Frankfurt School

in the United States. *Escape from Freedom* launched his career as a public intellectual and enabled him to influence scholars, political leaders, and the general public in the United States. Perhaps most significant for Fromm's widespread reception was his relationship with David Riesman. Riesman openly expressed his intellectual and personal debts to Fromm, and his book, *The Lonely Crowd*, built on Fromm's concerns regarding the conformist nature of contemporary American mass culture and recast it within a more distinctively American Liberal idiom. In addition to helping to transmit Fromm's ideas to an even larger U.S. audience, Riesman also introduced Fromm to political insiders within the Liberal Establishment. Thus, Fromm became an informal advisor to Adlai Stephenson and was able to share his opinions directly with the Kennedy Administration.²⁰ Partly as a result of his proximity to the Liberal Establishment, Fromm had a sizable impact on the intellectual formation of the New Left, but he was rapidly abandoned for voices more critical of that Liberal Establishment, as SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) grew into a mass political movement after it emerged as the leading voice within the anti-war movement.²¹

Although Horkheimer's attempts to successfully recruit American philosophers failed, there were several other messages in bottles sent by the Frankfurt School. Some of these messages, like *Reason and Revolution*, took decades to have their intended impact. Other messages, like those cast into the sea by Franz L. Neumann and Erich Fromm, were enthusiastically read, pondered and absorbed—but by scholars in other fields outside of philosophy. In this manner, Critical Theory grew to gain an audience within disciplines such as political science, sociology and psychology. It also attracted important allies, like C. Wright Mills and David Riesman, who subsequently incorporated Critical Theory into their own thought and methodologies. Although Critical Theory did not find a direct way into the field of philosophy, American philosophers who were attuned to the social sciences began to encounter some of the basic ideas of Critical Theory. This established a hospitable environment for the more formal philosophical encounter with Critical Theory that began in the 1960s after the rise and reception of Herbert Marcuse among the New Left and in the press of that era.

²⁰ See Friedman (2013, 184–185, 199–200, 215–218); see also McLaughlin (2021, 81–110).

²¹ See Jamison and Eyerman (1995).

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