

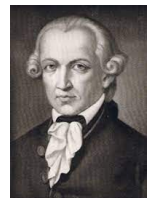
The Atheistic Challenge: Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School
The Christian Faith and Contemporary Challenges
March 21, 2021

“The autonomous man of Kant says ‘I am’ and allows nothing more ultimate than itself. The Christian says ‘I am’ in terms of Christ and God as the great I AM.” – Cornelius Van Til

I. A Short Review of a Long History

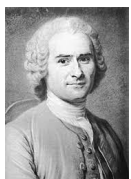
A. **The Enlightenment** = a multifaceted social, scientific, philosophical, and cultural phenomenon roughly dated from 1650–1800, which, generally, emphasized the superiority of human reason as a guide to all knowledge and human concerns. Launched the “Modern” period, which extends from mid-15th century up to the 20th century (1960’s or 70’s).

1. **René Descartes (1596–1650)** – French philosopher and mathematician; so-called “father of modern philosophy.” Attempted to gain certainty apart from divine revelation by deriving a basic, “undoubtable” maxim: *“I think, therefore I am.”*
2. **David Hume (1711–1776)** – Scottish skeptic; rejected Descartes rationalistic approach, arguing that when we examine the world, we have no logical justification for drawing connections between particular observations. Hence, no scientific knowledge of the world!
3. **Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)** – Prussian philosopher; Kant responded to Hume by arguing that pre-arranged categories of the knowing mind help to structure our experience of the world. Kant’s ‘critique’ concluded that we may not know the things “out there” (esp. God!), but we can still have stable knowledge “in here.” Kant enshrines rational autonomy as a pillar of Enlightenment thinking: *“‘Have courage to use your own reason!’—that is the motto of the enlightenment.”*



B. **Reckoning with the “Modern” Period: Three Major Responses to Kant**

a) **Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) – SUPPLEMENT REASON**

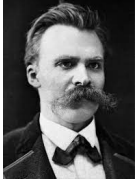


- 1) Religious Expressivism = Religion is still possible, provided we turn inward and build our notion of God on the basis of our own inward moral sentiment.
- 2) Individual Expressivism = Our natural humanity is innocent and noble, but the constraints of society corrupt our self-love and cause the misery of the world. (“Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains”). [Sigmund Freud (1856–1939): human identity and the purpose of life centers on personal sexual fulfillment]

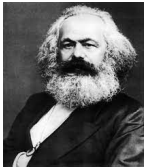
b) **G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) – REVIVE REASON**



- 1) Truth as Process = Truth/reality is not stable, but a process of contradiction and resolution, leading to a final all-embracing concept or whole, called the “absolute.”
- 2) Self-Consciousness Needs Society = Human self-consciousness is inextricably related to social recognition, and human relations pass through various stages en route to the ideal social community.

c) **Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) – REJECT REASON**

- 1) Will to Power = Now that the Enlightenment has rendered God unnecessary, and there is no stable structure to anything—no truth, no human nature—we can see that all “knowledge” is rooted in instinct and struggles for power.
- 2) Self-Creation = Our self-creation ought not to take the form of nihilism, but an assertion of our will to seek our own greatness as if every day had eternal significance.

II. Karl Marx (1818–1883) and the Communist Utopia

A. Turning Hegel “Right-Side Up”

1. Marx’s atheistic and materialistic theory held that all of history is the history of class struggles and that all historical development is driven by economic relations.
 - a) *“Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it.”* (Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*).
2. Proletariat (i.e., the “oppressed” workers) vs. Bourgeoisie (i.e., the “oppressing” owner).
 - a) *“At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production . . . Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.”* (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*)
 - b) *“[Communists] openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!”* (Marx, *A Communis Manifesto*)
3. The Goal? A communist utopia, where the workers collectively own the means of production.

B. Karl Marx and the devil

1. *“Thus Heaven I’ve forfeited, I know it full well ... My soul, once true to God, is chosen for Hell.” “The hellish vapors rise and fill the brain, Till I go mad and my heart is utterly changed. See the sword—the Prince of Darkness sold it to me.”*¹
2. *“Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again ... This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world ... Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people ... The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.”* (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*)

¹ Quoted in Paul Kengor, *The Devil and Karl Marx: Communism’s Long March of Death, Deception, and Infiltration* (Gastonia, NC: TAN, 2021), xxii.

III. Antonio Gramsci and the Rise of “The Frankfurt School”

- A. **Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)** – Italian Marxist philosopher who was jailed by Mussolini’s Fascist regime; wrote *The Prison Notebooks*, in which he surmised that the institutions of civil society (e.g., family, church, trade unions, education system)—shaped largely by a Christian worldview—are responsible for blocking the proletariat uprising and prevented communist revolution.

1. Gramsci’s Solution? Infiltrate and transform the cultural institutions that socialize people into perpetuating the oppressive ills of capitalism. Deconstruct and replace the “ruling hegemony” through a “long march through the institutions” (as Rudi Dutschke put it).

“Socialism is precisely the religion that must overwhelm Christianity. [Socialism is] religion because it has substituted for the consciousness of the transcendental God of the Catholics, the faith in man and in his great strengths as a unique spiritual reality.” (Gramsci, Cronache torinesi).

“This process, called ‘passive revolution’, can be accomplished only by the conjunction of two forces: that exerted from above by the communist intellectuals, who steadily replace the hegemony of the bourgeoisie, and that exerted from below by the ‘masses’, who bear within themselves the seeds of the new social order that has grown from their labour.” (Roger Scruton)

- B. **The Frankfurt School** – a group of researchers and philosophers associated with the *Institute for Social Research* (founded 1923) in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, who applied Marxist thought to their analysis of capitalist ideology embedded in traditional Western culture. Principal members included Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer.

“The Frankfurt School had always considered establishmentarian philosophies as obstacles to bringing about a liberated society. Its members condemned the preoccupation with absolute foundations, analytic categories, and fixed criteria for verifying truth claims.”

“[Critical Theory’s] aim is now to awaken the individual from the intellectual slumber into which he or she has been socialized.”

– Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP, 2011).

IV. “Critical Theory” at a University Near You

1. *“Critical pedagogy begins from a different set of assumptions rooted in the neo-Marxian literature on critical theory commonly associated with the Frankfurt School. Here, the critical learner is someone who is empowered and motivated to seek justice and emancipation. **Critical pedagogy regards the claims that students make in response to social-justice issues not as propositions to be assessed for their truth value, but as expressions of power that function to reinscribe and perpetuate social inequalities.** Its mission is to teach students ways of identifying and mapping how power shapes our understandings of the world. This is the first step toward resisting and transforming social injustices.”*

- Alison Bailey, Director of Women’s and Gender Studies Program at ISU, “Tracking Privilege-Preserving Epistemic Pushback in Feminist and Critical Race Philosophy Classes,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 32 no. 2 (2017): 6.