



# Critical theory and the management of change in organizations

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**Abstract** *Raises the initial problem of what is meant by the term critical theory and discusses some common misconceptions that have arisen about the meaning of this term. The dialectic logic that was championed by the group of scholars collectively known as the Frankfurt School is outlined and it is noted how dialectics transcends binary oppositional thinking. It is argued that the body of work of these scholars has a strong contemporary relevance to issues in the management of change in organizations. The other papers in the issue are introduced.*

In writing an introduction to any special issue of a journal, the guest editor would normally be expected to introduce each paper and place it into a context of both a broader body of literature and the other papers in the volume. While I will indeed follow such a protocol, I feel it is necessary to explain what critical theory is and what it isn't[1].

## What is critical theory?

The term "critical theory" has a two fold meaning. It is used to refer to a "school of thought". At one and the same time it also refers to self-conscious critique that is aimed at change and emancipation through enlightenment and does not cling dogmatically to its own doctrinal assumptions (see Geuss, 1981; Giroux, 1983).

The "school of thought" with which critical theory is associated is commonly referred to as "the Frankfurt School". Its real title is the Institut für Sozialforschung – the Institute for Social Research. This Institute was established in, but financially independent of, Frankfurt University in February 1923. Established by the wealthy grain merchant Felix Weil, this Institute's first director was the self-declared Marxist, Carl Grünberg, who remained its director until 1929. Max Horkheimer assumed the directorship in 1931 and shifted the focus from a preoccupation with Marxist political economy towards critical theory. The Institute became home to the now famous names of Theodor Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, Walter Benjamin, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Eric Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. The Institute was closed in 1933, under the Nazi regime, for "tendencies hostile to the state" (Jay, 1996, p. 29) but Horkheimer had anticipated this event and transferred its financial endowment out of the country. Many members of the Institute were Jewish which, in itself, was threatening in those times. After a short time of incorporation in Geneva, the Institute relocated to New York City in 1934 and became affiliated with Columbia University. It seems a little ironic