Week 3. The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory

1. What do Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse mean by "instrumental reason" and what is the connection between the spread of instrumental reason and the decline of critical thought? What distinguishes "critical theory" and how does it differ from what Horkheimer calls "traditional theory"? More generally, why do members of the Frankfurt School criticize "positivism" in the natural and social sciences? What are the implications of this critique for contemporary sociology and for efforts to develop a critical or radical approach to doing sociology?

2. What role do Horkheimer and Adorno ascribe to the "culture industry" in the suppression of individuality and critical consciousness? Are these effects inherent in media technologies themselves or merely contingent effects of their control by capitalist interests? How does Benjamin's analysis of the mass media and popular culture differ from that of Horkheimer and Adorno? Critics have charged Horkheimer and Adorno with elitism for their disparaging of mass culture. Do you agree or disagree with such criticisms?

3. Compare and critically evaluate the efforts by members of the Frankfurt School (and related theorists like Reich) to incorporate psychoanalytic insights within the framework of critical theory. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of this attempted synthesis of Marx and Freud? How might such a Freudo-Marxist perspective be applied to analyze the role that psycho-sexual dynamics play in shaping contemporary right-wing ideologies (e.g. the New Christian Right)?