

**Philipp Lenhard, Café Marx. Das Institut für  
Sozialforschung von den Anfängen bis zur  
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In *Café Marx* (2024), Philipp Lenhard delivers a welcome counterweight to the »great man« histories of the so-called Frankfurt School. Such approaches position the life and thought of its eminent thinkers as exhausting the philosophical tradition developed at the Institute for Social Research (IfS) in Frankfurt in the mid-twentieth century. Of course, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno form the Frankfurt School's theoretical center of gravity. More significantly, their institutional home at the IfS – vis-à-vis its idiosyncratic position between the German university system, on the one hand, and Marxist thinking and organizing on the other hand – influenced their direction of research in hitherto insufficiently acknowledged ways. Lenhard, then, consciously forgoes a »history of ideas« of the Frankfurt School and chooses to trace the historical development of the »life« of the IfS, or »the institute«, itself. Although Lenhard is coy about committing outright to a historical school, his approach can reasonably be understood as a blend of Cambridge School of contextualism and institutional history.

The IfS taken as a »lively place for intellectual exchange and conflict« is neither entirely physical nor entirely theoretical but rather a historical constellation manifesting through both registers (8-9). As a self-standing historical development, Lenhard counts four physical and theoretical manifestations through which the institute concretized itself: its physical structure, function as a meeting place, idiosyncratic legal status, and ideological commitments (8). In the six chapters of the book, Lenhard maps the relevant dimensions according to six life cycles of the IfS. How prominent a particular dimension features changes according to each time-period but remains in continuous interconnection with the other dimensions to form a cohesive picture of the IfS as an institution over time. To more vividly illustrate the institutional presence of the IfS for the reader, each chapter opens with brief, partly fictionalized scenes from its daily life. These literary interludes visualize the contexts explored historically in each respective subsequent chapter.

The first three chapters span the time from the inception of the idea for an independent institute for Marxist research born out of the political atmosphere in post-WWI Germany (1918–1924) to the establishment of the institute under the directorship of Carl Grünberg (1924–1930) and the subsequent directorship of Max Horkheimer (from 1930) up until the forced emigration of the institute and its core personnel in 1933. It is in these



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opening chapters that Lenhard provides a distinct contribution to the existing literature. He opens with a careful sketch of the relationships that the patron of the IfS, Felix Weil, son of grain-trade tycoon Herman Weil, formed in the atmosphere of left politics in Frankfurt, elucidating the ideological hopes and internal contradictions attached to the institute from its inception. The creation of a privately funded but publicly accessible institute for left intellectuals and the educated proletarian class alike, which further holds both close personal relations to the KPD while remaining in legal partnership with the university system unsurprisingly proved to be a »risky political balance act« (81).

This continued to play out under the first directorship of the labor historian Grünberg after the official inauguration of the institute in 1924. He endeavored to establish the relative autonomy of the institute through a »novel type of organization of scientific research« countering both the university as mere place of higher occupational training and the intensified fragmentation amongst the Marxist left (89). Especially insightful is Lenhard's positioning of the institute's library and archive as the physical center of the institute building and primary meeting place and the simultaneous focus of the scientific work through Grünberg's attempt to get »back to the sources« (*ad fontes*) of the Marxist tradition through the collection of primary sources and their archival reconstruction (101, 107). Chapter three delivers a detailed account of the inner circle surrounding Max Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock and their personal relationships to other leading figures of the institute. Under Horkheimer's directorship the methodological commitments shifted from a more orthodox orientation, as envisioned by Weil and in part executed by Grünberg, towards what is now recognizable as the theoretical position of Critical Theory. Though Lenhard's focus is not primarily on immanent philosophical developments, he skillfully draws out how Horkheimer's own intellectual debt to Arthur Schopenhauer and Rosa Luxemburg influenced such a shift (195, 236).

Chapter four follows the institute into exile to the United States (1933–1949). The exposition of the empirical sociological research conducted there, and the theoretical lessons drawn from it, showcase how the experience of the Holocaust culminated into the theoretical reflections of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored by Horkheimer and Adorno. Chapter five portrays the reestablishment of the institute in Frankfurt after the war (1949–1973). The years in exile drained the institute's foundational funds but the symbolic importance of a return of Jewish academics to Germany was supported by funds of the city of Frankfurt, its university, and continued financial support from the US (465–466). The change in directorship from Horkheimer to Adorno after the former's retirement in 1964 resulted in another »fundamental shift« in the character of the institute (501). The latter's prolific publications during that time and prowess for self-promotion allowed for the establishment of the institute as the Frankfurt School in the public eye (502). The ultimate chapter traces the



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legacy of the respective theoretical tenants of Critical Theory in Germany and abroad until today (1973–2024).

The historical methodology that Lenhard employs is noteworthy in two regards. First, it represents the methodological commitments of Critical Theory itself and is hence a pertinent choice. Rather than restricting himself to the theoretical output of the IfS, he positions its theories in pluralistic view to all institutional activity through which the continuities and changing features of the resulting theories can be better understood. Second, it allows for the contributions of figures whose work supported the research of the IfS, but who were not directly involved in the published works and are thus missing in previous histories, to come to the fore. Those positions held predominantly by women, i.e., secretaries, librarians, and archivists, themselves highly educated researchers and partners of leading figures of the IfS, often substantially contributed to the scientific work of the institute without official acknowledgement. Lenhard's reconstruction of the early years of the institute, i.e., what had been called Grünberg's »Café Marx« and which lends the book its befitting title, gives thus an inclusive and well-sourced historical account of the genesis of what is known as the Frankfurt School. Historically and philosophically minded readers alike will find *Café Marx* a valuable resource for further research.

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