

Cultural Marxism and Its Conspirators

 spectator.org/cultural-marxism-and-its-conspirators

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April 3, 2019, 12:40 PM



Last week I did one of my routine exercises in my Marxism course at Grove City College. In that class, we scour everything on Marx and various strains and offshoots of Marxism. We read all sides — true liberal learning, real diversity, genuine academic pursuit of truth. At this conservative college, we look at all sides, which is what liberal universities claim to do but, under the flag of “diversity” and “tolerance,” frequently shun opposing viewpoints that conflict with leftist orthodoxy. My Marxism course is an interactive class in which we pull up the big computer screen and openly Google terms, ideas, websites, and organizations. We do not shy away, ever, from daily checking Marxists.org, the website of Communist Party USA, *The Jacobin*, *The Militant*, you name it. We don’t fear and censor opposing viewpoints. My students will not be left ignorant of what the other side thinks.

Last week, as I do at some point every semester, I Googled the words “cultural Marxism.” I was shocked when the first thing that appeared on the page was this boxed definition:

Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory. In contemporary usage, the term **Cultural Marxism** refers to an anti-semitic conspiracy theory which claims that the Frankfurt School is part of a continual academic and intellectual effort to undermine and destroy Western **culture**.

[Frankfurt School – Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankfurt_School)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankfurt_School

Whoa. Seriously? After years of looking up “cultural Marxism,” I had not seen that whopper. An “anti-semitic conspiracy theory”? Says who? That’s not a definition; it’s an *ad hominem*. Actually, it’s a cheap smear. And it’s a smear that countless millions will see daily as their go-to definition for “cultural Marxism.”

It gets worse.

The link then charges: “This conspiracy theory is associated with American religious paleoconservatives such as William S. Lind, Pat Buchanan, and Paul Weyrich; but also holds currency among the alt-right, white nationalist groups, and the neo-reactionary movement.”

Yeah? No kidding? The “neo-reactionary movement”? What’s that?

For years I’ve known about cultural Marxism. My first tutorial on it, and the entirety of the Frankfurt School, came from Herb Romerstein, a friend and mentor to whom I dedicated my book *Dupes*. Never did Herb say that the charge of cultural Marxism was a slimy anti-Jewish plot. He walked me through the leading lights in the Frankfurt School, and he didn’t single out which ones were Jews.

An “anti-semitic conspiracy theory”? That sounds like the very conspiracy-mongering that the anonymous writers are charging as conspiracy-mongering.

This flatly isn’t right. It’s wrong. And it’s a shame. It’s a nasty charge that’s clearly having a pernicious influence. As a case in point, a testimony comes from the UK, where a conservative supporter of Brexit has been accused of peddling the “anti-Semitic trope of ‘Cultural Marxism’.” That’s an actual headline.

The two reporters who wrote that story, slinging that accusation at this unfortunate British conservative, almost certainly Googled a term they knew little to nothing about and landed at the first thing that glared from their screen. The intellectual laziness led to intellectual nastiness — cruelty even, as this is a vicious charge to make against someone, especially if those leveling it really don’t have a good idea of the history of the term.

And yet, in fairness to those two reporters, “cultural Marxism” is unquestionably hard to pin down. It would be nice if everyone could be, well, nice, as we all suffer the ideological folly of the men who devised the inane theories and perverse schools of thought which, for better

or worse, have come to be known as “cultural Marxism.” Take it from someone who reads this poison for living. These ideas are not merely confusing, vague, but often incoherent, incomprehensible, rambling, meandering, and, first and foremost, utterly idiotic and completely destructive to mind and soul. When I slog through it, I think not of “trope” but “tripe.” It’s awful junk.

Here are some rudimentary facts:

First off, you will not find a foundational book from, say, the 1930s, called *The Cultural Marxism Manifesto*. Maybe the best we can say is that cultural Marxism, for lack of a better term, is essentially, and very simply, Marxism applied to cultural goals. To repeat: *Marxism applied to cultural goals*. This is distinguished from the classical Marxism applied to economics or class goals. It is Marxist theory affixed to culture, and thus referred to commonly and understandably as “cultural Marxism.”

Who first coined the term? It’s hard to say, just as it’s hard to say who first coined the term “communism.” Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, but they didn’t coin the term communism. No one really knows, for sure.

And the fact is, there are many Marxists today working far more aggressively on the cultural front than the economic front. They are, in effect, *cultural Marxists*. And no doubt, 99% of them are not Jews. To criticize them and their *cultural Marxism* would not, by any stretch, be an exercise in anti-Semitism.

Who were some of the early Marxists who applied Marx to culture?

Pivotal was Antonio Gramsci, an Italian, a pioneer of applying Marxist theory to cultural objectives. He was not a Jew, not German, and not a member of the Frankfurt School.

That said, the Frankfurt School was the leading literal “institute” that applied Marxist theory to cultural objectives.

The two leaders of the Frankfurt School were Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who wrote major works on what they called the “culture industry.” This is so well-known that the very same [Wikipedia has an entry for “Culture Industry,”](#) a term it rightly credits to its founders, “the critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer,” as Wikipedia says in the first line of the entry, and to the wider Frankfurt School, as it lays out. Adorno and Horkheimer had a chapter called “The Culture Industry” in their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Sounds a little cultural and a little Marxist, eh?)

Two of the most influential members of the Frankfurt School who applied Marxism to culture (and to other areas) were Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. They were not only *cultural Marxists* but *Freudian Marxists*. One might also call Marcuse a *sexual Marxist*. He was the guru to the 1960s New Left on American college campuses.

An undisputed *sexual* Marxist who applied sex and Freud and Marx to culture was Wilhelm Reich, who coined the term and wrote the book, *The Sexual Revolution*. He's linked to the Frankfurt School, though he was much earlier. He was such a sexual freak, with very disturbing thoughts on the genital stimulation of children (among other things), that the Bolsheviks rejected him.

Georg Lukacs, a Hungarian, a Bolshevik, and a major early influence on the founders of the Frankfurt School, also applied Marxist theory to culture. He was Deputy Commissar for Culture and Education in Bela Kun's Hungarian Soviet Republic. To repeat: *culture and education*. Theodor Adorno adored Georg Lukacs.

Most of the guys in the Frankfurt School were Freudians as well as Marxists. Some, like Fromm especially, sought to devise a field of Freudian-Marxism that was anchored in psychoanalysis.

So, cultural Marxists, sexual Marxists. Yes.

Today, in the 21st century, much of the more culturally inclined Marxism flies under the banner of what is known throughout the academy as "critical theory." There are entire academic departments at universities dedicated to critical theory. Tellingly, most of these academic proponents of Marxism are not econ or Poli Sci professors, or historians, all of which know better, but faculty from English departments.

Today, there are even *gender* Marxists in the academy. There are self-described "queer theorists" and academicians engaged in "intersectionality" who are Marxists focused on cultural work.

This is widely known.

But above all, these Marxists are and were about culture. Culture, culture, culture.

If you Google "critical theory," the first thing that pops up is a boxed definition that states: "**crit-i-cal the-o-ry**, *noun*, a philosophical approach to culture, and especially to literature, that seeks to confront the social, historical, and ideological forces and structures that produce and constrain it. The term is applied particularly to the work of the Frankfurt School."

Precisely. Whoever posted that one nailed it. Hooray for accuracy! Note the words "culture" and "Frankfurt School." Again, *cultural Marxists* — or, if you don't like that, *Marxists in culture*.

As I noted in a [piece here last year](#), *People's World*, the successor to the *Daily Worker*, in the "[About](#)" section of its website, calls out and rallies what it calls "cultural workers" for the Marxist cause. These are Marxists operating on the cultural front. They are cultural Marxists.

This ain't rocket science, boys and girls. And it ain't anti-Semitism either.

Go back to that original Google box defining cultural Marxism as anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Ironically, if you click the provided link to the Frankfurt School reference at Wikipedia, it indeed explains: "The works of the Frankfurt School are understood in the context of the intellectual and practical objectives of critical theory.... In the praxis of cultural hegemony, the dominant ideology is a ruling-class narrative story, which explains that what is occurring in society is the norm."

Again, note the words "cultural" and "Frankfurt School."

There, it links (correctly) to Antonio Gramsci, the non-German, non-Jew, Italian. In fact, the Wikipedia page on Gramsci is pretty good, and includes 32 references to "culture" or "cultural." The third paragraph of the Gramsci entry states:

Gramsci is best known for his theory of cultural hegemony, which describes how the state and ruling capitalist class — the bourgeoisie — use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies. The bourgeoisie, in Gramsci's view, develops a hegemonic culture using ideology rather than violence, economic force, or coercion. Hegemonic culture propagates its own values and norms so that they become the "common sense" values of all and thus maintain the status quo. Hegemonic power is therefore used to maintain consent to the capitalist order, rather than coercive power using force to maintain order. This cultural hegemony is produced and reproduced by the dominant class through the institutions that form the superstructure.

That's correct. And there, at the page on Gramsci, are (rightly) no references to "conspiracy." Apparently, that's because certain different anonymous contributors (better informed) contributed to the Gramsci page — obviously not the same ignorant individuals who generated the shameless little box on cultural Marxism; that is, the nasty name-callers alleging anti-Semitism.

For the record, where does the charge of anti-Semitism come from? It, too, comes from laziness, nastiness, or a lack of charity and desire to smear opponents rather than get at the truth. The Wikipedia entry quotes (accurately or inaccurately) one of the individuals it accuses of anti-Semitism stating that all the members of the Frankfurt School were Jews ("to a man, Jewish"). I cannot vouch for that. I've never endeavored to tabulate a scorecard of Jews in the Frankfurt School. I have no desire. I don't do that. Don't ask me. Do your own damned scorecard.

It's crucial to understand, however, that those who write on the Frankfurt School, including its staunch advocates, always note that many to most of the members were Jewish. You can't read a history that doesn't note this. Why is that? For this reason: Any historian offering even a brief narrative account of the Frankfurt School, including the salient fact of its sudden mass migration to the United States, unavoidably notes that most members were

Jews because it's a crucial explanatory factor in their move to America — namely, they relocated because of Hitler's madness. As Jews, they would be targeted by Hitler for genocide. That's why they moved.

Truth be told, the only sympathy I've ever had for the Frankfurt School is that the poor guys could have been murdered by the Nazis. It's my only soft spot for them. Otherwise, their writings are nonsense, useless, fruitless.

But again, historians writing histories of the school can't avoid this fact. To cite just one example of numerous that could be referenced, probably the top academic work on the Frankfurt School (aside from Martin Jay's research) is Rolf Wiggershaus's *The Frankfurt School*, published in 1994 by MIT Press. It's a seminal scholarly work, nearly 800 pages in length, with translations of German writings that no other scholar in English has published. This is a fully sympathetic tome. My sense is that Wiggershaus likely aligns ideologically with — and is at least favorable to — the school. He writes in his opening pages: "The first generation of the Frankfurt School consisted wholly of Jews."

Wiggershaus certainly didn't mean that as a negative. He proceeded to further note how they were persecuted as Jews. Heck, Wiggershaus might even be Jewish himself. (I don't know, I haven't checked.)

Again, it's part of the history.

The first time I wrote about the Frankfurt School in a book, my editor added this query amid the editing process: "Paul, why in the world did they all suddenly leave Germany to come to the United States?" My editor wanted to know if this was some sort of Comintern-inspired conspiracy or the work of a communist cabal at Columbia University. No, no, I explained. The answer was because they were Jews fleeing Hitler. My editor answered: "Oh! You need to include that!"

Of course. And historians of the Frankfurt School need the freedom to include that key fact without nameless hacks vilifying them online as anti-Semites for doing so.

Even then, assume for a moment, for the sake of argument, that the vast majority of cultural Marxists in the Frankfurt School were Jewish, as its historians have asserted. Well, the vast majority of cultural Marxists today — writing at *People's World*, joining the [International Gramsci Society](#), penning tracts on "queer theory" — are certainly not Jews. Today's cultural Marxism isn't a Jewish thing. That's stupid.

Now, all of that said, could certain agitators on the "alt-right" exploit the fact that so many Frankfurters were Jews to try to create an "anti-Semitic trope" of the Frankfurt School? Of course, they could. That needs to be condemned and countered. But simply noting that

many were Jewish, or, more important, simply noting that today there's such a thing as a cultural form of Marxism, should absolutely not be permitted to be labeled an "anti-Semitic trope."

Ironically, these faceless online contributors also threaten leftist academic allies. When I last week checked the website for Occidental College's Department of Critical Theory and Social Justice, which, for years, boasted about instructing its pupils in "Marxism, psychoanalysis, the Frankfurt School," there was no longer any mention of Marxism, nor certainly cultural Marxism. Those leftists at Occidental must have yanked the language, no doubt fearful of being accused of anti-Semitism.

Above all, this is as much a lesson in the power of an enormously influential source like Wikipedia (and the Internet generally) to be abused and to spread bad information that ends up hurting people. Unfortunately, millions if not billions rely on Wikipedia, and what you thus have online is, ironically, the creation of a conspiracy theory about the "conspiracy theory" of cultural Marxism.

Again, if some are guilty of creating a fake conspiracy of a very real ideology or literal theory, then we should condemn that. That does not, however, mean that, say, critical theory, or the application of Marxism to culture, *à la* cultural Marxism, doesn't exist.

Alas, let's also be on guard for those who want to create a conspiracy theory out of term that, properly applied, isn't a conspiracy theory.