

# Critical Theory of International Relations

- Two kinds of theory
  - Problem solving theory X Critical theory
  - Understand, interpret X Transform

Robert Cox: All theoretical perspectives sustain the interest of certain groups/political

“Theory is always for someone or for something”  
Create theories to rationalize the world affairs

- Theory itself is a product of society, but at the same time it tries to distance itself from society
- Critical theory in IR-since 1980s

- Critical IR Theories as a challenge to dominant paradigms. Realism, liberal institutionalism
- Rationalists: neo-realists, neo-liberals... serve the interest of dominant elites
- Concerned with the relation between “power” and “freedom”
- Interdisciplinary approach; political science, IR, sociology, history, psychology
- Constructivism, identity politics, post-modernism, Frankfurt School
- To provide an alternative view to the realist view
- “IR can be explained by analyzing a collection of identities rather than states”.
- States only unit of analysis? Many distinct identities

- Kenneth Waltz: “states are involved in an unending struggle with each other, because that is the nature of states in an anarchic world; power is necessary to survive in it or to continue to fight; all states are potential enemies”
- Liberal institutionalists believe that states can achieve security through construction of international regimes and structures.

- Realists: focus on role of state. But CT incorporates NGOs transnational companies, domestic politics
- Influence of religion, culture, history
- Critiques of state centrism , science and objectivity in IR

- There is no clear cut definition
- Critical theory offers a multidisciplinary approach to society, is subject to change but is rooted in the dialectical tradition of Marx and Hegel

- Key thinkers: Robert Cox, Richard Ashley, Mark Hoffman, Jürgen Habermas
- Western European Marxist tradition
- Frankfurt School inspired by Marxism
- Jürgen Habermas: Key theory of dialogical ethics



- It seeks human emancipation in circumstances of domination and oppression.
- Social movements, human beings in modern sciences
- Extends to ethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of history

- Emerged from the work of German theorists collectively known as the “**Frankfurt School**” (early 1920s and 1930s)
- Influenced intellectually by Karl Marx
- Criticism of positivism
- The creation of The Institute for Social Research

# Institute for Social Research

- The first Marxist oriented research school was in Europe
- Scholars of at ISR developed a critical theory of society, a specific approach to interpreting Marxism
- This approach sought to revise Marx' s critique of capitalism and the idea that revolution was the best way to change the social and political structure

# Institute for Social Research

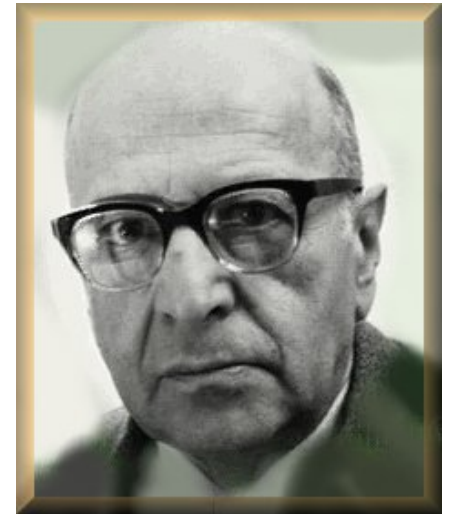
- The school was restrained by Adolf Hitler and had its Jewish members exiled
- School was relocated to Columbia University in 1934
- In 1953 school had re-established in post Germany

- Inspired by Hegel
- Liberation of individual. A key component to understanding Hegel is that he assumes that humans are driven by a common interest in freedom.



# Max Horkheimer (1895-1973)

- Chair of social philosophy and then director of The Institute for Social Research
- Institute under his supervision was oriented to developing social theory on an interdisciplinary basis.
- Endorsed the idea that there is no absolute truth of reality
- Maintained the idea that there are no general criteria for critical theory as a whole since it depended on a repetition of events



# Concepts and Contributions

- ❖ Combining thoughts of Hegel and Marx
- Entrenched in the Marxist tradition is the necessity for revolution
- Argued that Marxian concept of revolution implies continuity in change
- Marxism; idea of superstructure. Capitalism is not only a materialistic process, involves a cultural and social project (popular music, culture of consumption)
- Proposed a global revolution where capitalism is replaced by socialism

- The only problem is not capitalism, but enlightenment is the problem

- Horrible outcomes of modern state

Example: Secularism is good but being religious is to be backwards. Then how to explain religious fundamentalism? (misout, extremely modern response)

- Produce change in the world
- Methodology: self-reflection
- Enl. solutions for the problems caused by enlightenment
- We are culturally “produced” and “situated”.



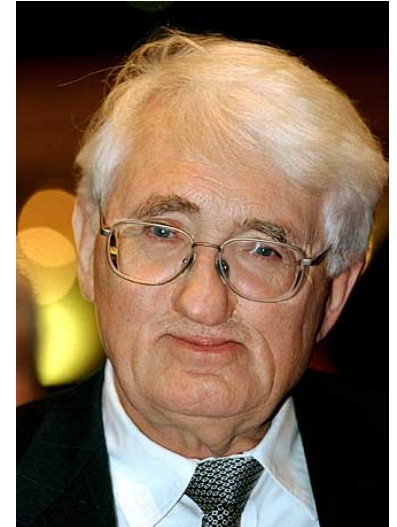
# Knowledge and Politics

- All knowledge is political
- Normal is “political order”
- Not imposing solutions upon each other

# Jurgen Habermas

## ❖ Background

- Born in Gummersbach in 1929
- Grew up during Nazi regime and WWII: Two influences that have a profound effect on his thinking and writings
- Studied philosophy at Gottingen, Zurich, and Bonn, where he earned his doctorate in 1954
- In 1964 he became a professor of philosophy at Frankfurt
- Perhaps most well known of second generation of critical theorists
- He was influenced by the works of Marx, Weber, and the early members of the Frankfurt School



- Jürgen Habermas:
  - Understanding the narratives, to interpret humanity look into literature
  - Objectivity X Subjectivity
  - Research to understand society X Res. to change the society for better (Chicago School X Frankfurt School)
  - Scientific process to study society (Chicago School)
  - You cannot be purely objective. Researchers filters information through their cultural experience, your stories of knowledge. Pure objectivity is not possible
  - Critique of the society and change it for the better
  - Sociological language is a political construction

# Concepts and Contributions



## Critical Theory

- In his article “The Tasks of a Critical Theory” he stated that the work of the Institute for Social Research was basically dominated by:

**Mass Media and Mass Culture**: The development of a culture industry for the manipulative control of consciousness

- Wanted a society where people are free to assemble and communicate openly
- Communication and understanding of language are the keys to understanding and comprehending knowledge

# Concepts and Contributions Cont.

## ❖ Communication Theory

- Concerned with reformulating Marxian theory in the light of twentieth-century social changes
- Argued that “individuals lives are influenced by constant interaction with others and with societys social structures”
- Expands Marx’ s conception of humanity by adding use of language to work
- The use of language as a significant aspect of human development
- Concentrate on how undistorted communication might lay the foundation for the emancipation of individuals

# Criticisms of Critical Theory

- Critical theory is that it reproduces idealist (utopian) positions
- Critical theory shows unnecessary concern about philosophical and theoretical problems
- Its preoccupation with negativity
- The claim that it developed from a purely academic setting and thus was isolated from working-class politics and became increasingly embroiled in abstract issues and “second-order” discourse
- The fifth criticism leveled against critical theory is that critical theorists have examined a variety of events without paying much attention to their historical and comparative contexts

Unnatural critical thought as the driver of social change: Steve Joordens at TEDxTrondheim

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oM07P-5BIYI>