

PHIL 450 SELECTED TOPICS IN PHILOSOPHY

The Frankfurt School: Modern Society, History, and Critique Fall 2012

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Course Description and Objectives:

The Frankfurt School refers to an important 20th Century school of critical thought and a group of thinkers associated with the Institute of Social Research founded in 1923 at the University of Frankfurt. These thinkers, represented by authors such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, critically reflect on the ways in which rationality is set in the service of oppressive political regimes in our modern society. The goal of Frankfurt School thinkers is to disentangle rationality from its association with oppression and fascism. Toward this end, they put forth two basic premises: 1) We must carefully analyze and critique the Enlightenment ideals (such as scientific rationality, economic prosperity, and progress) that helped shape the modern society, and 2) Philosophy must cooperate with other disciplines, especially the social sciences, in order to understand and change the conditions of the modern society in which we find ourselves.

This course provides an historical and thematic introduction to the fundamental texts of the first-generation thinkers of the Frankfurt School (also known as Critical Theory). We will be focusing on the following questions coming out of this school of thought: What is the distinction between traditional and critical theory? Is there progress in history? Did the Enlightenment fulfill its promises? What is instrumental rationality? How does the one-dimensional culture industry create passive masses in society? What does it mean to do critical theory? It is advised that students have some familiarity with and a background in the history of modern Western philosophy, especially Kant, Hegel, and Marx.

READINGS

- "Traditional and Critical Theory" (Horkheimer)
- "The Actuality of Philosophy" (Adorno)
- "The Idea of Natural-History" (Adorno)
- "Theses on History" (Benjamin)
- "The Concept of Enlightenment" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno)
- *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse)
- "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (Adorno and Horkheimer)
- *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics* Selections (Adorno)
- "Why Still Philosophy?" (Adorno)
- "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" or "Subject-Object" (Adorno)
- "What is Critique?" (Foucault)