

Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory: A Critical Analysis

Jefrey Breshears

PREFACE

“The Revolution won’t happen with guns, rather it will happen incrementally, year by year, generation by generation. We will gradually infiltrate their educational institutions and their political offices, transforming them slowly into Marxist entities.”

– Max Horkheimer

The Devil’s in the Definitions

The school board in the county where I live in the suburbs of Atlanta recently passed a resolution rejecting the integration of critical race theory (CRT) into the school curriculum. The board is composed of seven members – four Republicans and three Democrats. All the Republicans, who are white, voted to ban CRT. All the Democrats, who are black, supported integrating CRT into the curriculum.

It is, of course, disappointing that the vote broke down not only along partisan lines but also by race. There are, after all, many well-informed and intelligent blacks who regard CRT as racist and divisive propaganda.* Likewise, there are many white liberals and Leftists who passionately support this radical agenda. However, none of those on the school board, either the supporters or the opponents, seemed to have much of an idea what “critical race theory” actually is. During the debate over the issue, one of the Democrat board members asked the Republican chairman about his definition of CRT, noting that “critical race theory can be interpreted a number of ways.” The chairman replied that he didn’t have a definition of the term handy(!), adding: “having not had that question

presented to me in advance, so that I could do a more thorough answer, I’ll just say... it’s a revisionist history.” [“School Board Bans Critical Race Theory.” *Marietta Daily Journal* (June 11, 2021), A1, A10]

Suffice it to say that before we discuss or debate anything with anyone, it is imperative that we have a common understanding of the meaning of key words and terms. This is basic Socratic philosophy 101. But as masters of confusion and deceit, this is precisely what the radical Left and postmodern theoreticians have determined to destroy over the past century: the innate meaning of essential concepts such as “social justice,” “racism,” “sexism,” “equality,” “tolerance,” “marriage” and “gender.” Decades ago, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley emphasized this point in their dystopian novels *Animal Farm, 1984* and *Brave New World*.

Part 1 of this two-part critique of critical theory addresses the origins, the philosophy and the agenda of this insidious concept, while Part 2 focuses specifically on critical race theory. This is vital and essential information that every American – and certainly every Christian – absolutely should know about this divisive and destructive ideology.

* Among the many who could be cited are Clarence Thomas, Sen. Tim Scott, Rep. Byron Donalds, Rep. Burgess Owens, Herman Cain, Allen West, Alan Keyes, Niger Innis, Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, Shelby Steele, Robert Woodson, Ward Connerly, Stephen Carter, Jason Riley, Larry Elder, Deroy Murdock, Leo Terrell, Alveda King, Rev. Voddie Baucham, Candace Owens, Carol Swain, Deneen Borelli, Star Parker, J. C. Watts, Herschel Walker, *et al.*

PART 1: The Origins and Agenda of Critical Theory

Revisionist Marxism

In the midst of World War I, **Vladimir Lenin** (1870-1924) urged leftist elements throughout Europe to “turn the imperialist war into civil war.” Early in 1917 reformist elements in Russia succeeded in overthrowing the corrupt and incompetent tsarist regime and replaced it with a moderate socialist Provisional Government, which in turn was itself toppled later that the year by radical Bolsheviks bent on establishing a Marxist “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

But in fact Lenin’s vision of a great continental-wide proletarian revolution fizzled and flopped as the working classes of Europe never united *en masse* behind the Red banner. Although Communist revolutions sprang up briefly in Hungary and Germany, they were quickly squelched – leaving Russia (the USSR) as the sole Communist state. Classical Marxist theory based on class warfare proved insufficient in terms of rallying the masses of Europe, and in the midst of the post-war intellectual debates in Communist circles various left-wing theorists sought to revise Marxism more in keeping with the realities of the times. It was in this context that critical theory first emerged.



Vladimir Lenin:
“The goal of socialism is communism.”

Antonio Gramsci

In the aftermath of the Great War, one influential Marxist theoretician who came to the forefront was the Italian journalist and political philosopher, **Antonio Gramsci** (1891-1937), a co-founder of the Communist Party of Italy. Gramsci argued that classical Marxism, which focused almost exclusively on economic factors, needed to broaden its scope and refine its strategy. What was really essential was that Communists focus primarily on society’s cultural superstructure rather than its economic substructure.

Although a cultural revolution was a far more comprehensive, complex and ambitious undertaking, in the long term it would prove to be a brilliant and effective strategy for undermining and destabilizing Western civilization. Gramsci was among the first to understand that a “successful” Marxist revolution depended upon infiltrating and subverting key cultural institutions and gradually changing the core values of a society – a process that required a long protracted culture war of attrition.

Traveling to the Soviet Union in 1922 as a representative of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci witnessed the brute force and tyranny involved in trying to force radical socialism on that nation. His conclusion was that Communism was too extreme and too atheistic to be accepted voluntarily in the West. Instead, what was needed was a “quiet” revolution – one that essentially concentrated on reprogramming human nature through social conditioning. As an atheist, Gramsci believed this was attainable because “[T]here is no such thing as ‘human nature’, fixed and immutable.” Rather, as Marx would have put it, “human nature is the sum of historically determined social relationships.”



Gramsci agreed with Marx that economic power was a key factor in human history, but he also was convinced that economics was only one aspect of social

reality. Equally important was ideology – changing people’s beliefs, values, and goals in life. What was needed was a great and comprehensive cultural revolution – a persistent and prolonged indoctrination campaign to undermine people’s confidence in traditional institutions, religious beliefs and moral values. This strategy was all the difference between ideological subversion and violent revolution – or between cultural seduction and cultural rape. This was, in essence, the theory that later would be termed “**neo-Marxism**” or “**cultural Marxism**.”

Gramsci was later imprisoned in Italy, during which time he composed twelve “Prison Notebooks,” a blueprint for the cultural revolution. Gramsci called his working thesis and strategy “**critical theory**” – a systematic and comprehensive assault on the philosophical, moral, religious, and institutional foundations of Western culture. The strategic goal was “cultural hegemony” – i.e., a relentless campaign to seize the “commanding heights” of the culture. In that regard, two obstacles stood in his way to this cultural revolution: (1) capitalistic “bourgeois” values, and (2) Christianity. According to Gramsci, the latter was the main counter-revolutionary force, and it was in this context that he noted: “Socialism is precisely the religion that must overwhelm Christianity.... In the new order, socialism will triumph by first capturing the culture via infiltration of schools, universities, churches and the media by transforming the consciousness of society.”

The Frankfurt School

In 1923 several prominent German Marxists – most notably Félix Weil, György Lukács and Karl Grunberg – founded an adjunct academic institute in Frankfurt, Germany that they named the Institute for Marxism. However, for public relations purposes they soon opted for a more generic and less offensive name: the Institute for Social Research. Since then, the ISR has usually been known simply as “the Frankfurt School.” The Institute’s administrators and faculty were all cultural Marxists, and their model initially was the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow.

From the outset the Frankfurt School promoted a broad interdisciplinary approach to scholarship, attracting notable scholars in economics as well as in philosophy, history, psychology, sociology and other academic areas. Although generically Marxist, there were some philosophical variations and different emphases as various scholars applied Marxist principles to their particular fields of study. Under the directorship of Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), the ISR adopted the Gramsci strategy of “cultural hegemony”. As Horkheimer envisioned it, “The Revolution won’t happen with guns, rather it will happen incrementally, year by year, generation by generation.” Over time, the Left would surreptitiously infiltrate, infest and infect the great pillars of civilization: educational institutions, the legal profession, key political and government positions, the media, the entertainment industries, and other bastions of cultural influence – including liberal (“progressive”) Christianity. Eventually, all of the “commanding heights” of culture would be transformed into “Marxist entities.”

Under Horkheimer’s leadership the ISR scholars sought to synthesize classical Marxism, Social Darwinism and Freudian psychology, and in the process they created the theoretical basis for cultural Marxism – an ingenious ideology that had the potential to radically change Western culture. The Institute’s ideological philosophy was that of “critical theory” – a systematic and comprehensive assault on the philosophical, moral, religious, and institutional foundations of Western culture.

Over the next 30 years the Frankfurt School included several theorists who were particularly notable for their subsequent influence such as the psychoanalysts Wilhelm Reich and Eric Fromm and the social theorists Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, and in effect they laid the groundwork for what we would recognize today as the culture war in Western societies. Although critical theory offered no realistic solutions to any social and cultural problems, it nonetheless proved to be an effective strategy in its critique of the history, philosophy, politics, social and economic structures, major institutions, and religious foundations of Western civilization.



Félix Weil, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno

For both classical Marxists and neo-Marxists, the fundamental factor in all human relationships is the competition for power, and in that regard Marx’s theory of Social Darwinism predated even Darwin himself. Critical theory was based on Marx’s theory of how power functions in society to produce and perpetuate inequality and exploitation. Simplistically, Marx believed that everything was about group identity and explicable in terms of a simple social binary: the “oppressors” and the “oppressed.” For him, this was all about the dominant bourgeois class of the 19th century – wealthy businessmen, bankers, industrialists, and large landowners – and the subordinate proletariat class of factory workers and peasant farmers. The privileged class sustains its superiority through the application of “hegemonic power” as it controls the dominant ideology, the norms, values and traditions by which society functions. The bourgeoisie also controls the “commanding heights” of the economy – those key industries most essential to modern life including manufacturing, communications, transportation, natural resources, energy production, etc. The elite maintain their privileged position and enforce compliance through their influence within a nation’s political, legal and religious systems.

Among the Frankfurt School ideologues, the term “critical theory” was first used in a 1937 essay by Horkheimer entitled “Traditional and Critical Theory.” As a primarily sociological construct, critical theory contends that social conflicts are generated from societal structures and cultural assumptions more than

by individual and psychological factors – or even by philosophy and religion. But of course critical theory is itself a philosophy – or more correctly, an ideology that derives from a secular humanistic philosophy.

The primary target of critical theorists was the Christian-influenced heritage of the West that upheld the sanctity of human life and the inherent value of the individual. Being created in the image of God, individuals have the rational capacity to discern good and evil, the moral responsibility to choose between the two, and the potential to build a more just, equitable and humane society and culture to the extent that they function according to the universal moral and ethical principles of Natural Law. Cultural Marxists understood that until these beliefs were discredited and destroyed, Western societies would never reach the state of hopelessness and alienation that was an essential prerequisite for a socialist revolution. Therefore, a priority of the ISR was to destroy faith and confidence in orthodox Christian beliefs and values – something that both secular and “liberal Christian” intellectuals had been doing ever since the Enlightenment. It is important to note that the driving force behind the Frankfurt School’s research was never impartial scholarship but the aggressive promotion of a radical left-wing socio/political agenda.

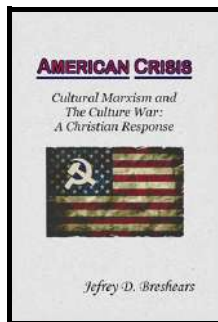
A Shelter from the Storm.

When Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power in Germany in 1933, the Frankfurt School dissolved and its scholars fled to Western Europe, Great Britain and America. It is important to note that none of these individuals headed East and sought sanctuary in the Soviet Union, the only officially Marxist nation at the time. Perhaps they knew something about the true nature of Communism that many naive Western intellectuals chose to ignore?

In previous years the ISR had developed contacts with prominent American leftists – many of whom were associated with Columbia University in New York City. To Horkheimer’s surprise, the ISR was offered official affiliation with Columbia, and with that the ISR reconstituted itself and subsequently became a haven for other left-wing refugee scholars and researchers throughout the 1930s. The great irony, of course, was that while America provided sanctuary for Horkheimer

and his comrades, they in turn were working to undermine the very traditions and democratic institutions that accorded them safety and security. Nonetheless, over the next 20 years the influence of Horkheimer and his colleagues spread throughout elite academia, and by the early 1960s many of their acolytes would become influential leaders in the New Left.

[Note: In Chapter 4 of my book, *American Crisis*, I observe that the influence of the Frankfurt School theorists shouldn't be over-emphasized as they were merely among the first and most influential critics of America's classical liberal and Christian-influenced traditions.]



Critical Theory: The Fundamental Premises.

There are six premises in particular that highlight the distinctives of critical theory.

(1) Identity politics. As previously stated, classical Marxists divided all human societies into two simplistic and stereotypical groups, “oppressors” (the bourgeoisie) and the “oppressed” (the proletariat), based exclusively on socio/economic status. Similarly, contemporary critical theorists classify individuals as oppressors or oppressed according to a more complex matrix including race, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical ability, age, weight, and other factors. It is important to note that “oppression” doesn't necessarily imply overt mistreatment or abuse but rather the application of “hegemonic power” in which the dominant group imposes its norms, values and standards on the rest of society. By enforcing these “hegemonic norms,” the dominant group characterizes others as inferior, abnormal, deviant, etc.

According to critical theory, one's identity as an individual is indivisibly connected to his/her group identity. Human beings are not individuals made in the image of God but merely part of some homogenous herd based on their skin color, gender and sexual orientation. Therefore, critical theory depersonalizes human beings as individuals while perpetuating simplistic group stereotypes. Nothing could be more degrading and dehumanizing. Furthermore, identity

politics conflicts with America's core principles of individual liberty, personal accountability, and equal justice under the law.

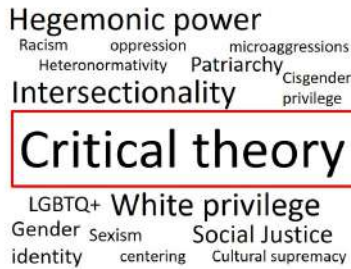
Furthermore, according to critical theorists, moral absolutes are an illusion: nothing in life is “objectively true,” and one's group identity determines one's perceptions of reality. Those who are privileged have a distorted view of reality – after all, they have created and profited from the very social structures that benefit themselves. They may advocate “meritocracy,” but the rules of the game are rigged in their favor. Therefore, according to neo-Marxist “standpoint theory,” only the marginalized and the oppressed can perceive all the injustices in society. This is, of course, illogical: if “moral absolutes are an illusion” and “there is no objective truth,” then the principle would also apply to the dogmas of critical theory itself.

(2) Social determinism. According to critical theory, everything in life is socially determined. Both classical Marxism and critical theory deny human free will and self-determination. But this is obviously self-refuting. If it were true, then the guiding principles of critical theory would themselves be merely a product of the social factors that determine the perspective of the critical theorist him/herself.

(3) Social Darwinism. Everything in life is determined by power relationships, and the driving force in history is the survival of the fittest. For classical Marxists, history was all about the struggle for supremacy over the means of economic production – the principle of **dialectical materialism**. For contemporary critical theorists, power relationships are more diverse and fragmented depending upon one's race, social class, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc. In other words, for neo-Marxists, history is determined by **dialectical group identity**.

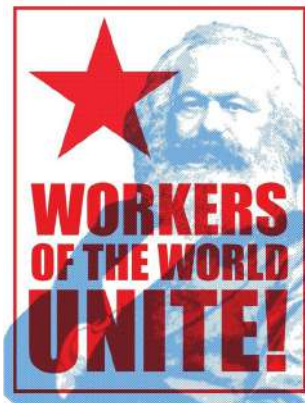
(4) Social conflict. Based on their particular group identity, everyone is either an “oppressor” (as exemplified by white male heterosexual conservative Christians) or a “victim of oppression” (i.e., every other sociological group in society). This is why cultural Marxists so despise America's heritage. For them, social conflict is inevitable, and the only “solution” is a comprehensive culture war that will eventually subjugate all of America's historic oppressors.

(5) **Social disunity.** Classical Marxists believed that the values and agendas of people of different classes are incompatible and adversarial. Likewise, critical theorists propagate the lie that the values and agenda of Christians, conservatives, and white male heterosexuals in general can never be correlated with those of women and minorities – unless the values and agendas of such women and minorities have been co-opted by those of the Oppressor class.



(6) **“Social Justice.”** In classical Marxism, the oppressed proletariat class must rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie in the the cause of “social justice,” and ultimately the only “solution” to social injustice is liberation through revolution. In the Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx put it this way: “Let the ruling classes tremble at the Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.... WORKING MEN OF THE WORLD, UNITE!”

Unlike the violent Revolution that Marx advocated (as exemplified by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia), cultural Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School envisioned a prolonged culture war of attrition in which Leftists would infiltrate and eventually control the “commanding heights” of the culture.



For critical theorists, the liberation of oppressed groups is accomplished through a comprehensive cultural revolution in which Christianity and traditional Western values and traditions are increasingly discredited and marginalized until they are eventually banned from the public square – all under the guise of “social justice.”

Critical Theory and America’s Culture War.

In recent decades critical theory has become a dominant force in the most influential public institutions of American life:

- The education establishment – from academia to elementary school;
- The legal profession;
- The media;
- Corporate America;
- Big Tech;
- The entertainment industry – Hollywood, the music industry, and even professional sports;
- Radical “progressive” politics – as propagated and promoted by the Democratic Party; and
- Liberal (“progressive”) Christianity.

America’s culture war is not an illusion, and those who refuse to acknowledge it are either spiritually and morally blind, egregiously apathetic, or too timid to engage it. Unlike many Christians and conservatives, critical theorists understand that what is at stake today is a culture war between two absolutely incompatible and irreconcilable worldviews. Every area of life from the classroom and the board room to the playing field is a battleground, and left-wing critical theorists are committed to promoting their warped notion of “social justice” by eliminating all forms of perceived “oppression” based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental condition, or socio/economic class. The latest fads and trends in postmodernism, feminism, gender studies, critical race theory and “queer theory” all stem from this insidious concept of critical theory – hence their pathological obsession with “heteronormativity,” “cisgenderism,” “intersectionality,” “white privilege,” “systemic racism,” “micro-aggressions,” “safe spaces” and “wokeness.” Critical theorists see their mission in life to be that of liberating minorities from oppression by the most evil people in American society: white male heterosexual conservative Christians – along with those who have been enculturated by the values of such people.

Postscript: A Critical Connection.

In the early 1920s the Communist theoretician **Leon Trotsky** (1879-1940) had predicted that just as the oppressed proletariat constituted the critical mass of shock troops in a classical Marxist revolution, oppressed blacks could be organized and mobilized to fulfill that role in America. Although this was a stark departure from classical Marxism, Max Horkheimer and his colleagues at the Frankfurt School were quick to realize the potential in such a strategy.

In classical Marxism it was the proletariat, led by a vanguard of elite intellectuals, who would overthrow the old order and usher in the new socialist utopia. But in the 1930s labor unions were negotiating collective bargaining agreements with the managerial class in many industries, and workers were being co-opted by the allure of materialism and the promise of a rising standards of living. As such, the American working class was generally ill-suited for the revolutionary role.

Therefore, neo-Marxist theoreticians no longer felt bound exclusively to the interests of the working classes alone. Instead, they were willing to ally with any and all “progressive” forces, including marginalized and oppressed minority groups, that could be radicalized, organized and mobilized for revolution.

As Horkheimer and his ISR associates settled in America in the 1930s, racial bigotry and discrimination – even “systemic racism” – were institutionalized and pervasive in many parts of the country through “Jim Crow” segregation laws and ordinances. The Frankfurt scholars viewed this as a golden opportunity, and they sought to exploit the situation in their efforts to forge a new revolutionary coalition of victims – i.e., blacks, Jews, and the traditional proletariat classes of factory workers, farmers and menial laborers – along with their sympathizers in academia, the media, and in the Communist Party USA (CPUSA).

The ISR immediately found sympathetic allies among the “New York Intellectuals” – various individuals and groups of left-wing writers, artists, intellectuals and scholars, many of whom were Trotskyite Jews who advocated for socialism, sexual “liberation,” modern art and left-wing folk/protest music. A standing joke among Greenwich Village Communists the 1930s was this fictional exchange

between two Party members discussing an upcoming cell meeting: “You bring the Negro, and I’ll bring the folksinger.”

(Continued in Part 2...)