Interrogating the Frankfurt School’s Critique of Authority,
From its Theoretical and Historical Origins to its Contemporary Political Relevance

by

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**Introduction**

The totality of relationships in the current age, this universality, was strengthened and solidified through something particular in it, namely authority, and this process played out essentially in the individual and the concrete, the family. The family forms the “nucleus” of bourgeois culture, the culture which itself is alive in the family just as authority is. This dialectical whole of universal, peculiar, and particular now proves itself to be the unity of diverging forces. The explosive element of culture emerges more powerfully in comparison to this cohesiveness.¹

-Max Horkheimer, *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1936)

Authority starts in the family. In the traditional bourgeois family, a child is cared for by her mother, but observes her father coming home from his underpaid job, acting as if he were the only authority in the household. The child admires her father for his strength and confidence, even when he takes it out on her. She is relieved when her mother tries to defend her, but resents her for her weakness that her father immediately targets. He abuses her mother in the same way that he is abused at work and she realizes that her mother truly is powerless: her mother is dependent on her father and has no choice but to accept his mistreatment. The daughter develops ambivalent relationships to her parents. She craves the affection and support of her mother, but is frustrated by her helplessness. She admires her father and strives for his approval, but is shocked by his cruelty. The kind, encouraging authority of her mother is crushed by the ruthless, dominating authority of her father between the hours of six p.m. and six a.m. Ten

years later when she gets her first job, she realizes that the same pattern plays out in the workplace. Her assertive, outspoken male coworkers are promoted, while the meeker ones are relegated to the least skilled tasks. Curiously, when she tries to take the lead, she is called selfish and aggressive. She realizes that it is not as simple as imitating models of authority, but that she faces unique economic and social barriers that force her into limited identity roles.

The way that authority is exerted in the family mirrors its social and economic forms. Just as a daughter may experience the patriarchal domination of her father and submissiveness of her mother, she discovered hierarchies and gender discrimination in the workplace. This can be interpreted in two complementary ways: first, that the family is a component of society that demonstrates its dominant trends; and second, that the family acts to reinforce these trends by recreating them on a smaller, more intimate level. Although there are an increasing number of families and social groups that do not fit this traditional mold, patriarchal structures are still the norm in Western capitalist democracies. We are left with the practical choice not to reject patriarchal capitalist authority, but whether to extend its privileges to a larger group. Should there be more female CEOs? Should marriage equality be granted to same-sex couples? Should the minimum wage be raised to $10.10 an hour (The White House 2014)? To answer “yes” to these questions is to support immediate progress toward economic and social equality. At the same time, these and similar policies increase the size and adaptability of existing authority structures that were created to accommodate wealthy, white, heterosexual males and are supported by values and expectations that we all hold. It is impossible to extend these structures to all of the
population, because by definition patriarchy and capitalism can only function with dominating and dominated classes. Although the dominating class may expand to include racial minorities, females, and non-heterosexual individuals, these structures demand a marginalized group.

Accepting this premise does not mean that one should answer “no” to the above questions or stop working toward economic and social reform. Instead, a “yes” should be accompanied by a confrontation of the authority of these structures that necessitate oppression. Authority cannot be understood—let alone challenged—solely in its capitalist economic form; it must also be recognized in the family, politics, culture, social identity roles, the individual, and her psychic inner life. For this reason, authority must be critiqued on the ideological as well as the structural level to understand how it acts and is reinforced, particularly by the individual in relation to society. Because authority is not reducible to external structures, but is also internalized in the individual in social norms, consumption preferences, and behavior, the study of authority has to include culture, morality, and psychology that constitute ideology. The interdisciplinary Institute of Social Research, also known as the Frankfurt School,\(^2\) took on this task with the intention of developing Marxism to account for the dialectical relationship between the economic base and the ideological superstructure.

The Frankfurt School confronted authority on a theoretical, empirical, political, and personal level. Although my thesis focuses on the relationship between the first three, the members’ personal experiences as German-Jewish exiles in the United States from 1934 on provide important context for understanding their study.

\(^2\) I will use the terms “Institute of Social Research” and “Frankfurt School” interchangeably.
of authority. In 1930 Max Horkheimer became the director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt and three years later Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. The Marxist Institute, whose members were almost exclusively of Jewish descent, was soon targeted. On March 13, 1933 the Institute was identified as Communist property and closed due to the encouragement of “activities hostile to the state” (Wiggershaus 1994, 128). The Institute members, including Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm were forced into exile. In my thesis I will focus on the work of these four members who constitute the philosophical and theoretical core of the Frankfurt School. After briefly relocating the Institute’s headquarters to Geneva, Horkheimer accepted an offer to relocate the Institute to Columbia University in New York. He was joined in the United States by Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm (Wiggershaus 1994, 132).

With the rise of the Third Reich and Stalinism followed by the Cold War and McCarthyism, the Frankfurt School’s critiques of capitalism and authority were more urgent than ever. Even in liberal democracies, capitalist economic and social structures fostered authoritarian tendencies such as hierarchical and stereotyped thinking and alienation from oneself, one’s labor and one’s community. In fact, it was within these liberal democratic capitalist structures that fascist ideology and tendencies were generated and internalized. The Frankfurt School’s critiques of capitalism flowed logically into its critiques of fascism due to the continuity in

3 Alienation is present today in the high rates of screen time that mediate the experience between individuals and the outside world. Sixty-seven percent of U.S. children watch two or more hours of television per day and total screen time averages 6.5 hours per day per child (Center for Disease Control 2007).

4 I will refer to the Institute members collectively as the “Frankfurt School,” and use individual names to highlight distinctions between their thought.
capitalist economic and individual instinctual structures under liberal democracy and fascism (Herbert Marcuse 1980). The Institute members rejected the premise that there was a single point at which liberal democracy transitioned into fascism, even in the case of a coup or an election when there is a sudden transfer of power. Instead, they believed that fascist tendencies were necessary for the success of a fascist movement with a popular basis and they were interested in how these tendencies arose and were reinforced. In this way, they followed the Orthodox Marxist conception of fascism as monopoly capitalism that is in many ways the product of capitalist economic structures.

The Frankfurt School was invested in developing a Critical Theory that revitalized Marxist revolutionary theory, whose critique did not adequately account for the material and ideological conditions of advanced capitalism. Marxism did not account for how capitalist authority structures (the economic base) shaped the needs and preferences of individuals (the ideological superstructure). The Institute members supplemented Marxism with Freudian social psychoanalysis and their critique of culture in order to account for the influence of ideology on individual behavior and preferences.

Unlike the nineteenth century capitalist societies that Marx critiqued, class structure in advanced capitalist societies was characterized by changes in the preferences and composition of the middle class. An examination of the Angestellten, the new white-collar working class in Germany that was a stronghold of Nazi support, illustrated both the shortcomings of Marxist theory and the necessity of psychoanalysis. This new class, although barely differentiated from the proletariat in
occupation and income, was concerned with leisure goods, cultural trends, and conspicuous consumption, and would even forego necessary material goods in exchange for luxury items. For the *Angestellten*, class interest did not correspond to material circumstances. Psychoanalysis provided a framework for understanding why people such as the *Angestellten* could act against their own material interests (Kracauer 1971). Additionally, Marcuse observed a growing conservatism in the expanding working class (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 167) that undermined Marx’s predictions about the radical potential of the working class. A revolutionary movement under advanced capitalism would not be driven by the material depravity of the working class, but by the “existential needs” for justice by a marginalized population (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 179). According to the Institute members, Marxism had to account for the historical circumstances in which the conservative working class was the basis for the rise of fascism, not communism, and authoritarian tendencies arose from the capitalist structures of liberal democratic societies.

In order to adapt Marxism to the changes in economic and ideological conditions, the Frankfurt School conducted several psychoanalytic studies on authority. Although it was (and still is) unorthodox for theorists with backgrounds in philosophy, sociology, literature, and law to engage in empirical research, it was important enough to the Institute’s work that Horkheimer determined it as the Institute’s new program in his inaugural speech (Horkheimer 1988a). The Institute would combine empirical social science and philosophical critique to develop an interdisciplinary social philosophy. A central aspect of my thesis will focus on what
the empirical studies contributed to the Frankfurt School’s study of authority that theory alone could not.

I will examine the Frankfurt School’s approach to the problem of authority from three perspectives: their philosophical critiques, empirical studies, and lastly, political engagement with the 1960s German student movement and the New Left. Most famously, Adorno and Horkheimer traced the development of the modern subject, culminating in the rise of fascism, in their 1944 work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As examples of the Institute’s empirical work, I will focus on two of its major studies, *Studies on Authority and the Family* from 1936 and *The Authoritarian Personality* from 1950. Finally, I will analyze Adorno and Marcuse’s debate about the student movement as the practical confrontation between Critical Theory and an anti-authoritarian revolt.

My thesis deals with a specific type of internalized\(^5\) authority manifested in our idolization of movie stars, consumption of repetitive pop culture, and acceptance of gender and power hierarchies in the family and in society. Authority is, of course, a prerequisite for any form of large social organization.\(^6\) People must accept as authoritative—whether explicitly or in the Lockean sense of tacit consent—certain laws and norms to govern their behavior. This includes the most basic components of social life, such as language and the general prohibiting of murder and theft\(^7\) that

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\(^5\) The distinction between “external” and “internal” should not be interpreted literally in spatial terms. Instead, it is used to differentiate between social, communal structures on the one hand (the economy, culture, politics), and thought and behavioral motivations on the other hand (class consciousness, consumption preferences, political ideology).

\(^6\) Whether or not there are forms of social organization that do not require authority is outside of the realm of my thesis. Even if this is true and formal political authority is not required, the authority of language, norms, ideology, etc. necessarily exists in any form of social organization.

\(^7\) Although, as Marcuse demonstrates, we attribute different moral weight to institutionalized violence, which is seen as legitimate, than to oppositional violence (see chapter three).
must be accepted as prerequisites to existence in a community. Although many
difficult complex questions arise when we move beyond the basics of language and
security to assess the necessity of other forms of cultural values, the Frankfurt School
adopts the Nietzschean approach of a “transvaluation of all values” and challenges
even language. As Adorno and Horkheimer point out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,

> If thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language
> into a celebration of the commodity, the attempt to trace the sources of
> this degradation must refuse obedience to the current linguistic and
> intellectual demands before its rendered entirely futile by the
> consequences of those demands for world history (Horkheimer and

Though and language are inseparably connected with the economic and social
structural determinants of preferences and behavior. Therefore, the Frankfurt
School’s social critique must include a critique of ideology and culture in addition to
political and social structures. The authority of these structures is not limited to the
external realm, but is necessarily internalized in individuals. The Institute members
emphasize the regressive and progressive role that authority plays while challenging
authority that becomes domination in the form of the totalitarianism of the “Culture
Industry” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the authoritarian tendencies of the
“sadomasochistic character” in *Studies on Authority and the Family* and *The
Authoritarian Personality*. Because they identify the problem as a domination of
authority and therefore excessive reduction of autonomy, they emphasize the costs of
authority, whether in its democratic or fascist manifestations.

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8 Nietzsche discusses the concept of the “transvaluation of all values” [*Umwertung aller Werte*] in his
work *The Antichrist*, explaining it as “a visualized declaration of war and victory against all the old
concepts of ‘true’ and ‘not true’” (Nietzsche 1918).
The Frankfurt School is interested in challenging authority that becomes domination, whether it is as ordinary as the position of the father in a bourgeois family or as world-historical as the victory of fascism in Germany. Although the Frankfurt School acknowledges the necessity of a certain degree of authority for social order, Critical Theory attempts to uncover these sources of authority rather than leaving them unchallenged. They often remain unchallenged because the individual does not experience these authority structures as oppressive, but instead is materially and instinctually invested in them. Rather than protest against poor working conditions or lack of benefits, employees are incentivized to work harder—to produce more and more efficiently—with the promise of marginal pay increases or promotions and the economic and social repercussions of non-conformity. Similarly, a child with an abusive father still craves his approval, and may reproduce his prejudices in order to please him. This raises the crucial question of whether authority that is not experienced as oppressive can still be considered oppressive, and if so, based of what criteria.

The ambiguous relationship toward this type of authority, including both hostility and adoration accounts for the difficulty in identifying it, and therefore, its strength. Reified authority structures such as the patriarchal hierarchy of “dominant” males characteristics and “submissive” female characteristics become internalized as psychological needs and preferences. The Frankfurt School takes a typological approach to studying how the psychology of individuals reacts in different ways to social trends. The institute members are most concerned with the “sadomasochistic” or “authoritarian” character type. Originating from the 1936 *Studies on Authority and*
the Family, Erich Fromm’s adaptation of this Freudian term links psychological personality type with authoritarian political forms. The authoritarian personality is characterized by the dominance of sadomasochistic tendencies: sadism in the form of prejudice and hatred for the weak and masochism as the desire to submit and belittle oneself before authority. This instinctual structure is reinforced by hierarchical social and economic structures, which it in turn reinforces through authoritarian behavior. In Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford’s 1950 study *The Authoritarian Personality*, the researchers develop an F-scale to detect authoritarian tendencies based on the assumption that these latent tendencies make individuals susceptible to fascist propaganda. The authoritarian personality is a threat not only to autonomous and reflective thought, but also to civil rights and liberties in capitalist democracies.

Beginning in the 1930s, members of the Frankfurt School including Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm are increasingly influenced by social psychoanalysis. They accept the Freudian drive theory that posits that human motivation is based on the suppression and repression of the sex and death drives to varying degrees (Freud 1925, 27). Despite differences in their interpretations of the drive theory, they share the understanding that economic and social factors shape the instinctual structure of the individual, especially during childhood. Social psychoanalysis not only provides a positive theoretical basis for demanding a

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9 Fromm was the only Institute member with a formal background in psychoanalysis and served as the primary authority on psychoanalysis in the 1936 *Studies on Authority in the Family*. He was dismissed from the Institute in 1939, but remained influential to the Institute’s work, especially Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford’s *The Authoritarian Personality* in 1950.
liberated society, but also locates this demand within individuals and their psychological needs and the solution within both individuals and society.\textsuperscript{10}

One must not fully accept the psychological basis of the Frankfurt School’s argument in order to find validity in its critiques. The Frankfurt School adapts Freud’s metapsychological theorems rather than the clinical science of Freudianism.\textsuperscript{11} In fact, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were opposed to its clinical application, one of the causes for the dismissal of practicing psychologist Erich Fromm from the Institute.\textsuperscript{12} They are predominantly interested in psychoanalysis’ use as a \textit{social} psychoanalytic theory, or as Marcuse puts it, how it “elucidates the universal in the individual experience” (Herbert Marcuse 1955a, 229). The fact that Freudian theories such as the Oedipus complex and the reductionism of the drive theory have been challenged by contemporary psychological research does not undermine Freudianism’s theoretical value\textsuperscript{13}; the philosophical connections and analytical framework that psychoanalysis provides in terms of a theory of internalization and a connection between social and instinctual structures is still preserved. John Galbraith’s theory of

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\textsuperscript{10} By the late 1960s, Adorno emphasized the importance of changes on the societal level through education and reform, while Marcuse focused on altering the instinctual structures of individuals through political organization (see chapter three: Adorno 1977; Herbert Marcuse 2001).

\textsuperscript{11} Karl Popper argues that Freud’s theories were empirically impossible to prove or disprove, because of their reliance on interpretation and the ability to explain any behavior by non-quantifiable psychological sources (Popper 1963).

\textsuperscript{12} Marcuse especially argued that psychoanalysis as a clinical science lost the revolutionary potential of Freudianism (the aspect that he was interested in), as it aimed to adapt the individual to the status quo rather than identify and challenge the larger social causes of repression (Herbert Marcuse 1955a, 233).

\textsuperscript{13} In Fisher and Greenberg’s \textit{Freud Scientifically Reappraised: Testing the Theories and Therapy}, the authors provide a comprehensive evaluation and analysis of empirical studies based on Freudian hypotheses through 1996. Their affirmative findings include a positive attraction between opposite-sex parents and children and a negative tension between same-sex parents and children posited by Freud’s Oedipal theory and that many characteristics Freud associated with the oral and anal character are indeed found in clusters. The aspects of Freudianism that were disproven in the studies included the theory of dreams as representations of unconscious wishes, the association between vaginal orgasms and psychological maturity in females, and unhealthy resolutions of the Oedipus complex causing homosexuality (Fisher and Greenberg 1996, 257–60).
the “dependence effect” provides compelling contemporary evidence for the social manufacturing of needs\textsuperscript{14}, resembling aspects of Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument about the “Culture Industry.” This understanding of preference creation removes the possibility of a superficial fix based on minor economic or social reform, based on the premise that the entire system remains geared toward (alienated) production.

Although the historical urgency of preventing fascism has passed, I believe that much of the Frankfurt School’s critique remains relevant. The conditions of advanced capitalist democracies that they describe have only become more aggravated: evidenced by rising inequality, increasing alienation, and the lack of “morality” in politics.\textsuperscript{15} I agree with their claim that both the problems and solutions lie not only in social and economic structures, but also in the preferences and needs that are internalized in individuals and, in turn, reinforce the authoritarian structures prevalent in patriarchal family, the American presidency,\textsuperscript{16} and the hegemony of popular culture. I am not arguing that one can simply transpose the Frankfurt School’s critique of authority onto contemporary society—to do so would be to undermine the historicism of their argument. Instead, I believe that we can learn from the theoretical, empirical, and political approaches through which they confronted

\textsuperscript{14} John Kenneth Galbraith, \textit{The Affluent Society}: “if production creates the wants it seeks to satisfy, or if the wants emerge \textit{parsi passu} with the production, then the urgency of the wants can no longer be used to defend the urgency of the production. Production only fills a void that it itself created” (Galbraith 1998, 127).

\textsuperscript{15}Marcuse calls for the reintroduction of morality into politics, which on the surface may appear similar to the conservative lamenting of the lack of religious morality in discussion of social issues. Instead, he is protesting against the necessity of presenting “rational” arguments in politics that presume capitalist values of production and economic efficiency and reject any others as “merely deceitful ideology”. Marcuse believes that we need to take “humanitarian and moral arguments” seriously to overcome our alienation from politics and regain control over political power, which now serves only as an end in itself (Herbert Marcuse 2001b, 67).

\textsuperscript{16} See Marcuse on the American presidency in chapter three.
authority to understand how authority is experienced in modern capitalist democracies and the possibilities for challenging it.

Specifically, I am interested in how the Frankfurt School analyses and challenges authority through the multidisciplinary approach of theoretical critique, empirical research, and political activism. Each of my chapters focuses on a different method. Chapter one examines Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the subject through the speculative anthropology of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This chapter explores the questions of how the authority of nature and society has acted on the subject and how this has changed in advanced capitalist democracies. Adorno and Horkheimer pose the problem as the totalitarianism of the instrumental rationality of enlightenment thought that must confront its irrational side to prevent a complete lapse into barbarism. Chapter two evaluates two of the Frankfurt School’s empirical studies of authority: first, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm’s *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1936) and second, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford’s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). These psychoanalytic studies mark an important decision in the Institute’s developments to pursue an empirical basis for their theoretical work and to use their theory to detect empirical trends. The empirical studies demonstrate a concrete engagement with the theories developed in the Frankfurt School’s philosophical work (the first study includes a theoretical section in which the concept of the sadomasochistic character is developed). At the same time, they necessarily lack the sophistication of the immanent critiques of authority in works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* due to the need to transform their theories into testable hypotheses in the empirical studies. Finally, chapter three explores
Adorno’s and Marcuse’s respective involvement with the 1960s German student movement, and their conflict over the relationship of Critical Theory and political practice, the role of violence in activism, and the prospects for revolutionary change. Marcuse’s involvement with the student movements and radical politics as the “Father of the New Left” indicates his priority of immediate political action as an essential component of Critical Theory. In contrast, Adorno’s insistence on thought as a form of praxis allows him to assess established institutions and oppositional groups equally critically, while putting a hold on any political action because of the lack of “objective circumstances” for change (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 127). In my conclusion, I will connect the critique of authority to Adorno and Marcuse’s concepts of freedom that highlight the revolutionary sentiment of Critical Theory in its implicit assumptions about a liberated society. Adorno returns to the Kantian idea of Mündigkeit, or maturity and responsibility, while Marcuse is concerned with realizing non-repressive politics on the basis of a sexually non-repressive society.

Although I deal mostly with Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm, and Horkheimer’s original texts, I consult secondary literature as well, particularly to shed light on the reception and critiques of the Frankfurt School’s empirical studies. I use Rolf Wiggershaus’s The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance, as my main historical source, as it provides the most comprehensive account of the Frankfurt School’s history. I quote all texts in English to accommodate non-German readers and include the original German in brackets when there is no direct translation. I provide my own translations of texts for which no English translations exist and, in these cases, include the original German in footnotes.
Chapter One: The Genealogy of the Subject and the ‘Totalitarianism’ of Advanced Capitalism

By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For “totalitarian” is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole. Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a “pluralism” of parties, newspapers “countervailing powers,” etc.

-Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man (1964)

The dystopia in Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man does not derive its power from universal surveillance, state censorship, or an omnipotent “Big Brother.” Instead, the power that Marcuse describes is much subtler and more decentralized. It does not depend upon formal state oppression, but the “totalitarianism” of an advanced capitalistic economic system that determines what people produce, consume, and, crucially, for Marcuse, need and desire. In Marcuse’s account of the total authority of advanced industrial society, he identifies why this authority is so difficult to challenge. It is not localized in the state, or even in monopolistic economic powers, but is introjected\(^\text{17}\) into individuals so that their instinctual compositions are shaped to affirm its alienating power. As a college student in advanced capitalist society, I need to have a laptop and a Smartphone so I can conform to social standards of fast and frequent communication; I want to receive an offer for the most prestigious job so that my hard work (towards what end?) is publicly affirmed. Although we experience these

\(^{17}\)Marcuse employs the Freudian term “introjection” for the psychological process through which social structures and behavior are internalized.
and similar desires as genuine and feel (temporary) satisfaction when they are fulfilled, Marcuse argues that they are, in fact, “false needs,” or “those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice” (Herbert Marcuse 1964, 4–5). What makes these needs “false” and other needs “true” is neither the fact that “false needs” are experienced as any less authentic than “true needs” nor Marcuse’s subjective criteria for what people should or should not want. Instead, in drawing this distinction between “true” and “false” needs, Marcuse considers the social whole in which individuals exist and are created. Although individuals’ desire to pay the lowest price for commodities drives the price down—an immediate benefit to the consumer—the need for twenty-cent bananas actually acts against the individual’s social interest by promoting the use of pesticides, the unsustainable use of land, and unsafe labor conditions. In contrast, the only uncontested “true needs” are the basic necessities such as food, water, clothing, and shelter at “the attainable level of culture” (Herbert Marcuse 1964, 5). Marcuse’s “true needs” is a concept similar to the minimum standard of living made possible by society and agreed upon through political processes. According to Marcuse, “true needs” beyond the most basic must be decided upon by free individuals, but must meet the criteria of non-destructive and non-repressive (Herbert Marcuse 1964, 6). This is not the case in American society today, in which services such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are under attack. “True needs” are partially determined by the technological means of society, which in itself is neither good nor evil, but distribution is always value-based and reflects power imbalances.
Marcuse undertakes the difficult task of telling people that many of their genuine preferences are actually destructive and reinforce systematic repression. Even those who attempt to oppose capitalist control by organizing strikes or publishing anti-establishment op-eds are satisfying their oppositional urges within institutional means. Therefore, they reinforce rather than disrupt the system that repeatedly demonstrates its ability to co-opt any conceivable form of opposition. Although Marcuse exposes himself to the risk of superficial criticism of elitism and paternalism, he successfully demonstrates the paradox of how social conditioning shapes our preferences so that we actively seek to reinforce the systems that repress us. If one accepts Marcuse’s claim that advanced industrialism is totalitarian, it makes the task of challenging its authority into a twofold task of individual instinctual in addition to social structural change.

1. Origins of Dialectic of Enlightenment

Marcuse’s insights into the totalitarianism of advanced industrialism are based on Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of enlightenment rationality in Dialectic of Enlightenment. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 1). Enlightenment employs the human capacities for reason and calculation in order to dominate external and internal nature, an attempt that is characterized by regression as well as progress. Through arguments such as the distinction between “true” and “false” needs, Marcuse extends and politicizes Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of
subject formation and authority. They critique enlightenment authority not only in its economic, psychological, and cultural forms, but also attempt to explain how these circumstances arise. In their illustrative example of the “culture industry,” Adorno and Horkheimer explain how popular culture, such as music, film, and radio, is repetitive and predigested for the passive consumer. In the era of the “culture industry,” entertainment is the “prolongation of work.” Its purpose is to provide a temporary “escape” form the monotony of labor—not by promoting creative expression that is barred from the workplace, but by providing thoughtless relaxation to maintain worker productivity where it really matters: in the workplace (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 109). Adorno and Horkheimer diagnose a society in which culture is not a realm of sublimation as Freud hoped it could be, where repressed drives can be expressed in socially neutral or productive ways. Instead, it is an extension of repression that leaves no outlet for authentic creativity, spontaneity, or critical thinking. If individuals cannot express oppositional thought within the imaginative possibilities of culture, then the prospect of unconventional thought at all is significantly diminished. In this chapter, I will analyze Adorno and Horkheimer’s account of the development of the modern subject and the totalitarianism of advanced industrial society in order to understand the mechanisms and extent of social authority.

_Dialectic of Enlightenment_ emerged out of a global crisis of politics, culture, and individuality. Adorno and Horkheimer witnessed the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism as refugees in the United States and were invested in understanding the
genealogical,\textsuperscript{18} philosophical, and psychological background of these crises. Their urgency was underscored by their perception that the barbarism of Hitler and the Holocaust would not end with the defeat of Germany; instead, the authoritarian tendencies that led to the rise of fascism in Germany were manifest in the already authoritarian economic, social, and cultural structures of modern capitalist democracies. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the hierarchical organization of the workplace and the family, the uncritical consumption of pop culture, and stereotyped thinking provide evidence that authoritarian tendencies originate within liberal capitalist democracies and therefore are more than just an external threat. Repressive authority structures were particularly concerning for Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, because of their shared understanding of the social mediation of individuality. Put in terms of unfreedom, “The individual, on whom society was supported, itself bore society’s taint; in the individual’s apparent freedom he was the product of society’s economic and social apparatus” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 125). Individuality and freedom were not static or metaphysical concepts, but historical products of socioeconomic class, parent-child relationships, and educational and professional organization. The consequences of societal structures extend far beyond the public behavior of individuals to influence their psychological composition and genuine preferences.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} tells the story of the genesis of the subject using a psychoanalytic approach expanded by philosophical

\textsuperscript{18} Adorno and Horkheimer adopt Nietzsche’s genealogical approach of challenging the accepted truth and legitimacy of values by tracing their changes over time and demonstrating their historical and cultural contingency. This approach implies speculation rather than historical documentation (Nietzsche 1999).
critique and a Nietzschean genealogy developed through literary examples. The psychoanalytic models of renunciation and repression illustrated by stories of Odysseus, the critique of the identity-thinking and preference creation in the culture industry, and the theory of anti-Semitism provide an important theoretical background for the Institute’s psychoanalytic research. A central assumption of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that problems such as alienation cannot be understood in isolation and any solutions must confront their totality through an understanding of their philosophical, historical, and psychological origins.

Enlightenment thought masters nature by understanding its patterns so that humans can avoid disaster and manipulate nature for the sake of their self-preservation. Whereas in the world of mythical thinking, humans anthropomorphize nature so they can relate to it as an image, a divinity, or a story, enlightenment thinking increasingly divides nature into abstract conceptual categories so that, for example, a particular oak tree is identified in relation to the general concept of a tree. Thus, all of the natural world are subsumed under categories imposed upon it by the human mind. Enlightenment thinking organizes humans in society in this rational, calculative way by dividing the subject into body and mind and projecting this division back onto nature. Object and subject are conceptually separated in humans so that subjectivity is stripped from the laborer who is perceived as an object. Similarly, in nature (that is increasingly a product of human creation), the objective material reality loses its subjective determination. For Adorno and Horkheimer, this constitutes a lapse from enlightenment back into myth.
Adorno and Horkheimer argue that as abstract enlightenment knowledge masters the natural world, it creates a more powerful second nature to which humans become unwittingly submitted. Society becomes a second nature when humans are alienated from it to the degree that it becomes impenetrable and feared. The threat of unemployment, homelessness, or bankruptcy inhabit the role that natural disaster, starvation, and disease once held. The totalitarianism of advanced capitalist economic and social structures causes them to be perceived as (and for the individual, become) objective laws rather than subjective creations. Without the freedom to shape their environments, human subjects increasingly sacrifice their autonomous capacity for critical thought, self-reflection, and autonomous action.

In critiquing alienation, Adorno and Horkheimer are not condemning enlightenment thought per se, but rather calling for enlightenment to be directed against itself in the form of self-reflective thought. Although Adorno and Horkheimer formulate this problem as a critique of alienation and the authority of totalitarian society in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Marcuse directly addresses the task of overcoming alienation in his writings in the 1960s and 70s. For Marcuse, this means eliminating “surplus alienation” through enlightenment rationality that is not destructive, but instead considers what we do, why we do it and how we could do it differently (Herbert Marcuse 2001c, 197). Despite Adorno and Horkheimer’s illustration of the totalitarianism of enlightenment alienation that produces “pseudoindividuality” and the brutality of fascism, the project itself reveals a belief in a readership endowed with the critical potential for autonomous thought, or Kantian *Mündigkeit* (maturity and responsibility) (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988, 163).
I will now examine Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of alienation from four overlapping disciplines presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the genealogy of the subject, language and thought, culture and ideology, and psychoanalysis. Adorno and Horkheimer’s speculative anthropology posits a theory of the subject as originally emerging from a separation between human and nature distinguished by fear of the other. In an attempt to master this fear, enlightenment organizes and quantifies nature so that it can be escaped or manipulated. By anticipating flooding and droughts, humans can avoid disaster and instead harness flooding for irrigation and keep reserves in case of droughts. Enlightenment mastery of nature at the same time requires renunciation, both in the sense of restraining indulgence to avoid future scarcity and the self-renunciation of denying physical and psychological needs in exchange for material or social recognition. Language plays an important role in the human relationship to the environment as the symbols that make the unknown knowable and the mechanism through which ideas and behavior are represented, formed, and increasingly, restricted. Closely related to their theory of language, Adorno and Horkheimer’s philosophical critique of thought identifies its limitations in myth and enlightenment and the potential for liberated thought as a force of social change. Calculative enlightenment thought is not restricted to the productive realm, but extends to the “culture industry” that, similarly, loses spontaneity and self-determination. Finally, the foundation of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique in Freudian psychoanalysis provides insight into the tension between control and renunciation and expansion and repression that recurs in the formation of society and the subject.
II. Myth, Enlightenment, and the Genealogy of the Subject

Adorno and Horkheimer develop a dialectic between two interrelated types of thought: myth and enlightenment. Each is defined by how it conceptualizes and enacts the human relationship to nature, herself, and society and each is contained in the other. In myth, humans are dependent on nature and mediate the relationship primarily through magic and superstition. When faced with the unpredictable destruction and prosperity of rainfall, droughts, growth, and scarcity, humans instill nature with intention by spiritualizing it. Each thunderstorm and successful hunt has a deliberate spiritual actor behind it and loses its arbitrariness. Although this relationship to nature is still one of submission rather than mastery, enlightenment can already be located within the spiritualization of nature. By anthropomorphizing nature, humans take the first step toward comprehending the unknown by seeing themselves in nature. Adorno and Horkheimer consider the attempt to comprehend and categorize nature characteristic of enlightenment thought, which is defined by its rational and calculating approach.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the self first emerges in myth with the alienation of humans from nature and the distinction between subject and object. Primitive humans confront nature as something unknowable and mediate this relationship by seeing themselves in nature and as a part of nature. They attempt to imitate mythical powers to appease them rather than abstract themselves from nature in order to dominate it. With enlightenment, the relationship is reversed and humans gain control over nature by conceptualizing themselves as made in the image of god,
thereby instilling themselves rather than nature with divine power.¹⁹ For Adorno and Horkheimer:

> Only when made in such an image does the human attain the identity of the self which cannot be lost in identification with the other but takes possession of itself once and for all as an impenetrable mask. It is the identity of mind and its correlative, the unity of nature, which subdues the abundance of its qualities. Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes a mere having, an abstract identity (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 6).

In myth, humans conceive of themselves both as separate from nature in their ability to shape their surroundings and as a part of nature in their fluidity with the objective world. Enlightenment’s emphasis on creating order and categories further alienates humans from nature, creating a distinction between humans as subjects and all else as objects. In myth this conceptual divide does not exist and humans’ source of power is the imitation of nature’s power. With enlightenment, humans abstract themselves from nature as a means of mastering it, thereby denying their place in the natural world and the natural within themselves in the service of establishing themselves as the authority. The prejudice and self-renunciation implied in the distinction between the “same” and the “other” is aggravated in advanced capitalist society. It is a definitive feature of the authoritarian personality who conceives of a simplified world of hierarchical relations.

### III. The Interplay between Language and Thought

Alongside the changes in the human relationship to nature, the role of language transforms, as both a product and a cause of the subject’s shifting perception
of her environment. In myth, language is a metaphor that represents the immediate case while retaining its relationship to the universal—the “nonidentical, fluid mana,” a relationship that is lost in the literal interpretation of metaphors in enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 15). Adorno and Horkheimer use the religious term “mana” to indicate everything that transcends the immediate experience in myth and is unified in the totality of the unknown. The mythical expression of fear—“the cry of terror”—is the immediate reaction to nature in its particular manifestations that becomes the basis for its name (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 10). This reflexive relationship to nature makes the particular case tangible, while still evoking its relation to its larger unknowable significance. With enlightenment, language is demystified and the element of mana that it contained is “solidified, violently materialized by humans,” just as nature is purged of its mythical elements (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 15). Nature is made knowable through language in the attempt to eliminate the fear that is conjured by the unknown and make it something tangible that can be dominated. This is successful to the extent that humans have the language and technology to predict the weather and to understand and prevent disease. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the reified economy and society create a second nature, in which predators and scarcity become socially created problems despite the technological capacity to alleviate these fears.

Adorno and Horkheimer consider language, as a product and producer of ideology, to be inseparable from reality. Language is not just the means with which humans communicate with one another; it plays an active role in shaping our thoughts by setting the terms and limits of thought and, therefore, action. In order to
conceptualize something, one must be able to formulate it in words. These characteristics make language fundamental to humans’ ability to perceive and communicate with the world, but by preselecting the tools that humans can choose from to construct ideas, certain forms of thought are necessarily excluded. Adorno and Horkheimer believe that the limitations of language, particularly for oppositional thought, reach an extreme in advanced capitalist society. In their preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they warn that:

> If public life has reached a state in which thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language into a celebration of the commodity, the attempt to trace the source of this degradation must refuse obedience to the current linguistic and intellectual demands before it is rendered entirely futile by the consequence of those demands for world history (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xvi–vi).

The effects of the capitalist means of production are in no sense limited to the economy, but encompass language, behavior, and even the capacity for thought. Any thoughts counter to the production-oriented enlightenment have to discard its language and find new forms of expression, for example, in art or music. Adorno and Horkheimer reveal their sense of urgency when they claim that opposition to regression in society may eventually become impossible. In order to understand the permanency and extent of enlightenment, it is important to understand Adorno and Horkheimer’s interpretation of the development of enlightenment thought.

By means of enlightenment rationality, humans learned that they can master nature by outwitting it, although it often came at the cost of self-denial. Odysseus is the model of the bourgeois subject that Adorno and Horkheimer choose to illustrate the enlightenment relationship to nature.
Odysseus, like the heroes of all true novels after him, throws himself away, so to speak, in order to win himself; he achieves his estrangement from nature by abandoning himself to nature, trying his strength against it in all his adventures; ironically, it is implacable nature that he now commands, which triumphs on his return home as the implacable judge, avenging the heritage of the very powers he has escaped (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 38–39).

In Odysseus’ encounters he repeatedly masters nature as the mythical through his submission to it. Like in myth, he acknowledges nature’s power over him to avoid being destroyed by it, but through a combination of this mimicry and reason is able to conquer it. First, Odysseus outwits the Cyclops Polyphemus by giving himself the name “Nobody,” tricking the dimwitted Cyclops who is unable to differentiate between a name (sign) and the empirical reality of the name’s carrier (the sign’s referent). Because of the Cyclops’s own lack of enlightened subjectivity, he is unable to identify the sign without the image (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 53). Through Odysseus’s denial of his subjectivity and his comprehension of both the mythical and the rational, Odysseus imposes himself as master. The psychoanalytic implications are evident in Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of Odysseus’s self-denial, who in order to survive is forced to deny his instinctual desires. A similar form of self-denial is necessary for the laborer in industrial society who must renounce her claims to the products of her labor and the subjective pleasure in her work in order to receive a living wage.

Similarly, when Odysseus encounters the Sirens, whose enticing song promises to destroy anyone who hears it, Odysseus devises a ploy to survive listening to the singing by cunningly arranging for finding gratification without paying the
customary prices of destruction. He makes sure that while enjoying the Sirens’ song, he is placed under a failproof physical restraint: Odysseus commands his workers to tie him tightly to the mast and plug their ears with wax as they row ahead, so that he can enjoy the song without succumbing to its enticing destructive power (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 26). His ruse allows Odysseus to outwit the forces of myth, yet tied to the mast of the ship, his passivity demonstrates the psychological cost of subject formation, which implied a renunciation in exchange for control and identity from the beginning when “Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries upon itself before the self…was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood.” Alluding to the Freudian paradox of civilization, Adorno and Horkheimer use the stories of Odysseus to explain the violence of self-denial that creates the enlightenment subject and is a part of every child’s adaptation to advanced capitalist society. Since Odysseus, “The way of civilization has been that of obedience and work, over which fulfillment shines everlastingly as mere illusion, as beauty deprived of power” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 26). Enlightenment rationality produces a subject who thinks in terms of restraint and control and thus sacrifices indulgence and sensuous self-fulfillment.

The psychological consequences of enlightenment thought are evident in the stories of Odysseus. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that enlightenment is totalitarian because of its ability to command the thought, behavior, and preferences of individuals, and the formation of individual psychology plays an important role in this (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4). Although initially alienation from nature made the human into the “all-powerful self,” it came at the cost of acknowledging the
multiplicity of nature and expressing the natural drives within humans (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 6). Distinguishing between the self and nature requires the denial of the natural, or the instinctual and somatic, within the self and, eventually, the denial of the subjectivity that this division granted. Drawing from Nietzsche and Freud, Adorno and Horkheimer present the paradox of sacrificing the fulfillment of drives for the stability of civilized society. This painful process first occurred with the creation of the self—“the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings”\(^2\)—in opposition to nature, but also recurs for each individual in childhood as he learns to conform to social expectations (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 26).

Adorno and Horkheimer complicate the Freudian narrative by arguing that increasing self-alienation in advanced capitalist society not only represses and controls human nature, but also manipulates it into reproducing the system that oppresses it. The totalitarianism of enlightenment encompasses the economy, in which humans are compelled to subjugate themselves to the end of production, and culture, the extension of the economic apparatus into leisure time that shapes individual preferences so that they perpetuate the reproduction of the status quo.

Alienation from nature allows humans to achieve their dominant position, but it does not stop when humans produce enough food to prevent starvation or the technology to avoid flooding. Instead, enlightenment measurement, standardization, and control that mastered the unknown in nature are directed towards humans and society, which were never more than conceptually divorced from nature. In advanced capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer observe society lapsing back into myth as

\(^2\)Repercussions of this exclusive origin of the self include the marginalization of women, LGBT individuals, racial and ethnic minorities, and other individuals who by definition cannot meet these standards.
irrational purposes emerged out of rational systems of production and humans become alienated from their own products—including the economy, culture, and politics—to the extent that they no longer perceived their own subjective role in creating them. Viewed as overwhelming and objective forces, these structures remained out of the control of individuals who are forced to submit to their laws.

The attempt at mastery that Adorno and Horkheimer believe defines enlightenment is only possible through the “advance of thought” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 1). But this type of thought is restrictive and its progress has always been accompanied by regression. Instead of thought as the connection between the image and the sign—the abstract significance and the immediate appearance—, advanced enlightenment thought becomes “reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine.” Thought is alienated from the thinking subject so that it becomes agency with no agent controlling it. Rationality, science, and mathematics “made thought into a thing—a tool, to use its own term,” but not a tool to be intentionally directed by its producers. Instead, thought becomes a tool that serves the interests of production rather than the subjects’ interests (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 19).

By conceiving of nature as an undifferentiated object to be mastered, humans grant themselves identity, but this subjectivity is necessarily an “an abstract identity” with qualities of the object. The subject “takes possession of itself” and establishes the bourgeois identity based on ownership while at the same moment becoming the first instance of bourgeois property (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 6). Claiming possession of oneself makes the self into something that can be owned and,
eventually, this ownership becomes transferable. This estrangement is evidenced in specialization, which reduces the economic role of a human to an extension of a machine, and popular culture, which imposes pre-formulated preferences on the individual.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of alienation is based on Marx’s theory of alienated labor, in which he describes the consequences of capitalist production for the worker’s relationship to her labor, the products of her labor, species-being—humans as creative members of a community—, and other humans. Marx critiques the capitalist system of production that produces alienated relationships, stripping the worker of ownership, creative expression, and genuine human interactions (Marx 2000). Although the capitalists reap the benefits of the social and economic systems at the cost of the material and social well being of the workers, even they are not free to act autonomously of the system that supports them. In order to be successful, they must also abide by the rules of production and exploitation.

Despite the similarities between Marx’s and Adorno and Horkheimer’s critiques of alienation, the two theories posit important distinctions between the material conditions of class society. Marx differentiates between two major groups: the capitalists, or the bourgeoisie and the workers, or the proletariat. Material deprivation is the crucial characteristic of the proletariat that contains revolutionary potential by promising to disrupt the false consciousness that keeps the proletariat invested in the system that exploits and ruins them. Although accepting Marx’s basic premises, Adorno and Horkheimer perceive an additional complication in confronting alienated society. Under advanced capitalism, technology and social organization has
developed to the point where the masses are provided a level of material comfort that defines them equally by consumption and production. Although the oppression of the liberal capitalist system may no longer take the form of hunger and disease for the majority of people, Adorno and Horkheimer believe that people have only become more alienated from themselves, their products, and their communities. This has the effect of making the ever-complicated social and economic systems increasingly out of the control of the humans that create them. Confronting false consciousness becomes an even more challenging task, because it means relinquishing the comfort and passivity that comes with the predigested advanced capitalist culture. Implied in the concept of false consciousness is the idea that there is a form of “true” consciousness that would allow individuals to critically assess their surroundings and reclaim ownership and intentionality over the products of their labor—whether that be through revolution or other means.  

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that enlightenment rationality fosters false consciousness because it is narrowly focused on constant and expanding production and consumption, without questioning their purposes or consequences. Advanced capitalism not only prioritizes production for its own sake, but it punishes anyone who does not conform to its restrictive rationality. The worker who refuses to work twelve-hour days in dangerous conditions will simply be fired and replaced, just as the employer who fails to exploit her workers will quickly fall behind. A more critical form of thought would confront the increasing alienation in society and consider  

21 Marcuse argues that concept of false consciousness may no longer be applicable because it implies underlying “true” consciousness, which he argues has been eliminated by the totality of control in advanced industrial societies (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 41).
nature, art, and humans as more than exchangeable commodities. Instead, advanced capitalism’s blind pursuit of equality and control leads to hostility against the different and unknown. That which cannot be calculated through equivalences and reduced to exchange value is considered threatening and treated accordingly. At the same time, violence toward the “other,” embodied in the anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew, is targeted at the capitalist qualities of exchange, calculation, and profit that dictate advanced enlightenment thought. The destructive side of enlightenment thought is embodied by the authoritarian character or personality, also referred to as the sadomasochistic character. The authoritarian character behaves sadistically toward perceived inferiors—members of the “out group” often distinguished by political, racial, or class differences—and masochistically when faced with authority. Enlightenment’s rationality lapses into myth when it becomes destructive domination that lacks the capacity for self-reflection. Like myth, advanced capitalism merely reproduces the identical in history, the economy, and culture.

The concept of the identical is crucial to Adorno and Horkheimer’s understanding of human thought and behavior in myth and, even more so, in enlightenment. The most basic way in which humans conceive of their environments is though equivalences: a collection of leaves, stems, and a trunk only becomes more than its particular immediacy through its connection to the concept of tree that makes sense of it as a cohesive whole by relating it to other trees. Humans create order by identifying patterns and by reinforcing and reproducing patterns they increase the scope of their control. Order and control recognize the identical in objects and subjects, therefore marginalizing the nonidentical—that which cannot be equated or
generalized, the aspect of the particular that is not translated into language or concepts. For Adorno especially, the nonidentical is an important part of art, music, and the self, that is lost “Through the mediation of the total society, which encompasses all relationships and impulses” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 29). He describes the nonidentical in music as unplanned spontaneity (as opposed to the planned spontaneity he observes in popular jazz improvisation) and the experimentation with new types of form that require active participation from the listener (T. Adorno 1980, 22).

When thought, culture, and identity become mere reproduction under the monopoly of enlightenment society, qualities are stripped away so that everything can be quantified and nothing is left but the identical. Spontaneity, opposition, and originality are lost with the nonidentical. The significance of identity-thinking for Adorno and Horkheimer is based on their understanding of the dialectic relationship between thought and reality, or the way in which humans perceive the world and its actual structure. As thought becomes increasingly identical, the nonidentical disappears in the self, culture, and social organization, which in turn reinforces identity-thinking.

IV. “Culture Industry” and Ideology

Adorno and Horkheimer observe the pervasiveness of identity-thinking in the modern world, and particularly in the realm of ideology they deem the “culture industry.” In advanced capitalism, culture no longer provides the opportunity for sublimation: the psychoanalytic concept of redirecting destructive death and sex
drives into socially acceptable, and sometimes even productive, expression. Instead, it becomes an industry that extends the repression of the economic apparatus, so leisure time is used to reinforce the totality of control (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 113). Adorno and Horkheimer’s choice of the term “industry” indicates the commodification of cultural goods, which lose their value as non-instrumental—art for the sake of art—when they are produced and consumed as a means to relaxation, amusement, or distraction. Culture as merely another commodity is not intended to provoke reflection, critique, or interpretation. In the culture industry, “The spectator must need no thoughts of his own: the product prescribes each reaction, not through any actual coherence—which collapses once exposed to thought—but through signals” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 109). When a film viewer sees a murderer creeping around in the dark, she knows to feel frightened; when a listener hears the familiar upbeat rhythm of the newest Katy Perry song, she knows to smile and sing along. The culture industry uses repetition and predictability to serve as an escape from thought and individual expression rather than an outlet for it.

When specialized occupations force people to perform menial tasks alongside a machine day after day, leisure time promises to be the realm of creativity and expression that is restricted from the workday. Instead, entertainment in the culture industry is tailored to the overworked laborer seeking escape or the exhausted manager fleeing from her thoughts. The predigested repetition of Hollywood films, pop songs, and consumer-directed art are immediately recognizable as familiar because of their similarity to all other commodities of their kind, yet retain just
enough variation to keep the consumer passively interested. This occurs without the 
consumer having to exert any effort in the process of consumption.

The liberating freedom promised by enlightenment has been reduced to a 
choice between inescapable alternatives. These alternatives are limiting not only 
because they provide the consumer with pre-selected options, but also because in the 
end they prove to be identical in their purpose and delivery. Advanced capitalism’s 
culture industry promotes free choice by providing the subject with the option 
between Democratic or Republican, Pepsi or Coca Cola. The emphasis on 
individuality and autonomy in discourse and especially media and advertising 
reinforces the illusion that the choice between alternatives is indeed an act of free 
will. Adorno and Horkheimer explain that this is accomplished because:

> Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated. The hierarchy of serial qualities purveyed to the public serves only to quantify it more completely. Everyone is supposed to behave spontaneously according to a ‘level’ determined by indices and to select the category of mass product manufactures for their type (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 97).

In order for the “free” choice between alternatives to retain the appearance of 
freedom, superficial differences are exaggerated and each variation in color, size, or 
price is considering a definitive expression of personality. The differences between 
the modern Democratic and the Republican platforms are underscored to the point at 
which the U.S. government was shut down for sixteen days largely due to partisan 
issues, freezing welfare and disability benefits and costing two billion dollars and 
120,000 private sector jobs (Lowrey 2013). Although both parties represent the center 
of the political spectrum, they are treated as polar opposites. This misconception
becomes real through its tangible (primarily negative) political and material consequences and the social significance of identifying as Democratic or Republican.

In addition to illuminating the repressive side of the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer account for the unprecedented level of material comfort it provides and the contentment that comes with that. In fact, this aspect of advanced capitalism is essential for its totality. Advances in production and technology free many people from material depravity and provide new levels of material comfort, but the same systems that provide this freedom reduce individual autonomy.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s observations about the culture industry have only become more salient today; everyday freedom consists in choosing between Miley Cyrus or Justin Bieber, the iPhone 5c personalized in lime green or baby blue (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988, 38). The new iPhone is marketed “for the colorful,” appealing to the individuality of each potential consumer by assuring her on the sleek website that “color is more than just a hue. It expresses a feeling. Makes a statement. Declares an allegiance. Color reveals your personality” (“iPhone5c” 2014). The belief that personality can be expressed through the choice between one of five colors dominates advertising and consumption. Taken literally, it means that Apple recognizes only five different personality types, a simplification whose overwhelming success can only be explained by the typed society to which it is marketing.22

Adorno and Horkheimer present these alternatives as inescapable, but what prevents people from choosing not to have a Smartphone or vote for one of the two

22 The iPhone exemplifies Marx’s “commodity fetishism,” a concept that captures peoples’ experiences as alienated from the processes of production and the human labor that creates commodities to the degree that they lose sight of the subjectivity that goes into producing objects (Marx 1872). This obscures the, often oppressive, class relations involved in producing commodities.
major parties? The choice between Democratic or Republican provides the clearest example of the lack of alternatives in practice. A citizen can vote for the Green party or actively abstain from voting, but both options have the same outcome: eliminating even the negligible possibility of democratic change without any tangible gain. Although the choice to own a Smartphone appears more flexible, social pressure to be accessible at any time and to conform to norms of “conspicuous consumption” yield a similar outcome (Veblen 1994). In fact, virtually the same percentage of Americans vote as own a Smartphone: an average of 53.4 percent of Americans have voted in general elections since 2008, while the number of Americans who own a Smartphone has reached 55 percent (“Voter Turnout” 2014; A. Smith 2013). The possibility of nonconformity always exists, but the power of the culture industry lies in its ability to compel the majority of the population to vote for one of two parties or to own a Smartphone. Notably, those who do not comply are often in marginalized socioeconomic positions that prevent them from doing so rather than active opponents of the system. In addition to this, as Marcuse points out in One-Dimensional Man, “The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual” (Herbert Marcuse 1964, 7). This holistic evaluation that moves beyond “equal opportunity” to consider the actual outcome of choice is a

23 I am not suggesting that these are the same population who own Smartphones and who vote, although there is certainly significant overlap. I hypothesize that there is a greater range of socioeconomic status in the population of Smartphone owners (a phenomenon in many developing countries) as it is often considered a social necessity. A Pew Research Center study from 2013 shows that 61 percent of adults with a household income of $50,000-$74,999 and 41 percent of adults with a household income of less than $30,000 had a Smartphone (47% $50,000 and under). This demonstrates that Smartphone ownership is a high 41 percent even in the lowest earning bracket (A. Smith 2013).
central component of Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of freedom within advanced capitalism.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, a choice between limited alternatives does not constitute freedom, but the irrational outcome of enlightenment rationality. Although they are the first to acknowledge the regression that accompanies progress and the sacrifices of moving from myth to enlightenment, their critique of enlightenment thought and society—its own rooted in the critical and reflective thought characteristic of enlightenment—indicates the potential of a more liberated enlightenment. Technology has already developed to the point where hunger and poverty are questions of distribution, not scarcity. Machines make labor efficient enough that the workday could be dramatically cut, allowing for more leisure time. In light of this progress and the simultaneous regression reflected in the billions of starving and impoverished people, eighty-hour workweeks, and commoditization of leisure time, Adorno and Horkheimer locate the problem in the social rather than the material circumstances:

The fault lies in a social context which induces blindness. The mythical scientific respect of people for the given reality, which they themselves constantly create, finally becomes itself a positive fact, a fortress before which even the revolutionary imagination feels shamed as utopianism, and degenerates to a compliant trust in the objective tendency of history (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 33).

The enlightenment emphasis on scientific objectivity and reality as a collection of empirical facts begins as a means for making sense of the natural world and becomes a reified “truth.” Just as nature was feared and mimicked under myth, enlightenment economy and society develop into unchangeable structures that the
individual confronts in their alienated form. Myth and enlightenment merge to recreate the overwhelming force of nature, this time as a second nature that is the product of humans themselves. Constant production without reflection or intention is the only action that can be trusted—the rest is left to “the objective tendency of history.”

Production, science, and technology are the only values that are immune to dismissal as metaphysical or superstitious. The ends that they fulfill, whether it is the manufacturing of luxury cars or development of pharmaceuticals, are not considered because the means themselves are the only things that can be judged objectively. Today, in politics, the media, and informal conversation, the term “subjectivity” is often used as an insult. Subjectivity implies bias and deception—instead, the subject should make herself resemble an object before her word can be trusted. Subjects must discard any claim to individualism and relinquish ownership over their words just to join the dialogue. As language, behavior, and individuals become identical and self-alienated, the reified reality becomes increasingly impenetrable.

V. Equality and Prejudice: the “Pseudoindividuality” of Advanced Capitalism

The origin of prejudicial thinking can be identified in Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussion of the subject-object distinction that abstracts humans from nature and the self from the other. From the beginning, the “other” has inspired fear and enlightenment demanded that differences be controlled through domination. This impulse is, somewhat perversely, represented in the enlightenment pursuit of equality. Equality in enlightenment, derived from the belief that humans are made in the image
of God, instills individuals with the right to autonomous action. At the same time, it punishes them for any deviation from the norm. Enlightenment began with prejudicial thinking and in its advanced form registers social differences as threats that are feared in the same way that nature was feared as the unknown. For Adorno and Horkheimer:

Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4).

Social order is only possible through equivalence; language itself is based on finding similarities in dissimilar objects. Although acknowledging its necessity, Adorno and Horkheimer also recognize the consequences of a society “ruled by equivalence.” Just as language loses its relation to the universal and aspect of the nonidentical, nature, art, and even individuals are subjected to the law of equivalence. In the case of bourgeois society, “Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures,” based on the “criterion of self-preservation” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 22). The spectrum of individuality becomes a dualistic measure of economic function, turning people into “abstract quantities” that either effectively adapt to the demands of society based on production, or fail and are “exposed to the force of the collective” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4; 22).

The bourgeois conception of the individual as an autonomous actor with the freedom of self-determination is undermined by the opposite impulse to eliminate inequalities. In society as in nature, “Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the ‘outside’ is the real source of fear” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002,
11). Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the barbarism of advanced capitalism exemplified in Hitler and the Holocaust is the radical attempt to eliminate that which is perceived as “outside”: the “triumph of repressive égalité” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 9). Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the Holocaust as ultimately reducible to the enforcement of equality fails to answer the prior question of how the value judgment that identified the “other” was made and overly abstracts from the concrete historical circumstances surrounding Hitler’s victimization of the Jews. Additionally, their theory does not explain the violence against the “other” which far surpasses any precedent in enlightenment or myth.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the division between self and other that was necessary for the formation of the individual becomes an attack on humanity in its extreme form, and an attack on individuality in its most basic form. The emergence of “pseudoindividuality” that Adorno and Horkheimer document in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is discussed in the context of popular music in Adorno’s 1941 critique, “On Popular Music” (T. Adorno 1980; Horkheimer and Adorno 1988, 163). In this essay, he illustrates the powerful, but often intangible, capability of a culture of pseudoindividuality to create a society of limited personality types. Although this premise is adopted in Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the “culture industry,” Adorno’s essay “On Popular Music” connects pseudoindividuality to the idea of “types.”

Popular music, Adorno argues, has lost the creative and somatic potential of “serious music” and instead serves as “social cement” that reinforces passivity by providing a non-disruptive form of escape. Music has developed to complement the
capitalist mode of production by maintaining a level of immediate familiarity through standardization and lack of variation that requires little attention and provides uncritical satisfaction. People enjoy popular music without an awareness of its placating effects, due to its façade of individualization. Adorno defines this “pseudo-individualization” as “endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself” (T. Adorno 1980, 45). Using techniques such as “normalized” improvisation and repetition, popular music presents itself as spontaneous creative expression, when it is really only a “multiple-choice questionnaire” (T. Adorno 1980, 446). Listeners maintain the belief that they are exercising their individuality when they choose between types of popular music, but they are easily identifiable as different types: “rhythmically obedient types” or “emotional types” (T. Adorno 1980, 460). This critique extends beyond culture and music. A defining characteristic of advanced capitalist authority is the internalization of the ideology that maintains the ideal of freedom while placing strict limitations on individual autonomy.

The idea of pseudoindividuality becomes the basis for Adorno’s observations of a “typed society” in the 1950 study on *The Authoritarian Personality* (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 747). The preservation of a belief in individuality alongside its actual elimination account for the stability of pseudoindividuality and the illusion of freedom in the choice between types. The authoritarian personality, the personality type that Adorno is most concerned with, is characterized by the same prejudicial thinking that results from the fear of the other: she perceives society in terms of “in-groups” and “out-groups” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 233). The stereotyped thinking
of the authoritarian personality is reinforced by the idea of equivalence, which rejects the prospect of the nonidentical and instead creates space for restrictive personality types. The psychology behind personality types and the problem of authority and pseudoindividuality are the central focuses of the Institute 1936 *Study on Authority and the Family* and Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford’s 1950 *The Authoritarian Personality*, which will be discussed in depth in chapter two.
Chaotic specialization will not be overcome by way of bad syntheses of specialized research results, just as unbiased empirical research will not come about by attempting to reduce its theoretical element to nothing. Rather, this situation can be overcome to the extent that philosophy – as a theoretical undertaking oriented to the general, the “essential” – is capable of giving particular studies animating impulses, and at the same time remains open enough to let itself be influenced and changed by these concrete studies.


Can empirical research enhance a philosophical critique of society? The Frankfurt School was unwilling to accept the limitations imposed on social critique by orthodox Marxism. Marxism provides a crucial theoretical framework for analyzing the material determinants of class society, but alone it can not explain preferences that respond to cultural trends rather than material needs, and the omnipresence of advertisement-like popular music and films that directed consumption of everything from clothing to political parties. A social critique whose scope was limited to economic determinants, or the “base,” disregards the fundamental changes in subjectivity that have occurred in advanced capitalist societies in which the ideological “superstructure” plays a central role. Many of these changes are not immediately obvious and cannot be understood merely through theorizing, but require empirical inquiries into cultural shifts. It is not just one’s economic class that determines what one consumes, how one thinks, or who one votes for. In addition, culture has an overwhelming power to direct consumers. Cultural trends create new needs—sometimes verging on
addictions—for the newest season of Mad Men\textsuperscript{24} or for political candidates through campaign strategies such as Barack Obama’s viral “Yes We Can” speech turned music video with over thirty celebrity performers (Yes We Can 2008). The Frankfurt School critiqued popular culture and ideology in addition to familial and economic authority structures to elucidate their implications on modern subjectivity.

The modern subject does not make choices autonomously, particularly not economic choices. Rather, individuals are constantly processing and internalizing an onslaught of advertisements, blog posts, Top 20 songs, Tweets, and political propaganda—often not easily distinguishable from each other. Adorno and Horkheimer believe that the rise of the “culture industry” is closely associated with a weakening of the ego on an individual psychological level, the dominance of “types” or “pseudoindviduals” rather than the classic bourgeois conception of individuals on the social level, and the rise of fascism and other forms of authoritarian thought on the political level (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 163; 109). For these reasons, the modern subject cannot be conceived of solely in terms of her role in the means of production as is the case under orthodox Marxism. Instead, subjects must be understood through the dialectical relationship between material conditions and ideological environment; therefore, the study of mass behavior necessitates the study of mass culture and ideology.

The Institute’s decision to pursue empirical research was particularly striking due to the members’ lack of formal training or experience in research methodology. Only one of the leading Institute members, Erich Fromm, was a practicing

\textsuperscript{24} Incidentally, Man Men is a television drama about an advertising agency and was one of the most popular shows in 2013 (“Sunday Cable Ratings” 2014).
psychoanalyst with experience in psychoanalytic research (Wiggershaus 1994, 42). He was responsible for introducing psychoanalysis into the Institute’s work and designed the methodology of the first empirical project, *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1936).25 Although Fromm was the leading psychoanalyst at the Institute in the 1930s, the influence of psychoanalysis extended beyond his contributions to Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse’s theoretical and political works. It is evident in the accounts of Odysseus’ self-renunciation to overcome the Sirens and self-repression to outwit the Cyclops in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Psychoanalysis becomes increasingly influential for Marcuse, who employs a psychoanalytic understanding of social subjects to develop his approach to revolutionary practice (see chapter three).

Fromm viewed Freudian psychoanalysis as a necessary supplement to Marx and Engels’ historical materialism, which differentiates between the economic base and ideological superstructure, but cannot explain how the superstructure is generated or the dialectical (rather than deterministic) relationship between the two. Psychoanalysis fills this gap with a theory of internalization that explains how dominant economic and social trends are transmitted into the preferences and behavior of individuals. Freud argues that consciousness and ideology must be understood through the repression and sublimation of drives. Fromm develops Freud’s theory by asserting that an individual’s process of adaptation and resulting psychology is based on an individual's socioeconomic circumstances in addition to instinctual drives (Fromm 1980a, 34). Fromm draws a parallel between a society’s mode of production (base) and its ideology (superstructure) and an individual’s

25 Fromm’s methodology is discussed in section VI.
material conditions and her psyche. The Frankfurt School not only rejected the Orthodox Marxist economic approach; they insisted on an interdisciplinary approach that critiqued society and the subject from inseparable economic, cultural, psychological and political perspectives. They attempted to move beyond orthodox Marxism using empirical research to determine how psychological and social tendencies were associated in individuals and what patterns in subjectivity existed in a “typed” society (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 747).

The decision to pursue empirical research was bolstered by two external demands. The first was the need to gain legitimacy through scientific research to ensure the security of the Institute and its members. This concern was not as much about prestige as it was a response to the Institute’s vulnerable status as a newly established Marxist institute at Columbia University during the Cold War. It was essential that the Institute members distance themselves from orthodox Marxism if they wished to continue their work in the United States, particularly as refugees. This entailed self-censorship: Adorno and Horkheimer successfully deflected FBI investigations by removing Marxist terminology from the 1947 edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, including replacing “capitalism” with “existing condition” and “capitalist bloodsuckers” with “knights of industry” (Rayman 2009, 21). Horkheimer suppressed explicit Marxist sentiments in other works (and Adorno conceded) and, notably, he chose to publish many works in German while in the United States despite lacking a German audience. The Institute’s journal, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, was published predominantly in German for all but the last issue published in 1941. The Institute’s first publication in the United States, *Studies on*
Authority and the Family was published in German and has yet to be translated in its entirety into English. Considering the importance of this study for establishing the Institute in the United States and demonstrating that the members’ “views are not mere intuitions but have developed in the course of extremely wide-ranging research activities in this field of knowledge,” it is striking that it was not published in English (Wiggershaus 1994, 150). The Institute members’ discomfort with written English could have been addressed by hiring a translator; a more likely explanation is Horkheimer’s conscious decision not to promote these studies to an American audience for fear of emphasizing the Institute’s Marxism. In the foreword to the Institute’s first empirical studies, Horkheimer proudly announces that “American social research” serves extensively as the Institute’s model, emphasizing the use of the most advanced empirical methods for what is clearly a foreign audience (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, x). Publishing Studies on Authority and the Family in German allowed the Institute to avoid censorship while producing a comprehensive interdisciplinary work for what could only be a future post-war readership.

The second external demand further accounts for the Institute’s decision to publish Studies on Authority and the Family in German. Horkheimer perceived the need to correct the imbalance between philosophy and science, an imbalance indicated by the popularization of irrational philosophies such as phenomenology and vitalism in Weimar Germany (Horkheimer 1988b). He diagnosed a crisis of philosophical thought in which the synthesis of philosophical and scientific methods was rejected. Instead, attention vacillated dramatically between the two poles: between positivism and phenomenology, social Darwinism and fascism. Horkheimer
aimed to address this danger and particularly its political implications with the development of the Frankfurt School’s “social philosophy” as a blended philosophical and empirical approach to social critique (Horkheimer 1988a). In his inaugural speech, Horkheimer tasked the Institute with developing a social philosophy:

> to organize investigations stimulated by contemporary philosophical problems in which philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians, and psychologists are brought together in permanent collaboration to undertake in common that which can be carried out individually in the laboratory in other fields (Horkheimer 1931).

Horkheimer initiated the first empirical study, *Studies on Authority and the Family*, during his first year as director of the Institute of Social Research in 1930. In this chapter, I will examine two of the Institute’s empirical studies on authority, *Studies on Authority and the Family* published in 1936 and *The Authoritarian Personality* published in 1950. In these studies, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, Adorno and their coworkers demonstrate their commitment to utilizing social scientific methods to test, revise, and reinforce their theories.

I intend for Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and specifically, their theories of subject formation, internalization and “pseudoindividuality” to serve as context for the Institute’s empirical research (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988, 163). I will break down the theoretical presuppositions that inform the Institute’s empirical methodology, discuss the value of empirical research as a supplement to theoretical work, and finally, assess the lasting influence and critiques of the “authoritarian character.” Interpreted without the context of the Institute’s theoretical works, the empirical studies may appear underdeveloped, but read alongside the comprehensive critique of totalitarian society.
provided in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they demonstrate a serious attempt to understand and critique authority as it appears in individual psychology. Likewise, claims that the Frankfurt School is “elitist” or “purely speculative” are discredited by the members’ demonstrated interdisciplinary approach and the empirical work that grounds their theory in actual historical and cultural phenomena (Kellner 2002, 31; Rayman 2009, 8).

The decision to undertake empirical research marks an important development from the economic-based theory of orthodox Marxism to the interdisciplinary social critique of the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory. This largely explains the significance of the first *Studies on Authority and the Family*, which lack a comprehensive analysis of the data, but lays the groundwork for future studies by developing the concepts and the methodology for social psychological research on character types. While the Institute’s theoretical works establish the theoretical critique of society that determines the presuppositions and approach to the empirical studies, the studies provide an opportunity to test the claims and associations posited in the Institute’s theoretical work. These include if and how family power structures are related to a child’s attitude toward authority and self-identified political preferences are associated with prejudice or conventionalism. By working, often simultaneously, on both theoretical and empirical projects the Institute members attempted to produce a multidimensional critique of authority that confronted the social structures, cultural trends, and psychological tendencies that characterized advanced capitalism as “totalitarian.” For “Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and
distribution which may well be compatible with a ‘pluralism’ of parties, newspapers ‘countervailing powers,’ etc.” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 3).

I. Confronting the Fascist Threat

The stakes were high for the Frankfurt School. Already in 1930, the Institute perceived authority as a serious threat in its political, psychological and theoretical implications. The fear that hierarchical structures in the economy and the family would culminate in a political crisis of authority was realized in 1933 with the victory of the Nazi party in Germany. The Institute members were forced into exile and the study of authority took on a new urgency: from a critique of repressive capitalist authority structures emerged a critique of authoritarianism, and notably, the connection between the two. From the first collaborative study of authority, the Frankfurt School’s empirical research was motivated by the members’ revolutionary Marxist intentions, but with the rise of fascism it acquired a new, defensive purpose: to prevent the success of fascism in other liberal capitalist democracies.

The timing of the Institute’s first empirical studies, which were conducted in the three years leading up to the Nazi dictatorship and its first two years in power, reveals the foresight in the Institute’s work. However, the Frankfurt School’s early interest in authority in mass culture and capitalist economic structures was by no means a prediction of the extent or magnitude of fascism. The interest in authority, particularly authority linked to Right-wing authoritarianism, stemmed from the identification of the dangers of capitalist structures in liberal democracies that encouraged hierarchical, stereotyped thought and behavior. Studies on Authority and
The *Family* marked the formal beginning of the Frankfurt School’s empirical critique of authority in capitalist society as a means to preventing its complete domination in the form of political authoritarianism.

Marcuse illustrates the continuity between liberal and authoritarian political structures in his 1934 essay, “The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Theory of the State.” On a theoretical level, authoritarianism indicated a complete turn away from the enlightenment values of rationality and individuality in favor of “political existentialism” and totalitarianism (Herbert Marcuse 1980, 187). The same authority structures that were formalized in political life under Fascism and Soviet Communism were present and, in fact, originated in the capitalist structures of liberal democratic nations (Herbert Marcuse 1980, 174). Marcuse’s analysis contained a clear political message: the false dichotomy of authoritarianism and liberalism provided the illusion that liberal democracies faced Fascism and Soviet Communism merely as external threats. In reality, capitalist democracies also had to confront the authoritarian tendencies existing within their own borders. Through this framework, phenomena in capitalist democracies such as alienation from one’s labor, oneself and one’s community; reification of the economy and politics; repressive cultures, and sadism and masochism in mass psychology reveal their authoritarian tendencies. These authoritarian tendencies were the target of the Institute’s empirical studies.

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26 For a more detailed discussion of Marcuse’s argument in “The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Theory of the State” see chapter three.
II. Why Freud?: The Conflict between Nature and Society

The problems that the *Studies on Authority and the Family* in 1936 and *The Authoritarian Personality* in 1950 addressed are social problems manifested and reinforced in the psychology of individuals. Freudian psychoanalysis plays a central role in shaping the conceptual and methodological foundation for the empirical studies. Although Fromm, Marcuse, and Adorno diverged on the interpretation and application of Freudian psychoanalysis, they agreed on its centrality for their work. Freud provides a necessary explanation for the tension between human nature and society and the destructive and constructive process that occurs when humans enter society. Upon entering society, humans are forced to repress and sublimate their basic sex and death drives in exchange for external security and the benefits of communal life. In this symbolic transformation, they can no longer take food or land, harm others, or have sex as they choose; instead, they have to regulate their behavior as the only way of guaranteeing that others will do the same. Instead of an individual acting as her own authority, each person submits to the authority of the state and receives security and a relief of responsibility in return.

Although Freud denied having read Nietzsche, he proposes a Nietzschean theory of the origin of society (Lehrer 1995, 105). Forty years earlier, Nietzsche compared the human transition into society to the forceful transformation of sea animals into land animals and the accompanying loss of instincts, power, and satisfaction. Without the ability to depend on their drives, humans are forced to think, calculate, and rationalize. They become dependent on their “weakest and most fallible organ”: the consciousness. The destructive drives that were once directed outward are
internalized and in this self-violating act the soul is created along with bad conscience, self-repression, and guilt (Nietzsche 1999, 5:322).

Freud describes a similar process, but believes that the psyche is the product of this transition and develops a systematic rather than genealogical approach to explaining what he posits as the tension between the id (Es), the ego (Ich), and the superego (Über-Ich). The id consists of the unconscious sex and death drives, the most basic components of psychological composition. The ego is the rational response to reality developed through identification with authority. Finally, the superego is the unconscious part of the ego that acts as a cultural reinforcement of repressive norms. The tension between the ego and the super-ego is the source of both guilt through satisfaction of the object-libido and pride through the narcissistic libido. This mirrors the ambivalent relationship to the father Freud posits in his theory of the “Oedipus complex.” The “Oedipus complex” describes the phenomenon in which a child both identifies with his father and wishes to destroy him to remove the obstacle to object satisfaction in the mother (Freud 1925, 34). Freud emphasizes the importance of psychological formation in the family and the Institute chose to focus on this aspect in its first empirical studies of authority.

Although Freud’s social psychoanalytic theory influenced all of the Institute members, his theory of clinical psychoanalysis was a source of serious contention. Freud establishes that one of the roles of psychoanalytic therapy is to lower the expectations of the super-ego, or ego-ideal, in order to reduce the antagonism that

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27 Although normally the ego dominates the id, the relationship is sometimes reversed when the ego is compelled to succumb to the sex and death drives of the id. Freud compared the relationship between the ego and the id to a rider and his horse: the rider must tame the horse, but because he is also dependent on the horse he must attempt to direct the horse’s interests to serving his own needs (Freud 1925, 27–28).
results from its tension with the ego. Additionally, Freud argues that therapy can make unconscious desires and conflicts conscious—and therefore controllable by the ego—through *Wortvorstellung*, the verbalization of the repressed residue of memories [Erinnerungsreste] in psychoanalytic discussion (Freud 1925, 20–22). Freud’s investment in therapy is based on his belief in the inevitability of the compromise that necessitates drive repression in exchange for the benefits of organized society. He denies the prospects of regression to the violent and chaotic state of nature and liberation in the form of a non-repressive society. For this reason, he advocates therapeutic measures for adapting the individual to society through the healthy sublimation of drives rather than proposing a resolution to the paradox of civilization. Similarly, Nietzsche rejects the possibility of establishing a non-repressive society, but instead of arguing for adaptation he provides the possibility of escape in his concept of the *Übermensch*. Both Freud and Nietzsche dismiss the possibility for radical social change because of their acceptance of repression as inevitable.

III. Revisionists vs. Revolutionaries: Conflicting Interpretations of Freud and Fromm’s Dismissal from the Institute

The role of therapy was one of the most contentious points in the psychoanalytic debate between Fromm, Marcuse, and Adorno. It became a much larger question of where to locate the need for change: in the individual or society. Fromm, a practicing psychoanalyst, took a more traditional Freudian approach and emphasized the possibility of gaining “a new kind of freedom” within the boundaries of existing society: “one which enables us to realize our own individual self, to have
faith in this self and in life” (Fromm 1941, 106). He argues that instead of fleeing from the overwhelming freedom of autonomous thought and action, therapy challenges the individual to confront and embrace freedom through active self-awareness.

Marcuse and Adorno rejected therapy entirely precisely because it adapted individuals to a reality that they found excessively prohibitive. Along with Friedrich Pollock, they were the only Institute members never to be psychoanalyzed (Wiggershaus, 267). They argued that Fromm and other Freudian revisionists misapplied psychoanalysis: rather than employing its revolutionary potential to enable individuals to be more critical and less conforming, revisionists used it as a tool for further pacifying individuals and reinforcing the repressive status quo. In Adorno’s 1941 book, *Minima Moralia*, he argues that:

> A cathartic method with a standard other than successful adaptation and economic success would have to aim at bringing people to a consciousness of unhappiness both general and—inseparable from it—personal, and at depriving them of the illusory gratifications by which the abominable order keeps a second hold on life inside them, as if it did not already have them firmly enough in its power from outside (Wiggershaus 1994, 267).

More than being merely misleading, therapy stifles the awareness of the need for structural change by telling the individual that she needs to change rather than encouraging her to change society. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer illustrated the “illusory gratifications by which the abominable order keeps a second hold on life inside [people]”: in the pleasurable escape of pop music, the identification with stereotypical movie stars, and the feeling of shared glory with political leaders (Wiggershaus 1994, 267). Psychoanalytic therapy is yet another form
of this ideological captivity. According to Marcuse, “Psychoanalysis elucidates the universal in the individual experience. To that extent, and only to that extent can psychoanalysis break the reification in which the human relations are petrified” (Herbert Marcuse 1955a, 229).

Marcuse was especially critical of Fromm for rejecting the Freudian drive theory. For Fromm, human nature consisted of a combination of environmental determination, historical context, and biological nature. “Human nature,” Fromm argued, “though being the product of historical evolution, has certain mechanisms and laws, to discover which is the task of psychology” (Fromm 1941, 13). Marcuse believes that by dropping the drive theory, Fromm diverges from Freud completely and lapses into a metaphysical belief in a spiritual or moral “human nature” that remains after economic, social, and ideological determinants are removed. The drive theory was necessary to explain what motivated the individual beyond environmental determinants and, with revolutionary change, could be liberated for expression.

Marcuse and Adorno are critical of Fromm’s “self-help” language, which they believe reflects Fromm’s misjudgment of the problem as individual rather than social. Marcuse criticizes Fromm for statements such as “Ours is a life not of brotherliness, happiness, contentment but of spiritual chaos and bewilderment” (Fromm 1950, 1). For Marcuse, this presented the problem as “essentially moral” and placed the responsibility on the individual, rather than society, for “the failure of his self-realization” (Herbert Marcuse 1955b, 260). Adorno was particularly critical of Fromm’s works, repeatedly writing to Horkheimer that Fromm “takes the easy way out with the concept of authority” by disregarding the necessary and positive role it
could play in cases such as Lenin’s vanguard party and “above all shows a severe lack of the concept of dialectics” (Wiggershaus 1994, 266). Conflicting interpretations of Freud led to Fromm’s dismissal from the Institute in 1939.

Fromm’s separation from the Institute was not only motivated by Adorno and Horkheimer’s support of Marcuse’s Freudian interpretation over Fromm’s, but was also related to Fromm’s increasing distance from the radical core of the Frankfurt School and best-selling appeal to a middle-brow mass audience. Fromm and Marcuse were the most well-known public figures of the Frankfurt School, but Fromm far outdid Marcuse in terms of the popular appeal of his work: only one of Fromm’s book sold less than 1,000,000 copies, while Marcuse’s most widely-read book, One-Dimensional Man, sold roughly 300,000 copies (Friedman 2014; Harold Marcuse 2014). It was not Fromm’s popularity itself that made the other Institute members reluctant, but the compromises that they believed Fromm made to appeal to a broader audience and his unwillingness to take risks in his work and expose himself to criticism. As early as 1934, Horkheimer wrote to Pollock voicing his hesitation that “although Fromm had some productive ideas, he did not particularly like him, since he was trying to stay on good terms with too many people” (Wiggershaus 1994, 265–66). Despite the harsh judgment of Fromm and his formal break from the Institute, he remained influential in the Frankfurt School’s later work.

IV. Social Character Types and the Importance of the Family

In Studies on Authority and the Family and The Authoritarian Personality the Institute members employ psychological typology based on Fromm’s adaptation of
Freudian character types. Beginning in the early 1930s, Fromm writes about Freud’s anal, oral, and genital types, which corresponded with sadistic and masochistic tendencies. Freud’s theory posits that oral and anal fixations in the pre-genital period lead to different personality traits once the child reaches the genital phase. For example, the childhood fascination with defecation and then the compulsion to learn to control one’s defecation could cause a child to be frugal and obsessed with saving later in life (Fromm 1980b, 289-90). The primary determinant of character type is a child’s resolution of the Oedipus complex: the erotic love for the mother and the desire to kill the father, in other words, the repression and sublimation of the sex and death drives. In extreme cases, this leads to both an internalization of submission and self-harm (masochism) and a desire to dominate and control others (sadism). Fromm interprets the sadomasochistic character as “characterized by his attitude toward authority” (Fromm 1941, 162). The sadomasochistic character is determined by the dominant desires to submit to others and force people into submission. Because of the association of the term “sadomasochistic” with neurosis and perversion and the association that Fromm develops between psychological tendencies and authoritarian political forms, he renames it the “authoritarian character.”

Drawing from Freud’s concept of “dynamic character,” Fromm explained that character type “refers not to the sum total of behavior patterns characteristic for one person, but to the dominant drives that motivate behavior” (Fromm 1941, 161). Fromm employs the concept of character as a psychoanalytic tool to identify commonalities between the psychological make-up of subjects, rather than elucidate the idiosyncrasies of each case. Fromm develops the term “social character” from
Freud’s concept of dynamic character, to describe the common psychology that each member of a society holds. He explains that:

The social character comprised only a selection of traits, *the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to the group* (Fromm 1941, 276).

Fromm breaks from Freud in defining social character based on dynamic adaptation to social and economic interactions rather than development solely in childhood or the pre-genital phase (Fromm 1941, 31). He rejects Freud’s dichotomous drive theory based on the childhood response to the Oedipus complex, and instead developed an environmentally and historically determined theory of drive adaptation. Through his Freudian and Marxist analysis, Fromm diagnoses the social character of modern capitalist society as dominated by alienation and driving people to forgo their sense of self in favor of belonging, or conformity (Fromm 1941, 183).

Fromm argues that psychological character formation occurs in the broader context of development within the family and society and is not limited to the pre-genital period. He asserts that Freud’s theory of pre-genital character formation mistakes symptoms for causes: oral and anal fixations are the result of certain personality types, not the determinants of them (Fromm 1941, 290). Fromm differentiates between two types of change, “static adaptation” and “dynamic adaptation.” “Static adaptation” is reflected by a change in behavior without a corresponding change in the psyche, while “dynamic adaptation” occurs when repression alters an individual’s character (Fromm 1941, 13). *Studies on Authority*
and the Family examines authority structures in the family as one of the primary causes of what Fromm deems “dynamic adaptation.”

Rather than viewing the family as an isolated unit, Fromm identifies it as a mediator of dominant economic and social structures. Capitalist authority is reproduced within the family, where in most cases the father acts as the authority and reproduces the same domination that he is submitted to in the workplace for his children (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 754). The authoritarian working class father is characterized by his adulation and submission to superiors in the workplace and his hatred for the weak and desire to overpower them. Even the lowest ranked worker serves as the head of his family, allowing a degree of authority for each man. This interpretation of the family demonstrates how even the most marginalized people can be invested in the continuation of restrictive hierarchical systems.

According to Fromm, parents’ economic and social identities are reproduced in their relationship to their children. The way in which children react determines their long-term attitudes toward authority (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 35). Even if a child rejects the authority of her father, she would learn that she lived in a society in which economic success and the stereotype of the dominant, masculine leader are two criteria for recognition. She can choose to embrace these values and assume her role within the hierarchy, or pay the material and social cost of rejecting them. Framed in these terms, this choice quickly loses its appearance of freedom. The most common outcome is that a child develops characteristics suited to the capitalist system and authority structures continue to be reproduced.
V. The Authoritarian Character: Connecting Social and Political Forms of Authority

In his theoretical essay on social psychoanalysis in Studies on Authority and the Family, Fromm connects Freud’s character types to family, social, and political structures, specifically the sadomasochistic, or “authoritarian” character to authoritarianism. He does not define sadomasochistic characters solely by dominant or submissive behavior, but by their desire for this behavior and the strong feelings of love toward authority figures and hatred toward the weak. Fromm explains:

The masochistic tendencies aim to resolve themselves by surrendering the individuality of the personality and sacrificing the happiness of the individual to power, and in this surrender, which in pathological cases leads to physical pain, find pleasure and satisfaction. The sadistic tendencies have the opposite goal, to make another into a submissive and defenseless instrument of one’s own will, to dominate him absolutely and unreservedly and in extreme cases to make him suffer and express the emotions that are connected with this suffering (Horkheimer 1988b).

Fromm argues that sadism and masochism are always found together in the same individual and different object relations induce different behavior from the sadomasochistic character. When faced with authority such as a father, boss, or political figure, the sadomasochistic or authoritarian character experiences fear and admiration and submits to the will of the leader. Weakness (closely associated with difference) symbolized by women, minority groups, and foreigners provokes hatred.

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and a sense of superiority in the authoritarian character accompanied by the desire to prove herself and her dominance. Masochistic tendencies compel an individual to seek fulfillment in the negation of the self or “loss of self,” which in mild cases manifests in the desire for direction and belittlement in the workplace and in extreme or pathological cases, the infliction of bodily harm (Fromm 1941, 164). These tendencies are satisfied by accepting and reveling in pain rather than avoiding or overcoming it. Sadistic tendencies lead to the opposite urge: to be the person who is inflicting pain and dominating others, either through formal positions, social acknowledgment, or physical abuse. Sadistic tendencies find fulfillment in the objectification of others and knowledge of their dependency. As in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, sadistic characters exemplified by the master, teacher, or employer act as authority figures but are also dependent on the slave, student, or employee. Just as the slave is dependent on the master for food, shelter, and direction, the master is not a fully autonomous individual because she needs dependents in order to be fulfilled.

In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm differentiated between “rational” and “irrational” authority in order to demonstrate that authority can be both oppressive and a necessary stage in development. He provides an example of “irrational authority” in the hierarchical relationship of an abusive husband and his wife. In this case, the husband abuses his wife until she finally threatens to leave at which point he transforms immediately and begs her to stay. The cycle continues and it becomes clear that it is the object of domination that is important to the abusive husband, not the subject herself (Fromm 1941, 164). The sadistic character seeks the domination,
but not the complete obliteration of the object, because maintaining that dependency is his only source of affirmation.

Hierarchical relationships are not necessarily authoritarian and authority does not have to be “irrational.” It is the abusive relationship, not the relationship itself that is problematic. Fromm differentiates between the “irrational authority” of the abusive marriage and the “rational authority” of teacher-student and parent-child relationships in which the purpose is encouragement and support of the student (Fromm 1941, 163). Adorno acknowledges the positive side of authority in teacher-student and parent-child relationships in his 1970 conversation, “Education for Maturity and Responsibility [Mündigkeit].” Authority must first be embraced so that it can be overcome:

But in fact the process—described by Freud as normal development—is that children generally identify with a father figure, that is, with an authority, internalize it, make it their own, and then learn in a very painful process, which is never successful without leaving scars, that the father, the father figure, does not match the ego-ideal that they have learned from him. In so doing, they detach themselves from it, and only in this way do they ever become mature, responsible people. As a causal factor, the factor of authority is, in my opinion, the precondition for the whole process of maturation [Mündigwerdung] (T. Adorno and Becker 1999, 26–27).

Incorporating Freud’s theory of psychological development into Kant’s concept of Mündigkeit, or maturity and responsibility, Adorno argues that authority is a necessary step in development. In the case of “normal development,” the authority relationship strengthens a child’s ego rather than weakens it through an internalization of the super-ego. Fromm explains that sadomasochistic character structures emerge out of abnormal development or the irrational coping with drive
repression and the internalization of the external super-ego, usually of the father—the authority figure within the family—or of leaders, ideas, or institutes found in cultures of authority. The repression manifests in the type of love that the masochistic character feels toward her chosen authority figure. It is an ambivalent love that is accompanied by a suppressed hatred, analogous to the Freudian Oedipal relationship of a son to his father.

Authoritarian societies contribute to these tendencies by promoting the rigid hierarchies and dichotomous thinking characteristic of authoritarian types. The three qualities of political authoritarianism that Marcuse identifies in his 1934 essay “The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Theory of the State”—universalism, naturalism, and political existentialism—appear in Fromm’s concept of the authoritarian character. Universalism is present in Fromm’s explanation that the authoritarian character is only capable of “‘Vicarious satisfaction through masochistic surrender to a higher, mighty power”29—often the nation or race (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 125). Conservative naturalism is found in the authoritarian character who deifies the past and denies the need for material improvement: “The way it was forever, it must stay forever; to want something that never was is a crime or insanity”30 (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 119). Finally, the authoritarian character is guided by political existentialism in his belief that “Life is determined by powers that lie outside the individual, his desires, and his interests”31 (Institut für

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29 My translation: “Ersatzbefriedigung’ durch masochistische Hingabe an eine höhere, gewaltige Macht.”
30 My translation: “Wie es ewig war, muss es ewig bleiben; etwas zu wollen, was noch nie gewesen ist, ist Verbrechen oder Wahnsinn.”
31 My translation: “das Leben ist von Mächten bestimmt, die ausserhalb des Individuums, seines Wollens und seiner Interessen liegen.”
The authoritarian state functions and flourishes because of the authoritarian tendencies established under liberal capitalism. Although Fromm was the first to explicitly connect character types with political forms, Marcuse made this connection implicitly in his discussion of the central aspects of authoritarianism.

VI. Studies on Authority and the Family: The First Empirical Test of the Authoritarian Character

Fromm’s approach to *Studies on Authority and the Family* was to “infer the character structure of the person answering by taking the answers in each questionnaire as a whole” in order to “allow conclusions to be drawn about unconscious tendencies in the person being asked and thus about the structure of the person’s drives” (Wiggershaus 1994, 171). Fromm believes that psychoanalysis could access an individual’s unconscious motivations—a prerequisite to understanding her character—which philosophy alone could not do. He points out that the difficulty in confronting authoritarian tendencies in liberal democracies is exaggerated by the fact that researchers usually only identify pathological cases of authoritarian characters and there is no method for detecting the more subtle authoritarian tendencies that are present in most individuals (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 122). One of the primary goals of the *Studies on Authority and the Family* is to develop this methodology and is taken up more comprehensively in *The Authoritarian Personality*.

Fromm’s concept of the authoritarian character is present in only one of the five surveys in *Studies on Authority and the Family*: the “Survey of Workers and
Employees” conducted from 1930 to 1931. In this study, the authoritarian character is framed in opposition to the “revolutionary” and “ambivalent” characters and each of the 700 completed questionnaires is categorized as one of these character types based on the subject’s dominant tendencies. The questionnaires cover the background, profession, family life, leisure activities, consumption habits, and political attitudes of subjects and include questions such as “Do you consider it right that women have a job?”32 and “Do you believe that one can manage to raise children entirely without beatings?”33 (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 243; 247). The questions are concerned with typical conservative stereotypes with the intention of revealing to what degree the workers identify with patriarchal capitalist structures. The evaluators consider the outlook and the behavior portrayed by the answers for “Insight into the psychological condition of German workers and employees in the years 1930 and 1931”34 (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 240). Institute affiliate Hilda Weiss summarize the findings:

The [authoritarian] type, who had family photographs, pyrography, or war photographs as pictures, who found modern architecture ugly, who believed that each person carries sole responsibility over his fate, usually also thought that one should not provide children with sexual education and that one could not raise children without beatings. [The revolutionary type], who hung up pictures of political leaders, found modern housing developments pretty, and attributed the responsibility over fate to social conditions and upbringing, was also prone to sexual education and an opponent of corporal punishment (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 271).35

32 My translation: “Halten Sie es für richtig, dass die Frauen einen Beruf ausüben?”
33 My translation: Glauben Sie, dass man bei der Erziehung der Kinder ganz ohne Prügel auskommt?”
35 My translation: “Der [autoritäre] Typ, der als Bilder Familienphotographien, Brandmaler-Arbeiten oder Kriegsbilder hatte, den modernen Baustil hässlich fand, der Meinung war, dass die Schuld am Schicksal jeder nur selbst trägt, fand gewöhnlich auch, dass man Kinder nicht sexuell aufklären solle und dass man in der Erziehung nicht ohne Prügel auskomme. [Der revolutionäre Typ.] Wer Bilder von politischen Führern aufhängte, die modernen
The authoritarian type is exemplified by his nostalgic idealization of war, animosity toward modern trends, the belief in complete self-determination and the use of violence in raising children. The belief in one’s responsibility for his own fate acts to justify the often prejudiced thinking of authoritarian characters and their tendencies to blame the oppressed rather than the oppressors in the minds of these individuals. The glorification of war and the past indicate the value of honor and sacrifice over change and contentment. These attitudes tend to accompany one another and are examples of the typical authoritarian character described in Fromm’s theoretical essay. The oppositional character, the “revolutionary type” also affirms Fromm’s description. The idolization of political leaders indicates an involvement and stake in political change, accompanied by an interest in new trends, the belief in social and environmental determinants, and the rejection of violence in raising children. The revolutionary character is invested in change, but not necessarily violent change. She is more interested in changing social structures as an end than the glory of war as an end in itself and acknowledges the consequences of external determinants, especially violence, in shaping individuals. The brief analysis provided in the “Survey of Workers and Employees” shows that the authors are interested in using psychoanalysis in the study of individuals to identify associated traits and move outward toward social and political implications. The intention of the study was not to determine the extent of authoritarian tendencies, but to test if and how the hypothesized traits were associated.

Siedlungshäuser schön fand, den gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen und der Erziehung die Schuld am Schicksal gab, war auch zur sexuellen Aufklärung geneigt und ein Gegner der Prügelstrafe.“
VII. *The Authoritarian Personality: The Second Empirical Study of Authority in a “Typed” Society*

The attempt to empirically determine the psychological basis of authoritarianism in individuals was carried out in greater depth in Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford’s *The Authoritarian Personality* published fourteen years later. At the time of the study, the psychoanalytic method of typology was heavily criticized, particularly because of its apparent failure as a method for creating clear distinctions between mental illnesses (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 745). It was associated with Nazi psychologists such as Erich Jaensch who notoriously developed a “race psychology” that included the anti-Semitic idea of the “Gegentypus” or “Antitype” (Ash 1998, 343). Even when typology was not explicitly labeled a “Nazi science,” it was charged with erasing the individualism and uniqueness of subjects (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 746). This argument is valid when applied to individual psychotherapy, but loses relevance in the context of social psychological studies such as *The Authoritarian Personality* that aim to detect social trends.

American psychologist Anne Anastasi attempts to refute the typological assumption that there is a “multi-modal distribution of traits” that can be organized into different personality or character types by demonstrating that “Actual measurement, however, reveals a unimodal distribution of traits, which closely resembles the bell-shaped normal curve.” If the vast majority of individuals cannot be categorized as a type, then, Anastasi argues, the system of typology becomes irrelevant. Anastasi is also critical of the attempt to resolve this by developing “mixed types,” a tactic which undermines the very purpose of developing “clear-cut classes.”
Responding to Anastasi’s critique, Adorno argues that the resulting “taboo” against typological classification—particularly stemming from the challenges of mental disease categorization—ignores the danger of failing to derive any coherency and trends in the social sciences. It also discounts the possibility of developing a “dynamic schemata” that could predict the association between certain traits and characteristics (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 745–46). In The Authoritarian Personality, Adorno and his colleagues at Berkeley attempt to develop this “dynamic schemata” that can account for the correlation between “authoritarian” tendencies such as stereotyped thinking, hatred of the “other,” and idolization of authority.

Adorno acknowledges the shortcoming of typology in his chapter on “Types and Syndromes” in The Authoritarian Personality, yet as in the Institute’s 1936 Studies on Authority and the Family, he chooses to employ a typological model. This can be explained by Adorno’s perception of the crisis of individuality and typology’s insight into this trend. Typology is particularly useful for the social psychoanalysis that Adorno is interested in and lacks many of the disadvantages of typology applied to individual psychoanalysis. Many of the criticisms of typology as a psychoanalytic method are concerned with its implications for the study of the individual, rather than for the study of society. As an approach to researching the individual as an atomistic subject, it is clear how typology can be limiting. Using broad categories to understand an individual necessarily limits the exploration of those traits that are unique to the individual and instead emphasizes the traits that are held in common with others and can be framed in generalizable terms. This is exactly why Adorno uses typology to detect trends in a “typed” society (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 747).
Adorno acknowledges that, “the rigidity of constructing types is itself indicative of that ‘stereopathic’ mentality which belongs to the basic constituents of the potentially fascist character” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 746). At the same time, this explains why Adorno uses typology in *The Authoritarian Personality*. He believes that the bourgeois individual as conceptualized in nineteenth century idealist philosophy no longer exists and research methods must be adjusted to account for this. He employed typology as a methodology that “thinks” in the same way as people. People genuinely desire economic success and social recognition, just as they feel animosity toward the weak and submit to the wills of superiors: all characteristics that tend toward authoritarianism. Typology was particularly suited for the motivating interest in fascism as a political doctrine with a foundation in mass psychology whose success is attributable to its appeal to certain mass tendencies.

Fromm emphasized that with the fall of feudalism, the primarily external restraints on the individual were removed. Now, individuals are forced to confront primarily the internalized limitations on their thought and behavior. Fromm conceives of this dilemma as one that the individual can solve through “original thinking” and “spontaneous activity” (Fromm 1941, 247;257). Adorno, along with Marcuse, challenges this claim by arguing that Fromm’s “Power of Positive Thinking” only aggravates the situation when a change in the mode of production is necessary to truly liberate individuals (Herbert Marcuse 1955a, 233).

In contrast to Fromm’s claim that the collapse of the feudalist system brought a new era of freedom, Adorno argues that the modern subject is both externally and internally unfree: The repressive authority of the current economic and social order
has forced people into occupying restrictive social roles while internalizing the increasingly authoritarian preferences of the capitalist system. This occurs in a way in which people are able to maintain their belief that they are exercising their “individuality.”

Although Fromm disagrees on the extent of the problem, he also asserts that there is a crisis of the individual in both authoritarian and liberal societies. Similarly to Adorno, Fromm argues that for many people the self has been replaced by a “pseudo-self,” that was a mere reflection and internalization of dominant social trends. In giving up their selves, these “automatons” lost the fear and insecurity that accompanies freedom, but in doing so became identical to millions of other people. Although arguing for similar phenomena, Adorno and Fromm differ in both their conceptions of “self” and “individual” and their solutions to the crisis of modern conformity and “loss of self” (Fromm 1941, 184). Adorno believes that the “individual” is an ideological construct that cannot be viewed in isolation from society or the means of production and can be transformed only through radical structural change.

Adorno and Fromm disagree on several fundamental points, but both observed that the individual, or self, had been marginalized by the capitalist economic and social order. This process has to be targeted in order to confront the threat of authoritarianism. Adorno argues:

There is reason to look for psychological types because the world in which we live is typed and ‘produces’ different ‘types’ of persons. Only by identifying stereotypical traits in modern humans, and not by denying their existence, can the pernicious tendency towards all-
pervasive classification and subsumption be challenged (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 747).

By modeling *The Authoritarian Personality* after the de-individualization that he observed as the outcome of “standardized, opaque, and overpowering social processes,” Adorno was able to understand social tendencies in the form in which they appear in society (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 747). Although under the guise of liberal ideals such as “individualism” and “freedom,” liberal democratic societies reflected a situation not unlike those under authoritarian regimes. In fact, it was the authoritarian structures in capitalist democracies that generated the mass psychology to which fascism and other forms of authoritarianism appealed. The superficial formality to which these concepts had been reduced had to be challenged in order to uncover the latent tendencies toward authoritarianism that existed in liberal democracies. Fromm’s innovation was to connect individual psychology, specifically conscious and subconscious attitudes toward authority, to political structures. The associate between psychological tendencies and political forms is the underlying assumption in both the *Studies on Authority and the Family* and *The Authoritarian Personality*.

VIII. Moving Beyond *Studies on Authority and the Family*: Advances in the Study of the Authoritarian Character

*The Authoritarian Personality* builds off of the theoretical assumptions and methodology developed in *Studies on Authority and the Family*, including the use of Freudian psychoanalytic character types, a Fromm’s concept of the “authoritarian
character” and a Frommian interpretation of personality. The authors base their studies on a revision of Freud’s dualistic drive theory that incorporates a more nuanced understanding of personality based on historical context, environmental development, biological determination, and a degree of “self-initiated action” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 6). Fromm’s lasting influence on *The Authoritarian Personality* demonstrates that the void between his Freudian interpretation and the rest of the Institute’s was perhaps not as large as the debate and formal separation from the Institute indicated.

The authors’ innovation, and particularly Adorno’s contribution, was to break down the concepts of authoritarianism, prejudice, and stereotypy into their component parts so that they could be detected without explicitly naming these traits, therefore moving beyond self-identified characteristics. Research subjects who would not identity themselves with the stigmatized terms “racist,” “anti-Semitic,” “sexist,” or “authoritarian” nevertheless revealed these tendencies through their reactions to statements such as “It is only natural and right that women be restricted in certain ways in which men have more freedom” and “Nowadays when so many different kinds of people move around so much and mix together so freely, a person has to be especially careful to protect himself against infection and disease” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 232; 239).

In the 1950 studies, the “authoritarian personality” is defined based on a number of variables: conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intraception (opposition to creative and reflective thought), superstition and stereotypy, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism,
projectivity of impulses and hostility, and preoccupation with sexual activity (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 228). Although the authors derive these qualities from Fromm’s original conception of the authoritarian character, they tease out the different facets of sadism and masochism and systematically organize them into nine measurable scales. Additionally, they connect the authoritarian personality to the specific Right-wing manifestations of prejudice and anti-Semitism, specific types of stereotypy. The concept of the authoritarian personality takes on a more explicitly Right-wing form that was previously only theorized, not integrated into the empirical criteria in the first studies.

The nine qualities of the authoritarian personality reflect the Institute’s understanding of the interconnectivity of economic, social, cultural, and political tendencies. The first variable, “conventionalism” encapsulates religious, intellectual, and ethical leanings—not to elucidate nuances and variations, but to determine the degree to which individuals differ or conform to “conventional, middle-class values” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 228). Although middle-class values may not immediately appear to be a criterion for fascist potential, the authors explain that “it is a well-known hypothesis that susceptibility to fascism is most characteristically a middle-class phenomenon, that it is ‘in the culture’ and, hence, that those who conform the most to this culture will be the most prejudiced” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 229). The authors were interested in detecting fascist potential, or the psychological tendencies that make individuals prone to joining a fascist movement. This explains why conventionalism plays such as central role.
Many of the variables target the subjects’ consumption habits, particularly cultural consumption. As Adorno and Horkheimer describe in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, culture is by no means separable from the economy, politics, or ideology, on either the societal or the individual level. The existence of a “typed” society is evident when one examines the cultural realm, in which there are often clear rules for what is “in” or “out” and the choice between hairstyles and movie genres is assumed to reflect one’s personality (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 747). In examining cultural consumption, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford seek to identify the subjects’ own levels of conformity and their projectivity onto others. The affirmation of statements such as “Books and movies ought not to deal so much with the sordid and seamy side of life; they ought to concentrate on themes that are entertaining or uplifting” demonstrate the propensity of individuals to reinforce identity thinking by not only making their own choices, but also making choices for others (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 235). This statement alludes to censorship and book burnings that represent the historical violation of individual liberties, most recently in Nazi Germany. The imposition of one’s own values onto others is taken a step further with the statement “Too many people today are living in an unnatural, soft way; we should return to the fundamentals, to a more red-blooded, active way of life.” Despite the deliberately casual tone of the questions (so as not to deter conventional types), this statement is clearly associated with the Fascist ideals of a natural, “active” way of life as opposed to the “unnatural, soft way” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 237).

The decision to frame the authoritarian personality in opposition to the “individualistic” or “democratic” personality differs notably from the *Studies on
Authority and the Family, in which the authoritarian character and the “revolutionary” character serve as the extremes (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, x; Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 271). This change reflects the different political urgencies at the time of the studies: in the early to mid 1930s in Germany, the Frankfurt School was still preoccupied with the prospect of a socialist revolution. In the 1950s in the midst of the Cold War, McCarthyism, and the recent memory of fascism, democracy appeared to be a model of anti-authoritarian behavior. The “individualistic” or “democratic” personality appealed to a much wider audience at a time when “revolutionary” had a dangerous connotation. The ability to reframe the authoritarian personality to adapt to different political circumstances demonstrates its lasting relevance in the 30s, 50s, and today. Equally as important, this adaptability reflects the Frankfurt School’s theory that underlies it: the authoritarian personality is a phenomenon found in capitalist as well as authoritarian societies. Authoritarianism must be prevented at all costs, but revolutionary change may be necessary to address the root of the (structural) problem.

Although The Authoritarian Personality draws significantly from Studies on Authority and the Family, it demonstrates several significant innovations in the psychological study of authoritarianism. Most notably, the authors develop the concept of authoritarianism to include prejudice and anti-Semitism found in Right-wing authoritarianism and pursue the issue of latent or potential authoritarian tendencies in addition to overt prejudice, stereotyping, submission, and aggression. The attempt to measure latent authoritarian tendencies was based on the assumption that anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice are derived from personalities that
target the “out-group” as the source of immorality, impurity, and corruption. This stereotyped thinking preserves the moral superiority of the “in-group” to which these personality types belong, while often revealing the repressed desires in the authoritarian personalities for which the “out-group” is so harshly judged (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 233).

IX. Measuring Psychological Tendencies: The A-S, E, PEC, and F Scales

The ability to detect latent authoritarian tendencies was especially urgent in the post-war period in which The Authoritarian Personality was published. Originally titled “The Fascist Character,” the changing political climate of the Cold War motivated the authors to change the title to demonstrate its relevance to both Left and Right-wing forms of authoritarianism (Wiggershaus 1994, 411). This reflects the finding that those who self-identified with conservative values were not significantly more prejudiced. The authors explain this using a theory of “pseudoconservatism”: conventionality and authoritarian submissiveness on the ego level, with violence, anarchic impulses, and chaotic destructiveness in the unconscious sphere” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 675). Surface conservatism is not a reliable indicator of fascist potential because of the contradictions between genuine conservatism and totalitarian fascism; it is pseudoconservatism that is the best indicator of fascist potential (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 265). The most significant product of the study, the F (fascism) scale, measured a specific type of Right-wing extremism rather than a more general authoritarianism, but for the same reasons that anti-Semitism and ethnocentrism were
not significantly associated with politicoconservatism, the F scale could not be
directly aligned with political preference.

Four scales were developed, tested, and revised: the A-S (anti-Semitism) scale, the E (ethnocentrism) scale, the PEC (politicoeconomic conservatism) scale and the F (fascism) scale. The purpose of the study was “to make ‘depth psychological’ phenomena more amenable to mass-statistical treatment and to make quantitative surveys of attitudes and opinions more meaningful” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 12). As a mass movement targeting the psychology of individuals, authoritarianism could only be understood, let alone prevented, if there was a means for quantifiably studying mass psychology. The published study included the various revisions as well as the final versions of the scales in order to facilitate further research in this area.

Each of the scales went through a series of revisions until they were internally consistent, statistically significant and reliable, applicable to research on a mass scale, and yielded a roughly equal distribution of outcomes. The A-S and E scales measured overt prejudice and consisted of opinion statements to which the subject had to agree or disagree on a six-point scale. The scales include statements such as: “Persecution of the Jews would be largely eliminated if the Jews would make really sincere efforts to ride themselves of their harmful and offensive faults” and “The worst danger to real Americanism during the last 50 years has come from foreign ideas and agitators” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 84; 128). The questions target the subjects’ tendency for stereotyped thinking, the division into “in-groups” and “out-groups,” and conventionalism (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 233).
These A-S and E scales were used as the basis for the F scale: the “indirect measurement of antidemocratic trends.” The goal for the F scale was not to develop another questionnaire that investigates overt prejudice, but instead to target the “potentially fascist” personality types who were susceptible to fascist propaganda in the case of a political movement (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 4). This has a broader applicability and can be used for a wider range of research beyond the predominantly middle-class, non-Jewish, white, educated subjects surveyed in the current study. The PEC scale was not included in the formation of the F scale because of its low correlation with the A-S and E scales, demonstrating that prejudiced and authoritarian tendencies were not necessarily associated with right or left politics.

After three major revisions, the F scale consisted of thirty questions covering the nine categories of authoritarianism listed above. The subjects were asked to agree or disagree on statements such as: “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn” and “People can be divided into two classes: the weak and the strong” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 255; 256). After the third major revision, the F scale reached a .775 correlation with the E scale, meaning that about three-quarters of subjects who scored in the high quartile on one scale did so in the other (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 264). The authors explain the discrepancy based on the tendency of some people to conform to ethnocentrism even if it is not a deep-rooted personality trait and the possible suppression of hostility toward minority groups by those susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda. Correlation with the PEC scale remained a low .53, demonstrating that similarly to ethnocentrism, anti-
democratic tendencies were not significantly associated with politico-economic conservatism (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 265).

A high scorer on the F scale is characterized by identification with and blind submission to superiors, hatred and violence towards the weak, conventionalism fueled by the desire for social recognition, and general ambivalence based on the weakness of the ego and the inability to form nuanced understandings. Adorno provides an example of a typical answer from a high scorer: “Adultery, as long as never found out, is o.k.—if found out, then it’s wrong—since some of the most respectable people do it, it must be all right.” Within one thought, the subject changes his mind several times, demonstrating his inability to form reflective opinions and acknowledge imperfection in the people he admires. First indicating that he has no objection to adultery itself, he then acknowledges the negative social repercussions before settling on acceptance because “some of the most respectable people do it” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 760). The same subject demonstrates his sadomasochistic resolution of the Oedipus complex when he describes his admiration for his father, despite enduring regular beatings for “carelessness.” Unable to view his father critically, the subject explains that “His word was law, and whenever he was disobeyed, there was punishment.” The reified ideal of authority is typical of the authoritarian personality, who sees objective “law” behind subjective behavior and embraces the reality presented by authority figures as unchangeable.

Of the typical low scorers, the “genuine liberal” is the most reliably opposed to authoritarianism and, according to Adorno, is the case of “that balance between superego, ego, and id which Freud deemed ideal” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 771).
The “genuine liberal” is characterized by “a strong sense of personal autonomy and independence,” strong, reflective values and respect and openness to difference (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 781). A typical low scorer of this type describes her belief that “There should be no minorities; there should only be individuals and they should be judged according to the individual. Period!” She goes on to explain her family background and her parents’ happy marriage. Both her “broad-minded” and intelligent father and her sympathetic and loving mother are manifest in her ego ideal. Adorno concludes his discussion of high and low scorers by highlighting the significance of family as the primary cause of character formation, referring back to Horkheimer’s work in the *Studies on Authority and the Family* (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 783).

Results were reported primarily in terms of “high” and “low” scores due to the inability to sufficiently prove that a high score on the F scale necessarily indicated anti-democratic or fascist tendencies. The authors attained their goal of creating a scale that was significantly associated with ethnocentrism scores without referencing any minority groups and instead targeting personality types that were prone to prejudiced thinking. Follow-up interviews and more extensive qualitative research were included in the study as a first step, but conclusively proving the validity of the F scale remained outside of the realm of this study.

In 1983, social scientific researcher Jos Meloen conducted the first comprehensive survey and analysis of F scale studies with the intention of assessing the validity of the F scale as a measure of anti-democratic and fascist potential. Out of the hundreds of published studies that used the F scale during the thirty years after its
completion, Meloen chose the 125 studies that were most transparent about reporting methodology and results. These publications included about 350 samples of 29,000 people in the United States and 17,000 in twenty-three other countries (Meloen 1993, 49). He chose four criteria for assessing the F scale’s validity:

1. Groups that support anti-democratic and profascist principles will have high F scale means.
2. Antidemocratic and profascist groups will have higher group means on the F scale (or related F scales) than the population as a whole.
3. Groups that explicitly support democratic and antifascist values will have mean F scale scores below those of the general population.
4. Regional differences in authoritarianism in the United States as a consequence of the country’s historical development are confirmed by regional scores on the F scale or similar scales (Meloen 1993, 48).

The first and second criteria measuring openly anti-democratic and profascist individuals evaluated studies of Right-wing extremists groups, including activists for British fascist Sir Oswald Mosley, supporters of apartheid in South Africa, and former SS and Wehrmacht members in Germany (Meloen 1993, 51–52). The third criterion examined studies of counterculture groups and anti-fascist groups. The last criterion assessed studies of students and non-students in various urban and rural parts of the United States (Meloen 1993, 58). All four criteria were met, allowing Meloen to confidently state that: “On the strength of the massive evidence presented, we conclude that the F scale is an instrument for the measure of antidemocratic and fascist tendencies and that has retained its validity over time” (Meloen 1993, 61).

Although Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford were unable to confirm the validity of the F scale themselves, they succeeded in creating a tool for future research on authoritarianism that proved to retain its research viability for decades
after. The political and psychological implications of this, particularly in confronting authoritarian tendencies in individuals, remain to be explored.

X. Reassessing the Empirical Studies Alongside the Philosophical Critique

Although the reception of the first empirical studies, *Studies on Authority in the Family* was muted much in part to its publication in German in 1936 and the lack of a German or a German-speaking American audience, *The Authoritarian Personality* generated widespread attention. It was lauded as “one of the Milestone studies of empirical social research” in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* (Fahrenberg and Steiner 2004, 127). The later president of the American Psychological Association, M. Brewster Smith praised it as “certainly the most extensive and sophisticated research on [anti-Semitism] yet contributed by psychologists. Its contribution to our systematic knowledge of personality organization and to research methodology are scarcely less striking” (M. B. Smith 1950). One of the most famous reviews of *The Authoritarian Personality* came from University of Chicago sociologist Edward Shils, an “anti-communist critique” that alerted Adorno to the danger of McCarthyist accusations upon the reception of the studies (Rayman 2009, 16-17). Sociologist Uta Gerhardt argued that it was this fear that caused Adorno to terminate his plans to stay in the United States long enough to become a citizen and leave the United States permanently in August 1953 (Gerhardt 2002, 19).

Despite Shils’ bias against Adorno and the Frankfurt School, he makes several important criticisms in his essay on *The Authoritarian Personality*. He charges the
authors with assuming a Left-Right continuum of political preferences with the “nativist fundamentalist Authoritarian” on the Right and the Left merely as the opposite in every way (Shils, 32, 38). According to Shils, this assumption neglects the existence of Left authoritarians such as Bolsheviks who demonstrate many similar tendencies to Right authoritarians, as well as other combinations of political preferences that do not fall on this spectrum. Shils’ criticism highlights several assumptions in the Frankfurt School’s concept and study of the authoritarian character in both *The Authoritarian Personality* to which he is responding and the earlier *Studies on Authority and the Family*. First, the Institute members only briefly describe the antithesis the authoritarian character, which appears in the first study as the “revolutionary character” and in slightly more depth in the second study as the “democratic” or “individualistic” personality. It is clear what personality type is being critiqued, but not what stands in opposition to it. Second, significant discussion of authoritarian tendencies within Leftists is conspicuously absent throughout the Frankfurt School’s critique, in which “authoritarianism” is often synonymous with “fascism.” Although the lack of correlation between the politico-economic conservatism (PEC) scale and the F scale indicate that there is no relationship between Right or Left politics and fascist or antidemocratic tendencies, the authors maintain the associate between “Right” and “authoritarian.” They do so by distinguishing between the surface conservatism that the PEC scale measures, which is self-identified conservatism that is not significantly associated with fascist tendencies, and “pseudoconservatism,” or deeply rooted fascist tendencies. They use this explanation rather than considering that the binary of conservatism and liberalism
or Right and Left may not be causally related to the presence or absence of authoritarian tendencies, a consideration that would undermine the assumption upon which their studies are based (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 675).

Contrary to Shils’ contestations, the Right-Left binary that the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* employ is both deliberate and politically relevant. Although the concept of the authoritarian character indeed indicates a specific type of fascist authoritarianism, it does not preclude the existence of Left-wing authoritarianism (see Adorno on “Left fascism” in chapter three). 

Moreover, the studies of the authoritarian character respond to the historical circumstances in which Right-wing authoritarianism, or fascism, posed the greatest political threat: first in Western Europe in the 1930s (*Studies on Authority and the Family*), then in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s (*The Authoritarian Personality*). The victory of fascism in Italy and Germany and its spread throughout Western Europe illustrate the reality of the fascist threat and its mass appeal at the time of the Institute’s first empirical studies. Even in the United States at the onset of the Cold War, the Institute members perceived that it was fascism, not communism that was most likely to lead to authoritarianism in the United States. Adorno defends himself against Shils’ accusations by explaining that:

> The fact that less attention was given in the volume to the authoritarian communist party-liner than to the potential fascist is solely due to the historical situation. At the time the questionnaire and interview schedules were set up and the material was gathered (1944-1945), the National Socialists were our enemies and the Russians our allies. In the atmosphere then prevailing, the common denominator of anti-Nazism did not yet allow the difference between autonomous thinking

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36 Adorno engaged further with this subject in his defense of Jürgen Habermas’ term “left-fascism” in the context of the New Left student movements (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 128).
and its perversion by the communist dictatorship to crystallize as clearly as later on (Rayman 2009, 17).

Adorno took the threat of fascism seriously, both because of his experience in Germany observing the rise of National Socialism and because of his observations of fascist tendencies in the United States. Social manifestations of fascism appeared in individuals’ conventionalism, superstition, anti-Semitism, and prejudice, all forms of hierarchical and stereotyped thinking that pointed toward the specific type of radical Right-wing authoritarianism. The F scale was not merely a means for informing the development of theory, it was a practical device to recognize and distinguish the “potentially fascist character” from other forms of surface conservatism. This must not be mistaken with a mandate for political action: The Frankfurt School’s psychoanalytic typology was a form of analysis, not a prescription, that was intended to diagnose the contradictions and dangers of the historical situation. When The Authoritarian Personality was nominated for the 1949 Bernays Award for “action-related research,” the committee members were justified in their decision not to select it given that “its characterological analysis did not give much guidance to corrective social action,” nor did it attempt to do so (The British Colonial Social Science Research Council 1949; M. B. Smith 1950, 159).

The analytical rather than prescriptive approach to social scientific research and philosophy was characteristic of Adorno. It extended beyond The Authoritarian Personality to Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment and defined Adorno’s relationship to the 1960s student movement and political practice. He believed that thinking itself was “a form of practice” and his role was to further the theoretical critique of society as an important component of revolutionary change (T.
Adorno 1999, 798). Adorno’s sensitivity to fascist tendencies never faded: he identified the danger of a resurgence of fascism in the voluntaristic tendencies among the radical Left student movement in Germany. Particularly Adorno’s wariness of the authoritarian tendencies of the student movement, but also his attitude toward political practice in general provoked a debate between him and Marcuse, who took a dramatically different stance. Marcuse, who came to be known as “the Father of the New Left”, insisted that there were times such as the present in which “theory that is kept separate from praxis becomes untrue to itself” (Marcuse 1969; T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 125). Marcuse endeavored to promote radical change by engaging with the student movement and developing a revolutionary theory for the New Left. The debate between Adorno and Marcuse came down to whether authoritarian tendencies have to be addressed at their capitalist structural roots or can be subdued before they become actualized in fascism; or, in the case of the authoritarian character, whether fundamental structural changes are necessary to alter the instinctual composition of individuals or whether fundamental structural changes are necessary to alter the instinctual composition of individuals or whether more enlightened education and political reform are sufficient to quell the destructive authoritarian forces inherent in all societies.
Chapter Three: The Adorno-Marcuse Debate and the Problem of Anti-Authoritarian Political Praxis

The possibility of its political realization is itself a part of Marxist theory. The working class and the political praxis of the working class, and the changing class relations (at the national and international level) continue to determine the conceptual development of theory, as they in turn are determined by it—not by the theory without praxis, but by the one which ‘seizes the masses.’ Realization is neither a criterion, not the content of Marxist truth, but the historical impossibility of realization is irreconcilable with it.


…the uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither sings over his consciousness nor lets himself be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give in. Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway. As long as it doesn’t break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation. The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it—this too a form of relapse—objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization. Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part a comportment, a form of praxis, it is more akin to transformative praxis than a comportment that is compliant for the sake of praxis.


Adorno was a notoriously difficult person to work with. This was less of a problem when he was working independently on his theoretical work, but it created conflicts when he embarked on necessarily collaborative empirical projects. Adorno’s participation in and eventual dismissal from Paul Lazarsfeld’s Princeton Radio Project captures the implications of his uncompromising approach to empirical research that proved to be inseparable from his theoretical critique and was often mistaken for incompetence or bias. Public comments such as Adorno’s explanation that “the project was at the whims of a young ignoramus” in reference to the overseer at the Rockefeller Foundation certainly
did not help his cause, but it was not only his unwillingness to compromise or censor himself in social situations that accounted for his inability to complete work on this project (Morrison 1978, 342). Adorno’s reading of cultural critique as a social critique and his refusal to abandon his theoretical presuppositions conflicted with the accepted standards for empirical methodology (Morrison 1978, 339). In this case, Adorno’s insisted that it was impossible to accurately study the social implications of music through music listeners because “it would be naïve to take for granted an identity between the social implications to be discerned in the stimuli and those embodied in the ‘responses.’” Although mistrusting of individual responses, Adorno concluded that “the implications of objective contents do not completely diverge from the conscious and unconscious awareness of those to whom they appeal”: by definition, popular music could be considered to an extent a reflection of mass interests. Thus, social preferences could be derived from the music itself and the conditions in which it was produced. Adorno’s claim that social trends could be understood without studying social subjects was met with pushback from both the empiricists and the program directors, causing him to be written off as “a social commentator and not a social scientist” (Morrison 1978, 339). Most aggressively, the NBC program director dismissed Adorno’s research, asserting that “its pretense at scientific procedure is so absurd in view of its numerous arbitrary assertions, that it is hardly worthy of serious consideration, except possibly as propaganda” (Morrison 1978, 340). Although these attributes, especially painted in this light, hindered Adorno’s work on this project, they were the same qualities that accounted for the strengths of Critical Theory’s dialectical cultural, social, and political critique.
The struggle to integrate Critical Theory and empirical research was echoed by the conflict between Adorno and Marcuse over Critical Theory’s relationship to political practice. Adorno’s stance was consistent with his approach to empirical research: he believed in a dialectical relationship between theory and practice that had to take the historical situation into consideration that allowed for or prevented the possibility of radical social change. He was no more willing to compromise or easy to work with in the context of political practice. At the time that Marcuse was re-radicalized by the 1960s student movements, Adorno insisted that the objective circumstances for revolutionary change did not exist. He engaged with the German student movement by speaking at SDS (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund) conferences, published public statements wary of the German state becoming a police state after the murder of protestor Benno Ohnesorg, and was the teacher of student movement leader Hans-Jürgen Krahl (Berman 2014, 15). For the student movement, Adorno represented the importance of critical non-conformity and autonomous, self-reflective thought—the reason that the students looked to him as a leader. Paradoxically, it was their appeal that Adorno to become their leader that caused him to distance himself from the student movement. He interpreted the desire for a leader rather than self-guided thought and action as indicative of the authoritarian tendencies

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37 As a young man, Marcuse left the moderate leftist SPD after accusing the leadership of complicity in the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, leaders of the Marxist revolutionary Spartacus League in Germany during World War I (Wiggershaus 1994, 96). He proceeded to devote himself to academic work and was employed by the US Office of Strategic Services during World War II, but the 1960s student movements drew him back to radical political engagement (Harold Marcuse 2014a).

38 On June 2, 1967 a university student, Benno Ohnesorg, was shot and killed by the Berlin police while protesting against the visit of the Iranian Shah (Berman 2014). This marked the climax of the German student movement and the outrage over Ohnesorg’s death caused student protests to erupt in every university city in West Germany (Wiggershaus 1994, 616–17). Adorno coauthored an open letter published in Die Zeit, “To the Police and the Students” calling for a thorough investigation so that an accurate judgment could be made and ended with the warning that silence threatened to transform “our constitutional democracy into a police state” (“Zur Polizei und den Studenten” 1967).
of the movement. It was exactly this priority of action over theory and reflection that he feared, especially given the recent fascist past in Germany.

In contrast, Marcuse did not perceive the same authoritarian tendencies in the student movement and was more optimistic about the current possibilities of enacting change. He denied Adorno’s claim that the objective circumstances for radical political practice did not exist, interpreting this as a premature paralysis on action (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 127). Marcuse rejected this aspect of orthodox Marxism that demands that the objective historical circumstances for revolution exist and worked to construct a revolutionary theory adapted to advanced capitalism that facilitated political practice. Although he adopted the Orthodox Marxist interpretation of fascism as an advanced form of monopoly capitalism with no clear point at which liberal democracy becomes fascism, he supplemented it with his critique of ideology and libidinal structures to place more weight on changes in the superstructure as well as the base. Marcuse and Adorno share the understanding that psychological tendencies toward authoritarianism arise under liberal democracies, but for Marcuse the significance of this lies in the opportunity for revolutionary change starting in the ideological realm through education and organization, regardless of the “objective” historical circumstances.

Marcuse’s theory of fascism, particularly the continuity between liberal democratic and fascist libidinal structures in individuals and authority structures in the family and economy, helps explain the urgency behind his call to action. Drawing from Marx in his 1934 essay “The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Theory of the State,” Marcuse argues for the continuity between authoritarianism and
liberalism, demonstrating that authoritarianism was a more extreme form of liberalism based on the same economic and social structures. Authoritarian states position themselves in opposition to liberalism to hide their similarities\(^\text{39}\), just as liberal states conceive of themselves as the antithesis to authoritarianism. Although both forms of government are based on the same economic and social authority structures, authoritarianism elevates political authority to the position that economic authority holds under liberal capitalism (Marcuse 1980, 174). Under liberal capitalism, people view the economy as natural and unchangeable: they must accept the jobs, the wages, and the prices that the market offers. This attitude toward authority transitions smoothly to the authoritarian notion of politics, in which the state and the leader become the reified reality and one must accept the laws and fabricated narratives of the authoritarian regime, if not by embracing them that at least by acknowledging them as the enforced reality.

Although arguing for the continuity between liberal capitalism and authoritarianism, Marcuse makes important distinctions between the two systems in his 1934 essay “The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Theory of the State.” Similarly to Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussion in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he highlights the progressive as well as the regressive side of liberalism that is eliminated under authoritarianism (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988). Liberalism is rational, calculable, and critical. Rather than presenting the positive qualities as absolute or even dominant under liberalism, Marcuse described a dialectic relationship between autonomy and heteronomy, rationality and irrationality. The

\(^{39}\) The Nazis condemned liberalism along with Marxism, pacifism, and Judaism as “un-German” (Russell Berman 2014).
rational liberal capitalist order is economically efficient and productive, but at the same time it shows its irrationality in the perpetuation of alienation, repression of individuality and spontaneity, and production for no deliberate purpose. Rationality already becomes increasingly limited and instrumentalized for irrational ends under liberal democracy. With authoritarianism, restrictive liberal rationality is further limited by state control at the cost of individual freedom. This produces three defining trends that signify the transition from liberalism to authoritarianism: universalism, naturalism, and political existentialism. “Universalism” means that individuals can only seek fulfillment as part of the whole, rather than as autonomous subjects (Marcuse 1980, 175). In “naturalism,” not only the economy (as is the case in liberalism), but also politics, society, and history become reified, and acquire a mythical aura that transcends material needs and the desire for earthly happiness (Marcuse 1980, 181). Finally, “political existentialism,” or what Marcuse calls the “Foundational doctrine of totalitarian states” deprives individual thought and action of significance and replaces it with the state as the only source of meaning (Marcuse 1980, 187).

By identifying these dominant trends in fascism, Marcuse provided guidelines for differentiating between liberal democracy and authoritarianism beyond their often misleading formal titles. At the same time, he demonstrated how authority structures in society and, by implication, individuals, form under liberal democracy and are altered and strengthened to correspond to the authoritarian political order. The three qualities of authoritarianism—universalism, naturalism, and political existentialism—

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that are dictated by the state and reinforced by society signify the domination of the authoritarian tendencies that had already begun to form under liberal democracy. This is a crucial aspect of Marcuse’s theory of fascism: although the two forms of government have unique qualities, there is no single moment that can be isolated as the transition from liberal democracy to authoritarianism. This assumption guides the Frankfurt School’s critiques of fascism, but they disagree on how fascism can be prevented: for Marcuse, the only option is to address it through revolutionary change to liberal democratic capitalist structures while Adorno and Horkheimer argue that harnessing democratic institutions is the most reliable approach to prevention.

1. Preservation or Revolution: Democracy’s Role in Preventing Fascism

Shortly after Horkheimer became the director of the Institute of Social Research in 1930, Critical Theory faced the task of confronting fascism as an irrationally rational and regressive form of political and social organization. Although fascism utilized rational methods of social control, its ends—depriving individuals of autonomous, rational capabilities—were necessarily irrational. The Institute members demonstrated that authoritarian tendencies extended much further than external social structures: they were also present in the instinctual structures and personality types of individuals. Critical Theory demanded radical structural change in order to address the authoritarian tendencies in capitalist democracies, but the revolutionary critique was often made secondary to practical concerns. For Adorno and Horkheimer, a contradiction arose when the surest way to prevent fascism entailed defending repressive capitalist democracies. Although they argued for theoretical continuity
between liberal democracy and fascism, in practice they acknowledged the necessity of preserving democracy if instability could lead to fascism. Marcuse did not perceive this contradiction: he framed the priority of preventing fascism as an urgent call for revolutionary change. He argued that liberal capitalist democracy had reached a point at which it would become either socialism or neo-fascism (Herbert Marcuse 2001b, 70). To meet this demand, he attempted to develop Critical Theory into revolutionary political practice to facilitate the establishment of socialism as an end in itself and as the only alternative to fascism.

Marcuse wrote his 1934 essay on the continuity and distinctions between liberal democratic and fascist states in a similar style to the philosophical critiques he produced in the beginning of his career, such as his “Intellectual History” contribution to the theoretical section of *Studies on Authority and the Family*. After ending his career with the US Office of Strategic Services during World War II, he became increasingly political and was radicalized by his involvement in the 1960s student movement. The distinct tone of Marcuse’s later works is captured by his unpublished text “The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy,” written around 1972-73. In this essay, he aims to transform the Frankfurt School’s critique of authority into an attack on “the Establishment” by proposing a concrete program for the New Left in the United States that attempts to reconcile the two tasks of revolution and preventing fascism (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 175).

The theoretical continuity between liberal democracy and fascism often prevented the Institute members from drawing clear conceptual distinctions between

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41 By neo-fascism, Marcuse did not mean the repetition of history, but a new form of fascism aided by the same conservative, repressive mass support.
the two political forms. Even in Marcuse’s 1934 essay in which he deliberately sets out to differentiate between democracy and fascism, he balances the identification of distinct qualities with an emphasis on their similarities. Despite sharing the belief in structural continuity, Adorno defended democratic means to combatting fascist tendencies and advocated for institutional avenues such as education as the most secure way to uphold the categorical imperative of preventing another Auschwitz (T. Adorno 1977).

The evolution of the “authoritarian character” illustrates the conflicting priorities of the Frankfurt School. As early as 1950, Adorno defines the authoritarian personality in opposition to the model “democratic” or “individualistic” personality, rather than the “revolutionary” character as is done in the Institute’s studies conducted in the early 1930s (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, x; Institut für Sozialforschung 1936, 240). This change demonstrates the relevance of the concept of the authoritarian personality in both pre-fascist and democratic contexts. At the same time, it reveals a shift in political agenda that in the 1930s is concerned with the “revolutionary” personality as the ideal type, then, in the 1950s, the “democratic” or “individualistic” personality. Marcuse returns to the authoritarian character’s 1930s anti-revolutionary connotation when he utilizes the concept in the 1970s. In this context, the authoritarian character and its prevalence within capitalist democracies reinforced his claim that radical social change was necessary to prevent fascism

42 Adorno begins his 1966 essay “Education after Auschwitz” with the following statement: „The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again. Its priority before any other requirement is such that I believe I need not and should not justify it” (Tiedemann 2003, 19). He goes on to propose measures such as psychological studies of former Nazis, education in the countryside, and informative media programs.
Marcuse used the theory authoritarian character and instinctualization of social trends to develop a program for the New Left in the United States even after the failure of the student movement in the 1960s (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 165). By 1972-73, Marcuse believes there are only two paths left for capitalist democracies: fascism or socialism. This claim gives the New Left the responsibility for revolutionary change not only because of its utopian possibilities, but also as the only alternative to fascism.

The conceptual problem with the authoritarian character is that it associates any type of stereotyped, hierarchical, and uncritical thought with fascism. This is a useful analytical tool at times, but it creates new theoretical obstacles due to the lack of distinction between latent authoritarian tendencies and pronounced fascism. It radicalizes the qualities such as conformism, prejudice, and stereotyped thinking and the individuals who demonstrate these tendencies by associating them with fascism— their most extreme form. This ambiguity in the Institute’s theory extends beyond the authoritarian character to the fascist potential in political forms in general. It eventually contributes to the split between Adorno and Marcuse over the current possibilities for addressing the problem of authoritarian tendencies in society. Although they agree on the depth of the problem of increasing authoritarian tendencies in individuals and their source in capitalist authority structures, they disagree on the current risks and possibilities of pursuing revolutionary political action. This conflict comes to the forefront in a 1969 correspondence between Adorno and Marcuse about the behavior of the student movement and its relationship to Critical Theory (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999). Both Adorno and Marcuse admire
the anti-authoritarian and nonconforming stance of the student movement, but Adorno believes that the objective circumstances for revolutionary action do not exist. Adorno is wary of the authoritarian tendencies in the German student movement at the moments when they appeal to him as a leader or demonstrate a priority of action of reflective thought. In contrast, Marcuse believes that the New Left, extending beyond the student movement to include “housewives, racial and national minorities, employees, unemployed, in brief, practically the entire underlying population,” must create the objective conditions for revolution through mass mobilization and education (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 168). He is much more suspicious of “the Establishment” than the students, which he makes clear when he writes to Adorno that “I still believe that our cause (which is not only ours) is better taken up by rebellious students than by the police” in response to Adorno calling the police when SDS students occupied the Frankfurt Institute building in 1969 (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 125; Kraushaar 2003, 400). Marcuse’s investment in the student movement and, after the student movement, the New Left, is not based on his optimism that revolutionary change as possible, rather it is marked by a desperation to act immediately or risk lapsing into neo-fascism.

Rather than give a detailed account of Adorno and Marcuse’s roles in the 1960s student movements, I will contrast their perspectives on Critical Theory’s relationship to political practice through their public and private responses to the German student movement and the best course of action to prevent fascism. I will draw on the heated correspondence in 1969 spurred by their disagreement over Adorno’s reaction to the SDS occupation of the Frankfurt Institute building
This correspondence represented a history of personal and professional conflicts between Adorno and Marcuse and was the last communication between the two before Adorno’s death in August 1969.

I will analyze Adorno’s 1969 essay “Resignation” for his formal response to the criticism of his refusal to take a leadership role in the student movement. To further illustrate Marcuse’s theory of the continuity between advanced capitalism and fascism and the need for political action, I will analyze his unpublished 1972-73 essay, “The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy.” Marcuse wrote this essay after the student movements had died down as a call to revive the New Left, as he believed that radical structural change was the only way to prevent “reactionary-conservative” American society from lapsing into neo-fascism. Douglas Kellner, editor of the first publication of this essay, offers two possible explanations for Marcuse’s decision not to publish this text. First, Kellner suggests that the challenge to presidential power posed by the Watergate scandal and Nixon’s proceeding resignation in 1974 could undermine Marcuse’s argument for the infallibility of the president and the strength of conservative forces (“Richard M. Nixon” 2014). Although this could explain Marcuse’s initial hesitation to publish the essay, the quick recovery of (conservative) presidential prestige marked by Reagan’s election in 1981 indicates that Watergate was much more of an exception that a fundamental flaw in Marcuse’s analysis. Kellner’s second speculation about Marcuse’s choice not to publish the essay is that he was consumed by his work on aesthetics, a plausible explanation considering how prolific Marcuse was (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 164). Regardless of why Marcuse chose not to publish “The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy,” its unpublished
state reveals a rougher and more immediate articulation of his argument about widespread neo-fascist tendencies in American individuals and institutions. It therefore lacks the polished form of Marcuse’s other works that address these ideas including “As Essay on Liberation” (1969) and Counterrevolution and Revolt (1972). This is evidenced by the brief references to ideas such as the revolutionary potential of “Third-World national liberation movements” and the “sadomasochistic character” without thorough explanation, and the direct bullet-point lists at the beginning and end of the essay (Herbert Marcuse 2001b, 165-66; 170; 166; 184–86). The advantages that this text presents include Marcuse’s focus on current political events as opposed to theoretical scenarios to illustrate his claims and the expansive picture it provides by connecting many of Marcuse’s ideas.

II. The Existential Need for Revolution: Adapting Marxism to the New Reality

Marcuse wrote “The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy” in the wake of Nixon’s landslide reelection against anti-war candidate George McGovern, which he believed was a direct reflection of “the historical fate of bourgeois democracy: its transformation from a dynamic into a static, from a liberal-progressive into a reactionary-conservative state” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 165). Marcuse did not posit a teleological understanding of democracy, but rather reflected on the historical development of, particularly American, advanced capitalist democracy. He believed it had reached a turning point from which it would either revolutionize to become a socialist state or, more likely, devolve into neo-fascism. His analysis reconciled the tension between preserving democracy to prevent fascism and eliminating capitalism.
to establish socialism on a theoretical level by interpreting the latter as the only sustainable alternative.

In this essay, Marcuse presents a practical and theoretical revolutionary program. The theoretical foundation for his program adapts revolutionary Marxist theory to the changes of advanced capitalism using Freudian social psychoanalysis. He contextualizes his argument within the politics of the Vietnam War, the women’s liberation movement and domestic issues such as unemployment and welfare. Marcuse was the member of the Frankfurt School who was most engaged with current affairs and demonstrated this through his ability to both apply his theory to political controversies and illustrate his claims using examples from contemporary politics. Drawing on American politics, the philosophical tradition of Marxism, and Freudian social psychoanalysis, Marcuse provides a revolutionary program that can be divided into three levels: first, a theory of instinctual restructuring as a prerequisite to revolutionary social change; second, the tangible political goals for a revitalized revolutionary movement; and third, the immediate political tasks of the New Left in the United States.

Marcuse emphasizes the need to defend democracy against fascism, because “Compared with a neo-fascist society, defined in terms of a ‘suspension’ of civil rights and liberties, suppression of all opposition, militarization and totalitarian manipulation of the people,” democracy is the “lesser evil”. He argues that this must be done in a way that attacks democracy’s capitalist foundations, while preserving its political freedoms. Democracy’s capitalist structures threaten to completely transform the “bourgeois-democratic form” into the “monopoly and state capitalist structure” of
fascism. At the same time, the institutional remnants of the “bourgeois-democratic form” of democracy—whatever was left of the formal democratic freedoms—retain the possibility of raising the political consciousness necessary to catalyze radical change (Herbert Marcuse 2001b, 177-8). It is not the political form of democracy—the concepts of civil rights, equal representation, and participation—that is irreparably corrupted, but its economic foundation. Politics must be the target of social change, because the political triumph of fascism would officially eliminate all semblance of political rights. While the opportunity still exists, mass conservatism, military aggression, and the attack on social welfare must be targeted through political practice in order to spread the political consciousness for the revolutionary transformation of democracy’s capitalist structure.

The severity of the situation in liberal democracies is underscored by Marcuse’s comparisons between the current state of United States politics and Nazi Germany. He likens the U.S. intervention in Vietnam to the “final solution” and alludes to the Nazi’s rise to power through democratic elections in his discussion of the “free election” of Nixon’s “warfare government” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 172; 168). Despite the similarities, Marcuse returns to the crucial political distinction between fascism and democracy. Democracy, he argues, “provides a chance (the last chance?) for the transition to socialism” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 177). Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse was not restrained by the risk of provoking instability, nor the safety of the status quo. Instead, he believed that confronting the political threats under democracy was equivalent to preventing fascism in its early form. Marcuse’s pessimism with the state of capitalist democracy and its likely lapse
into fascism was accompanied by an optimism that the New Left could seize this last opportunity to achieve revolutionary change.

Marcuse’s revolutionary critique of democracy is rooted in Marxism, a source that he openly references despite the antagonistic political environment of the Cold War United States. Although strongly influenced by “orthodox Marxism,” he acknowledges its shortcomings and makes several crucial revisions to Marxist revolutionary theory to account for the changing circumstances under advanced capitalism (Herbert Marcuse 1993). Marcuse believes that several key factors distinguished early capitalism from advanced capitalism and necessitated a revision of Marxist revolutionary theory. Under advanced capitalism, the working class has extended to include the middle class without being radicalized or “proletarianized” as Marx predicted (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 167). In this process, an increasing proportion of society becomes a part of the “ruled class,” while an elite few constitute the ruling capitalist class and the socioeconomic classes in the middle shrink. Unlike under early capitalism, the expanded working class is not overwhelmed by material depravity in addition to the still dehumanizing working conditions, but is insulated by the material comfort of a rising standard of living. For this reason, Marcuse argued that the radicalization of the working class that Marx’s theory depended on as the force behind the revolution would not occur under advanced capitalism.

Marcuse’s diagnosis of a polarized class society in the early 1970s has only become more extreme today: US income inequality has reached its highest point since 1928 and the poverty rate has increased by four percent since Marcuse wrote this essay in 1973 (Saez 2013; “Poverty in the United States” 2014). Despite this, the
overall comfort afforded to the middle class confirms Marcuse’s theory that unrest will not be spurred by material depravity, but by “existential” need, or the desire to have a fairer, more just society. Massive socioeconomic inequality has awoken this existential need, as seen in the 2011 protests of the Occupy movement that spread to “951 cities in 82 countries,” but opposition has failed to gain serious traction (Rogers 2014).

Marcuse set out to explain the changes in capitalist society that necessitate a reevaluation of the role of the working class, which was becoming increasingly conservative rather than radical. A crucial distinction was the comfortable standard of living afforded to the members of the expanded working class without a fundamental change in the nature of their labor. By 1970, 95 percent of American households had a television set—virtually every family, regardless of socioeconomic class (TV Basics 2012). The equivalent today is computer use: the number of households with a computer increased from 8 percent in 1984 to 76 percent in 2011 (File 2013). Marcuse theorized that the comfortable material lifestyle of the broad working class prevented it from resisting less immediate economic and political injustices—whether it was violence mediated through a television set or political corruption accepted as “just politics.” Instead, the conservative majority affirmed the status quo and everything that came with it: “In other words: the people were willing (nobody forced them) to ‘buy’ inflation and unemployment, war crimes and corruption, a grossly inadequate health service, the continued rat race of the daily existence” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 168). Marcuse polemical critique reveals his outrage that, given the choice between two presidential candidates completely within “the Establishment,”
American citizens would reject the potential for political reform and enthusiastically reaffirm existing injustices by reelecting Nixon (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 168). Voters’ conservatism can be partially explained by the fear of the alternative that led many people to dismiss Leftist policies as “socialist”—a perception that continues to be propagated today (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 168–69). But Marcuse believed that the fear of socialism did not go far enough in explaining the rise of a reactionary conservatism that increasingly resembles neo-fascism.

Adapting the Marxist concept of a material base that generates ideology, Marcuse argued for a “dialectical materialism” that accounts for “‘mediations’ between infra- and superstructure, one of the modes by which the social structure is reproduced in the individuals” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 170). Although Marx’s theory rightfully attributes social and political ideology to the structure of the economy, it does not explain the reciprocal relationship between the two or how ideology is “introjected” into individuals so that they are invested in reproducing the status quo. Marcuse explains the dialectical relationship between base and superstructure through his psychoanalytic theory of “instinctualization”: the process through which individuals experience the demands of the capitalist system as their own needs and preferences (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 173). Similar to the argument put forth in Studies on Authority and the Family, Marcuse explains that the psychological development of the individual, particularly within the family, “mediates” between the capitalist structure and the individual in capitalist society (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 170). Marcuse argues that the capacity for advanced
capitalism to reproduce itself within the mental structures of individuals accounts for its powerful resistance to revolutionary change:

In new ways: because the interplay between production and destruction, liberty and repression, power and submission (i.e., the unity of opposites which permeates the entire capitalist society today) has, with the help of technological means not previously available, created, among the underlying populations, a mental structure which responds to, and reflects the requirements of the system. In this mental structure are the deep individual, instinctual roots of the identification of the conformist majority with the institutionalized brutality and aggression. An instinctual, nay, libidinal affinity binds, beneath all rational justification, the subjects to the rulers…The mental structure involved here is the sadomasochistic character (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 170).

As Adorno and Horkheimer describe in Dialectic of Enlightenment, the power of advanced capitalism lies in its totality, both in the sense of its ability to contain contradictions and its extension into the psychological composition of the individual. For example, capitalism is directed at efficient production, but this production is used in places such as Vietnam as a means for efficient destruction: the “the productivity of killing” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 176). These contradictions are not only a symptom of politics, but are internalized in the individual, exemplified by the “sadomasochistic character,” the Freudian concept adopted by Erich Fromm and renamed the “authoritarian character.” The sadomasochistic character perceives the world in terms of dichotomies—of superiors and inferiors, “in-groups” and “out-groups”—without recognizing the contradictions in this type of thinking or in its societal manifestations (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 233). Characteristic of the sadomasochistic mental structure is an uncritical identification with authority, in this case the militaristic Nixon administration.
Marcuse’s reference to the “libidinal affinity” that characterizes individuals’ loyalty “beneath all rational justification” draws on Freudian drive theory. In order to explain seemingly contradictory behavior, Marcuse adapts the Freudian concept of the death and sex drives. An individual’s psychological structure is based on the degree to which she represses, sublimates, or expresses these drives, primarily during the formative stage of early childhood. According to the drive theory, if one of the drives is “sublimated”—reverted into socially acceptable expression—it alleviates pressure from the other drive (Herbert Marcuse 2001b, 88–89). Although Marcuse acknowledges the relaxation of sexual taboos in dress, behavior, and discourse in the United States, he argues that this represents a repressive form of sexual liberation “defined by alienation.” Instead of creating friction within society, this type of sexual liberation markets “sex as a salable commodity, thereby eliminating and subduing most of those forces and features which, according to Freud, made sexuality and Eros a really liberating and socially dangerous force” (Herbert Marcuse 2001b, 90). Marcuse believes that sexuality is essentially a life force that strives towards peace, unity, and creation and can therefore be directed against destruction and hostility if it is not repressed. Instead of acting as a disruptive force, restrictive sexual liberation further reinforces the stability of the monogamous patriarchal family within capitalist society by creating outlets for sexual expression that do not disrupt social structures.

The correlative of repressed sexuality was “a release of destructive and aggressive energy on a scale hitherto unknown” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 91). Marcuse argues that the atomic bombs, the Vietnam War, and the constant increase in defense spending were rooted in the death drives of individuals, or the “identification
of the conformist majority with the institutionalized brutality and aggression” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 170). The desire to identify with authority, especially a powerful and destructive authority, is derived from the feeling of impotence of the sadomasochistic character and the resulting need to seek external sources of power. Although the sadomasochistic character—the individual dominated by sadomasochistic tendencies—is the most extreme case, Marcuse asserts that the majority of Americans demonstrate such tendencies (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 171).

The Frankfurt School’s theory of the sadomasochistic character is rooted in a theoretical, not clinical psychological understanding of human socialization. Understood in this way, Marcuse’s analysis presents a compelling explanation for why individuals often identify with authority figures and institutions on a visceral (in Marcuse’s words, instinctual) level rather than based on a rational evaluation of their policies. In the United States, this is evidenced by the sense of personal pride when the government exerts its military strength and invades nations in order to “liberate” or “democratize” them and the patriotic celebrations of the United States as “the greatest country on earth” (Palin 2010). Marcuse provides the example of the president, who retains authority and respect (and even reinforces it) “whether or not he ordered the dropping of the atom bomb or the massacre of the Vietnamese people” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 176). The sadomasochistic character views authority figures uncritically and instead of questioning the authority of a president who acts immorally, she adjusts her morals to account for the actions of the president. Marcuse’s critique of attitudes towards the president echoes Adorno’s discussion of the sadomasochistic character in The Authoritarian Personality. In response to a
question about adultery, a typical high scorer on the F scale (a measure of the political manifestations of sadomasochistic tendencies) remarked that “since some of the most respectable people do it, it must be all right” (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950, 760). Authority figures are not subjected to criticism; instead, their behavior is accepted as the moral standard.

Marcuse wrote the “The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy” before the Watergate scandal, an incident that proved that there is a limit to presidential power. Kellner proposes that this may be the reason that Marcuse chose not to publish this essay (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 164). Whether or not Nixon’s forced resignation in response to Watergate caused Marcuse to temporarily reassess his argument for the extent of presidential power, the recovery of presidential prestige indicates that this scandal did not refute his analysis. The most recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention the ideological “War on Terror” reveal Americans’ continued support of aggressive presidential authority and destructive policies in society that can still accurately be called “reactionary-conservative” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 165).

After describing the psychoanalytic theory that underlies his claim, Marcuse outlines the foundation and goals of a revolutionary movement based on his theory of instinctualization. The redefinition of classes that Marcuse calls for due to the expansion of the working class without its radicalization “shifts the emphasis from the classes to the ‘people’” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 174). Marcuse believes that Marx’s class distinctions that locate the revolutionary impetus in the working class no longer hold. Instead, individuals from all classes who have had liberating experiences must compose the revolutionary movement (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 173). Marcuse’s
theory does not appeal solely to the material needs of the working class, but also to the potential for social and political justice that could end destructive warfare, ensure a fair distribution of material and social goods, and create a true cultural realm. Adapting Lenin’s idea of the “vanguard party,” Marcuse calls for “liberated” individuals from all classes to organize against the ideological and instinctual as well as the economic and social structures of advanced capitalism (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 178):

Just as, in the advanced capitalist countries, the radical impulse is likely to originate in the existential dimension beyond vital material want (privation), so the political education will have to accentuate and articulate this dimension. This means that the need for a fundamental reorganization of manual and intellectual labor is accentuated by a corresponding “ideological” change: education must focus on “cultural,” moral issues as political weapons (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 179).

Marcuse’s political tactics target society on the cultural level and individuals on the instinctual level in order to create the opportunity for material change. He retains the Marxist assumption about the centrality of economic determinants, but locates the struggle in the cultural and psychological as well as the material realm. Marcuse appeals to those who have had experiences that have made them critical of advanced capitalist society “and who have become militant socialists in this confrontation” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 178). Adorno would object to Marcuse’s claim that there are certain “liberated” individuals in an unfree society who can lead others in liberating all of society. For Adorno, the social determination of individuals means that “without the freedom of the species [Gattung], without the social species in general, there is no such thing as individual freedom” (T. Adorno 2006, 178).
Freedom for Adorno is a social concept, just as the individual is a social being, a *Gattungswesen* that is shaped by her socioeconomic status, family dynamics, and cultural and historical context. Because Adorno does not consider the individual to be separable from society, there is no possibility of a “liberating experience” that could free an individual if the society that has shaped her remains unfree (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 178). However consistent Adorno’s interpretation of social freedom is with the Frankfurt School’s Marxist understanding of individuals as social beings, it is clear why Marcuse does not fully accept this premise. If there are no individuals who can interrupt the reproduction of an unfree society, then there is little possibility for substantial social or political change. Marcuse needs to allow for the possibility of “militant socialists” to lead “political education in theory and praxis”; without this option, political action would be paralyzed, and the historical means for achieving revolution ignored (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 178).

III. Violence and Morality

Marcuse’s use of the word “militant” to describe the revolutionary organizers illustrates his ambivalent attitude toward violence. On one hand, the central principle that Marcuse provides for the New Left is *anti*-militancy in terms of “focusing theory and practice on such targets as the war, the military establishment, the power structure’s attack on education and welfare” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 184). Marcuse’s aggressive language characterizes the enemy that the New Left is facing—in this case the United States government—by its violent militancy. On the other hand, it was this destructive aggression that Marcuse aimed to abolish and violence
may have been a necessary tool in accomplishing this. When Marcuse employs the term “militant socialists” he captures the dedication and “liberating hatred” that he believes is “the token of the liberated consciousness” that can counter the institutionalized violence of the United States government (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 173).

Although Marcuse did not directly advocate for violence, he insists on a more nuanced theoretical evaluation rather than universal condemnation of it. He criticized the hypocritical “preaching of love and non-violence” which denounces violence not based on the act or intention, but based on “legality.” This does not reduce violence, but instead “plays into the hands of the practitioners of hatred and violence” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 172). Institutions such as the United States government are permitted to commit acts of mass violence, while prohibiting any dissenters from challenging institutionalized power with their own acts of violence. Rather than taking an absolutist stance against violence, Marcuse accounts for differences in the perpetrator and intent of violence. In a letter to Adorno, he insists that,

We should have the theoretical courage not to identify the violence of liberation with the violence of repression, all subsumed under the general category of dictatorship. Terrible as it is, the Vietnamese peasant who shoots his landlord who has tortured and exploited him for decades is not doing the same thing as the landlord who shoots the rebelling slaves” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 134–35)

Marcuse develops theoretical standards for distinguishing between violence used to further oppression and violence used for liberation. In the first case, violence exacerbates inequality in order to gain additional power over the oppressed (the slaveowner’s violence against his slaves). In the second case of the Vietnamese peasant shooting his landlord, violence may not only be justifiable, but also necessary
in order to challenge the assumed legitimacy of systematic violence. According to Marcuse’s criteria, violence is only permissible when it aims to alleviate, not exacerbate oppression. This understanding of political power dynamics is crucial to Marcuse’s revolutionary theory that considers both intent and consequences in the use of violence or other forms of power. Although he does not explicitly call for the New Left to use violence, he acknowledges that it is necessary under certain circumstances.

Adorno was much more direct in his rejection of violence. Similarly to Marcuse, he was horrified at the institutionalized aggression of advanced capitalist states (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 9). He warned of the danger of Germany becoming a police state if a thorough and transparent investigation did not occur after the shooting and killing of student activist Benno Ohnesorg by Berlin police (“Zur Polizei Und den Studenten” 1967). Unlike Marcuse, who strongly sympathized with liberating violence, Adorno was also wary of signs of violence from the activist groups. This is illustrated by his reaction to the SDS occupation of the Institute of Social Research in January 1969. After the students repeatedly refused to leave, Adorno felt he had no choice but to call the police, who arrested all of the student activists. Adorno and Marcuse disagreed on the legitimacy of the students’ actions and Adorno’s right to involve the police. Although the SDS was a non-violent organization and did not even harm property in the occupation of the Institute, Adorno was wary of the “bureaucratic clinging to agendas, ‘binding decisions,’ countless committees and suchlike” that indicate a “technocratization” he fears might “flip over into fascism” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 132). He interpreted the
nonviolent occupation of the Institute as a sign of dangerous aggression, reading fascist tendencies into it that Marcuse found misplaced. Marcuse agreed that if the students had used violence, Adorno would have had a right to call the police, but as it were calling the police aligned the Institute with the very institutions that Marcuse sought to abolish (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 125).

Adorno and Marcuse’s disagreement ran deeper than the SDS occupation of the Institute to the theoretical problem of the use of violence in activism. Adorno viewed violence as necessarily oppressive, whether it was used for liberation or domination. He was critical of Marcuse’s willingness to separate revolutionary violence from the liberated outcome it aimed to achieve, arguing that “Dialectics means, amongst other things, that ends are not indifferent to means” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 132). According to Adorno, a violent revolution could not produce a nonviolent society because the aggression and destruction built into structures and practices would necessarily carry over in some forms. This assumption minimizes the importance of the question of whether violence should be used to achieve revolutionary change, because even if it were successful it could not attain the desired goal.

Adorno criticized Marcuse for letting his vision become dominated by the immediacy of politics rather than the mediation of theory. He pointed out that Marcuse protested the use of napalm while ignoring the “Chinese-style torture” of the Vietcong, an inconsistency that Adorno argued “takes on a ideological character” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 127). For Marcuse, this view was not inconsistent, rather it accounted for the moral difference in the use of violence based on by whom and for
what purposes it is used. By differentiating in this way, Marcuse demonstrated a more nuanced theoretical framework for judging acts of violence. With no stake nor experience in the necessary compromises of political practice, Adorno was free to take a more absolutist stance against violence. He avoided the complications of advocating for violence that could slip into oppression, or even fascism, but by doing so he reaffirmed the inequality between revolutionaries who were restricted to using nonviolent means and the perpetrators of legal, institutionalized violence that they were opposing.

Marcuse argues for the introduction of “socialist morality as political force” to account for circumstances such as the discrepancy between violence as oppression and violence as liberation. In the face of the “minimization of moral issues (as ‘merely’ ideological)” under advanced capitalism, Marcuse calls for the recognition of “the material content of moral issues, their political substance and potential.” He advocates for evaluation based on moral rather than legal or other means, meaning judgment based on criteria such as oppression and inequality that transcend given legal or political forms. Moral judgment would find the institutionalized perpetrators of mass violence more condemnable than those who used violence to protest against institutionalized oppression (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 179). This approach would reveal the injustice of institutional action that is otherwise protected by its claim to legality.

Although Marcuse provides both theoretical and practical guidelines for inciting social change, he rejects the prospect of providing a detailed vision of liberated society. He insists that this outcome could only be understood in its
realization, and all that can be done is to identify and challenge injustices (Wiggershaus 1994, 623). Similarly, he argues that the only concrete formulation of the need for liberation is experienced as a negative need, as hatred against unfreedom and freedom from alienation. According to Marcuse, this is the most powerful, tangible force that can be harnessed for revolutionary action. People must be able to criticize, hate, and reject destruction and dehumanization in capitalist society in order to overcome it.43

IV. What is Praxis?: The Break between Adorno and Marcuse

Marcuse determines the political task of revolutionary movements to organize on a community level around issues such as school reform, childcare, and resource pollution, “decidedly ‘reformist’ issues, unpolitical, but as the work proceeds, each of them would reveal its political character within the whole” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 181). This approach requires people to accept delayed gratification. It entails asking people to work against their own immediate interests in cases in which the same institutions that one is trying to overthrow offer the promise of immediate, yet superficial reforms. Marcuse’s plan depends on the assumption that discontent with public schools will lead to the realization that capitalist democracy has to be fundamentally revolutionized. More likely, local districts will accept an immediate, yet temporary fix, and instruct their teachers to teach to standardized tests to receive

43 Although Marcuse provides a compelling argument for why hatred is the most powerful emotion to arouse revolutionary forces, he does not address the difficulty in channeling this hatred into long-term radical political goals. Hatred is often directed at particular manifestations of injustice rather than the cultural and institutional roots of the problem. A mother’s outrage when her son is shot and killed does not always translate to the desire to negotiate the politics of gun control laws, just as sudden dismissal from one’s job does not necessarily make the newly unemployed declare war against capitalism. Marcuse leaves the issue open of how hatred can be transformed into necessarily more abstract goals directed toward structural change.
more federal funding. Unfortunately, given the comfortable material conditions that cloak the oppression of advanced capitalist systems, Marcuse has no other option but to appeal to peoples’ sense of “existential needs” and the possibility that organizing around reformist issues would spread the political consciousness to generate a revolutionary movement (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 179; 181).

The urgency for immediate political action as both a preventative measure against fascism and a necessary step toward fundamental structural change is highlighted by Marcuse’s description of the “immediate tasks” of the New Left. Before the deep structural problems of economic alienation, political oppression, and instinctual manipulation can be addressed the New Left has to seize the opportunity to raise political consciousness while the democratic means to do so still existed. Marcuse concludes his essay by proposing five immediate tasks: writing representatives, organizing protests and boycotts, hiring lawyers to prevent legal discrimination, fundraising, and local organizing and educating (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 186). Although these reformist measures bear little indication of their revolutionary potential, they are consistent with Marcuse’s call to take advantage of existing political possibilities under liberal democracies before mass conservatism and aggression threaten to make them collapse into fascism. All of these tactics were safely within legal, parliamentary means of democratic opposition, which Marcuse acknowledges runs the risk of strengthening existing institutions if instead of achieving change they merely reinforced the ability of “the Establishment” to co-opt opposition (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 169). He accepts this risk due to the necessity for immediate action to awaken people’s political consciousness. The radical theoretical
foundation of Marcuse’s revolutionary program can only reveal itself once enough individuals have had the “liberating experience” to form an oppositional movement.

In contrast with Marcuse—dubbed the “Father of the New Left”—, Adorno refuses to provide any prescriptions for political action (Herbert Marcuse 1969). Adorno warns of the danger of premature action and the absolutist tendencies that at times emerge in the German student movement. He defends Jürgen Habermas’s term “left fascism” in reference to the student movement leader Rudi Dutschke’s voluntaristic ideology in a letter to Marcuse.⁴⁴ Adorno was wary of either leadership or a program that would discourage radicals from autonomous thought. This concern was derived from his belief that revolutionary thought and action must be enacted by a critical and self-reflective subject, not the repressed individual who simply chooses a new source of authority and direction. Adorno argues for a dialectical understanding of revolutionary action, positing that a hierarchical anti-authority movement would simply replace old authority structures with new ones. His biggest reservation about the German student movement was their absolutist condemnation that theorizing without political practice means “resignation”—the title of Adorno’s 1969 essay responding to Marcuse and the student movement (T. Adorno 1999). Adorno interpreted the tendencies within the student movement that rejected theory as a denial of thought altogether.

⁴⁴ A week after the police shooting of Benno Ohnesorg in 1967, Habermas spoke at a conference with SDS leaders including Rudi Dutschke and Hans-Jürgen Krahl. In response to Dutschke’s defense of the use of violence and insistence that “everything now depends on the conscious human will,” Habermas accuses Dutschke of presenting a form of “left fascism.” Habermas states that “In my opinion, he has presented a voluntarist ideology, which was called utopian socialism in 1848 and which in today’s context, I believe I have reasons to use this characterization, has to be called left fascism” (Berman 2014, 16).
Adorno and Marcuse’s 1969 correspondence in response to the SDS occupation of the Institute demonstrates Adorno’s fear of a resurgence of fascism, which causes him to see the destructive tendencies in the student movement. He cites Habermas’s term “left-fascism,” as a dialectic expression of the potential for the radical left student movement to transform into its opposite (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 128). Adorno rejects Marcuse’s claim that there is any opportunity for the German student movement to affect social change:

Firstly, inasmuch as it inflames an undiminished fascist potential in Germany, without even caring about it. Secondly, insofar as it breeds in itself tendencies which—and here too we must differ—directly converge with fascism. I name as symptomatic of this the technique of calling for a discussion, only then to make one impossible; the barbaric inhumanity of a mode of behaviour that is regressive and even confuses regression with revolution; the blind primacy of action; the formalism which is indifferent to the content and shape of that against which one revolts, namely our theory. Here in Frankfurt, and certainly in Berlin as well, the word ‘professor’ is used condescendingly to dismiss people, or as they so nicely put it ‘to put them down,’ just as the Nazis used the word Jew in their day (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 131–32).

The psychological regression from autonomous to collective thought (what Adorno deemed the true “resignation”), the absolutist stance that rejects theory in favor of unreflective practice, and the anti-intellectualism verging on opposition to thought demonstrates fascist tendencies among the German student movement for Adorno (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 131). Even in 1969, he believed there was “an undiminished fascist potential in Germany” that the student movement risked reawakening, alluding to the prevalence of the authoritarian character type. The hypothesis of Adorno’s 1950 study on The Authoritarian Personality is that latent
neo-fascist tendencies manifest in the stereotyped and hierarchical thinking of individuals make them susceptible to joining a fascist movement (T. W. Adorno et al. 1950). Adorno was concerned that valuing “blind primacy of action” indicated the rise of neo-fascist tendencies in the student movement, despite its self-identification as the radical Left (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 131).

Adorno supports his argument with psychoanalysis more explicitly when he describes in a letter to Marcuse “the barbaric inhumanity of a mode of behaviour that is regressive and even confuses regression with revolution” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 131). This accusation was influenced by Adorno’s personal confrontations with members of the German student movement: he was accused of being “critical in theory, conformist in practice,” his lectures were repeatedly interrupted by student activists until he cancelled them, and the SDS occupation of the Institute ended with Adorno calling the police (Wiggershaus 1994, 632; 635; 633). The students’ disappointment with Adorno’s—and to an extent Marcuse’s—refusal to take a leadership role in the student movement and provide a vision of a “concrete utopia” or the political action that it would take to achieve it only exacerbated Adorno’s concern with the authoritarian tendencies of the movement (Wiggershaus 1994, 623). He turns the accusation of “resignation” against his critics by claiming that social organization that subsumes the individual in the whole, “This act, not unwavering thought, is resignative” (T. Adorno 1999, 292). For Adorno, a revolutionary

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45 In July, 1967 the SDS hosted a four-day conference in Berlin centered around Marcuse as the Critical Theorist who backed the student movement. Shortly before the conference, radical student movement leader Rudi Dutschke demanded that Critical Theory provide a description of a “concrete utopia” in an interview in Der Spiegel. The students were disappointed when Marcuse refused to do so, instead denying the student movement’s potential for inciting radical social change and redirecting focus to the Third World liberation movements (Wiggershaus 1994, 622–23).
movement aimed at liberating the individual has to be based on autonomous thought, which “atrophies like all instrumental reason” when subjugated to collective action. Adorno goes further to say that “according to Freud, whoever regresses has not reached his instinctual aim,” a statement that does not consider that the temporary (and to an extent, necessary) priority of collective action is aimed at fulfilling instincts that are repressed in contemporary society. It may be true that “By contrast the uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither signs over his consciousness nor lets himself be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give in.” Adorno’s idealization of the “uncompromisingly critical thinker” leaves little opportunity for action, but it allows him to retain his critical approach rather than making compromises for political ends (T. Adorno 1999, 292).

Although Marcuse and Adorno share an abstract conception of the relationship between theory and practice, they differ dramatically in its application. In a letter to Adorno, Marcuse argues that, “there are situations, moments, in which theory is pushed further by praxis—situations and moments in which theory that is kept separate from praxis becomes untrue to itself” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 125). He believes that the Institute has an obligation to develop its revolutionary theory to its logical outcome, which for Marcuse means its political implications. To refuse to do this is not an impartial act, but an active affirmation of the status quo. Adorno agrees with Marcuse’s hypothetical scenario in which theory and practice must be engaged in a dialectical relationship and, indeed, this is the basis for his decision to step outside of theorizing to conduct empirical studies. But the common ground stops there: Adorno insists that “such a situation neither exists objectively
today, nor does the barren and brutal practicism that confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory anyhow” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 127). The student movement’s rejection of theory rather than dialectical understanding of its inseparability from practice triggers an even stronger reaction from Adorno, who condemns the aspects of the student movement that appear to him as “barren and brutal practicism.” Although Adorno’s theory is based in revolutionary Marxist thought, it is unclear whether the “objective” circumstances for revolutionary practice would ever have existed in his mind, short of an actual revolution (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 127).

Adorno sees the danger in the German student movement’s hostility toward intellectuals and especially those who refuse to engage in political practice, such as himself. This is a warning sign for Adorno, which he compares to the Nazi treatment of Jews—again illustrating his propensity to associate tendencies with their most radical outcomes (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 132). Unlike Marcuse, he is not flattered by the students’ appeal to him for guidance; instead, he is distraught by their inability to see that it is not the time for political practice or even disregarding that, to act without an authority commanding them. He criticizes the student movement of “pseudo-activity: action that overdoes and aggravates itself for the sake of its own publicity, without admitting to itself to what extent it serves as substitute satisfaction, elevating itself into an end in itself” (T. Adorno 1999, 132). For Adorno, “Within absolutized praxis only reaction is possible and therefore false” (T. Adorno 1999, 281). A change in material and social conditions is necessary to interrupt the false consciousness that prevents revolutionary action, but reflection and theory are always
necessary to make this practice more than mere reaction. It is unclear if these conditions would ever exist for Adorno, or if thought as a “form of practice” that “points beyond itself” will always be the only true form of practice (T. Adorno 1999, 292–92).

Adorno’s fear of a resurgence of fascism yields him unwilling to risk investing in a social movement if it contains any regressive tendencies. He denies the current possibility for radical change given the historical circumstances of the late 1960s. Marcuse, on the other hand, believes that the “historical impossibility of realization is irreconcilable” with Marxism (Herbert Marcuse 1993, 219). As a revolutionary theory, Marcuse believes that “possibility of its political realization is itself a part of Marxist theory.” Theory has to be conceived of in relation to political practice, which means developing a theory that “seizes the masses” (Herbert Marcuse 1993, 218). Marcuse is concerned with shaping his theory so that it accomplishes this, even if it meant simplifying it. Adapting or simplifying theory so that it reveals its revolutionary potential does not mean compromising it; it is an essential component of Marcuse’s Critical Theory. Although Marcuse wrote his share of philosophical texts targeted towards a readership immersed in Marxist theory (see Hegel’s Ontology and Theory of Historicity (1932) and Reason and Revolution (1941)), he also saw the need to present his theory in a way that was accessible by a larger readership and could be realized in political practice. Marcuse adopts a similar approach to Marx, who wrote books including Das Kapital for an educated elite, but also published works such as the Communist Manifesto as direct political statements intended to incite action in a broader audience.
Although Adorno and Marcuse both advocate for radical change, Marcuse is more willingly to take the risk of investing in immediate political action. In an interview with Der Spiegel, Adorno claims “If I were to give practical advice in the way that Herbert Marcuse has to a certain extent done, it would be at the cost of my own productivity.” He goes on to argue for his role as a theorist in the division of labor, citing Marx who in his later years admitted that, “without the division of labor nothing would work” (Wiggershaus 1994, 621). Adorno’s statement both trivializes Marcuse’s work and detracts from his own credibility when he claims that his work is a (more effective) form of revolutionary praxis (T. Adorno 1999, 293). It gives the impression that he is concerned with his work for its own sake rather than for its role in a political change. Marcuse defends himself against Adorno’s accusations, retorting that he had never given “practical advice,” while at the same time justifying his actions by arguing that “our (old) theory has an internal political content, an internal political dynamic, that today, more than ever before, compels us to concrete political positions” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 129). Marcuse balances his desire for Adorno’s approval with his evidently stronger impulse to engage in political activity (the immediate tasks for the New Left at the end of his 1973-73 essay are a clear example of “practical advice”). In a letter to Adorno, Marcuse confirms an accusatory comment that Horkheimer makes in Der Spiegel, calling Marcuse’s work “cruder and simpler” than his ideas. Marcuse insists that “I believe crudeness and simplification have made the barely recognizable radical substance of these thoughts visible again” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 134). Although Marcuse does not go so far as to claim that the German student movement is a revolutionary movement, he
argues against Adorno that it does indeed “have the prospect of ‘effecting a social intervention,’ already evidenced in the spread of political consciousness (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 133).

Adorno’s hesitation to engage in political practice was primarily motivated by the belief that theory is a form of practice and his fear of fascism that was conjured at any sign of a lack of critical, reflective thought. This fear was initially articulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* when fascism was posited as the radical outcome of enlightenment and shaped the empirical studies, which were framed increasingly as a defense against fascism rather than revolutionary provocation. The association of non-reflective, stereotypical thought with fascism was a product of the lack of a theoretical distinction between political forms and instead an emphasis on “tendencies.” Adorno is critical of the aspects of the student movement that demonstrate authoritarian tendencies. Marcuse, on the other hand, consistently prioritized radical social change, while emphasizing the need for defense against fascism with varying degrees of urgency. He observes neo-fascist tendencies in capitalist democracies, leading him to refute the idea that preventing fascism means maintaining the status quo. In a letter to Marcuse, Adorno criticizes Horkheimer for making the “undialectical” argument in the 1930s that “suspect democracy is always better than dictatorship, which its collapse would bring into being” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 134). Marcuse argues that:

The system is global, and it is democracy, which, with all its faults, also carries out, pays for, and arms neo-colonialism and neo-fascism, and it obstructs liberalism. Double isolation: neo-fascism and this democracy are not alternatives: *this* democracy, as a capitalist one, drives, in line with its inherent dynamic, towards a régime of force? (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 134)
Marcuse makes a similar argument here as he does in his 1934 essay, “The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Theory of the State,” in which he argues that liberal democracy and authoritarianism are derived from the same economic and social order and that the former, in its advanced form, already begins to lapse into the latter. He accuses Horkheimer of making an arbitrary cut off between the formal titles of democracy and dictatorship, when in fact modern democracy already shows many of the oppressive and militant signs of fascist dictatorships. Horkheimer makes this argument himself with Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and would agree with Marcuse’s dialectical understanding of history, specifically the transition from advanced capitalist democracy to fascism. At the same time, Adorno and Horkheimer see the practical need to prevent formal fascism, even if it came at the cost of radical social change. Marcuse charges Horkheimer—and implicates Adorno along with him—with defending democracy as the “lesser evil” (T. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 134). Marcuse believes this overlooks the crucial fact that neo-fascism is already present in the United States intervention in Vietnam, the increasing conservatism of the working class, and the prevalence of the sadomasochistic or authoritarian character in liberal democracies. The status quo contains much of the danger and destructiveness of fascism and defending it means protecting these neo-fascist tendencies. Even after the student movements died out, Marcuse maintained that “bourgeois democracy in its present form marks the stage where only two alternatives seem possible: neo-fascism on a global scale, or transition to socialism” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 165). Marcuse attempts to reconcile the demands to prevent
fascism and for revolutionary change by removing the possibility of maintaining the status quo as a third option and instead leaving only these two paths.

Four decades later, the claim that bourgeois democracy is headed toward either global fascism or socialism appears to be a relic of a previous era. But the fact that fascism and socialism are not recognized as the challenges to democracy that they were during the post-war and Cold War periods does not undermine the validity of Marcuse’s analysis. Marcuse was correct in his assumption about the capacity for democracy to breed conservatism and discourage structural opposition, but he underestimated the capacity of bourgeois democracy to sustain itself through these measures without lapsing into a more extreme form. The power of bourgeois democracy as a political form is derived from its basis in the “monopoly and state capitalist structure,” which poses the real threat to democratic freedom. In the early 1970’s, Marcuse believed that the “liberal institutions” of bourgeois democracy had not yet been completely overcome by (repressive) advanced capitalist structures, hence the possibility for promoting political consciousness through democratic means. Marcuse warned that,

Advanced capitalism is adequately equipped for doing away with these institutions if and when the conflict becomes intolerable, while the Left is still much too weak to transform them into socialist democracy. Overcoming this weakness requires the use of democratic institutions while combating the forces which, within this democracy, make the people themselves the harbinger of conservative, reactionary, and even neo-fascist tendencies (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 178).

The question now is whether or not the institutions that allow for opposition have already been “done away with” and the opportunity for structural challenges through democratic means has passed. The election of Reagan in 1981 marked a new
conservative era in the United States and seemed to affirm Marcuse’s fears that people and institutions have become more regressive and reactionary. If freedom is not determined by the options available to individuals—in this case the candidates, the policies, the reforms—“but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual” than it does appear that freedom in today’s democracy has diminished (Herbert Marcuse 1964, 7). Despite the weakening of the Left since Marcuse’s time, I believe that this weakness can be still overcome through the institutional means that Marcuse advocates. Although threatened through campaign finance, gerrymandering, and other manipulative practices, democratic institutions still provide the opportunity for genuine dissent that could awaken political consciousness enough to spark a movement for radical political transformation. In this way, reform could be the first step toward major structural change.

We are given two models for social change: first, Adorno’s emphasis on the importance of theory that provides a critical framework, but little prospect for action; and second, Marcuse’s urgency of immediate political practice that balances practical necessity with theoretical analysis. Although Marcuse was indebted to Adorno, Horkheimer, and the other Institute members for his theoretical development, only he provided an actionable connection between the Institute’s theory and political practice. Marcuse’s moderate, apparently reformist stance is only a first step—and one of the only possible first steps—toward radical structural change. The depth of the problems of repression, alienation, and inequality under advanced capitalism, manifest in individuals and ideology as well as the economy and social structures, makes an approach that targets education and political consciousness a prerequisite to
addressing the problems at their structural roots. The problem—and the solution—lies in the needs and preferences of individuals who genuinely and legitimately want to support their families, make a living, and receive social recognition; therefore affirming the system that not only provides them with these opportunities (or denies them), but also create the very needs and values that make them want to succeed in these terms. Needs and preferences are not individual in that they arise autonomously or in isolation. They are social needs that require social fulfillment and the status quo will consistently be reaffirmed until these needs are transformed.
Conclusion

People are not as bound to authority as was supposed as recently as some thirty years ago because of their identification with their father imago. What we are witnessing is rather a neutralizing effect resulting from the pressure to conform. This leads to a closing off of the entire horizon of freedom and dependency. Where no freedom is experienced, there can no longer be any authority. The vanishing of this conceptual pair, freedom and authority, is more significant today than the growing apathy. This process of neutralization is what we must be concerned with.


Authority in its most common form is not experienced as oppressive, nor is it challenged as disposable. This is because it is internalized in individuals so that their needs and preferences have been adapted to embrace the authority of the patriarchal family and the ideology of advanced capitalist culture and consumption. The type of authority that I am concerned with is controlling and can become dominating, yet only reveals these tendencies through a Critical Theoretical analysis, not recognition on the part of individuals. It is what Adorno calls in his 1964-65 lectures on “History and Freedom” a “neutralization” of traditional concepts of oppressive external authority and its antithesis, freedom: this type of authority acts in new, more subtle ways. It is the authority of Apple products, HBO series, and other forms of standardized mass culture in addition to the heterosexual, religiously affiliated, male American presidency that provide the material for the Frankfurt School’s critique of authority. These authorities have become reified realities that narrow identity-roles and reduce the subjective capacities for spontaneity and critical thought. Perhaps more importantly, the desire for these opportunities has also diminished, so that people
truly believe in the freedom to choose their own jobs, beliefs, and identities, a freedom that is in truth only a choice between alternatives.

According to the Frankfurt School’s critique of advanced capitalism, globalization does not increase diversity and plurality, but expands the reach and adaptability of the restrictive capitalist authority that dictates the global market. As Marcuse says, “There is no longer anything ‘outside capitalism.’ Even the socialist and Communist systems are linked with capitalism today, come what may, in a world system’ (Herbert Marcuse 2001b, 66). As we have seen, this capitalism is so much more than an economic system: it shapes the way we think about objects and subjects as commodities, the way we view family structures, society, and politics as reified rather than under our control, and the way that we display our identities through TV shows, iPhone colors and sweatshirts with “Wesleyan” stamped proudly on the front. There has never been an atomistic individual, but there are certainly degrees to which the individual can act spontaneously and creatively in society. Are the choices that we are given under advanced capitalism truly freedom and do we have the power to define our own identities, or is this a pseudo-freedom and our identities pseudo-identities?

Why is the Frankfurt School concerned with the authority of the patriarchal father in the working class family and the political leader who orders yet another neo-imperialist invasion? Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm, and Marcuse’s critiques extend beyond the immediate historical threat of fascism, which accounts for their continued relevance. The problem that these authorities pose—and the defining characteristic of authority under advanced capitalism in its liberal democratic and fascist forms—is
that this authority is internalized in individuals, so that we accept it as normal (because it is) and embrace it more often than we challenge it. We reproduce it in our own relationships when we skeptically greet a stay-at-home dad or enthusiastically campaign for Barack Obama without seriously considering if there are any alternatives. The opportunity to vote and the social and economic benefits of marriage cannot rightfully be withheld from anyone, as they bring immediate benefits. But the extension of oppressive institutions to include a larger group does not alter the inherent oppressiveness of a political system controlled by powerful economic interests or the priority of the economically beneficial consumer-unit of the monogamous bourgeois family. Can this be accurately called freedom? The significance of the Frankfurt School’s attempt to understand and critique how authority functions and gains its strength under advanced capitalism boils down to the question of freedom, or rather unfreedom. How does and can authority both prevent and facilitate freedom and what concepts of freedom do the members of the Frankfurt School hold?

In Adorno’s 1963 lectures on Problems of Moral Philosophy, he captures the essence of the Frankfurt School’s approach to social critique:

We may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity—but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed. I would say that the place of moral philosophy today lies more in the concrete denunciation of the inhuman, than in vague and abstract attempts to situate man in existence (T. Adorno 2000, 175).

Similarly to Marcuse’s emphasis on “liberating hatred” and the refusal to provide a vision of a “concrete utopia” for the student movement, Adorno explains that the potential of social critique lies in identifying the “inhuman” (T. Adorno 2000,
That which is unjust, oppressive, and destructive can and should be critiqued and challenged, rather than wasting time on the “vague and abstract attempts to situate man in existence.” Aside from the impossibility of defining an ahistorical concept of the “the human or humanity” due to ever-changing social and cultural conditions, we can think and act much more tangibly through “the concrete denunciation of the inhuman.” Herein lies the fruitfulness of the Frankfurt School’s theoretical, empirical, and political challenge to the oppressive authority of enlightenment identity-thinking and the “culture industry,” prejudiced sadomasochistic tendencies, and “reactionary-conservative society” (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 180). Despite the members’ critical approach and concern with regression and oppression rather than a positive vision of progress and liberation, certain presuppositions of what constitutes freedom underlie their critiques. For Adorno, this is the Kantian idea of Mündigkeit and for Marcuse it is the prospect of a non-repressive society based on Freudian drive theory (T. Adorno and Becker 1999; Herbert Marcuse 1964, 6).

In Adorno’s last radio interview broadcast a week after his death on August 6, 1969, he returns to the Kantian idea of Mündigkeit, or maturity and responsibility that implies the ability to speak for oneself through its relation to the German word mouth [Mund] (Trommler et al. 2004, 321). Adorno begins the interview, titled “Education to Maturity and Responsibility [Mündigkeit]” by discussing Kant’s famous 1784 essay “What is Enlightenment?” in which he introduces the idea of Mündigkeit (Kant 2004). Kant refers to it primarily in its negative form as Unmündigkeit, describing the Enlightenment as the process by which individuals summoned the courage to break
from their habits of unreflective obedience, or *Unmündigkeit*, and exercise reason. Once the structural barriers are removed, as Kant believed they had, the only things preventing the individual from attaining *Mündigkeit* are laziness and cowardice. Kant calls on the individual to “Have courage to use your own understanding!” and employ the uniquely human capacity for reason that is the basis for freedom (Kant 2004, 2).

Adorno sees the individual capacity for reason and self-reflection not only as the capacity that counteracts authority and the basis for greater freedom in society, but also as the best defense against a repetition of the horrors of Nazi genocide, the embodiment of brutality and the most extreme result of *Unmündigkeit*. Although basing both discussions, “Education to Maturity and Responsibility” and his 1966 “Education after Auschwitz” on Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?,” he reframes the concept of *Mündigkeit* in terms of an educational program that deemphasizes the personal responsibility in Kant’s statement, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity [*Unmündigkeit*]” (Kant 2004, 2). Instead, he identifies the social and cultural causes of *Unmündigkeit*, transferring the primary responsibility for *Unmündigkeit* from the individual to society and social conditioning. This reflects Adorno’s conceptualization of the individual in relation to society portrayed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which he and Horkheimer explain that the bourgeois concept of the atomistic individual never existed in reality and what exists now can more accurately be described as a “pseudoindividual” shaped by a confluence of economic, social, and cultural factors (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988, 163). *Dialectic of Enlightenment* deals with the simultaneous regression and progress of enlightenment thought in order to highlight its oppressive and liberating features.
Nevertheless, Adorno is interested in the individual’s ability to reason and demonstrates again in his response to the student movement that Mündigkeit is the most promising way of combating unfreedom. This interpretation of the social role in promoting Mündigkeit underscores the importance of education and socialization in shaping individual behavior.

Marcuse agrees to the extent that he proposes educational and organizational means similar to Adorno’s in “Education after Auschwitz” as a first step, but he demands a more radical change in the instinctual structures of individuals and the introduction of morality into politics and social discourse (Herbert Marcuse 2001a). Marcuse’s primary concern is with authority structures such as the patriarchal bourgeois family and the destructive American political system and culture of false sexual liberation in as much as they suppressed the sex and death drives. The non-repressive expression of these drives was a central aspect of liberation in Marcuse’s eyes. Political action should be directed against the powerful institutions such as the imperialistic United States government, the oppressive German police that stifle student opposition, and the economic superpowers that control what we consume. In contrast to Adorno, who appeals to reason and Mündigkeit, Marcuse argues that “humanitarian and moral arguments are not merely deceitful ideology. Rather, they can and must become central social forces” (Herbert Marcuse 2001b, 67). Marcuse rejects the limitations put on public discourse that include value judgments based on production, efficiency and expansion that are under the guise of objectivity, but only serve to further the power of those who already have it. Instead, he calls for an
expansion of “humanitarian and moral arguments” that takes control of politics and society through a more deliberate and consensual intentionality.

Marcuse charges advanced capitalist society with the perpetuation of “repressive tolerance.” This is the tolerance that is used to protect the interests of power-holders while suppressing the voices of opposition. Repressive tolerance operates by using tactics such as the neutralization of any radical opinions by publishing them next to the same number of conformist opinions. As Marcuse points out, “The equality is deceptive, for the affirmative, conformist opinion is multiplied and fortified by the whole context,” including the advertisements, front-page highlights, and the predisposition of the readers toward conformist rhetoric (Herbert Marcuse 2001a, 177). In the face of repressive tolerance, intolerance is the only alternative:

…the realization of the objective of tolerance would call for intolerance toward prevailing policies, attitudes, opinions, and the extension of tolerance to policies, attitudes, and opinions which are outlawed or suppressed…what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today, is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression (Repressive tolerance, 81).

“The objective of tolerance” that Marcuse refers to is the elimination of repressive tolerance that reinforces oppression and in its place the establishment of a more equal distribution of power. In order to achieve this, we must refuse to tolerate the imbalanced power structures that define advanced capitalist societies. This includes the capitalist system in which a minority controls the capital and a majority serves the capital and the patriarchal structures in which the dominance of men goes
unchallenged and women and minorities who try to assert themselves are quickly “put back in their place.”

Repressive tolerance is at work on Wesleyan University’s campus today, where fraternity brothers struggle to hold on to their power and even more disturbingly, the majority of the student body rushes to support them. The arguments for abolishing this institutional support of gender inequality are silenced by the defense of “tradition,” “secrets,” and “brotherhood.” How many rapes will have to occur in fraternity houses, how many men will have to be denied membership because of their sexual orientation, how many people will be objectified and dehumanized before the community realizes that “tradition” is not a good in itself? In the case of fraternities, tradition is based on privilege, masculinity, and heteronormativity: tradition becomes synonymous with oppression. As a remnant of Wesleyan’s years as an all male institution, fraternities reinforce the power of the already advantaged at the cost of the safety and well being of the marginalized majority. Tolerance does not mean allowing for fraternities’ continued existence and cannot be compared to the establishment of LGBT or women’s rights, which strive to gain equal recognition for the oppressed. Repressive tolerance in defense of fraternities must be counteracted with the refusal to accept the preservation of power in the name of tradition. It necessitates immediate action to reveal the illegitimacy of the outdated fraternities that undermine our community values of gender equality, inclusivity, and respect. Only then can we achieve the “objective of tolerance” by bringing our institutions in line with truly tolerant and enlightened values.
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