



## Episode 1,164: Cultural Marxism and the Frankfurt School

Guest: Paul Gottfried

**WOODS:** Let's talk about, first of all, cultural Marxism as a concept. Can you accept the idea that there can't be something like cultural Marxism given that Marxism is a materialistic, economic doctrine, and cultural Marxism is something quite different? So is there really a cultural Marxism?

**GOTTFRIED:** I'm glad, Tom, you asked me that question, since I've written entire books on the subject. No, I do not consider cultural Marxism a form of Marxism, and although I have continued to use that term cultural Marxism, I always point out that it is basically an epithet of derision created by critics of the Frankfurt School, mostly on the interwar right, and they refer to these people as *kulturelle Marxisten*. But the original cultural Marxists I don't think would have rejected this term or the Frankfurt School, and I think they would have been quite happy to describe themselves as such until their enemies began to describe them as cultural Marxists.

One of the points that I think I try to stress — I know I try to stress in my books is that cultural Marxists were totally unacceptable to real Marxists and certainly to communist regimes, which rejected them. After the Nazis came to power in Europe, Georg Lukacs went into the Soviet Union and he changed his theories considerably while he was there, and he wrote the work, *Der Zerstörung der Vernunft*, *The Destruction of Reason*, which represents a kind of straight Marxist Leninist interpretation of 19th and 20th century intellectual history. But he was very careful not to sound like a member of the Frankfurt School. Lukacs was never formally a member of the Frankfurt School, but he certainly carried their ideas about culture being determinant of other things, that capitalism to the extent that it was bad destroyed people's natural erotic urges and caused fascism as sadomasochistic behavior. But he was not an historical materialist the way Marx was, and none of the Frankfurt School I think would fall into the category of being historical materialists in a Marxist sense.

**WOODS:** All right, so fair enough. So in other words, we can still use the term descriptively, bearing in mind that scientifically speaking we wouldn't say that it really does fall into Marxism as a category of Marxism.

**GOTTFRIED:** Exactly.

**WOODS:** All right, so let's talk then about the Frankfurt School, and I'd like you to start by just giving us the basic history of the early Frankfurt School. What is the time period we're talking about and who are the major names?

**GOTTFRIED:** Okay, well, the Frankfurt School is organized in Frankfurt in the 1920s, and it centers around the friends of Max Horkheimer, whose father was a wealthy German Jewish businessman who ends up paying for the Frankfurt School, which they had a building and they meet there, and the most important collaborator of Horkheimer was of course Theodor Adorno, who like Horkheimer sort of spends the period of the Second World War in the United States.

The Frankfurt School tries to combine Marxism and Marxist critique of capitalism with its own brand of Freudian psychology. And the critique of capitalism – which the Frankfurt School puts together under the influence of Horkheimer; Adorno; and my professor at Yale, Herbert Marcuse; Eric Fromm, who later becomes famous in America as the author of *The Escape From Freedom* – but under these people, they put together a theory that fuses Freudian psychology or their interpretation of Freudian psychology with Marx's materialist understanding of history and his critique of capitalism. What they come up with is a kind of shotgun wedding or marriage of these forces, and what they produce is neither really Marxism nor anything that Freud would have recognized as Freudian psychology or death psychology. In fact, Freud was extremely critical of what the cultural Marxists did. And they sort of go off in two different directions.

One I think is the idea of sort of getting rid of sexual repression, and you have this emphasis in the work and activities of Wilhelm Reich, who's very concerned with having proper sexual orgasms; to some extent in Marcuse, who talks about polymorphic sexuality, which is being repressed under capitalism, although not under Stalinism.

**WOODS:** [laughing] Right.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right. This is true. He was my teacher. He told me this, and that the Soviets were sort of moving to overcome sexual repression, I suppose by putting all these people in concentration camps.

**WOODS:** [laughing]

**GOTTFRIED:** And the other direction in which this moves is anti-fascism and seeing fascism as a product of both an irrational economic system, which is capitalism in their minds, although there's no reason to assume – we would assume capitalism is perfectly rational, but they don't. And the other thing is the organization of the family in a repressive manner, one that suppresses or represses homosexual urges, one in which women are put in a submissive position relative to men, and after 1933, these people in the Frankfurt School also stress anti-Semitism as part of the irrational system capitalism and sexual repression which they're criticizing.

So it ultimately sort of creates a package of bad things that they're trying to overcome: anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism. And they all sort of form a package. The people who emphasize sexual liberation are usually a bit different from the ones who will stress anti-fascism and anti-Semitism, though they do make a group. They do tend to work together as a school.

After 1933, they come to the United States, and they set themselves up at Columbia, and they stay there until after the Second World War. And in the United States, the Frankfurt

School leaders, Adorno and Horkheimer and some of their collaborators here, produce the work *Studies in Prejudice*, paid for by the American Jewish Committee, which also significantly puts out *Commentary* magazine.

And the most important of those volumes, those indigestible volumes — I think if you tried to read them, you would probably get a headache after about two pages. But the one that becomes most famous, although most people who quote it never read it, is *The Authoritarian Personality*, which comes out in 1950. And that is very often quoted particularly by social psychologists. And Adorno and Horkheimer, while they're producing this, come up with their own F-scale, which allows employers and government agencies to determine who has a fascist authoritarian personality. And this one might say is one of the enduring legacies of the Frankfurt School in the United States, that government agencies and social psychologists become concerned with the continuing threat of fascism.

And during the Cold War, anti-communism for at least some people become associated with a fascist authoritarian personality. This is a common leftist criticism that comes out of the Frankfurt School. Adorno, Horkheimer — not so much Horkheimer, but Adorno and Marcuse and Fromm were all fairly sympathetic to the Soviet Union, or at least more sympathetic to the Soviets than they were to their American hosts. So the anti-fascism that we're still dealing with that is more virulent and widespread now than ever before definitely comes out of the Frankfurt School, and it is typically linked to racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. This too we might say is part of the legacy of the Frankfurt School.

They also, back to Germany, were sent back by the American occupation that wants to reeducate the Germans, and Horkheimer is given a position at the University of Frankfurt. He calls his friend Adorno to come. And many of them resettle in Germany, where they address the residues, we might say, of the fascist authoritarian personality, which they argue had resulted in Nazi tyranny. So they established themselves in Germany as well as the United States.

A last point that I would make about them is that, in the United States, the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* — and *The Authoritarian Personality* are not considered works of the radical left. Remember, they are paid for by the sponsors of *Commentary* magazine, which is an anti-communist liberal magazine, also Zionist. They also are praised, the Frankfurt School, by Seymour Martin Lipset, who says they're right about the authoritarian personality, but they should apply it to the Soviets as well as to the Nazi Germans and to the far right in the United States. So there were attempts by Cold War liberals to sort of integrate the authoritarian personality into their sort of leftist or liberal form of anti-communism.

**WOODS:** All right, so based on what you've just said, a lot of what we're observing today really does have its roots in this, in the sense that we have people hysterically worried about fascism — I mean, of all possible things to be worried about, they're worried about fascism; they're worried about an extreme right wing that is unbelievably marginalized and with no institutional or financial support to speak of. They're worried about that. They've got everybody against such people, the entire culture, everybody. They're worried about that. Meanwhile, they want to demonize people by calling them anti-Semites, racists, the whole sort of thing. They have the same — well, probably a somewhat more exaggerated view of eroticism than the Frankfurt School had. So it's not conspiratorial or just an odd quirk of ours to note that there are certain similarities here.

**GOTTFRIED:** No, you're absolutely right. I think what we see is a continuation and a deepening of the Frankfurt — or an intensification of the Frankfurt School ideology, and what I argue in my book on fascism is the second generation of the Frankfurt School represented by people like Jürgen Habermas is much more radical than the first. It's radical in certain ways. It's violently anti-German in the case of Germany. In fact, the entire course of German history is seen as moving psychologically, culturally in the direction of Nazism and the terrors or taint of Nazism has not been fully removed from Germany no matter what you do. It requires constant social engineering.

And in the case of the United States, we've taken over Frankfurt School ideas, but we've carried them well beyond what the first generation of the Frankfurt School envisaged. They were not looking for gay marriage. They were not looking for transgendered bathrooms. Many of these weird ideas have become part of conservatism, incorporated. They buy into them because they don't want to have to fight the left over them. So it's not only that the Frankfurt School persists in our society. In some ways, it has become even more radicalized.

**WOODS:** What's the end game that they're seeking? Now, that's in a way an unfair question, because there's never an end when it's these folks. But let's imagine they could reach it. What's at least the goal they're moving toward?

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, I think it's the total eradication of white Christian male society as it has existed up until now in the Western world. Now, they don't seem to be particularly concerned with fighting Muslim homophobia or Hindu misogyny or whatever. I mean, all of their anger is directed against the Christian white bourgeois West, and I think they will not be happy until they have totally destroyed and/or reconstructed the society that they're constantly attacking. But the direction from which they're coming, I would argue, is no longer a traditional Marxist socialist direction. It is a radicalized cultural Marxist direction.

**WOODS:** Now, you say this as somebody who has written numerous books on the subject, you're very widely published, you speak numerous European languages. I will have probably the occasional libertarian punk who's never read — who can barely read English, much less other languages, who will come on and say: oh, that's crazy conspiracy talk from Paul Gottfried. So in other words, this idea that they would have that as their goal. How would you answer something like that?

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, I mean, could they tell me anything that would refute what I've just said? Is there anything which the cultural left establishment is doing that would suggest that I'm wrong? And it's like everything they do seems to tend in one direction, and it's sort of a nihilistic direction and they also bully, but it's not just random bullying. What they do is they bully people who are seen as representing the culture or the civilization that they're trying to destroy or the family structure they're trying to destroy.

It's not just that they are concerned with poor women who are carrying unwanted embryos that were implanted by the guy who raped them or something. They're quite happy to have women destroy their infants up until the moment they come out of the birth canal, and probably next week they can kill them after they come out of the birth canal. There seems to be an effort to destroy all traditional social morality as it has existed in the Western world and just about everywhere else.

And these are not random acts. They all seem to be directed toward one might say a premeditated goal of some kind. So this would be my response to the person who says they're just being nice or they're just trying to liberate people and these actions really don't form any kind of gestalt. Yes, they do, and they all seem to be moving in a certain direction.

Let me go beyond this. I think even the attacks that I read in the neoconservative or conservative, incorporated press that this is just Marxism I think is nonsense. I think it's a deliberate obfuscation. We are not dealing with the socialists of the 1950s. We're dealing with something else. And very often, the people who are very supportive of this nihilistic effort are corporate capitalists, international business, and so forth who do not think they're going to be abolished. And they won't be abolished because, you know, crony capitalism will go on. The primary interests of the cultural Marxist is destroying white Christian bourgeois civilization. Everything else is secondary, including socialism. Socialism is a means toward that end. If they can control the economy, they can control the culture.

**WOODS:** Let me now ask about where and if the state comes into this, because of course we know there is what has been called the therapeutic or administrative state. In the absence of that, though, I mean, it certainly seems to be the case that a lot of this is being carried out through at least ostensibly private institutions and through the normal channels of civil society. So can you try to unpack exactly what's going on here, the extent to which this is being done through pressure exerted through private channels, or is it being done with the fist of the state in the background?

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah, it's being done by both sides, and I always make the invidious comparison between the present system of therapeutic administrative management in cultural Marxism with the Nazi state. In the Nazi state, there were certainly people who were anti-Semitic or anti-Polish or whatever running around, trying to oppress groups, discriminating against them and so forth. But without the heavy hand of a centralized state, this would not have resulted in the disaster that it did. I have never claimed that if the state goes away, all of these problems will vanish. They won't.

But what I have argued is that they would become less acute, because you see the hand of the state in almost — the universities, for instance. They are certainly being pressured by the state to go after sexists, to fight unwanted advances by males, to introduce affirmative action programs one way or the other. And once you recruit certain groups, they bring with it certain kinds of academic programs. And it is very hard to see the present situation without looking at state action or the actions of what we now call the deep state. So I would not argue that these problems are going to vanish if the state goes away here or in Western Europe, where the state performs similar actions. But I would argue that these problems would probably become less serious without the constant intervention of the state.

**WOODS:** What if there was a complete defunding of higher education?

**GOTTFRIED:** Oh, that would be marvelous.

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**GOTTFRIED:** Oh, yes, yes, I agree. Defunding of everything, you know?

**WOODS:** [laughing] Yeah, defunding of everything. You see, this is how — you know, let me just say something. People talk about we need to be more open and as libertarians we've got to reach out to more people. And I think, Paul, I think you and I are doing that with each other right here, because we can both agree the defunding everything is exactly the way to go. Now, if I were to reach out to people on the left, I'd never get that kind of agreement. I try. It never works out that way. And as Jeff Deist says, I can't think of one area anymore — now, I know there are exceptions. You find some guy who's like a throwback to Thomas Jefferson but he thinks he's on the left. Fair enough. I can't find any area of life that I can confidently say somebody on the left would say, "Yeah, certainly should not be involved in that."

**GOTTFRIED:** No, because they control the state, and they're shaping exactly you might say this nihilistic or destructive goal that they intend to pursue, so there's absolutely no reason they would want to pull the state out of any of this. Now, there are some things they'd want to pull the state out of like, I don't know, giving money to some religious organization that's conservative. But on the whole, they're very happy with state power, and the conservative establishment really doesn't mind either as long as the state makes wars that they favor and as long as it looks out for certain corporate capitalist interests that are giving the conservative movement money. They're not against the state either. So I think except for paleolibertarians and some paleoconservatives, there are very few political groups in the United States that oppose the growth of the managerial therapeutic state.

**WOODS:** I want to say something about Herbert Marcuse because you knew him a bit.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** And I've read a passage — I mean, I know more or less what he believed in, but I read a passage that he wrote in which he said that, yes, we talk about toleration and free speech, but we can't really extend that to the right, because if we tolerate that, that's going to undermine everything we're working for. If we tolerate intolerance, let's say, or if we tolerate reactionary views, that's going to undermine progressivism, so we can't tolerate that. So even that, which is something that we see on these college campuses, even that's not a new thing. Even that goes back to these folks.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right, right. But the work *Repressive Tolerance* by Marcuse is a work that he publishes I think in the late '60s. The Frankfurt School had been around over 40 years by then, and although they were soft on the communists and some of them were Stalinist apologists and so forth, as far as I know, that is the first time the Frankfurt School or people who are epigones of the Frankfurt School will openly come out in favor of suppression of reactionary opinions. Up until then, they didn't do that. And the reason they didn't do that, it would seem to me, is that they were afraid that they would be the victim of the intolerance. It was only when they were in a commanding position that they came out or Marcuse came out and called for shutting up people on the right who were a problem.

I must say, with all due respect to my former professor, Marcuse was a fortress of tolerance and open discussion in comparison to neoconservatives and most American liberals today. He was less repressive than many of the people who later criticized him.

But I do agree that the idea of shutting up people on the right is new. By the way, the arguments that are now used are a little different from Marcuse. Marcuse would say that

these people were bad and we have to shut up because they're counterrevolutionary and that tolerance is really repressive because we keep counterrevolutionaries in power. The argument today is people have to be shut up on campuses because they're insensitive, and I don't think Marcuse ever spoke about sensitivity or insensitivity. That I think is a more modern therapeutic justification for shutting people up.

**WOODS:** I've heard it said — well, by you and by others and, in fact, even earlier in this conversation — that when you look at real communists, card-carrying Marxists, they would look at the Frankfurt School and say: you're not real Marxists because you're not putting the primacy on the economic and you don't understand the role that culture plays or whatever. But one of the points that you and others have made is that, moreover, the real communists tended to be in their own personal conduct and often in their expressed views quite conventional and bourgeois. Like they weren't saying we should have polyamory or we should have feminism or whatever or certainly we should have homosexuality. Good luck getting that across in the communist party in the 1950s. That's not happening.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right, right.

**WOODS:** But at the same time, can't we take that a little bit too far? Because after the Bolshevik Revolution, they did make abortion available, and one of Mises' criticisms of socialism, which I'm sure folks on the left side of the libertarian spectrum don't want to hear — one of his criticisms was that it does seem to bring free love and feminism in its train. So surely there's some connection there between traditional communism and those things.

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, I kind of have a very different perspective. I think the communists tried this for a short period of time. Then they become extremely puritanical, if I can use that misused term [laughing]. I mean, in that they punished homosexuals. For a while, they tried to control abortion, but then they decide to just let that one go. And communist societies, postwar societies had a lot of abortion. But homosexuals were sent to labor camps and things like that as being bourgeois decadence.

What I have noticed is that since communist parties have been dissolving in Western Europe — not so much in Eastern Europe, by the way, where they just become nationalists. But in Western Europe where they're dissolving, former communists become cultural Marxists. If you look at Italy, Germany, other countries, France, the former communists become advocates of open borders, gay marriage, punishing Holocaust deniers, all the rest of this we might say the sort of cultural leftist agenda. And they cease to be Marxists in any recognizable sense.

Now, this is different in Eastern Europe, as I said. We have people like Tudman in Croatia who were communists and Titoists become ultra-nationalists. Or you know, the case of Putin. This is not unusual. But in Western Europe, the traditional Marxists become cultural Marxists, and that I think is a significant trend. They sort of give up on Marxist Leninism and just become supporters or gay marriage, open borders, Islamic immigration, stuff like that.

**WOODS:** But I think it's well beyond gay marriage. It's gay marriage and everybody has to be happy about it and everybody has to celebrate it and everybody has to have a nondiscrimination policy against the following 12 groups, 11 of which you didn't even know existed until an hour ago.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** And this has to be rammed through at every level of society so that everybody knows who's in charge and what it's going to take to stay out of trouble in the future. And that's the problem that really ought to alarm, well, frankly anybody, but particularly me. And the thing is I'm not in a position — I don't hire people anyway. I have a few independent contractors, but I can hire anybody I want to. It's not a problem for me personally. But I just don't like the bullying direction the whole thing is going in.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah, it's something that I saw among libertarians with the gay marriage proposal before it was forced down our throat by the federal government, and the argument was it's perfectly okay because it's freedom of choice. The argument that I was making at the time was: no, it will not be freedom of choice, because for those of us who don't accept it, there will be punishment and we'll be attacked as bigots and the government will come after us, and our opposition will be criminalized. So that once you do this, you simply give the therapeutic managerial state more power to control our behavior. It does not increase our freedom; it increases government control.

**WOODS:** I almost hesitate to ask Paul Gottfried this question, but is there anything that can be done? Now, I almost want to cover my ears, because I'm afraid of the answer. I'm afraid that the answer will be there isn't anything [laughing]. So do you have anything else you can tell me?

**GOTTFRIED:** I'm afraid you'll have to cover your ears [laughing].

**WOODS:** No, no [laughing].

**GOTTFRIED:** No, I think there really has to be a political and cultural sea change for any of this to go away. And I think there has to be — I know this is like wishful thinking, but I'd like to see a real right develop, as opposed to the bogus right that has marginalized me and other people on the right, because that might make a difference. In places like Poland or Hungary, you have a real right; therefore, you don't have gay marriage. In the United States and Canada, you don't have a real right. What you have is a right that goes along, providing that certain demands are met, like taking a strongly pro-Zionist foreign policy, getting involved in democracy construction abroad, things like that. Where you have a serious right, you can oppose this, but I don't see the United States developing a well-funded, serious, media-visible right in the near future, and therefore, you'll have to cover your ears.

**WOODS:** Ah, well, that's not quite what I was hoping for, but it was more or less —

**GOTTFRIED:** [laughing] It's what you expected.

**WOODS:** — I'm sorry to say, what I expected. That's right; that's right. You know, you sent me this interesting essay. Will there ever be an opportunity for us to discuss that?

**GOTTFRIED:** You mean the essay on purges in the American —

**WOODS:** Yes, the essay on purges. Can we talk about purges sometime?



**GOTTFRIED:** Oh, absolutely. That is one of my favorite subjects.

**WOODS:** [laughing]

**GOTTFRIED:** I've devoted my old age to writing on this problem. No, I think purges are extremely important for understanding why the American conservative movement has developed as it has, and it is hardly ever talked about.

**WOODS:** All right, so at some point —

**GOTTFRIED:** I'd be very happy to come on your program to discuss that.

**WOODS:** Okay, so we'll definitely have to have you back to talk about that. And just in case I have somebody who's not been offended by this episode who's still listening in, how do you handle this — now, especially being Jewish, how do you handle somebody who looks at the Frankfurt School and writes to you a nasty letter saying, "Hey, Paul Gottfried, why don't you mention that these are Jews and this is all a part of their plan to destroy Christian civilization?" I get emails like this from people from time to time, and they say: why don't I go after the Jews, because they're trying to destroy Christian civilization? And they'll point to the Frankfurt School. What do you say to that?

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, you know, it's interesting because I had a quarrel with the American representatives of the Frankfurt School who were concentrated in the *Telos* school when Paul Piccone was alive, because I agreed with the Hungarian Jewish political commentator Zoltan Tar, who wrote a book in German on the Frankfurt School saying that you cannot understand them without looking at their Jewishness. I totally agree. I think they really were interested in destroying what they saw as a repressive, fascist Christian civilization. I think this is true. But my response to these people who are obsessively anti-Jewish is that if Jewish leftists have helped to do this, there certainly had been a lot of Christian collaborators.

**WOODS:** Duh! [laughing] I mean, hello!

**GOTTFRIED:** I mean, why weren't Ukrainian peasants influenced by this? They were anti-Jewish. Why is it that American Protestant culture and many Catholics now go along with this? They're even more extreme than the Jews. There has to be something in the culture itself that makes people receptive to bad ideas, whether they come from Jews or other sources. I mean, that's usually the response that I give. But I do not deny the fact that they're Jewish. In fact, in my writings I mention this, and I do not deny that their being Jewish, their sense of marginality as Jews, which may have been exaggerated in the case of some of them, had an effect.

Either way, Adorno was a Catholic, although his father had been Jewish. Horkheimer, who was Jewish, becomes extremely right-wing by the end of his life. But the other ones are very definitely Jewish. Marcuse I don't think ever thought about his Jewishness. Eric Fromm hated Christians and blamed the Holocaust on Christianity. So you know, they weren't all equally anti-Christian, although there's no question that the sense of Jewish marginalization or marginality affects the political thinking of the Frankfurt School.

**WOODS:** All right, so there we'll leave it. What are the books in, let's say, the body of work of Paul Gottfried that people should consult if they want to learn more about this?

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, my book on the post-Marxist left very definitely treats this, and the second half of my book on fascism provides a detailed discussion of the Frankfurt School and anti-fascism, so I'd recommend both of those works.

**WOODS:** All right, so the book on *Fascism: The Career of a Concept* I think we've covered on the show. I'll link to that.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** But then also is it *The Strange Death of Marxism*? What's the name —

**GOTTFRIED:** Right, *The Strange Death of Marxism: The European Left in the New Millennium*.

**WOODS:** There it is, okay, yeah. And by the way, that is, at least for somebody like me who was sort of a newcomer to this stuff when I read it, that's a pretty thorough — it's not a super-duper long book, but there's no fluff in it. There isn't one sentence that's fluff. It is packed with information and ideas and names and history. It is all in there.

**GOTTFRIED:** And unlike your books, it is very densely written. It's written in Gottfriedese.

**WOODS:** Well, actually, I have to say I enjoy Gottfriedese. Like, you sent me that essay and you said, "Well, I'm not sure about the prose," and I thought, *Don't change one syllable on this thing. I love it.*

**GOTTFRIED:** [laughing] Okay.

**WOODS:** Anyway, thanks a lot, Paul. Always fun talking to you.

**GOTTFRIED:** Okay, thank you for having me.