Critical Theory and the Gospel

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Introduction

While Critical Theory as a school or tradition of thought is not new, it has come to some prominence in recent years. While there are numerous persons and writing with varied perspectives within this school or tradition, it is nonetheless possible to summarize the principles and convictions of Critical Theory in a general way.

This article will first summarize the key tenets of Critical Theory through an engagement with some of the seminal thinkers of Critical Theory. These key thinkers explored here are: Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. These thinkers should provide a representative sample of the writings of Critical Theory.

I argue that if Christians are to respond fully and properly to Critical Theory, such a response must be rooted in a truly Christian biblical-theological framework. Such a Christian response will recognize that Critical Theory is in effect an alternative theology or religion, and that it is helpful to understand Critical Theory as just such an alternative theology or religion.

A truly Christian response to Critical Theory will show that it is not—ironically—critical enough. Christianity truly gets to the heart of the matter and actually is the most truly "critical," in that the Christian message offers a true understanding of reality and what is wrong with the world, and likewise offers the true solution to the myriad challenges, problems, and sufferings experienced and seen in the world.

Critical Theory: A Brief Survey

It is not easy to briefly summarize critical theory. It is a movement or school of thought with a variety of thinkers and themes. Nonetheless, there are general commitments and positions that we can summarize.

All roads lead back to the Institute for Social Research, founded in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany. Hence, this Institute, and its fellow-travelers, are often referred to as the "Frankfurt School." The early Frankfurt School was composed of Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, and Friedrich Pollock. Other associated persons would be the famous psychoanalyst and social psychologist Erich Fromm, Otto Kirchheimer, Henryk Grossman, as well as Walter Benjamin. Second generation persons who are associated with the Frankfurt School would especially include Jürgen Habermas (born in 1929). The school was unapologetically Marxist, though it also felt free to try and advance, critique, and/or adjust the received Marxism of their day. With the rise of Nazism to increasing power, the Institute

for Social Research moved to Geneva in 1934, and to New York City (Columbia University) in 1935.[1] Likewise Critical Theory utilizes many insights from Hegel, and at least some members of this school saw Sigmund Freud's basic paradigm as essential to its work.

Critical Theory was birthed in the aftermath of World War I. It was hoped—by many persons sympathetic to Marxism—that this crisis would precipitate the revolutionary activity for which many Marxists hoped. But such a revolution did not occur after World War I, and this led to something of a crisis for the Critical Theorists in general. Thus, Critical Theory both accepts much of the general Marxist (and Hegelian) paradigm, but is quite happy to re-work, re-think, adjust, extend, and even reject at points, various aspects of the Marxist paradigm. One of the "last" great thinkers of Critical Theory—Jürgen Habermas—has been more explicit about, at least in some senses, moving past Marx.

There are a number of ways one could try to summarize the key themes of critical theory. The movement was (and is) by no means monolithic, and the debates within the movement are not insignificant. In this article it is suggested that the key themes of critical theory can in general be viewed through the lens of traditional Christian insights and themes. That is, it will be argued that what critical theory offers is—in its own way—a kind of alternative theology or religious vision of the world. The various themes of critical theory can be seen or understood as themes, convictions, insights, hunches that all in various ways can be related to traditional Christian themes or doctrines. My contention is that when we read the critical theorists we can see in their various convictions and arguments and theories a kind of echo of various Christian themes—even if in critical theory they are often distorted, twisted, and rejected. But because critical theorists are nonetheless creatures living in God's world and on God's terms, their various themes and arguments can be rightly understood through the prism of key Christian themes and truths—even when the arguments, themes, and convictions of critical theory run radically counter to fundamental Christian truth claims. For organizational purposes I will group the various insights of critical theory into three broad categories:

(1) Creation and Reality

(2) Sin and Its Effects

(3) History, Redemption, and Eschatology

The Theology of Critical Theory

Creation and Reality

Let us turn to Herbert Marcuse, particularly his, "From Ontology to Technology: Fundamental Tendencies of Industrial Society."[2] Marcuse, in a fascinating way, traces the birth of modern

science and its entailments. We will not recount the narrative here, as much of it is *fairly* non-controversial: the modern world saw a shift from seeing a *telos*built into the very structures of reality, and as even guiding history, to a situation where there is no *telos* whatsoever as constitutive of reality; the world comes to be seen in primarily mathematical categories; technology becomes virtually ubiquitous.

Suffice it to say that For Marcuse, the rise of *science* and its ally *technology* is then linked to the rise of *capitalism*. So, we should not be surprised that as Marcuse and other Critical Theorists talk about "liberation" and the like, this entails the "liberation" from Capitalism, and from societies which create and perpetuate Capitalism.

For Marcuse, there are certain key "goods" with which persons ought to be concerned. These true goods, which should be at the heart of things are: "the abolition of anxiety, the pacification of life, and enjoyment." These are all "essential needs."[3] And at the birth of modern science, there was a recognition of the importance and true goodness of these "goods." There are also additional realities (whether good or not) which Marcuse considers "intrinsic to the very notion of modern science." These are "world harmony," "physical laws," and even of "the mathematical God," which/whom Marcuse calls "the highest idea of universal quality throughout all inequality!"[4] But, according to Marcuse, what has *in fact* happened? The good things just mentioned, which were goals or even motivating factors for modern science have all been abandoned or marginalized. In short, the goods of "the abolition of anxiety, the pacification of life, and enjoyment" in a way helped birth modern science (and the Enlightenment and modernity and industrial society), but then modern science betrayed and turned on these key "goods." Marcuse explains: "Industrial society clearly developed a notion of technology which undercuts its inherent character."[5] That is: Industrial society or modern science turned on those principles—those goods—which were at the heart of the very project of industrial society or modern science itself. To summarize, Marcuse writes: "pure instrumentality [an aspect of modern science and technology] deprived of its ultimate purpose, has become universal means for *domination*."[6]

We begin to get a real glimpse of Marcuse's ontology or metaphysic, and his anthropology, as we read on. Marcuse proceeds to write that *civilization* itself is foreign to, and hostile to, the nature of man. And bound up with *civilization* is *work*. Marcuse seems to assume that without *civilization* and *work*, man could meet his deepest needs and be happy and satisfied. Here we see most likely the Marxist-inspired utopianism, in which in some mysterious way, food will be supplied, shelter will be found, and safety from crime will just somehow be present.

He can write: "Civilization is man's subjugation to work"—*and this is inherently a bad thing*.[7] And Marcuse's anthropology is explicit in the following: "The primary instincts of man naturally tend to immediate satiation and to rest, to tranquility through this appeasement; *they oppose themselves to the necessity of work and labor* and to the indispensable conditions of satisfaction in a world ruled by starvation and the insufficiency of goods."[8] Indeed, "society" is intrinsically hostile to the good of the individual. As Marcuse writes: "Society therefore must turn the instincts away from their immediate goal and subjugate them to the 'reality principle,' [i.e., the necessity of work?] which is the very principle of repression."[9]

But as Marcuse develops this line of thought—the repressive nature of society itself—things take a dark and odd turn. What happens to people—as they live in society—is that the instincts of persons change, and they in a sense embrace and accept repression. As Marcuse writes: "Their instincts become repressive; they are the biological and mental bases which sustain and perpetuate political and social repression."[10] That is: persons (in the sense of their instincts) embrace and perpetuate the political and social repression which is a natural corollary of society and work itself. Indeed: "All progress, all growth of productivity, is accompanied by a progressive repression and a productive destruction."[11] As this gets worked out: Society and work—especially in a capitalist mode—is *by its very nature*—inextricably linked to, and entails: (1) "progressive repression" and (2) "productive destruction."

We will return to Marcuse below when we reflect more explicitly on the various ways Critical Theory can speak of redemption, deliverance, utopia, and the future—generally in a revolutionary way. But for now, let us turn to how Critical Theory understands the human dilemma, what Christian theology has traditionally spoken of as centered around sin.

Sin and Its Effects

If one has read much of 20th century philosophy, social theory, and social critique, one sees a fairly typical pattern: a hunger and yearning to make sense of the times, and in a sense to ask a basic question: What has gone wrong? How did we get here? Or, what makes the modern world the modern world? While the exponents of critical theory which we are examining are generally Marxist and fellow-travelers of Marxists, one also clearly sees this pattern with the emergence of mid-twentieth century Conservatism. We could get off-script here, but I am thinking of the seminal work of Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*. Weaver, writing this book in 1948—three years after World War II—was asking key questions: In the light of two world wars, how did the modern world become what it has become, and is there any way forward out of the myriad political, social, and moral pathologies? In an intriguing way, the exponents of

critical theory are posing very similar questions—though differing significantly from the general paradigm offered by someone like Richard Weaver.

Let us turn to an important essay by Theodor W. Adorno, "Society." We are placing Adorno's reflections on "society" in this section on "Sin, Atonement, Redemption, Sanctification, and Holiness," for here we glean insights on how at least Adorno thought of man as a social creature—but man as a *social* creature is *already* in a kind of system which is—in Christian theological terms—"sinful," such that man is in need of liberation. As Adorno works through his understanding of society, it is clear that the chief culprit that plagues society today is "the market system."[12] He writes: "the abstraction implicit in the market system represents the domination of the general over the particular, of society over its captive membership."[13] Likewise: "Behind the reduction of men to agents and bearers of exchange value [i.e., capitalism] lies the domination of men over men."[14] In short, at least *one* of man's fundamental problems, if not *the* fundamental problems is a societal set of relationships in which something like "the market system" prevails. Something like socialism does not yet—on Adorno's view—promise to clear the deck of all societal problems, frictions, "oppressions," etc. But clearly, the societal reality which most concerns Adorno is that society in which "the market system" is generally prevalent. But we learn that Adorno seems to see virtually *all* societies as plagued by market realities. He can write of "the universal law of the market system."[15]

Society, for Adorno, never—it seems—encourages right thinking, living, or "consciousness." Rather, "society increasingly controls *the very form of consciousness itself*."[16] That is, "society"—and again essentially capitalism is in view here—actually conditions the very way we think of our own societal situation. Thus, one can *think* that making a middle-class income teaching at the local school, or pastoring a local church, or working in the local factory, etc., is leading a good life. But in reality, one has been *conditioned* to think in that way. One is *actually* oppressed and downtrodden—due to having to live out one's life in a market economy. Thus, the oppressed and downtrodden may live one's entire life in that situation, and never know it. We will return to this theme in our "Reflections" section.

One of Herbert Marcuse' key books is his 1955 *Eros and Civilization*, subtitled, *A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*.[17] His thesis in *Eros and Civilization* is quite clear. Every effort must be made to liberate persons from anything that will inhibit erotic pleasure. Marcuse speaks positively of "Polymorphous sexuality," and writes: "the new direction of progress would depend completely on the opportunity to activate repressed or arrested *organic*, biological needs: to make the human body an instrument of pleasure rather than labor."[18] In short,

Marcuse is arguing that the forces and reality of the "market economy" (i.e., capitalism) mitigate *against* erotic satisfaction. He writes: "the erotic energy of the Life Instincts cannot be freed under the dehumanizing conditions of profitable affluence."[19]

Marcuse takes for granted "Freud's proposition that civilization is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts . . ."[20] Indeed: "Free gratification of man's instinctual needs is incompatible with civilized society: renunciation and delay in satisfaction are the prerequisites of progress."[21] And again: "The methodological sacrifice of libido, its rigidly enforced deflection to socially useful activities and expressions, *is* culture."[22] Hence, *culture* i s the culprit, for culture *by its very existence* hampers or impedes the "free gratification of man's instinctual needs."

Marcuse summarizes Freud. There exists both a "Pleasure Principle" and a "Reality Principle." The Pleasure Principle is just that—man is driven to various forms of pleasure, including (or especially) sexual pleasure. The Reality Principle is that in any given society there are a number of barriers which keep persons from seeking to fulfill the Pleasure Principle. These two principles are—in fact—in fundamental conflict.[23]Like other Critical Theorists, "society" or "civilization" mitigates *against* true human freedom. As Marcuse writes: "The replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle is the great traumatic event in the development of man . . ."[24]

In summarizing Freud, Marcuse does not hesitate to speak in architectonic terms of this struggle between the "Pleasure Principle" and the "Reality Principle." As Marcuse writes: "Freud considers the 'primordial struggle for existence' as 'eternal' and therefore believes that the pleasure principle and the reality principle are 'eternally' antagonistic. In short, we have *something like* an older metaphysical and moral dualism. We have something like the old Manichean dualism between good and evil, but transposed into different categories: the "eternal" struggle between (1) the provenance of true freedom, which is sexual—the *Pleasure* Principle, and (2) that which constrains and leads to repression of one's desire—the *Reality* Principle.

And the clash between these two principles is—again—spoken of in terms of revolutionary liberation. Psychoanalysis can help recover the deep repression which both the individual has done to himself, and which the larger culture—also shaped by the Reality Principle—has inculcated. But what happens as someone who is seeking psychoanalysis to come to terms with their sadness, or depression, or anxiety, or anger—or whatever it might be—starts to discover these deep repressed desires, desires which flow from the Pleasure Principle? The recovered, repressed desires "must eventually shatter the framework in which they were made and confined" [vis-à-vis the Reality

Principle].[25] What happens: "The liberation of the past does not end in its reconciliation with the present. Against the self-imposed restraint of the discoverer,[26] the orientation on the past tends toward an orientation on the future."[27] Indeed: "The discovery of lost time becomes the vehicle of future liberation."[28]

So, Critical Theory offers its own understanding of sin and the human dilemma. It has gnostic and dualistic (even Manichean) overtones, since the problem of man appears to have always been in existence. There is no pre-fall realm from which man has fallen. Further, community or civilization is *by its very nature* oppressive and mitigates against true freedom. Let us turn to what Critical Theory tends to say about history, the future, and even the nature of eschatology. In this last section we will even get a sense of Critical Theory's understanding of redemption.

History, Redemption, and Eschatology

There are a number of points where Critical Theory addresses the future, or a future hope, or redemption, or some kind of eschatological goal it is seeking in history. *Generally*, when it is looking ahead, to that to which it aspires, it speaks in some kind of utopian or even revolutionary terms. Let us return to Herbert Marcuse's essay, "From Ontology to Technology."

Marcuse laments that what he calls "the technological project" should have eventually "annulled" itself. As Marcuse writes: "the necessity for domination was supposed to disappear."[29] As a professing Marxist, we are clearly in Marxist territory here with Marcuse. There is need for centralized power—which is centered in and flows from the revolution—to exist. But it will fade away once the revolution has accomplished its goal of destroying the capitalist order, and once the subsequent centralized state has accomplished its goals. We get a sense of the not-so-subtle dystopianism when we read Marcuse's lament that "the technological project" or "technicity" did not indeed fade away. What *should* have resulted is as follows: "The triumph over misery and the insufficiency of goods should have made it possible to 'abolish labor,' to put productivity to the service of consumption, and to abandon the struggle of existence in order to enjoy existence."[30]

But it is worse on Marcuse's reading. The "domination and destruction" of the technological project continues. Indeed, "domination and destruction themselves become the conditions of progress."[31] That is, "domination and destruction" became—as Marcuse saw it—the warp and woof of twentieth-century society, very much a *technology*-centered and driven and shaped society. Marcuse goes on to write that "individuals perpetuate their own domination."[32] That is, he *seems* to be saying that 20th century man perpetuates a system in which man *himself* is *being dominated*. Thus,

persons perpetuate a technological society in which persons *themselves* are being dominated.

And *here*—at the end of this essay—is where Marcuse finally gets to his own solution to this technological dilemma. The answer is revolution. Marcuse writes: "all liberation presupposes a revolution, an upheaval in the order of instincts and needs: a new reality principle."[33] Marcuse then writes: "This total transvaluation of values would affect the being of nature as well as the being of man."[34] It is not wholly inaccurate to see this "total transvaluation of values" as a kind of *rebirth* of both *man* and *nature*—albeit a rebirth quite different from the rebirth of biblical faith.

We complete this section on history, the future, and the nature of eschatology by looking at a seminal essay by Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."[35]This is a provocative essay, essentially twenty separate theses or paragraphs (not un-reminiscent of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, in the sense of an almost stream-of-consciousness flow of thought). The bogeyman of the essay seems clearly to be historical materialism—the notion that matter is all there is, and the history "marches" (without meaningful human agency?) to its end. We might think we have some true kind of freedom or agency, but really this "historical materialism" wins all the time, something which Benjamin laments.[36]

For Benjamin the kind of happiness we experience is inextricably bound to our own particular human circumstances and human situatedness. This—in one sense—is almost self-evident, but there is a dark and somewhat depressing way that Benjamin construes our situatedness, as we shall see.

Benjamin provocatively speaks of our happiness as being bound up with *redemption*. He writes: "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of *redemption*."[37]And: "The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to *redemption*."[38]He continues, in almost a cryptic way: "There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of this."[39]

It is striking how this notion of redemption and Messiah shows up in this essay. Benjamin continues with the same theme: "only a *redeemed* mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is *Judgment Day*."[40]

It is hard to know exactly what to do with Benjamin's images of redemption, Messiah, and judgment day. This

may *simply* be a kind of rhetorical flourish. But I will try and suggest that this imagery—at one level—more likely reflects an image-bearer stumbling upon central Christian truth claims and realities, even if one never ultimately accepts these truth claims and realities.

Indeed, we are likely forced to conclude that Benjamin is engaging in a kind of *mockery* and *denigration* and *perversio n* of Christian imagery. Thus, as his essay proceeds, Benjamin speaks of the various realities which threaten mankind, and the kind of redemption necessary to rescue persons from this threat. This threat is pictured in terms of Marxist class struggle. Thus, it seems that language of redemption, messiah, and judgment are being re-worked or "transvalued" into Marxist categories. Thus, Benjamin writes: "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist."[41]

As Benjamin proceeds his own (presumably) philosophy of history emerges quite clearly. The victors write the history, and this written history will always favor the victor. This may be generally true, of course. He writes: "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate."[42] Benjamin continues: "According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession."[43] Again, this may be generally true. But then Benjamin writes: "For *without exception* the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror."[44] What kind of philosophy of history is emerging here? If the Whig view of history interprets the past and says that what happened is good—the past occurred as it did because things *ought* to have happened that way, Benjamin seems to be saying that *all past history* has been the victory of *folks, powers, institutions which should not have been victorious*. But this general thesis is asserted, and not really explained.[45] In short, Benjamin seems to view the historical past as *simply* or *only* the victory of "barbarism."[46]

This is of course fundamentally a non-Christian understanding of history. The Christian is *quite* free to draw attention to the many and variegated examples of sin in the world, the way man's sinfulness has wreaked havoc in the world since the garden, and the many ways in which man's sin has caused, contributed to, and exacerbated human suffering. But what the Christian *cannot* do is picture *all* history that way. Can a Christian really look at the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus as just one more example of the victory of barbarism in human history? Of course, there is no subtle irony here, for almost assuredly the evil one—and various Jewish and Roman authorities—*were* engaged in a kind of barbarism when they put the Lord Jesus to death. But Christians know the fuller story.

The "subduing" of the anti-Christ (which appears to be primarily understood as economic forces), is ultimately portrayed in revolutionary terms. And for Benjamin this revolutionary moment is shot through with Messianic hope and overtones. For Benjamin a "historical materialist" [which seems to be Marxism in Benjamin's preferred sense] "approaches a historical subject only where he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."[47] The present for Benjamin is "a model of Messianic time."[48] Rather than think or work in "historicist" terms (where one identifies many causal links in a kind of chain from past to present), we should think or work in terms of "Messianic time"—for in this construal there is a real hope of meaningful revolution which can set all things right: "[the non-historicist historical] establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time."[49] Indeed, in this (for Benjamin) preferred way of thinking "every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter."[50] We will reflect on how to respond to Benjamin's provocative essay in the reflections section below.

Theological Reflections

Critical Theory and Reality

Christian readers and interpreters of Critical Theory will likely be struck by the passion and desire of many of these writers to grasp what has gone wrong with Western society. For example, in their seminal work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (originally published in 1947, though distributed in a more informal way in 1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno could explain the impetus and goal of this work as follows: "What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism."[51] As noted above, this kind of sentiment appears *at almost the same time*—the mid twentieth-century, directly, after World War II, in the writings of someone like Richard M. Weaver. Thus, for example, Weaver writes: "This is another book about the dissolution of the West."[52] Indeed: "[This] book was intended as a challenge to forces that threaten the foundations of civilization . . ."[53]

It is something of a challenge to remark upon Critical Theory's understanding of the nature of reality without *also* speaking of Critical Theory's understanding of the human dilemma. The reason for this is straightforward. Critical Theory does not posit any sort of pre-fallen era which *then* becomes fallen or sinful. That is, there is no pre-sin realm or era, as Christian theology has traditionally asserted. Thus, to explain or explore Critical Theory's understanding of the nature of reality *is* to explain the various challenges, problems, difficulties that face mankind. As noted below, this means that for Critical Theory there can be something

like a Manichean tendency. That is, there is a tendency to see reality as *inherently* problematic, or *essentially* problematic. Nonetheless, we will tryto *first* offer a theological analysis of Critical Theory's understanding of the nature of reality, and *then* shift in the second section of these theological reflections to focus more on what Christian theology calls sin.

We saw, especially in Theodor Adorno's "Society," a kind of aversion towards, and even hostility towards the reality of "society" (and in Marcuse an aversion towards "work" as something inherently repressive and destructive). Do we see a similar concern as expressed by Jean Paul Sartre, when he could say that "hell is other people"? On a theological level the frustration, nervousness, skepticism, and hostility toward "society" might be what emerges when one (1) notices or recognizes the pain, unfairness, awkwardness which exists in so many social relations; but (2) does not have an understanding of the goodness of creation and this good, created order combined with the reality that sin has tainted, corrupted, and marred this world and life in this world. In short, Critical Theory does not have a larger theological framework of creation—fall—redemption—consummation against which to interpret and make sense of life in the world.

The doctrine of sin helps the Christian to realize that life is not heaven yet, and it is understandable—if nonetheless tragic—that much of our current existence is lived behind our own veil of tears, as we await the face-to-face vision Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 13:12.

It is intriguing that Critical Theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer lamented the "dialectic of Enlightenment"—the idea that the Enlightenment, which *began* ostensibly as an attempt to liberate persons and provide for the well-being of persons, actually ended up becoming (ostensibly) a tool of oppression and subjugation. What is intriguing is that the Critical Theorists—at least at some level—are still working with a commitment to the centrality and primacy of the individual. Persons like Marcuse will focus on the *sexual desire and pleasure* of the individual, but all or most of the Critical Theorists place the individual at the center of things. In *that* sense the Critical Theorists are working in the key modes of the Enlightenment: the centrality of the individual.

In the course of redemptive history, we learn that other civilizational entities are good and proper. For example, the family—ultimately a pre-fall reality—is not *hostile* to truly being human. Ephesians 6:1-4 reads:

> Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Fathers, do not provoke your

children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Children here are told to obey parents "in the Lord" (v. 1). Paul quotes the fifth commandment, reminding his readers that there is a covenantal *blessing* which attaches to obeying parents (vv. 2-3). Fathers are indeed commanded to raise children in the "discipline" (παιδείᾳ) and "correction" (νουθεσίᾳ) of the Lord. Children then, in part through godly parents, are being shaped—under God—into being the persons they ought to be. There is a "paideia" of the Lord, into which parents (here explicitly Fathers) are commanded to lead children.

The most obvious example of civilization/community in Scripture, after the family, would of course be the Church itself—"a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). The Church is of course that institution, and is at the heart of redemptive history. Rather than the Church being an institution which harms or hampers or mitigates *against* being most fully human, the Church is that institution in which, and through which, and in relationship to which persons can truly become the person they ought to become. Indeed, it is the "plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" that "through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:9-10).

In short, while Adorno can say "society increasingly controls *the very form of consciousness itself*,"[54] the Christian can say that certainly "society" (here think of the family) *is*—by God's command through Paul—to "condition" persons within a family. Fathers are to "condition" (raise?) children, and do so by inducting them into a certain reality—the *paideia* of the Lord. To push this further, we should say that *all* fathers induct or "condition"—to some degree—their children.
The *real* question is simply: In what way and into which culture is a father training his children?

It would seem that Critical Theory—by seeing "society"
as *fundamentally* and *essentially* hostile to human well-being is working with an anthropology wherein what is most important is the solitary individual and his or her desires and will (and for Marcuse this is fundamentally sexual desire). The Critical Theorists, although lamenting and even despairing the Enlightenment, are still staunchly committed to at least one Enlightenment principle: the virtually unchallengeable place and sovereign role of the isolated individual.

Critical Theory was and is right to look at the world and say, "Something is not right here." Traditional Christianity asserts that there was indeed once an Edenic era, a pre-fall era. Sin has disrupted this, and now all persons come into the world in what is *now* a post-fall era. Christianity therefore posits a radical and necessary disjunction between these two eras or moments of history: That era which precedes the fall, and that era (our own)

which comes after the fall. Like every philosophy or theology which denies this key assertion, Critical Theory must cast around for explanations for our current dilemma, but excludes in principle the Christian understanding of these two eras in history. But there is a deeper problem, which we will explore in the next theme.

Rather than seeing civilization as *inherently* hostile to human well-being, the Christian faith posits a pre-fall era, in which "civilization" (the union of the first human pair) as a good thing, and this union of man and woman is pictured—at least in Genesis 1—as a part of the created order as created by God. It is no surprise when we see present-day heirs of critical theory expressing clear contempt for the traditional family. Indeed, another Critical Theorist, Theodor Adorno, in his (and other editors) *The Authoritarian Personality*, considered support for the traditional family as one of the markers of being a "fascist."[55]

Critical Theory and Sin

As we noted above, it is somewhat difficult strictly to differentiate (1) Critical Theory's understanding of *the nature of reality* from (2) Critical Theory's understanding of *the human dilemma or sin*. Nonetheless, in this section we reflect on Critical Theory's understanding of the human dilemma, or sin.

We noted a tendency, especially in Theodor Adorno's essay "Society." That is, one can spend one's entire life apparently happy, making a middle-class income, etc., and never realize that one has been *conditioned* to think one is happy and generally free, while one is *actually* oppressed and downtrodden by the market system in which one has lived one's life. Now, on the one hand—and dealing at the level of abstraction or generality—it is *of course* the case that one can be radically self-deceived. Indeed, Jeremiah 17:9 can speak of the heart as "deceitful above all things." And in the story of Saul and the Amalekites, in 1 Samuel 15, Saul's frankly bizarre dialog with Samuel—when Samuel confronts Saul after failing to follow God's command to wipe out the Amalekites—can only (almost *only* [?]) be read as an exercise in self-deception.

But perhaps the key example of self-deception in the Bible is in Romans 1, where Paul can argue that all persons know God. What can be known about God "*is plain* to them"; God "*has shown it* to them"; even God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, *have been clearly perceived*"; "they *knew* God". But in their suppression of this knowledge "they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." Thus, *self-deception* is a reality and category the Christian can and should affirm, *but it must be construed, understood, and conceptualized* within an overarching biblical-theological framework which will ultimately take into consideration a biblical theology of God, man, sin, person and work of Christ,

redemption, soteriology, church, and last things.

But, Critical Theory's conception of self-deception seems to misfire at a number of points. The heart—it seems—of man's problem is that he is conditioned by "society" or "the market system." There is certainly an anthropology at work here. It seems that man is the innocent creature, caught in a conditioning world in relationship to which he seems to have virtually no ability to exercise any true agency. Is this a kind of Manichaean world in which reality is virtually *by nature* evil, and over which man has no real redemptive solution—besides revolution? In an odd way, man seems absolved of any responsibility for his current dilemma. Man may play a role in the regenerative work of revolution, but man—in a kind of hyper-Pelagianism sense—seems to bear no real responsibility for his dire situation. While the Christian is quite happy to affirm a notion of "self-deception," the conceptual framework within which Critical Theory construes "self-deception" or being conditioned must be ultimately rejected as deficient. Why is this? Because on a Christian understanding man has plunged *himself* into misery. Yes, there can be—on a Christian understanding—forces arrayed against us, forces both in the heavenlies (Ephesians 3 and 6) as well as more mundane, earthy forces. But the *heart* of the dilemma, on a Christian understanding, is that man—both our representative head Adam, and each and every one of us—has placed *himself* in his dire situation.

Perhaps the key weakness with Critical Theory's understanding of the human dilemma—on Christian terms—is that it misses the heart of the matter. When one reads the literature of Critical Theory, man seems to be a cog in a world which is way beyond his control. That is, man is—in one sense—simply an "innocent" creature caught in a world of political and cultural and economic forces. Thus, for example, it is "market forces" or the like that is corrupting man or controlling man. Those things *out there* are making one's life miserable. And again, of course it is *partially* true—in a Christian analysis and understanding of culture—to note that there are *all sorts of forces* arrayed against persons in this life. But what seems to be completely absent within critical theory is the notion that the *real* problem lies deep within each and every human heart.

One is reminded of G.K. Chesterton's quip when a newspaper in London ran a series of guest editorials, asking the guest editors to respond to the question, "What is Wrong With the World?" Chesterton's answer was short and to the point: "Dear Editors. I am." And this was the point of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 1978 commencement address at Harvard University, where Solzhenitsyn argued that the real problem of Western culture in the modern world runs right through the middle of every human heart. Thus, while Critical Theory seeks to be "critical," it is

ironic that in the end it is not really critical *enough*.

Critical Theory, Redemption and Eschatology

As we saw above, it is intriguing how often Critical Theory makes recourse to language of redemption, and even does so with eschatological overtones or imagery or language. We saw this above, especially in the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin could write:

> "Our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of *redemption*."[56]

> "The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to *redemption*."[57]

> "There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of this."[58]

As Stephen Eric Bronner writes concerning Walter Benjamin: "the revolution becomes an apocalyptic 'leap into the open skies of history.'"[59] Bronner could also write: "New forms of redemption may still exist for the neglected utopian shards that have been littered throughout history."[60]

The use of Christian imagery, including redemptive imagery, by non-Christian, and especially revolutionary groups is not uncommon, and not unique to Critical Theorists. As James Billington recounts in his history of revolutions, the various strands of the French Revolution used explicit Christian imagery—at times perverting them in sordid ways—to describe their various revolutionary acts. For example, Count Mirabeau, who was at one time a French ambassador in Berlin, and an early leader in the French Revolution, appears to have popularized the phrase, "revolution of the mind." He also explicitly uses religious imagery to describe the French Revolution. Billington writes:

> The purpose of the Estates-General[61] was not to reform but 'to regenerate' the nation. He subsequently called the National Assembly 'the inviolable priesthood of national policy," the Declaration of the Rights of man 'a political gospel," and the Constitution of 1791 a new religion 'for which the people are prepared to die.'[62]

I am suggesting in this essay that Critical Theory *also* failed to recognize that its *own* system of thought was—ultimately—a kind of religious scheme, though parasitic on fundamental Christian realities, principles, doctrines, and concepts. This is especially clear when we reflect upon Critical Theory's use of redemptive and messianic themes, and its call for a revolutionary redemption.[63]

Critical Theory is most certainly *not* wrong to think in redemptive

and eschatological terms. Besides Walter Benjamin, this revolutionary thrust was explicit in Herbert Marcuse as well. Marcuse was right, in a sense, in recognizing that "a new reality principle" (Marcuse's language) is needed. The Christian faith asserts that the gospel which Christians proclaim calls very much for a *new birth* or a *new creation*. This new birth or new creation is that which man most truly needs. But this new birth or new creation is of course more radical than Critical Theory realizes, or calls for. The new birth and new creation at the heart of the Christian gospel is indeed a rebirth, but it is a rebirth which requires death and resurrection. It requires that the power used or needed to create the world (2 Cor. 4:4-6) is the exact power necessary to re-create a person. While Critical Theory calls for "a new reality principle" which ultimately requires death (simply a part of revolution), the Christian faith heralds the need for death, but a death which is then followed by resurrection for those whose faith is in Christ.

Marcuse, in the tradition of Engels (and Marx), follows a very provocative thesis of Sigmund Freud—at least as Marcuse understands it. That is, Freud could teach that civilization *itself* is *by nature* hostile to human instincts. Again, there is an odd kind of hyper-individualism lurking at the heart of Critical Theory. Liberation—at one level—has to do with liberating the individual from the constraints of civilization, and this includes the liberating of sexual or erotic desire. As in so many strands of Critical Theory, the Critical Theorists are correct to discern the need for liberation, but—on Christian grounds—there is much askew.

Because Critical Theory understands the human dilemma—at least in part—as the oppressive nature of *society itself*, Critical Theory likewise construes its understanding of *redemption* in a certain way. We must be "liberated"—at least in Marcuse's sense—from *reality itself*. In Marcuse's terms we must be "liberated" from the "Reality Principle," such that we might enjoy the virtually unfettered "Pleasure Principle."

If biblical Christianity proclaims that God accomplishes his redemptive purposes through the blood of His Son, Critical Theory teaches that all will be made right through revolutionary activity, and in the case of at least Marcuse, this revolutionary activity is tied inextricably to erotic pleasure. Thus, we are left with a kind of deracinated redemption through sexual activity and pleasure.

If the Christian account of man and reality more generally is correct, how could someone *not*—in some way, shape, or form—bump into eschatological themes in his or her intellectual deliberations? Has not God indeed placed eternity into the heart man (Ecclesiastes 3:11)? Thus, it makes sense that we should see redemptive and eschatological yearnings and reflections in the thought of those who have not bowed the knee to the risen Lord Jesus.

While recognizing that the use of eschatological, and even messianic, imagery by a non-Christian may in fact be driven by animus, a desire to mock, etc., this does not annul the theological significance of the fact that unbelievers do indeed bump into explicitly Christian theological verities, images, tropes, and concepts in their intellectual deliberations and reflections. We *certainly* should not be surprised. We should rather say, "Yes, that makes sense. We all live in God's world, and think, argue, deliberate, and engage in intellectual deliberation against the backdrop of just such a world, a world which is created, ruled, and sustained by the God of Holy Writ."

But perhaps it is *also* worth noting that Critical Theory is not bumping into this or that Christian theme, and offering some vague affirmation of something Christians also believe. Rather, Critical Theory is reconfiguring, indeed corrupting or perverting, central Christian truths—like the nature of redemption. Nonetheless, the fact that Critical Theory speaks of the need for "redemption," and even speaks of the need for a Messiah is somewhat striking.

So, to summarize our last key theme—the centrality of an eschatology of revolutionary redemption. First, Since Critical Theory appears to posit "sin" as something that has always existed (there is no pre-fall state), Critical Theory has no echo in their system of how things ought to have been. Second, since man's problem is primarily economic, there is an inadequate grasp of what needs to be done to set things right. Third, since Critical Theory is by definition atheistic, there is no good, holy, loving, and righteous God who is reconciling persons to Himself and to one another. Even as Critical Theory somewhat cooled to traditional Marxism as it developed as a school, the reality or force or power behind revolutionary redemption could almost not help to be some form of human-generated revolution. Nonetheless, historical materialism remained lurking in the background as Critical Theory developed. Critical Theory ultimately appeals to revolution as the hope or means of redemption, but "redemption" appears to bow the knee to the prior commitment of Critical Theory or revolution.

Conclusion

Critical Theory is a fascinating school of thought with a wild array of twists and turns since its founding in the 1920s in Frankfurt, Germany. It emerged in the aftermath of World War I, which should have been—ostensibly—a key moment for the hoped-for communist revolution to finally occur. Critical Theory attempted to both work within, while advancing or correcting and at times even virtually rejecting, the Marxist (and Hegelian) principles which were so central to the origin of Critical Theory. And within this brew of Marx and Hegel, there was an intriguing mixture of Sigmund Freud.

The Critical Theorists were (and almost 100 years later, still are) trying to come to

terms with the various pathologies of the modern world. They have their own understanding of: (1) *creation, man, and the nature of reality*; (2) *sin, atonement, sanctification, and holiness*; and (3) *history, the future, and the nature of eschatology*. Like all persons living in God's world, the Critical Theorists thought, reflected, and intellectually wrestled as created men to whom God had clearly revealed Himself in and through the created order (Romans 1). We should not be surprised, then, that Critical Theory can be understood as a kind of religion—a kind of idolatrous endeavor which cannot but help—in a sense—think about ultimate realities in a way which both borrows from traditional biblical themes and categories, while simultaneously corrupting, marginalizing, and even mocking some biblical themes and categories. The definitive Christian critique of Critical Theory is yet to be written, but it is hoped that this article has at least provided something of what such a critique might look like.

*Image Credit: Unsplash

1. Some histories place the move to New York in 1934.
2. Herbert Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology: Fundamental Tendencies of Industrial Society," in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edd. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989), 119-27.
3. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 124.
4. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 124.
5. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 124.
6. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 124.
7. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 125.
8. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 125.
9. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 125. In this section Marcuse makes explicit his dependence on Sigmund Freud.
10. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 125.
11. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 125.
12. Theodor W. Adorno, "Society," in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edd. Stephen Eric Bronner

and Douglas MacKay Kellner (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989), 271.

13. Adorno, "Society," 271.

14. Adorno, "Society," 271.

15. Adorno, "Society," 271.

16. Adorno, "Society," 271.

17. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, originally published in 1955). I will be working from the 1996 publication in this article.

18. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, xv.

19. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, xxiii.

20. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 3.

21. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 3.

22. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 3. Marcuse's emphasis.

23. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 12-15.

24. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 15.

25. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 19.

26. This restraint is "self-imposed restraint" because persons themselves inevitably embrace the necessity of the Reality Principle.

27. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 19.

28. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 19. Marcuse's text actually includes some French, which I have rendered into English above. His text reads: "The *recherché du temps perdu* becomes the vehicle of future liberation."

29. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 126.

30. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 126.

31. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 126.

32. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 126.

33. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 126.

34. Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology," 126.

35. This essay was published in 1940, before Benjamin committed suicide later in that same year. The German title is *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, and is sometimes translated as "On the Concept of History."

36. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989), 255.

37. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255. Emphasis mine.

38. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255. Emphasis mine.

39. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255-56.

40. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 256. The French is in italics in Benjamin's text. Other emphasis mine.

41. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.

42. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.

43. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.

44. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257. Emphasis mine.

45. I am not here complaining of a lack of "proof." Many good essays simply summarize the author's convictions and general principles. But it would certainly be helpful if there were even *some* illustrative examples given.

46. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.

47. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 261-62.

48. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 262.

49. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 262.

50. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 261.

51. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, originally published in 1944), xiv.

52. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 1.

53. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, vi.

54. Adorno, "Society," 271.

55. This theme runs throughout *The Authoritarian Personality*. For one example, in the "Conclusions" to their studies the editors ponder what might be done to prevent the development of the "authoritarian personality," or "fascist." The editors express concern that it almost *must* be the case that any successful effort to resist fascism must start rather early in the life of children. This is because "ethnocentric parents" will undoubtedly get in the way: "For ethnocentric parents, acting by themselves, the prescribed measures would probably be impossible. We should expect them to exhibit in their relations with their children much the same moralistically punitive attitudes that they express toward minority groups—and toward their own impulses." He continues: "But more serious, because much more widespread, is the case of parents who with the best will and the best feelings are thwarted by the need to mould the child so that he will find a place in the world as it is." That is, even for parents who *want* to resist parenting in an "ethnocentric" way, the parental passion and concern for one's children will ineluctably lead most parents to prepare their children for the world *as it is*, and this world is more encouraging of "fascism," than not. See Adorno et al, *The Authoritarian Personality*, 975-76.

56. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255. Emphasis mine.

57. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255. Emphasis mine.

58. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255-56.

59. Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25.

60. Bronner, *Critical Theory*, 115.

61. The "Estates-General" consisted of the "First Estate" (clergy), the "Second Estate" (nobility), and the "Third Estate" (the majority of the people).

62. James Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 20.

63. Peter Thompson recounts this insight from Ernst Bloch from Bloch's *Heritage of Our Times*. See Thompson, "The Frankfurt School, Part 6: Ernst Bloch and the Principle of Hope," *The Guardian* (online), April 29, 2014. Cf. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* (Polity: 2009, originally published in 1935).