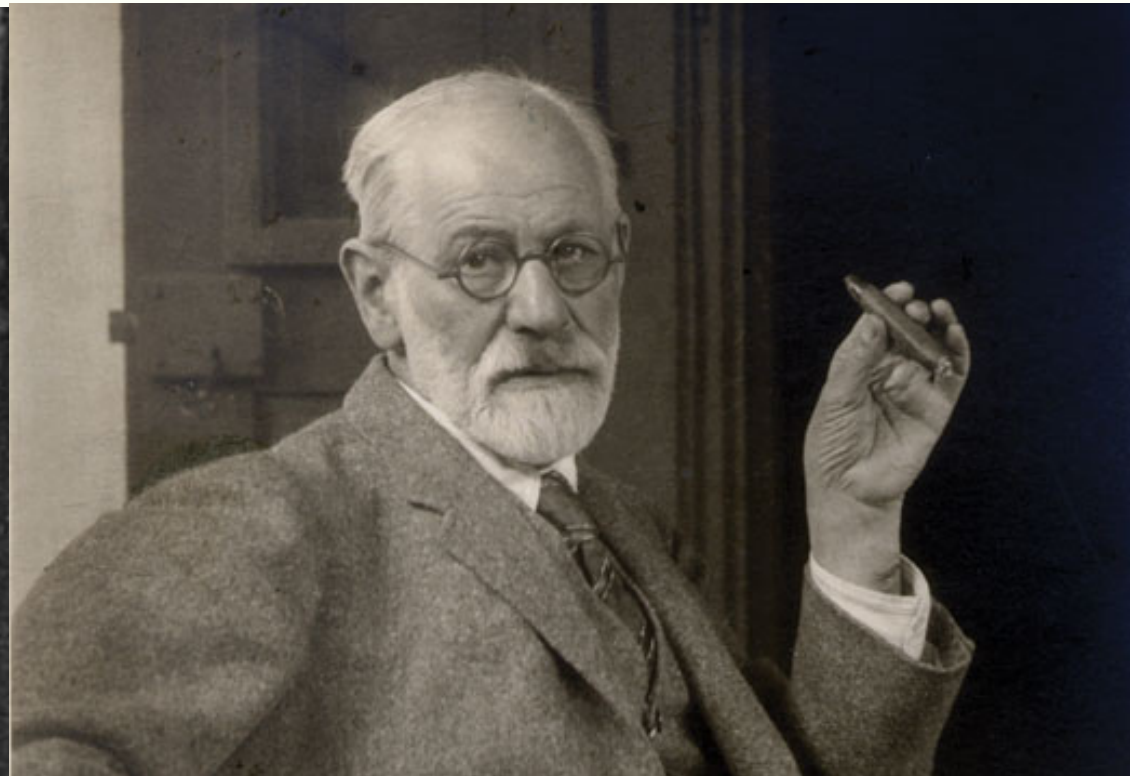
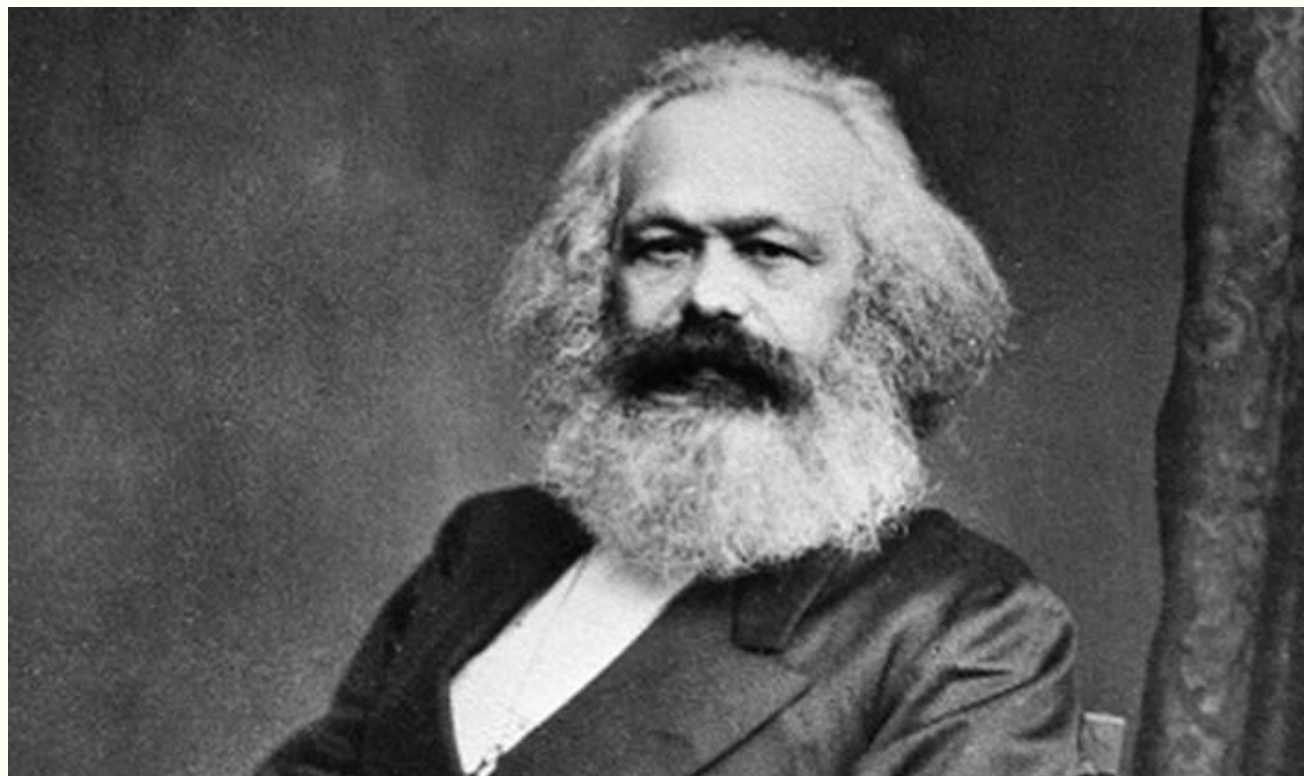


# INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THEORY

WEEK  
1

**Society as an Object of Study: Marx, Freud, Weber**



# AGENDA FOR WK 1

01

## WHAT IS CRITICAL ABOUT CRITICAL THEORY?

- Society as an object of study
- Ontology, Metaphysics and Phenomenology

02

## THE PREDECESSORS OF MODERN CRITICAL THEORY

- Karl Marx
- Max Weber
- Sigmund Freud

03

## HOW TO USE CRITICAL THEORY

- Marxist Cultural Analysis
- Antipositivist Sociology
- Psychoanalytic Theory

# WHAT'S CRITICAL ABOUT CRITICAL THEORY?

- Western Modernity (as opposed to pre- and post-modernity)
  - rejection of tradition
  - faith in inevitable technological, scientific, and social progress
  - introduction of formal equality
  - formation of the nation-state and therefore the 'citizen' (as opposed to the 'subject' under monarchy)
  - nationalist ethic
  - knowledge begotten by rationalization and empiricism (as opposed to spirituality or authority)
  - emphasis on individualism and liberty
- **Ontology**: the nature of being
- **Metaphysics**: outside of the physical realm, beyond the laws of matter and energy
- **Phenomenology**: the structure of experience in consciousness
- **Social theory**: the explanation of social relations, differences, processes, and changes through the development of meta-narrative models
- **Critical theory**: the method of using meta-narrativistic theoretical models to critique, understand, or prognosticate social, philosophical, phenomenological, political, and aesthetic values and trends



# FORMS OF PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE

**Ontology:** the nature of being

- Answers questions like "what is the nature of being" "how do we exist" "what is reality" "where did we come from" "who am I" "who are you" "who are all these people"

**Metaphysics**

- Answers questions like "what happens when we die" "what is outside our realm of existence" "what happened to us before we were born"

**Phenomenology.**

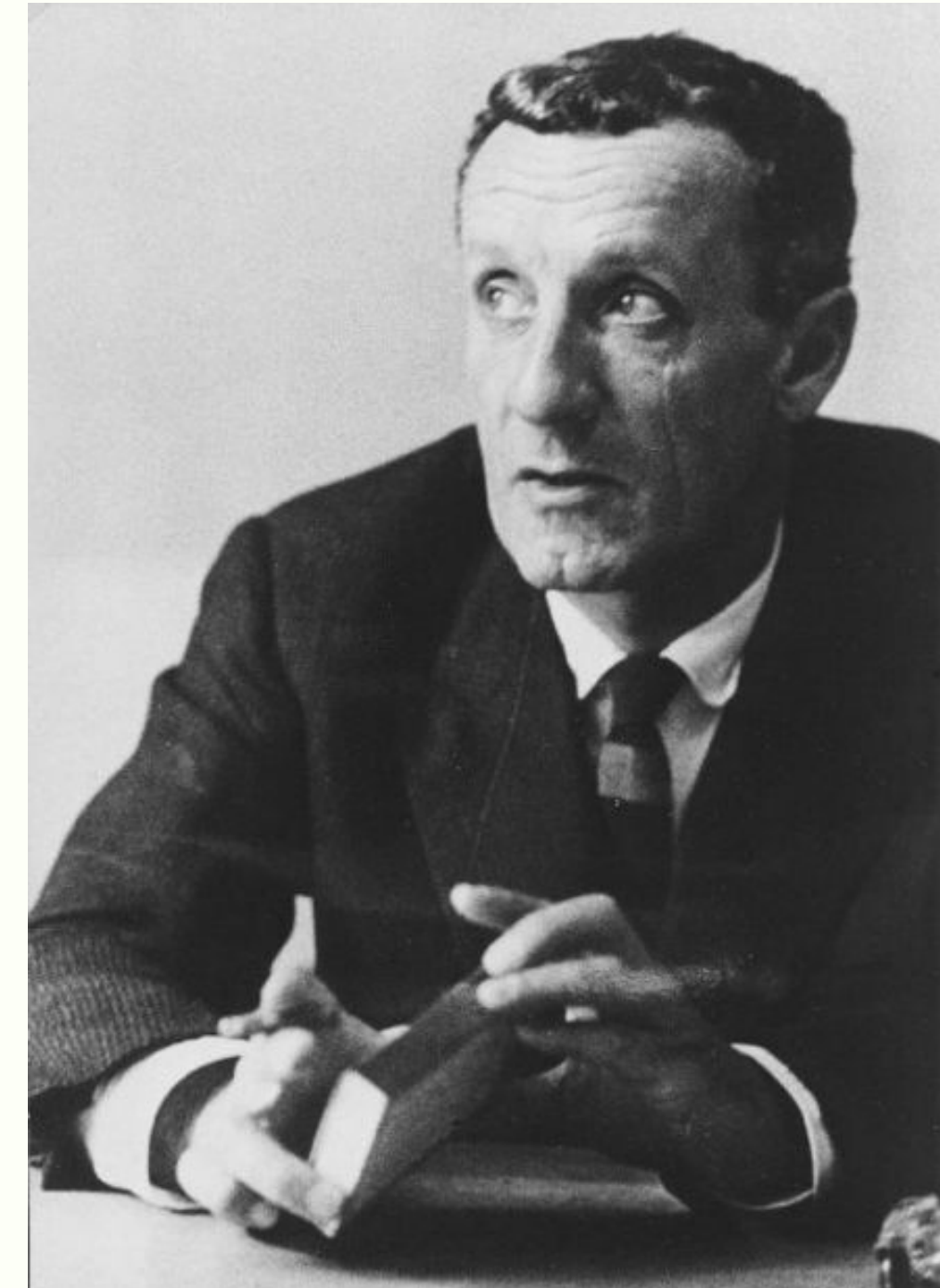
- Answers questions like "what am I experiencing" "what is my relationship to this or that object" "is my experience real or illusory" "do others have the same conscious reality that I do"

**Hermeneutics**

- Answers questions like 'how do we interpret' and 'what beliefs inform our judgments or interpretations of things'

**Epistemology.**

- Answers questions like 'how do we know what we know' 'what is our structured body of beliefs' and 'what is truth'



# PHENOMENOLOGY, HERMENEUTICS

- This, however, is not enough to resolve our problems. For perhaps all we find, when we inspect the contents of our minds, is no more than a random flux of phenomena, a chaotic stream of consciousness, and we can hardly find certainty upon this. The kind of 'pure' phenomena with which Husserl is concerned, however, are more than just random individual particulars. They are a system of universal essences, for phenomenology varies each object in imagination until it discovers what is invariable about it. What is presented to phenomenological knowledge is not just, say, the experience of jealousy or of the colour red, but the universal types or essences of these things, jealousy or redness as such. To grasp any phenomenon wholly and purely is to grasp what is essential and unchanging about it.
- The word 'hermeneutics' was originally confined to the interpretation of sacred scripture; but during the nineteenth century it broadened its scope to encompass the problem of textual interpretation as a whole. Heidegger's two most famous predecessors as 'hermeneuticists' were the German thinkers Schleiermacher and Dilthey; his most celebrated successor is the modern German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. With Gadamer's central study *Truth and Method* (1960), we are in the arena of problems which have never ceased to plague modern literary theory. What is the meaning of a literary text? How relevant to this meaning is the author's intention? Can we hope to understand works which are culturally and historically alien to us? Is 'objective' understanding possible, or is all understanding relative to our own historical situation? There is, as we shall see, a good deal more at stake in these issues than 'literary interpretation' alone.

# THE BRANCHES OF CRITICAL THEORY

These are each placed in proximity to their tradition/branch. For example, Gender and Sexuality studies comes out of the Psychoanalysis branch of critical theory whereas Structuralism comes out of a combination of Western Marxism and Phenomenology

## Western Marxism

- Marxist cultural analysis
  - ideology critique
- Critical Race Studies

## Phenomenology

- Affect Theory
- Structuralism
- Post-Structuralism

## Psychoanalysis

- Performance Theory
- Gender and Sexuality

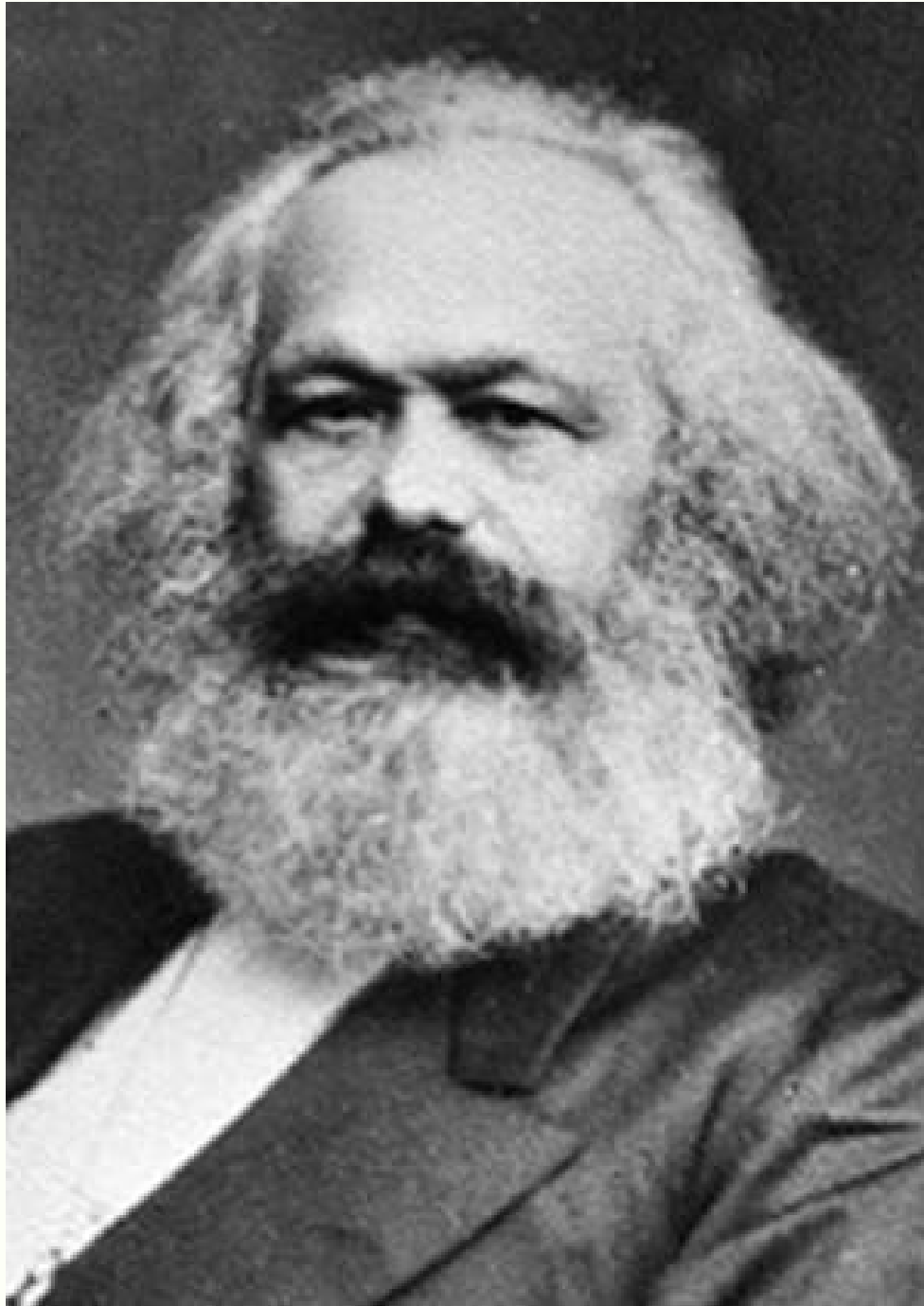
- Formalism



# THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

- **The Frankfurt School** was founded just before the outbreak of WWII and was a collection of theorists and philosophers who came to the conclusion that the Modern era had not be accurately theorized yet
  - Specifically, they were critical of Marx's predictions about the socialist revolution (especially as Stalinism developed)
- In founding the school, the Frankfurters sought to create adequate social theories that would not only describe how Marx was incorrect but deduce from his writings what could be applied to multiple societies
  - In other terms, a **theory** is a set of ideas or a model that can be applied to multiple circumstances and the Frankfurters wanted to find within the writings of Marx, Weber, and Freud the sets of theories that they could use to describe or critique their modern society.
- This is characterized in the 1920s and 1930s as the break between **Western Marxism** and Soviet Marxism.
  - Whereas Soviet Marxism had a clear and specific mode of coming into being (the cultural secretary of the USSR, Mikhail Bakhtin would write what was and was not considered Marxist), Western Marxism emphasized ideological inquiry and critique.
  - **Ideology critique** presumes that each piece of culture (book, film, etc.) has preceding it or informing it a particular ideology and it is the critic's duty to unveil this ideology.
  - Like the Sino-Soviet Split, Western Marxism largely relies on Marx's writings (rather than the Soviet interpretation of Marx's writings) as their theoretical jumping-off points. They sought to use his writings not necessarily as political documents but as interpretive theories of society and history (read him like a philosopher rather than a revolutionary). They then asked the question 'does this still apply' 'if so, how' and 'if not, what can we offer in its place'

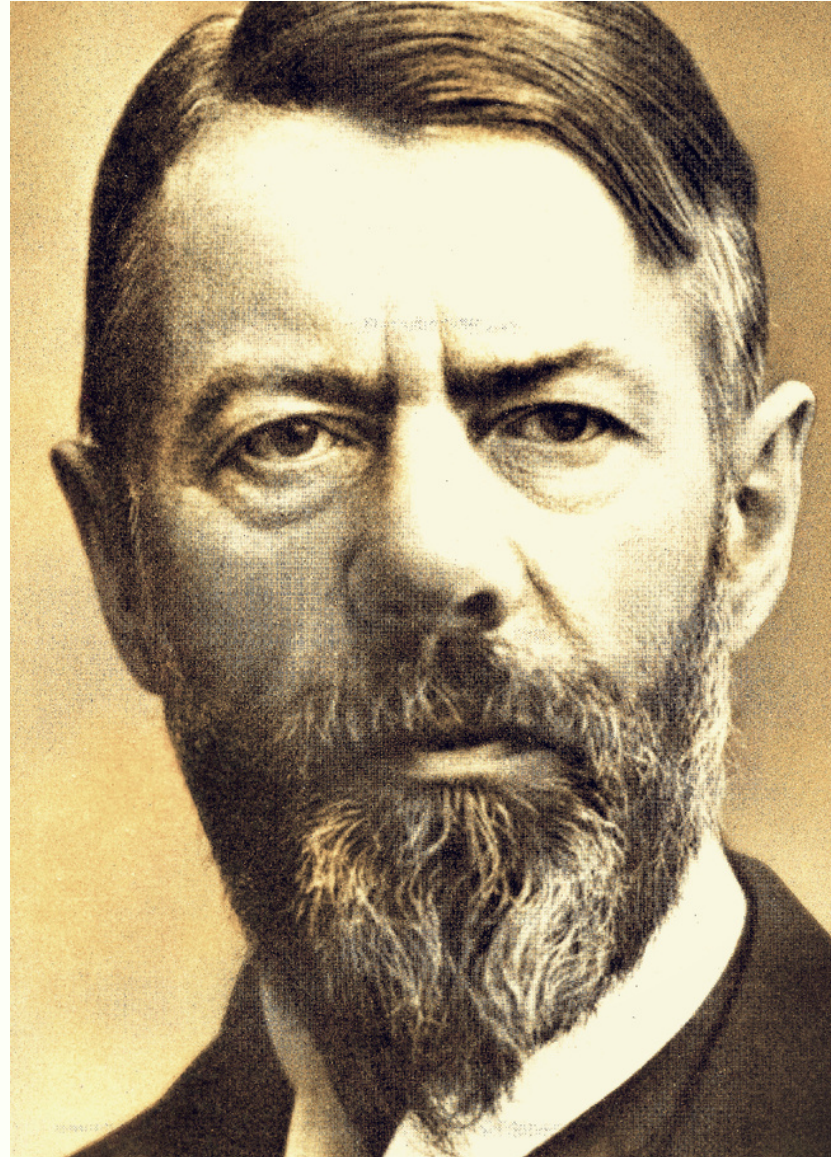
# KARL MARX



- Marxist analysis preferences *historical materialism* as the mode of inquiry on societal relations and change through time
- historical materialism — all of historical change is based on the differences among classes, which are indicated or displayed by their material conditions
- dialectical materialism — all of historical change results from the struggle between two or more classes with contradictory desires
  - Primitive communism
  - Agrarianism/Feudalism
  - Capitalism
  - Socialism
  - Communism
- Alienation — performing labor that is small and repetitive alienates us / separates us from our human nature (our essence); formulating people as their labor separates us from our human nature
- Ideology — 'opiate of the masses'; the belief system behind the material conditions; the social belief system that unites classes/produces classes

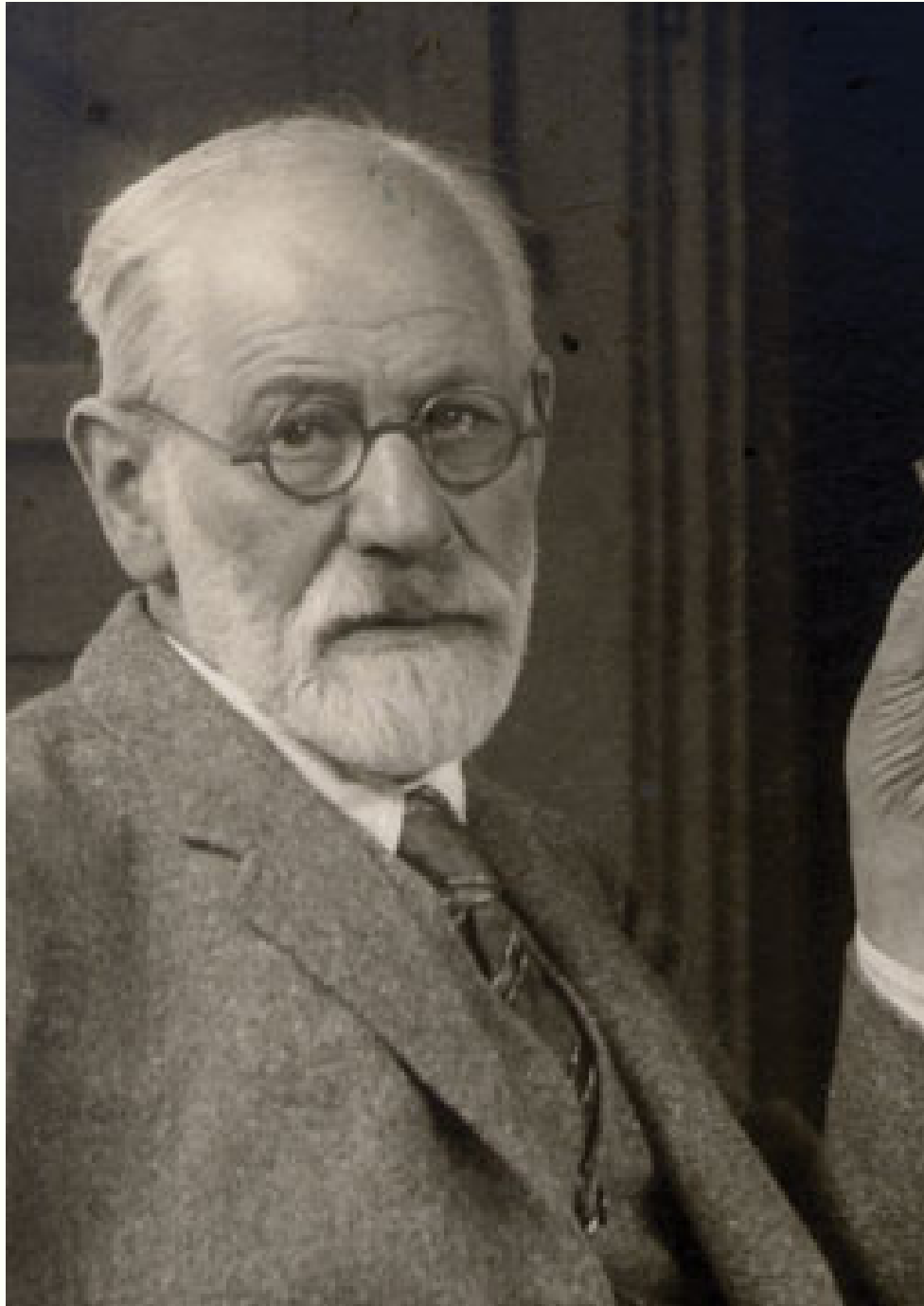


# MAX WEBER



- ***The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*** is Weber's magnum opus
  - it argues that the seeds of capitalist individualism were planted at the beginning of the reformation
  - with the rejection of church authority, this laid the foundations for what would later be constitutional democracy (politically) and individualism/capitalism (ideologically)
- The protestant ethic, according to Weber:
  - live a life of asceticism (life without social pleasures)
  - predestination means that the elect is already predetermined but you should work hard to meet that identity
  - those who have wealth must deserve it otherwise God wouldn't have given it to them
- Interpretivism/Anti-positivism
  - As one of the founders of sociology as a discipline (along with Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and W.E.B. DuBois in the U.S.), proposes that social changes and relations cannot be described or investigated using the scientific method
  - therefore, a new methodology must be developed based on the epistemology of interpretivism (interpretation)

# SIGMUND FREUD



- Freud was one of the most prolific writers of his generation, leaving behind manuscripts that have been the model of inquiry for psychoanalysts as well as literary and cultural scholars
- Of most importance for critical theory:
  - the unconscious
  - the dream
  - the oedipal complex
- As the consciousness conceals meaning, so too may the materialism of society be preceded by or be concealing an unconscious ideology
  - For Fredric Jameson, it is the duty of the scholar to demystify and interpret this political unconscious



# HOW DO WE USE CRITICAL THEORY?

- Has theory, then, become "institutionalized"? The question cannot be answered properly if the word "institutionalized" (a term that carries sinister connotations of syringes and straitjackets) is taken in a purely pejorative sense. That theory is now widely taught in academic institutions is to be commended, not condemned as some sort of squalid capitulation. Things have changed for the better since I taught Marxist theory every week at Oxford in the early 1970s in an informal session which was not even advertised on the university lecture list, which was widely disapproved of by my colleagues, and which operated less like an orthodox seminar than a kind of refuge for ideologically battered students. Most students of literature can now expect a theory course or two to be on offer, a fact that one naturally welcomes.
- Properly understood, then, literary theory is a kind of metadiscourse. Rather than figuring as one way of speaking about literature among others, it adopts a critical stance to other forms of critical analysis. In particular, it tends to suspect that much of what is said is question-begging. Critics may ask whether a particular narrative twist is effective, but narratologists want to know what this strange animal called narrative is, and are reluctant to be fobbed off with our intuitive sense that everyone can recognize a story when they see one. If the critic discerns, say, Jungian patterns in a novel, the theorist is keen to know what "novel" actually means. Can it be defined? How does a short novel differ from a long short story? Critics may wrangle over whether Oscar Wilde is a major or minor writer, but theorists prefer to investigate the (often unconscious) norms and criteria by which we make such judgments. All reading involves interpretation, but hermeneutics inquires into what goes on when we interpret. A critic might speak of a literary character's unconscious; a theorist is more likely to ask what a "character" is, and whether the text can have an unconscious, too.



# HOW DO WE USE CRITICAL THEORY?

- This return to everyday cultural and political life is clearly to be welcomed. Yet there is, as usual, a price to be paid. Pure theory may have its problems, but its very distance from the everyday allows it to act from time to time as a powerful critique of it. There is, in fact, a concealed Utopian dimension to much of this thought. Poststructuralism dreams of a time when rigid hierarchies and oppressive polarities will be prised open, to release a play of difference and diversity. Whatever the slippages involved in the act of interpretation, hermeneutics continues to pledge its faith in the possibility of human understanding. Reception theory (with its implicit slogan "More power to the reader!") seeks to liberate the reader from the passive, meekly conformist status he or she has so far been allotted by the critics, seeing readers instead as agents and cocreators. Behind this theoretical current the demands of the 1960s student movement can be dimly sensed.
- This is not the case with much postmodernist theory. To be sure, there is a radical wing to it, but for the more complacent forms of postmodernist thought, pluralism, multiculturalism, and a respect for human difference are about as good as it gets. It is hard to see this as an adequate politics in a world where the mightiest capitalist power in history holds the rest of the world to ransom. It is characteristic of Marxism that it refuses a retreat from the social and political into "discourse" while also refusing a cynical or defeatist complicity with social existence as we know it. Other forms of political criticism, such as postcolonialism, can then be assessed according to this standard. Currents of postcolonial thought take for granted the global division of power and resources, and restrict themselves instead to questions of identity and ethnicity. But more promising varieties of postcolonial thought signal the persistence in the present of classical socialist critiques of Western imperialism, however revised such analyses need to be in light of what some optimistically call "late" capitalism.

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