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John Abromeit

Excerpt

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## Introduction

To judge something that has substance and solid worth is quite easy; to comprehend it is much harder; producing an adequate representation of it, which unifies judgment and comprehension, is the most difficult of all.

Hegel, Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

### WHY A NEW STUDY OF HORKHEIMER AND EARLY CRITICAL THEORY?

This study has two main purposes, which overlap but are not identical. First, it is intended as a comprehensive intellectual biography of Max Horkheimer from 1895, when he was born, to 1941, which marks the threshold of a new phase in Horkheimer's life and thought.<sup>1</sup> Several excellent general studies of the development of Critical Theory<sup>2</sup> as a whole have been written.<sup>3</sup> However, the publication of Horkheimer's *Collected Writings* and the opening of the Max Horkheimer Archives have made available much previously unknown or unavailable material, which has made a reassessment of Horkheimer's work

<sup>1</sup> Nineteen forty-one marks a logical place to end a study of the early and middle phases of his intellectual biography for several reasons. In that year, Horkheimer reduced to a bare minimum the activities of the New York branch of the Institute for Social Research and discontinued the publication of the Institute's journal so he could move to Los Angeles, where he could dedicate himself to his theoretical work unencumbered by any practical or administrative responsibilities. Nineteen forty-one also marked the culmination of a rather dramatic shift in Horkheimer's thought. The beginnings of this shift are best symbolized by Theodor Adorno's arrival in New York and his appointment as a full member of the Institute in 1938 on the one hand, and the departure of Erich Fromm from the Institute the following year on the other. Although not the only factor in the transformation of Horkheimer's thought during this time, his closer working relationship with Adorno in the period 1938–41 did much to push Horkheimer away from some of the key theoretical positions he had developed in the early and mid-1930s. For a more detailed examination of this shift see Excursuses I and II and Chapter 9.

<sup>2</sup> Although the concept of "critical theory" is normally much more diffuse in the Anglo-American world, I shall follow the German convention here by using it to refer specifically to Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School tradition. In order to distinguish my use of the term in this specific way, I will capitalize it throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Most notably, Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Boston, Toronto, and London: Little Brown, 1973), and Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1994). See also David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980) and Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1989).

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possible. This study draws on this material as well as the extensive secondary literature on Horkheimer in German and the much less extensive literature in English. In general, the focus is directed primarily – and unapologetically – to Horkheimer’s thought. Examination of the biographical details of Horkheimer’s life or the lives of those who influenced him is in most cases limited to what is necessary to explain the development of his ideas. In the first two chapters, which treat Horkheimer’s childhood, youth, and student years, more attention is devoted to biographical context. Beginning with the third chapter, Horkheimer’s theoretical work and those writings of his colleagues, which contribute to an understanding of his own writings, become the central concern. Although I have sought to refer to and build on earlier scholarship rather than repeat it, some repetition has been unavoidable in order to present a coherent narrative. To be sure, I have drawn on previous, general treatments of the history of Critical Theory, such as Martin Jay’s still unsurpassed *Dialectical Imagination* and Rolf Wiggershaus’s *The Frankfurt School*, but I have also sought to revise and deepen their accounts, when necessary. In addition, the principal and subsidiary arguments presented here have been developed in dialogue with a number of other authors who have written studies that either focus primarily on Horkheimer or present particularly incisive or influential interpretations of his work.<sup>4</sup>

The second main purpose of this study is to recover and reconstruct the model of “early Critical Theory” that largely coincides but is not identical with Horkheimer’s own thought from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s. I have chosen to focus on Horkheimer’s early Critical Theory here for a number of reasons. As will become apparent in the remaining pages of this introduction, I believe that Horkheimer’s early work was not only his best, but also that which has the potential to contribute most to contemporary discussions and attempts to renew Critical Theory. Horkheimer’s early Critical Theory is much less familiar today than *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or even *Eclipse of Reason*. Horkheimer’s commitment in the 1930s to expressing himself primarily in essays (and aphorisms) rather than books has contributed to the neglect of his early writings. Yet taken together, the essays (and aphorisms) Horkheimer wrote during this time constitute a very substantial body of work that is eminently worthy of reconsideration. Of these essays, only Horkheimer’s 1931

<sup>4</sup> Among the former group of authors, I have engaged most with the following studies: Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. Benjamin Gregg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Gerd-Walter Küsters, *Der Kritikbegriff in der Kritischen Theorie Max Horkheimers* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1980); Peter Stirk, *Max Horkheimer: A New Interpretation*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992); Olaf Asbach, *Von der Erkenntnistheorie zur Kritischen Theorie des Gesellschaft: Eine Untersuchung zur Vor- und Entstehungsgeschichte der Kritischen Theorie Max Horkheimers 1920–27*, (Opladen, Germany: Leske und Budrich, 1997) and *Kritische Gesellschaftstheorie und historische Praxis: Entwicklungen der Kritischen Theorie bei Max Horkheimer 1930–1942/43* (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 1997). Among the latter group of authors, I have engaged most with the following: Alfred Schmidt, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Moishe Postone, and Hauke Brunkhorst. For references to their numerous works on Horkheimer, please consult the bibliography or the various discussions of them in the main text.

inaugural address as the new director of the Institute for Social Research, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research,” and his 1937 programmatic essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” remain somewhat familiar today. However, this focus on what are interpreted as Horkheimer’s “methodological” essays from the 1930s has contributed to a misleading view of the overall aims – and accomplishments – of his early Critical Theory.<sup>5</sup> The systematic interpretation and overview presented here of Horkheimer’s work in the 1920s and 1930s will enable these aims and accomplishments to emerge more clearly and, hopefully, will also spark a renewed engagement with this remarkable body of work.

Recovering the model of early Critical Theory also requires a reexamination of Horkheimer’s personal and, more importantly, theoretical relationships with Erich Fromm and Theodor Adorno in the late 1920s and 1930s. The acrimonious debates that marked Fromm’s departure from the Institute in 1939 and continued with other members of the Institute – most notably Adorno and Herbert Marcuse – have obscured the important contributions Fromm made to the formation of early Critical Theory, so significant attention will be paid here to Fromm’s own intellectual development and the strong affinities between his and Horkheimer’s work during this time. Because Horkheimer is often remembered today primarily as the coauthor (with Adorno) of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I will also devote much attention here to working out the important theoretical differences that existed between him and Adorno from the late 1920s through the late 1930s. When Horkheimer and Adorno met in the mid-1920s, they had many common interests and even a shared academic advisor in Hans Cornelius. So why did the two of them part ways theoretically in the late 1920s, and why did these differences persist through the 1930s? In order fully to grasp the distinctiveness of the model of early Critical Theory and, in particular, the important ways in which it differs from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is necessary to reconstruct Horkheimer’s shifting attitude toward Adorno’s theoretical writings in the 1920s and 1930s.

To further elaborate the main aims of this study, it would be helpful to say a few words about the title and the concept of “foundations,” in particular. On the one hand, the foundations of Horkheimer’s early Critical Theory were antifoundational insofar as they were thoroughly historical and not ontological or metaphysical. On the other hand, it was essential to Horkheimer to recognize that all of the theoretical concepts he developed were related in more or less mediated ways to the historical epoch in which he was living – what he called the “bourgeois epoch.” Perhaps the most important way in which Critical Theory differed from its “traditional” counterparts was its refusal to naturalize modern bourgeois capitalist society and its attempt to identify the contradictions and tendencies that could possibly – if by no means necessarily – lead to a qualitatively new postcapitalist and postbourgeois historical epoch. This presupposition of a historically discrete, but still incomplete bourgeois epoch forms the basis of Horkheimer’s work through the late 1930s. However, one can and must speak of the historical foundations of Horkheimer’s early

<sup>5</sup> See discussion in Chapter 7, pp. 258–9.

Critical Theory in a more precise sense, for it is the historical transformation and antagonistic dynamic of modern bourgeois society or, in other words, the *dialectic of bourgeois society* that structured his thought at the most general level during this time. The meaning of this concept will become fully apparent in the further course of this study, but a preliminary determination of it can be found in Horkheimer's 1937 essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory":

To put it in broad terms, 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 contradictions of the modern era; it generates these contradictions 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.<sup>6</sup>

This dialectic first moved to the center of Horkheimer's work in his lectures on the history of philosophy in the late 1920s. There, and in many other essays he wrote in the 1930s, the concept was formulated in less economic terms than in the previously quoted passage. As we shall see, the philosophical dimensions of the dialectic of bourgeois society were crucial for Horkheimer. He took very seriously the critical philosophical ideals that were articulated during the ascent of the European bourgeoisie during the early modern period, but he also came to believe that these ideals were increasingly hollowed out with the consolidation of capitalism and the gradual transformation of the bourgeoisie from an oppositional to a hegemonic social formation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The title of this study also implies that the tradition of "Frankfurt School" Critical Theory has its foundations in Horkheimer's early work. This implication is intended, but it must be qualified in certain ways. The "Frankfurt School" label is useful to designate in a general way a tradition of critical social theory that has certain important continuities; but the label is problematic insofar as it obscures the qualitative shifts and transformations this tradition has undergone. Although there is little question that the "Frankfurt School" tradition first took shape in Horkheimer's early writings, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* represents a qualitatively different model that fits seamlessly into the larger trajectory of Adorno's work, but represents a break with Horkheimer's early Critical Theory. Habermas's early work – especially his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*<sup>7</sup> – bears strong affinities to the model of early Critical Theory in general, and to the idea of a dialectic of bourgeois society in particular. Yet in the following years, Habermas would develop a theory of communicative action that, despite his continuing gestures to the relevance of Horkheimer's early work, represented another qualitatively new paradigm within Frankfurt School Critical Theory. My intention here is not to uphold Horkheimer's early work as a rigid orthodoxy that disavows or precludes any further innovations

<sup>6</sup> "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Max Horkheimer, Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 227 (translation amended).

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

in the tradition. Such dogmatic foundationalism would be antithetical to the fundamental openness of Horkheimer's early Critical Theory, according to which theoretical concepts must be constantly revised in light of new historical and empirical social research. I do believe, however, that Horkheimer's early work represents a distinct model that has been unjustly forgotten and could still contribute much to current attempts to develop a Critical Theory adequate to early twenty-first-century social and political conditions.

#### HORKHEIMER'S ECLIPSE IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN RECEPTION OF CRITICAL THEORY

In the remainder of this introduction and in the epilogue, I will put forth my case for revisiting the model of early Critical Theory developed by Horkheimer (and Fromm). First, however, let us examine the reasons why Horkheimer's work has fared so poorly in the reception of Critical Theory in the Anglo-American world compared to that of the other members of the Frankfurt School tradition. One important cause of the eclipse of Horkheimer's work can be found already in his response to the changed political and historical conditions in Europe and the United States after World War II. After seventeen years in exile in the United States, Horkheimer returned to Frankfurt in 1950 to rebuild the Institute for Social Research and to play a role in the education of the first generation of German students after the catastrophic events of the war and the civilizational rupture of Auschwitz. Habermas's well-known anecdote, that Horkheimer kept his writings from the 1930s under lock and key in the basement of the rebuilt Institute for Social Research, is symptomatic of the dramatic shift in his thought that occurred after his return to Germany. Horkheimer became rector of the J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt and was on friendly terms with many of the most important German and American figures in the postwar reconstruction of the Federal Republic, including Theodor Heuss and John J. McCloy.<sup>8</sup> Horkheimer's theoretical production came to a virtual halt and his public political pronouncements became increasingly conservative in the 1950s and 1960s. When his writings from the 1930s began to circulate once again in pirate editions during the tumultuous political climate of the 1960s, Horkheimer was reluctant to republish them. He finally did so only after distancing himself from them and arguing that the qualitatively different historical and political situation defied any unmediated application of his earlier work to present conditions. Horkheimer had, in other words, done much himself in the 1950s and 1960s to create the impression that his earlier work was no longer relevant to contemporary concerns. Anyone who takes seriously the "temporal core of truth," which was an essential characteristic of his Critical Theory throughout his life, is obligated to heed his warnings about appropriating his theoretical concepts in an ahistorical fashion. Yet

<sup>8</sup> McCloy was president of the World Bank from 1947 to 1949 and the High Commissioner for Germany, 1949–52. Heuss was the *Bundespräsident* of the Federal Republic from 1949 to 1959. For samples of Horkheimer's correspondence with these men, see GS 18, pp. 223–5, 460–2, and 525–7.

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one must also recognize that social, political, and historical conditions have changed dramatically since the 1960s. If one rejects the static, positivist view of history – as Horkheimer did – and recognizes that any interpretation of historical events contains an essential subjective moment and that changed conditions in the present create new possibilities for interpreting and appropriating the past, then one need not view Horkheimer's warnings in the 1960s about the dated character of his earlier work as an absolute prohibition.

In Germany, Horkheimer and Adorno had already been prominent figures in scholarly and broader public discussions in the 1950s and early 1960s, even though the New Left and protest movements were important in the late 1960s in drawing further attention to their work.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of the reception of the Institute's *Studies in Prejudice* among American sociologists, Critical Theory remained relatively unknown in the United States prior to Herbert Marcuse's appearance in public debates in the late 1960s.<sup>10</sup> However, Marcuse's sudden rise to prominence proved to be a mixed blessing for the American reception of Critical Theory in the following decades.<sup>11</sup> As one commentator put it, "Unwonted media celebrity first 'gurufied' Marcuse ... then stamped his thoughts with the killing censorship of a fad whose time had passed."<sup>12</sup> Martin Jay's pioneering study of the history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, along with several other monographs, translations, edited anthologies, and journal articles in the 1970s on Critical Theory and/or particular Critical Theorists, left no doubt that their work deserved more serious attention.<sup>13</sup> Yet the academic reception of Critical Theory in the United States

<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer became head of the philosophy department and then rector of the J.W. Goethe University as a whole in the early 1950s. Although he played a crucial role in rebuilding the Institute for Social Research after the war and gave frequent public speeches and radio addresses, his intellectual production was limited, particularly compared to that of Adorno, who really found an audience for the first time in the Federal Republic in the 1950s and 1960s. On Horkheimer and Adorno's roles as public intellectuals in the postwar period, see Detlev Claussen, *Theodor Adorno: Ein Letztes Genie* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2004), pp. 265ff. and Stephan Müller-Doohm, *Theodor Adorno: Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 554–679.

<sup>10</sup> The best examination of the American reception of the work of Horkheimer and the other members of the Institute is Thomas Wheatland's recent study, *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). Wheatland demonstrates that a few members of the New York intellectual community did take a serious interest in Horkheimer and his colleagues in the 1930s and 1940s. He also describes the positive reception among American sociologists not only of the *Studies in Prejudice*, but also the Institute's earlier empirical project, *the Studies on Authority and Family*. Yet he also points out that this early reception was much more limited than it could have been and that the Americans' reception of the Institute's empirical work failed fully to grasp the theoretical principles that had guided them. Thus, overall, his study confirms that a serious and comprehensive American reception of their work did not begin until the 1970s. For a more detailed discussion of Wheatland's study, see my review, "Reconsidering the History of the Frankfurt School in America," in *Reviews in American History*, vol. 39, No. 2 (June 2011).

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the Anglo-American reception of Marcuse, see *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, eds. John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1–6, as well as the piece by W. Mark Cobb in the same volume, "Diatribes and Distortions: Marcuse's Academic Reception," pp. 163–87.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York, 1992), p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination op. cit.* Other important monographs include Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the*

remained uneven at best. Despite several first-rate studies of his life and work, Marcuse's theoretical and philosophical work had been largely forgotten by the mid-1980s.<sup>14</sup> A selection of some of Horkheimer's most important essays from the 1930s appeared in English translation in 1972. The first and only monograph dedicated to Horkheimer appeared in 1992, but it was written by a young British scholar and went largely unnoticed in the United States.<sup>15</sup> The next significant collection of Horkheimer's essays in English translation did not appear until 1993.<sup>16</sup>

By this time, however, the intellectual field had shifted decisively. French "poststructuralist" theory had become a dominant force in the Anglo-American academy.<sup>17</sup> With their thoroughgoing skepticism of "grand narratives" of progress in history and science and their efforts to reorient Critical Theory toward the concrete particular, Adorno and Benjamin's work resonated in some – if certainly not all – ways with the "postmodernism" and/or "poststructuralism" of Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, because Adorno and Benjamin had devoted more attention to aesthetics and cultural theory than Horkheimer, their work was still of interest in language and literature departments, as well as interdisciplinary humanities and cultural studies programs, in which postmodern and poststructuralist theory established itself most successfully. Jürgen Habermas also established himself in the American academy in the 1980s and 1990s, but in different fields: in philosophy, and to a lesser extent, sociology and political science departments.<sup>19</sup> At least through the mid-1980s,

*Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977); anthologies include *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gehardt (New York: Urizen, 1978); translations include Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* op. cit.; the journals that played the important role in introducing Critical Theory to an American audience in the 1970s were *Telos* and *New German Critique*.

<sup>14</sup> Morton Schoolman, *The Imaginary Witness: The Critical Theory of Herbert Marcuse* (New York: Free Press, 1980); Barry Kätz, *Herbert Marcuse and the Art of Liberation* (London: Verso, 1982); and Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (London, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Peter Stirk, *Max Horkheimer: A New Interpretation* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Essays*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> "Poststructuralism" was the term coined in the United States that referred in a very imprecise way to the diverse bodies of work of theorists such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida. None of these theorists accepted the leveling of the differences between their work that the concept arguably implied.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Lyotard's essay "Adorno as the Devil," *Telos*, no. 19 (Spring, 1974); Derrida's appreciative discussion of Benjamin's controversial discussion of law and violence in "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," trans. Mary Quaintance, *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 228–98; and Derrida's discussion of Adorno and Benjamin in the speech he gave upon accepting the Theodor Adorno Prize from the city of Frankfurt in 2001: "Fichus," in Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 164–82. In a late interview, Foucault also emphasized the commonalities that existed between his own work and that of the Frankfurt School. See *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Habermas's first work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, op. cit., which was originally published in 1962, but did

Habermas continued to present his own work as a critical reformulation of the theoretical project developed at the Institute for Social Research in the 1930s. Yet, since Habermas became increasingly focused on questions of liberal-democratic political philosophy and legal theory in the late 1980s and 1990s, few people doubt any longer that his work represented a profound break with the Critical Theory of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. This break was illustrated by Habermas's reception in the United States, which – like his reception in Germany – expressed a need to move beyond what was perceived as obsolete in Critical Theory more than a need to draw on it in order to address contemporary problems.<sup>20</sup> Horkheimer's work, in which the philosophical, sociological, and historical moments all outweighed the aesthetic, did not find a place in American discussions of literature, humanities, and cultural studies, as had Adorno's and Benjamin's. By the 1980s, Horkheimer had also been eclipsed by Habermas in the reception of the Frankfurt School in American philosophy and sociology departments.

By the 1990s, those scholars and intellectuals still interested in Critical Theory had been split, for the most part, into three camps.<sup>21</sup> There were those who believed Jürgen Habermas had overcome the weaknesses of the first generation of Critical Theory and reformulated it in terms adequate to the changed historical conditions. Habermas's principal works were translated

not appear in English translation until 1989, stimulated much discussion among historians in the United States, as the following collection of essays makes clear: *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). Since Habermas's move away in the mid-1960s from an understanding of modern European history as a “dialectic of bourgeois society” – which was indebted to Horkheimer's early Critical Theory – toward a more systematic and normative understanding of “modernity” as the differentiation of value spheres, his work has not resonated as much with historians. For a perceptive examination of this crucial shift in Habermas's theory of history, see John McCormick, *Weber, Habermas and the Transformations of the European State: Constitutional, Social and Supra-National Democracy* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Thomas McCarthy's “Translator's Introduction” to Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1: *Reason and Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), pp. v–xxxvii. Furthermore, as Russell Jacoby has pointed out – in “Das Veralten der Frankfurter Schule,” in *Keine Kritische Theorie Ohne Amerika*, eds. O. Negt, D. Claussen and M. Werz (Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 1999), p. 147 – the American reception of Habermas focused more on his strictly theoretical work, rather than the political interventions that have made him such an important figure in the German public sphere. A noteworthy exception to this trend was Robert Holub's study, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere* (New York and London, 1991) as well as the more recent study by Martin J. Matustik, *Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Presenting the American reception of Critical Theory in this way is admittedly schematic and misleading in many ways, but it would go beyond my primary concern here – illustrating the general neglect of Horkheimer – to provide a more nuanced account. Thus, the three main tendencies in the American reception of Critical Theory in the 1980s and 1990s that I have named here are not intended as strict classifications, but simply as a preliminary means of orientation. For more detailed treatments of the American reception of Critical Theory in the 1980s and 1990s, which largely overlap with my account here, see Peter Hohendahl, *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignments in Postwar Critical Theory* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 198–228, and Russell Jacoby, “Das Veralten der Frankfurter Schule,” op. cit., pp. 132–49.

into English in the 1980s,<sup>22</sup> and his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* was seen by many sympathetic to Critical Theory as a compelling critique of French poststructuralism.<sup>23</sup> There were those who were less skeptical than Habermas about reconciling the traditions of Critical Theory and poststructuralism, either on philosophical or aesthetic grounds.<sup>24</sup> Finally, there were a few who were critical of both poststructuralism and Habermas's reformulation of Critical Theory.<sup>25</sup> Common to all three general positions, however, was a surprising lack of reflection on the origins of Critical Theory in Horkheimer's early work and the relevance it might still have for contemporary discussions. Although Jürgen Habermas stressed the ongoing importance of Horkheimer's original program, his American followers made little effort to reassess that legacy themselves.<sup>26</sup> They seemed to assume that the task had already been accomplished with Habermas's reformulation of Horkheimer's early interdisciplinary project in terms of a *Theory of Communicative Action*.<sup>27</sup> Those who sought some sort of reconciliation between poststructuralism and Critical Theory looked to the work of Walter Benjamin and, to a lesser degree, Theodor Adorno, often stressing their critiques of totalizing reason and their work on aesthetics and

<sup>22</sup> To name only the most important, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, and vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, 1984 and 1987, respectively); *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Members of the first group, sympathetic to Habermas and generally hostile to poststructuralism, include Thomas McCarthy, Andrew Arato, Jean Cohen, Seyla Benhabib, and Richard Wolin.

<sup>24</sup> Members of this group include Martin Jay, Richard Bernstein, Nancy Fraser, Andreas Huyssen, Mark Poster, David Hoy, and Douglas Kellner.

<sup>25</sup> This group included some of the key members of the journal *Telos* – such as Paul Piccone and Russell Berman. The journal was sympathetic to Habermas in its early years, but turned increasingly to Adorno in the 1980s. See, for example, Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Back to Adorno,” *Telos* 81 (Fall, 1989); other participants in discussions of Critical Theory in the United States who remained critical of both Habermas and French poststructuralism and sympathetic to Adorno and/or Walter Benjamin included Peter Hohendahl, Susan Buck-Morss, Fredric Jameson, and Jay Bernstein.

<sup>26</sup> One important exception was the volume *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, eds. Seyla Benhabib, Wolfgang Bonß, and John McCole, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1993). This volume contains essays by some of the most important philosophers, sociologists, and intellectual historians working in the field of Critical Theory. Yet the majority of the contributions were written by German scholars, which reflects the more profound reception of Horkheimer's Critical Theory in Germany. The “emerging reevaluation of Horkheimer's work,” of which the editors speak in their introduction (p. 12), still has not arrived on the other side of the Atlantic. It is perhaps not surprising that this volume, despite the impressive intellectual stature of its contributors, seems to have left few traces in American discussions of Critical Theory. The editors frame Horkheimer's work largely in terms of a theoretical inspiration for Habermas in his efforts to move beyond the putative aporias of Adorno's mature work (pp. 10–12). Furthermore, many of the contributors represented in the volume make a strong case, either in their essays in the volume or elsewhere, that a reevaluation of Horkheimer's work is no longer necessary, that it no longer speaks to present concerns.

<sup>27</sup> This is reflected, for example, in the introduction to *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, as mentioned in the previous footnote.

cultural theory. Those who remained steadfastly critical of both Habermas and poststructuralism called for a renewed assessment not of Horkheimer, but of Adorno's work, which they viewed as the most sophisticated formulation of Critical Theory and more relevant to present concerns.<sup>28</sup> Horkheimer had, in other words, been largely forgotten across the entire spectrum of discussions about Critical Theory in the United States. In the past decade, the reception of Critical Theory has expanded and diversified in ways that are too complex to recount here. One can say, however, that interest in Benjamin, Adorno, and Habermas has remained strong, while Horkheimer's work has continued to be neglected.

#### THE RELEVANCE OF HORKHEIMER'S EARLY CRITICAL THEORY TO CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS

Horkheimer's early Critical Theory could contribute to contemporary discussions in a number of different fields. First, Horkheimer's early work provides an excellent model for a materialist intellectual history of modern Europe. At first glance, "materialist intellectual history" may appear to be a *contradictio in adjecto*, but revisiting Horkheimer's early lectures and essays makes clear why this is not the case. Horkheimer's concept of materialism is thoroughly historical, not ontological, metaphysical, mechanical, or physiological. He explicitly criticized attempts by Lenin and others to define materialism as the ahistorical primacy of "matter" over "mind." Surveying and bringing up to date the long history of philosophical materialism, Horkheimer argues that this anti-traditional tradition has manifested itself most consistently in a critique of ideas that justify socially and historically constructed forms of domination as eternal or necessary. Philosophical materialism has consistently deflated pretensions to "absolute truth," and allied itself with concrete political and social movements in the name of the more "modest" goal of improving the lives of concrete individuals living under historically specific forms of social domination. Yet materialism for Horkheimer – as for Marx – also constitutes a method of interpreting history and intellectual history. It expresses the conviction that even the most recondite ideas have a specific social content that binds them in more or less mediated ways to the struggles of concrete individuals and groups, which reproduce or alter historically specific social conditions and institutions. Taken together, Horkheimer's lectures from the late 1920s and his essays from the 1930s provide a remarkably rich materialist interpretation of the intellectual history of modern European philosophy – from the Renaissance all the way through to early-twentieth-century tendencies such as phenomenology and vitalism. Horkheimer consistently provides penetrating and original interpretations of the philosophical movements, authors, and works he examines, while at the same time demonstrating how their ideas are a mediated expression of the larger dialectic of bourgeois society that characterizes the history of modern Europe. One important example of how Horkheimer's early work

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, for some, such as Fredric Jameson, the import and relevance of Adorno's work did not become fully apparent until in the 1990s. See his *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990).