

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk membahas tentang teori kritis Mazhab Frankfurt secara umum mulai dari sejarah hingga perkembangan teori kritis Mazhab Frankfurt, serta bagaimana penerapan aspek atau nilai dari Teori Kritis Mazhab Frankfurt dalam pendidikan dan perkembangan Teori Kritis Islam. Pendekatan dalam kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Data-data yang dimuat dalam artikel ini dikumpulkan melalui pencarian literatur melalui buku, jurnal, dan dokumen-dokumen lain yang membahas mengenai Teori Kritis Mazhab Frankfurt. Analisis data dilakukan dengan proses konten analisis. Hasil dari kajian ini adalah Teori Kritis Mazhab Frankfurt termasuk salah satu aliran filsafat ilmu yang masih eksis hingga saat ini. Tidak hanya untuk barat namun juga oleh filsuf-filsuf muslim. Meskipun tidak terlalu familiar di Indonesia, namun aspek maupun nilai dari Teori Kritis Mazhab Frankfurt dapat kita adaptasi dalam proses pendidikan seperti melalui penerapan pedagogi kritis untuk mengembangkan pemahaman dan kepekaan untuk melakukan perubahan serta pengaplikasian pendidikan agama kritis menjadi pendidikan agama Islam kritis yang mematahkan stigma yang kerap kali membenturkan antara Islam dan Barat dalam bidang pendidikan. Hal yang tidak kalah penting adalah adanya peluang besar bagi para akademisi maupun filsuf untuk terus mengembangkan konsep Teori Kritis Islam yang tergolong masih minim rujukan. Teori kritis sejatinya dapat menjadi salah satu konsep dalam pengembangan keilmuan Islam, karena Allah sangat menganjurkan umatnya untuk berpikir secara kritis dalam mengejar ilmu pengetahuan.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Pedagogi Kritis, Pendidikan Agama Kritis, Pendidikan Agama Islam Kritis, Teori Kritis Islam, Teori Kritis Mazhab Frankfurt*

Introduction

Twentieth-century philosophy is defined by four major schools: phenomenism, existentialism, neo-Thomism, and analytical philosophy, along with the Neomarxist tradition. Critical Theory, which emerged later, falls under the Neomarxist umbrella because it is seen by some Marxists as a departure from traditional Marxist thought. Neomarxism sets itself apart by rejecting Friedrich Engels' oversimplification of Karl Marx's teachings. Engels was instrumental in organizing Marx's ideas into a coherent and systematic framework, which ultimately became known as Marxism, the official ideology of international communism (Suseno 1992, 159-60).

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory originated from a significant tradition of Marx-inspired philosophy that has evolved considerably away from Marx's initial concepts. Named for its association with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, this intellectual movement critically engages with traditional theories, particularly positivism. Critical theory posits that positivism is insufficiently attentive to human praxis, asserting that it lacks the depth and practical relevance necessary for robust social analysis. Furthermore, proponents of critical theory argue that contemporary modes of thinking mirror the cognitive frameworks of mythological societies, thereby highlighting the need for critical examination and transformation in modern intellectual discourse (Upe and Wahid 2019, 62).

The Frankfurt School's Critical Theory eschews evaluations of the rightness or wrongness of social realities, focusing instead on the liberation of individuals from oppressive structural hegemony through the cultivation of critical consciousness and diverse perspectives. It posits that the attainment of social justice is contingent upon the active engagement and awareness of the marginalized communities in the processes of critical analysis and practical reflection. This framework underscores the necessity of empowering the oppressed to participate in transformative social action (Fajarni 2022, 75).

The Frankfurt School's Critical Theory can be more accurately characterized as an ideologically oriented inquiry. This framework employs a critical lens to analyze reality in relation to a variety of ideologies, including Neo-Marxism, Materialism, Feminism, Freirean pedagogy, and Participatory Inquiry, among others. As a methodological approach, Critical Theory facilitates the critique of existing thoughts and paradigms, contributing to the advancement of scientific understanding and the exploration of alternative perspectives within the realm of social inquiry (Muslih 2016, 95).

Initially, the Frankfurt School offered a critique of the liberal-capitalist framework characterizing contemporary society. However, Jürgen Habermas's contributions are often viewed as infusing this critique with a renewed dynamism. Habermas underscores the significance of subjective consciousness in effecting changes in objective structures. Thus, his analytical framework predominantly centers on superstructural phenomena—including culture, economy, religion, politics, and education—while particularly interrogating the underlying rationality or ideology that governs these domains. This perspective was further elucidated by Gaston Bachelard and Ferdinand Gonseth, who proposed a conception of knowledge as a process of "becoming." This notion facilitates the engagement of researchers and critics alike. In the epistemological domain (Burhanuddin 2018, 123).

For instance, William Meynell articulates the concept of the "Critical Theory of Knowledge" to examine the interplay between experience and reality. This critical approach recognizes the role of a conscious subject who persistently poses questions. It acknowledges that through the act of questioning, one engages with experiences or realities, thereby generating understanding and informing decisions (Meynell 1991, 10).

Previous studies have addressed various aspects of critical education theory. Muhammad Adnan examined the critical education paradigm from the perspective of Islamic education (Adnan 2015, 97). Gerald Moratua Siregar analyzed Habermas' critical theory as an alternative approach to implementing independent learning policies through competency-based curriculum (Siregar 2021, 142). Research by Aiman Fikri explored critical philosophy and the contributions of critical education theory (Fikri et al.

2024, 2810). However, these studies have not provided concrete steps for applying critical theory in educational practice or addressed the development of Islamic critical theory.

This research employs a qualitative approach to elucidate the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. It begins with an exploration of its historical context, key figures, and the evolution of the theory, followed by an examination of various philosophers' perspectives on this critical framework. The study culminates in an analysis of the application of critical theory within the educational sphere. Data collection is conducted through a literature review of relevant books, journals, and other sources. The data is then analyzed using critical content analysis to assess the findings about the Frankfurt School's critical theory. A key novelty of this study is its focus on the extent to which the values and aspects of this critical theory can be integrated into everyday educational practices, and also to explore the development and opportunities of critical Islamic theory.

History and Background of Critical Theory

The Frankfurt School is officially known as the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research). Established in early 1923 by a group of young intellectuals from Frankfurt, the institute was funded by member Felix Weil. It later became one of the departments of the University of Frankfurt. Under the leadership of Max Horkheimer in the 1930s, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research achieved a peak of maturity (Upe and Wahid 2019, 69).

The terms 'Frankfurt School' and 'Critical Theory' evoke more than just a specific paradigm within social science; they also conjure memories of influential figures such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas. Additionally, they are associated with the student movements of the 1960s, the "positivist dispute," critiques of culture, and perhaps evoke reflections on German émigrés, the Third Reich, Judaism, the Weimar Republic, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. There is more at play than merely a school of thought or a segment of academic history. The label 'Frankfurt School' was initially assigned by outsiders in the 1960s, but Adorno eventually embraced it with evident pride. At its core, it represented a critical sociology that viewed society as an antagonistic totality, incorporating the ideas of Hegel and Marx while positioning itself as their intellectual heir (Wiggerhaus 1995, 1).

The characteristics that defined a 'school' within the context of the Institute of Social Research were evident in varying degrees—some consistently, while others appeared temporarily or sporadically. Noteworthy attributes included:

1. Institutional Framework: The Institute of Social Research main-

tained an institutional structure throughout its history, albeit with periods of diminished presence.

2. **Charismatic Intellectual Leadership:** Max Horkheimer emerged as a pivotal figure, embodying a commanding intellectual presence and fostering confidence in a novel theoretical agenda. He actively engaged with distinguished scholars, positioning himself as a 'managerial scholar' who consistently reminded his colleagues of their elite status and the significant responsibility they bore for the evolution of 'Theory.'
3. **Foundational Manifesto:** The inception of the Institute was articulated in Horkheimer's seminal inaugural lecture of 1931, titled "The Present State of Social Philosophy and the Tasks Facing an Institute of Social Research." This lecture served as a cornerstone for subsequent narratives regarding the Institute and was frequently revisited by Horkheimer himself, notably during the 1951 ceremony marking the Institute's reopening in Frankfurt.
4. **Innovative Paradigm:** The Institute championed a 'materialist' or 'critical' theory of social existence, characterized by an interdisciplinary fusion of philosophy and social science. This theoretical framework systematically integrated psychoanalysis and drew upon critiques of rationality and metaphysics from thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Klages, all within the broader context of historical materialism. The term 'Critical Theory' was employed throughout, though its interpretation varied among its proponents, including Horkheimer, who gradually shifted from his initial conceptualization.

Publication Outlets: The dissemination of research findings was facilitated through esteemed publications, including the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung (Journal of Social Research)*, which initially was published by Hirschfeld in Leipzig and later by Felix Alcan in Paris.

Figures and Development of Critical Theory

Critical theory possesses distinct characteristics when compared to other critical schools. Firstly, its focus extends beyond merely critiquing the political landscape of its time. Critical theory addresses the prevailing dominance of capitalist class interests that ideologically suppress workers' consciousness, aiming to facilitate social change by illuminating the forces that generate and sustain social inequality. Secondly, critical theory seeks to understand the limitations of rationality, including its shortcomings, and to assess its own rational processes through that understanding (Rush 2004, 9–10). Thus, reflexivity emerges as a fundamental characteristic of critical theory.

A distinctive feature of Critical Theory is its focus on exposing and challenging forms of domination within society. Specifically, it addresses the domination associated with class society, exercised by capital owners over the proletariat. This domination is typically understood to manifest in the social relations of production, which represent the foundational structure of society. The Frankfurt School further expands on this notion by incorporating the concept of domination within the superstructure, extending it to include political and cultural domains. As a result, the nature of domination is both total and monolithic: total in that it encompasses various aspects of life, and monolithic in its aim to safeguard the interests of the owners of production from the emergence of political awareness among those groups that have been or may be oppressed (Thayf, Syamsuddin, and Suparningsih 2020, 162–63).

In the realm of social science, the Frankfurt School’s Critical paradigm maintains that theory and human praxis are inseparable, resulting in a form of theory that is intricately intertwined with political alliances. This perspective fosters an interest in the liberation of both one and others. In essence, the Frankfurt School Critical paradigm advocates for an approach that eschews the comfort zone, instead promoting a continuous evaluative process. To summarize, the philosophical dimensions of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory can be articulated as follows:

Table 1. Philosophy of Critical Theory Paradigm

Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology
Historical reality-virtual reality shaped by social, political, ethnic, and gender values crystallized over time.	T r a n s a c t i o n a l / subjectivist, mediated findings (dialogical/dialectical).	Critical and transformative; restoration and emancipation as value-laden.

The development of critical theory is inseparable from the influence of several figures from various generations. Some of the figures who have influenced the development of critical theory include:

A. First Generation

1. Max Horkheimer

Max Horkheimer was born in 1895 in the vicinity of Stuttgart, Germany. His parents were part of the local Jewish community, which had steadily expanded throughout the nineteenth century and had successfully established itself as a vital component of the city’s economic, political, and cultural landscape. Horkheimer’s initial philosophical interest was in Schopenhauer, but he also developed a fascination with Marxist theory toward the conclusion of the war. While majoring in psychology and philosophy at the newly established J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt, he simultaneously pursued independent studies of Marx alongside

Pollock, who would later complete a dissertation on Marx's theory of money in 1923 (Abromeit 2018, 19–20).

The root of domination lies in the socio-epistemological contradictions inherent in capitalist society. Capitalism represents a stage of societal development that has succeeded in accumulating immense wealth, yet, paradoxically, poverty continues to persist, both in relative and absolute terms (Horkheimer 1989, 45). Another more fundamental contradiction arises from the nature of capitalism itself: How can the ideals of welfare, justice, and freedom for all—central promises of this system—be realized in an environment characterized by competition among atomistic individuals, each solely focused on pursuing their own interests (Horkheimer 1947, 90).

For Horkheimer, materialism serves as the appropriate theoretical framework to explain and address social inequalities. He went on to articulate the concept of Dialectical Materialism, which he later expanded through his introduction of Critical Theory. The term “Dialectical Materialism” highlights two key aspects. First, Horkheimer's approach represents a form of dialectical materialism that sets itself apart from vulgar materialism by incorporating valuable insights from the ideologies it critiques, including elements of idealism and positivism. Second, it emphasizes that Horkheimer's dialectic is fundamentally rooted in materialism. This focus is significant because dialectics has historically been linked to idealism, a viewpoint that Feuerbach, Marx, and Engels ultimately rejected in its idealistic form (Horkheimer, 1989, 34). For Horkheimer, the primary aim of dialectical theory is to clarify the essential distinctions between the ideal and the real, as well as between theory and practice (Horkheimer 1947, 124).

2. Theodor W. Adorno

Adorno's preference for a paratactic approach to philosophy, as demonstrated in later works such as *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics*, was directly influenced by these passages. Conversely, he consistently expressed his concerns regarding Walter Benjamin's profound theological aspirations, which he believed were incompatible with a genuinely materialist perspective. Consequently, Adorno's interpretation of constellations resembled what might be called “negative theology.” The state of redemption or “reconciliation” (*Versöhnung*) that Benjamin's thought suggested could only be inferred negatively: it would represent the antithesis of the current, degraded condition. For this reason, Adorno frequently referenced the philosopher F. H. Bradley's insight: “Where everything is bad, it must be good to know the worst.” (Wolin 2006, 51).

Adorno's concept of “negative dialectics” emerged as a counter to the Hegelian variant, which has rightly been criticized for conflating the “real” with the “rational” and thus glorifying the historical present

in all its deficiencies. The Frankfurt School philosopher harbored a deep aversion to the Hegelian moment of “synthesis.” However, this unwavering focus on the “negative” began to appear, at times, theoretically self-defeating. If every attempt to transform the “totally administered world” merely reinforced its overwhelming power, then all efforts at practical intervention—every form of praxis—seemed futile. In the 1960s, Adorno faced accusations of “resignation.” He addressed these criticisms with the same elegance and vigor that had become his trademark. Around this time, he also experienced his first notable encounter with Max Horkheimer. During the 1940s, from their exilic vantage point in Pacific Palisades, California, the two collaborated on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: a comprehensive reinterpretation of Western cultural evolution in light of the profound civilizational regression ushered in by National Socialist barbarism. One of the paradoxes in the receptionist’s history of the Frankfurt School is that such undeniably unrepresentative work would come to be recognized as its signature theoretical achievement (Wolin 2006, 51–52).

3. Herbert Marcuse

Herbert Marcuse was born in Berlin on July 19, 1898. His father, a Jewish immigrant from the Pomeranian provinces, had moved to Berlin with his brothers. Marcuse began his studies in modern German history in Berlin and later continued at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, where he also pursued philosophy and economics as minor disciplines. In 1922, he earned his doctorate in Freiburg with a thesis titled “*The German Novel about the Artist*.” Drawing heavily on Georg Lukács’s “*Soul and Form*” and “*Theory of the Novel*,” as well as Hegel’s “*Aesthetics*” (WiggersHaus 1995, 95–96).

After earning his doctorate, Marcuse, who had been married since 1924, returned to Berlin. His father secured him an apartment and a stake in a publishing and antiquarian book business, where Marcuse hosted a left-wing literary salon. This gathering became a forum for discussions on Marxist theory, Gestalt psychology, abstract painting, and contemporary trends in bourgeois philosophy. Alongside his closest friend, he delved into Heidegger’s *Being and Time* shortly after its publication, recognizing that it addressed a crucial aspect overlooked in Marxist theory—despite Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*: the existential dimension. They appreciated how the book began with everyday forms of alienation and clarified the question of what constitutes authentic human existence. Consequently, Marcuse resolved to return to Freiburg, where he had previously attended Husserl’s lectures without much interest, and to pursue an academic career in philosophy (Wiggerhaus 1995, 96–97).

Critical theory, as articulated by Marcuse, is focused on understanding all forms of social practice and the various factors that impede their

self-consciousness and free development. It seeks to fulfill two key purposes: first, to prevent the loss of truths that past knowledge has diligently pursued, and second, to critique current conditions and analyze their tendencies. By investigating the social structure present in all social phenomena—evident in particular facts and conditions that determine their place and function—critical theory aims to reveal that this structure harbors unrealized potentialities. These potentialities arise from a disparity between the prevailing human existence and the essence of humanity, which encompasses historically established abilities and capacities that remain unfulfilled. This gap can be understood by exploring what stands in opposition to the established order: social struggles, concepts that transcend conventional patterns of description (including the dominant use of language), and the wants and desires that signal frustration and a longing for an alternative way of being (Held 2004, 224–25).

B. Second Generation (Jurgen Habermas)

The ideas generated by the Frankfurt School have significantly influenced Jürgen Habermas, who has emerged as a leading voice for a new generation of critical theorists. Born in 1929 and raised in Nazi Germany, Habermas did not embrace radicalism until the late 1950s. Under the guidance of figures such as Adorno, to whom he served as an assistant, Habermas recognized the systematic applications of Marx and Freud. After teaching at Heidelberg University, he assumed a chair in philosophy and sociology at the University of Frankfurt in 1964, a position he held until 1971, when he moved to the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg, West Germany, where he continues to work. Although his body of work should not merely be seen as a linear progression from the earlier writings of Horkheimer and Adorno, his endeavors since the late 1950s have focused on reshaping critical theory (Held 2004, 249).

Habermas envisions his project as an endeavor to formulate a theory of society with a practical purpose: the self-emancipation of individuals from domination. By evaluating the self-formative processes of the human species, Habermas's critical theory seeks to enhance the self-awareness of social groups capable of instigating societal transformation (Held 2004, 250). Habermas's work operates on multiple levels. He frequently aims to establish fundamental analytic distinctions that clarify certain logical relationships and, ideally, offer the framework for reconstructing historical materialism. However, it is often challenging to follow the reasoning that underpins these categories. For instance, in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, it remains unclear what specific argumentative approach establishes the interests as 'quasi-transcendental.' Furthermore, the validity and practical utility of these categories often come into question (Held 2004, 390).

Habermas poured his thought project by saying science has its own interests. In this context, Habermas distinguishes three categories of science with the underlying interest category. The three categories of science in question are presented in the following table (Upe and Wahid 2019, 117):

Table 2. Groups of sciences and their interests

Group of Science	Interest or Purpose
Empirical-Analytical Natural Sciences	Nomothetic (search for natural laws) technical interests
Historical-Hermeneutical: history, literature, socio-cultural, etc.	Ideographic (expression of meaning) interests: broadening horizons, communication, and collective action
Action/Critical Sciences: sociology, politics, philosophy, feminist theory, etc.	Critical reflection. Interests: emancipatory

C. Third Generation (Axel Honneth)

Axel Honneth was born in Essen, Germany, on July 18, 1949. He is a philosopher and social theorist recognized as part of the third generation of Critical Theory. Honneth studied at the Universities of Bonn and Bochum from 1969 to 1974, where he earned his M.A. in philosophy. He then continued his studies at the Universities of Berlin and Munich. During his time in Munich, Honneth was directly mentored by Jürgen Habermas. In 2001, he became the director of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, focusing on philosophy, social theory, ethics, and German literature. Since 2011, Honneth has held a professorship in the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University in America (Upe and Wahid 2019, 124–25).

Honneth's most significant contribution to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory lies in his exploration of the theory of recognition, often referred to as the politics of recognition. His notable work is titled "The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflict." In his theory, Honneth critiques Habermas, who posits that social relations in society will naturally establish themselves within a public sphere characterized as a communicative society. According to Habermas, individuals can engage in direct communication with one another without the necessity of self-recognition within that societal context. He views the subject not as an ethical being but rather as an entity focused on rationality, defined by communicative actions aimed at achieving consensus. Honneth, however, argues that this perspective is not conducive to true

human intersubjectivity. He emphasizes that social life is inherently tied to the morality and ethics inherent in each individual. It is through the presence of these moral and ethical considerations that individuals can foster an environment rich in harmony and kinship among one another (Upe and Wahid 2019, 128–30).

Islamic Philosophers' Views of Critical Theory

The development of Frankfurt School critical theory has generated significant controversy, particularly among social scientists such as Ben Anger. Angger argues that critical theory lacks empirical substantiation and regards the concept of an ideal society, defined as one without oppression and injustice, as merely an abstract aspiration (Sholahudin 2020, 89). From an Islamic perspective, critical theory does not acknowledge revelation as a legitimate source of knowledge, which perpetuates a scientific paradigm that remains secular in orientation (Irawati et. al. 2021, 879).

Even so, the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory still attracted the interest of prominent Islamic philosophers, who have engaged with and adapted its principles to further develop Islamic thought in a conceptual and emancipatory framework. This intellectual endeavor serves as a critique of prevailing social structures, ideologies, and forms of oppressive power. Additionally, it aims to reinterpret Islamic teachings to ensure their relevance to contemporary societal challenges. Notable figures in this scholarly engagement include:

1. Ḥasan Ḥanafī

Ḥasan Ḥanafī has explicitly and consistently embraced the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory throughout his philosophical career. He reinterprets the concept of *al-Yassār al-Islām*, asserting that the term “left” extends beyond socialism to encompass a synthesis of progressive elements from various Islamic schools and liberation movements in Muslim history. Ḥanafī’s engagement with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory began during his visits to the United States between 1972 and 1975, where he encountered the ideas of liberation theology that merge Catholic spirituality and Marxism with distinct Latin American socialism (Hanafi 2003, 65–68).

For Ḥanafī, Critical Theory serves as a vital bridge connecting philosophy with a range of disciplines, particularly the social sciences and humanities (Hanafi 2015, 71). His critiques primarily focus on the interpretation of Islamic tradition and the impact of Western thought on the realities faced by Arab nations. Furthermore, Hanafi’s examination extends to the socio-epistemological structures of contemporary Muslim society and challenges classical kalam science, which often prioritizes theocentric themes while neglecting broader collective human interests.

2. Syed Hussein Alatas

Syed Hussein Alatas advocates for the deconstruction of the colonial legacy that has been internalized by Malay Muslims in their thought and perspective. He openly acknowledges the existence of critical elements that can be aligned with Islamic beliefs, such as the critique of false consciousness, the role of ideology, and the notion of colonialism as a response to the crisis of capitalism (Thayf 2020, 166).

One of Alatas's key intellectual roles was to contemplate the direction society should pursue. He championed a form of socialism that harmonized with Islamic principles. In 1956, while studying at the University of Amsterdam, he published a brief monograph titled "*Islamic Democracy*", which included discussions on socialism, particularly Scientific Socialism and its philosophical foundation, historical materialism. He critiqued certain aspects of socialism for what he considered the "superficiality of its doctrine." For instance, Alatas argued that the perspective that views human beings solely as products of institutions had been proven inadequate. Years later, while teaching at the University of Singapore, Alatas elaborated on the relationship between Islam and socialism in response to anti-socialist sentiments among Islamic groups in Malaysia, which he believed required correction. He expressed his agreement with Seyyed Jamaluddin Afghani and Haji Omar Said Tjokroaminoto regarding specific characteristics of socialism that could be found within Islam (Alatas 2016, 203).

3. Malcolm X

Malcolm X advocated for a critical theory that served as an alternative to the prevailing Eurocentric narrative, which even influenced African American self-perception. This critical theory resonated with the autonomous social science proposed by Alatas. A significant aspect of Malcolm's contribution to this effort was his call for an Afrocentric ideology as a counter to white supremacist ideologies. He urged young activists in the civil rights movement to independently look, listen, and think for themselves (Malcolm 1991, 49). Additionally, he championed Black Nationalism as a means of liberation for African Americans. While Alatas promoted an Islamic interpretation of socialism, Malcolm emphasized the importance of Black Nationalism.

4. Fawzia Gilani-Williams

Fawzia Gilani-Williams further developed the concept of "Islamic Critical Theory," which incorporates principles from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, particularly in the realms of emancipation and social justice. She highlights the need to merge Islamic values with critical methodologies to free individuals from structural oppression. This approach illustrates the alignment between Islamic ideals and

critical theory in the quest for justice and freedom. Gilani-Williams' "Islamic Critical Theory" is rooted in Horkheimer's three criteria for a theory, asserting that a critical theory must simultaneously be explicable, practical, and normative (Gilani-Williams 2014, 16–27).

5. Franz Magnis-Suseno

Frans Magnis Suseno posits that in advanced industrial societies, contradictions, frustrations, and oppression often go unnoticed. Society conveys an illusion of overall well-being, suggesting that all needs can be met and that everything operates efficiently, productively, smoothly, and purposefully. These deceptive impressions must be critically examined and unveiled. This leads to the concept of the "totality that wants to be opened." Critical theory fundamentally seeks to achieve *Aufklärung*, or Enlightenment. *Aufklärung* refers to the desire to illuminate truth, to uncover the veils that obscure the inhumane aspects of reality from our consciousness. Within this framework, critical theory addresses the notion of "*verblendungeszusammenhang*" (the link of obscurity), which acts as a comprehensive veil that blinds us to the truth (Suseno 1992, 165–66).

6. Akhyar Yusuf Lubis

Similarly, Akhyar Yusuf Lubis perceives Frankfurt School Critical Theory as a means to emancipate humanity from the economic dominance of capitalism and the ideologies that sustain it. He underscores the necessity of a new paradigm in social science that can more accurately and humanely unveil social realities while challenging oppressive structures. For Lubis, critical theory highlights the interconnectedness of theory and praxis, emphasizing that theoretical insights must be translated into actionable practices. This issue also lies at the heart of critical theory's perspective on (social) scientists. According to critical theory, the role of (social) scientists extends beyond merely providing knowledge about social phenomena or explaining social conditions; they must also illuminate and enlighten social actors regarding the oppressive conditions they face. By recognizing these social circumstances, individuals can better understand and ultimately transform the systems that manipulate and oppress them (Lubis 2024, 77).

All of the above views essentially aim to free society from narrow-minded thinking that shackles them through intellectual criticism in order to achieve a better life. Of course, all of these views are appropriate to their respective fields. This shows that the concepts and values of Western philosophical theories can coexist with the spirit of Islam without undermining each other and proves that critical theory can be a relevant approach in various aspects of life by encouraging society to think critically and always question existing assumptions to create a just

and sustainable society.

Application of Aspect of Frankfurt School Critical Theory in Education

Application of Critical Theory in Critical Pedagogy

The relationship between education and critical theory has been notably advanced by scholars such as McLaren, Giroux, and Apple through the framework of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy serves as an educational paradigm that foregrounds the interplay between power, social justice, and knowledge production. This approach fosters the development of a critical consciousness among learners, encouraging them to engage in reflective reasoning and to interrogate prevailing ideologies alongside the social power structures that underpin them. The primary objective of critical pedagogy is to empower learners to become critical thinkers who actively question the status quo and strive to transform oppressive social systems and structures throughout the educational process (Lamsal 2024, 77).

Critical Theory and Pedagogy are grounded in normative commitments to exposing and transforming oppressive economic, political, social, and cultural structures, as well as emancipating individuals from the resulting inequalities and injustices that pervade all areas of human interaction. The term critical pedagogy refers to the theorization and implementation of pedagogical approaches that directly challenge these oppressive formations (Mason 2010, 136).

Critical pedagogy represents a significant social movement that integrates educational practices with critical theory. It critically analyzes the interplay between oppression, literacy, and praxis. Within the framework of critical pedagogy, the concept of critical consciousness emerges, empowering learners to identify and understand the contradictions inherent in their social, political, economic, gender, racial, and class conditions. This heightened awareness catalyzes action aimed at addressing these contradictions (Pruyn and Huerta-Charles 2016, 27).

The objective of education, particularly one designed to empower learners as agents of social change, should extend beyond the mere attainment of academic grades or the accumulation of knowledge. Instead, it must equip individuals (irrespective of their racial or ideological backgrounds) with the necessary tools to foster fulfillment in their personal lives and within their communities. Achieving this goal necessitates not only the impartation of knowledge but also the development of practical skills and competencies (Geuss 1981, 55).

Critical theory aims to facilitate liberation and enlightenment by illuminating the often-overlooked mechanisms of coercion, thereby enabling individuals to discern their actual interests. In this context,

critical theory seeks to unveil the interests and socio-political motivations of dominant powers (including the realms of science and culture) to promote emancipation and enlightenment. The synthesis of critical theory with educational practices gives rise to the critical pedagogy approach, fostering a transformative educational experience. This approach underscores the significance of empowering and educating learners to cultivate problem-solving skills and critical thinking abilities. Educators are called upon to adopt a critical pedagogy, which entails interrogating the dominant cultural narratives and subjecting them to rigorous political analysis (Kerebungu and Pangalila 2019, 106).

Critical theory is extensively employed to confront challenges and critiques within curriculum studies, particularly in the context of the United States. Within the framework of education, critical theory seeks to illuminate various manifestations of injustice and inequality by revealing the human interests and actions that permeate the educational environment. Through an examination of the ideological and political forces that shape the everyday operations of schools, critical theorists endeavor to formulate innovative and unconventional perspectives on the phenomenon of schooling. In conclusion, critical theory serves a pivotal role in advancing educational practices that interrogate societal norms and advocate for social equity, such as:

1. Critical theory emphasizes the imperative of addressing social injustices, particularly within the educational framework.
2. The content and dominant culture presented in schools often reflect the interests and vested agendas of particular groups.
3. Underlying the educational system is a prevailing ideology that warrants critical examination, as it is essential to explore and assess alternatives to this dominant ideological framework (Kerebungu and Pangalila 2019, 106–7).

The necessity for radical analysis in educational contexts necessitates a specific set of competencies among educators. Proficiency in critical language functions as a vital instrument for the political critique of existing systems. Furthermore, educators must engage with the ideological frameworks of all members of the school community to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the institutional culture. Equally paramount is the willingness to cultivate new knowledge that challenges prevailing paradigms. Consequently, educators must establish classroom environments that empower students not only to engage in listening but also to articulate and write from multiple perspectives (Kerebungu and Pangalila 2019, 107).

This approach may be perceived as radical, particularly when implemented within pre-university educational systems. However, the central objective is to nurture critical thinking abilities that enhance

understanding and sensitivity, ultimately facilitating transformative changes. To elucidate the implications of this theoretical framework, one can reference the eight postulates of critical pedagogy:

1. Education encompasses not only the dissemination of knowledge but also the engagement with political dynamics. This perspective posits that educators should not merely transmit information; rather, they should also cultivate within students an awareness of their political rights as citizens. It is essential to clarify that this does not entail encouraging students to pursue political careers or join political organizations; rather, the emphasis lies in fostering a democratic political consciousness among them.
2. Ethics must be positioned as a foundational component of educational frameworks. This obligation extends beyond the purview of religious educators; all educators bear ethical responsibilities that should be imparted to their students.
3. Education ought to be inclusive of the diversity that characterizes society, embodying the principles of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). Education needs to acknowledge and validate these differences, utilizing them as a source of cohesion for cultural unity and mutual understanding.
4. The curriculum should not be regarded as a fixed or sacrosanct document that precludes diverse interpretations and applications. Rather, it should represent a dynamic entity that allows for the continuous questioning and challenging of scientific postulates in a transparent, academic, democratic, and sustainable manner.
5. The scope of education extends beyond the mere transmission of established knowledge; it should actively foster critical examination of existing scientific paradigms, facilitate the exploration of novel ideas, and cultivate the development of innovative forms of knowledge.
6. Moreover, education must endeavor to reformulate prevailing notions of truth, striving for a more nuanced understanding and interpretation. This can be achieved through the interdisciplinary synthesis of various fields, as the integration of diverse perspectives enriches the discourse surrounding scientific truths.
7. Ultimately, the role of education transcends the mere critique of established norms; it must also proactively engage in envisioning pathways toward a more enlightened and equitable future.
8. Educators must conceptualize themselves as transformative intellectuals dedicated to the pursuit of social change and enhancement

(Kerebungu and Pangalila 2019, 107–9).

The eight principles of critical pedagogy emphasize the examination of methodologies and initiatives aimed at transforming educational structures that sustain inequality. This pedagogical framework serves as a cultural-political instrument that acknowledges and values human differences, particularly in terms of belief systems, race, class, and gender. The primary objective of critical pedagogy is to emancipate the marginalized while fostering a collective discourse of critique, resistance, and hope, thereby striving to alleviate various forms of human suffering.

Furthermore, it is imperative to address disparities in technology-integrated education to mitigate the digital divide. Ensuring equitable access to educational technology for all students must be complemented by the cultivation of critical digital literacy skills, enabling learners to ethically and analytically engage with technological advancements. Such competencies should reflect cultural diversity and respond to the varied needs of students (Ramadhani and Winarno 2025, 320). In the current era of disruption, individuals should be equipped to organize and analyze the technological needs of their communities. Comprehensive community learning of critical theory is essential to ensure that each person develops an independent understanding of critical theory and their purpose in life (Tasnur and Sudrajat 2020, 49).

Critical Religious Education to Critical Islamic Religious Education

The concept of Critical Religious Education (CRE) was developed by Andrew Wright at King's College London, drawing upon his prior works on spirituality and religious education. According to the Critical Religious Education (CRE), the fundamental objective of religious education is to cultivate a shared understanding of the pursuit of a meaningful life. This pursuit gives rise to profound ontological inquiries concerning the essence and purpose of life, thereby illuminating the nature and structure of the ultimate order of things (Ucan 2020, 44).

The critical religious education (CRE) approach is predicated on three principles: ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgmental rationality. In essence, critical realism posits two tenets. Firstly, it maintains that a material reality exists independently of human subjectivity and experience (ontological realism). Secondly, it acknowledges the subjective and contextually contingent nature of human knowledge (epistemic relativism). This middle-ground approach thus allows for judgments and understandings of phenomena to be non-determined but based on the best currently available information and research methods (judgmental rationality) (Ucan and Wright 2018, 205).

The CRE approach is predicated on the search for the ultimate reality of the order of things, that is, "truth" and "truthfulness," as the most prominent features. The contention surrounding claims of transcendental

truth necessitates an examination of the worldviews, symbols, narratives, inquiries, and practices that are also contested. In contradistinction to the liberal RE, CRE does not prioritize the constructive power of learners. Instead, it conceptualizes learning as a discovery process that occurs through active engagement with the reality of objects or phenomena. Wright proposes that when engaging with a religious phenomenon or worldview, it is imperative to address its critical, essential features. This is because learners cannot frequently discern the ultimate and variant features of a religious worldview. Muslim pupils, for instance, may encounter difficulties in differentiating between the fundamental truth claims of Islam and its practical and socio-cultural aspects. Consequently, students must engage with the critical aspects of a religious phenomenon related to a particular worldview in terms of its relation to the worldview as a whole and to its parts, as well as how it is associated with other worldviews. Furthermore, this necessitates the initiation of a critical dialogue between the horizons of meaning of students and the various religious and secular traditions. The present study posits that the integration of CRE can serve as a catalyst, prompting Muslim pupils to engage in a meticulous, cogent, judicious, and conscientious learning process. This, in turn, can facilitate the cultivation of a more intricate and diversified comprehension of their faith (Ucan and Wright 2018, 205).

Most Muslim and non-Muslim educators are still thinking that there is quite a significant tension between Islam and the West (secular liberalism) from their educational perspectives. While at first, critical education was not very popular in the Arab and Muslim world, today there is an increasing need to harmonize Islamic instruction with democratic modern values (Saada 2018, 411). It is also considered that traditional Islamic religious education could not respond to diversity within and outside Muslim communities, and therefore it has become an inadequate framework for meeting the religious and educational needs of Muslims today (Ucan and Wright 2018, 202).

Two fundamental concepts underpin CIRE: 1) faith balanced by criticality and context, and 2) a demand for social justice. In the context of CIRE, faith is balanced by criticality and context. The objective of this initiative is to facilitate a connection between the learner and the traditions, beliefs, and scriptural texts that have been handed down through history. The goal is to enable individuals to comprehend the contemporary implications of these traditions, beliefs, and scriptural texts. This enables the process of arriving at “non-determined” judgments during the pursuit of “the ultimate reality.” The second component of CIRE is the demand for social justice. Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education that aims to empower learners to take action in and on the world. Its objective is to foster an environment where individuals can exercise their autonomy and make decisions that align with their own values and aspirations. In

essence, critical pedagogy seeks to liberate human will from subjugation to the will of other human beings, promoting self-determination and the ability to shape one's own destiny (Felsenthal and Agbaria 2025, 2)

Saada and Magadlah then propose a Critical Islamic Religious Education (CIRE) paradigm that is better able to adapt Islamic religious education to modern democratic and pluralistic societies. CIRE fosters critical and reflective skills in Muslim students by promoting a non-apologetic and critical understanding of Islam and modernity. This approach enables students to engage in debates concerning the common good and, when necessary, reconsider their beliefs (Saada and Magadlah 2020, 212). In simple terms, there are two concepts in CIRE, namely faith balanced with criticism and context, and the demand for social justice.

CIRE does not suggest that all aspects of Islam are subjective or that no norms are shared among Muslims globally. Instead, it acknowledges that the core spiritual and ethical values of Islam have influenced diverse cultures, and that Islam has been interpreted and expressed within various historical, cultural, and geographical contexts. CIRE fosters the development of students' cognitive, spiritual, and moral faculties. These elements, together with physical and emotional articulations, are essential in defining *tarbiyyah* (upbringing, caring, and guidance) in Islamic literature. CIRE is characterized as inclusive, relevant, and progressive, as outlined in the following points:

1. CIRE assists Muslim students in cultivating their own reflective, critical, and dynamic identities. This approach stands in opposition to the essentialized, dogmatic, literalist, apologetic, and affective understanding of Islam that has been produced in the devotional discourse. Conversely, it possesses the capacity to elicit an intra-faith critique, given its propensity to perpetuate erroneous positions and interpretations. These misrepresentations have the potential to incite violent extremism.
2. The development of critical Islamic identities is not in opposition to the tenets of Islam and the message of the Quran regarding the utilization of reasoning and contemplation for the comprehension of Islamic primary sources (the Qur'an and Sunnah).
3. CIRE has been developed as a tool to promote understanding and tolerance among Muslim students regarding the diversity present within Islam, including its various sects and schools of thought, as well as the range of interpretations that exist among these communities. The objective of CIRE is to promote intellectual engagement, introspection, and receptivity towards diverse Islamic ideological orientations. Additionally, it facilitates the articulation of non-religious or secular Muslim perspectives on Islamic principles and the

conceptualization of ideal societal structures. Finally, it can diffuse tensions between followers of different denominations and explore how religious knowledge is intimately related to practices of power and control in Islamic history.

4. CIRE promotes the development of discernment among Muslim students, encouraging them to engage critically with the knowledge produced by religious authorities. It aims to instill a sense of awareness regarding the potential misuse of this knowledge for political ends. The study posits the hypothesis that Islamic education and theology, akin to other systems of knowledge, may be susceptible to the influence of discourses of radicalization and politicization within the broader societal context. Consequently, it is imperative to interrogate the entities that represent Islam and the underlying motivations behind their actions.
5. The critique from outside the Islamic tradition in CIRE empowers Muslim students to become confident defenders of their faith against common misunderstandings, Islamophobic, and orientalist perceptions.
6. CIRE promotes a reevaluation of past interpretations by Muslim scholars, encouraging its adherents to critically assess the validity and applicability of their work in the modern age. Furthermore, this assists Muslim students in distinguishing between the fundamental truth claims of Islam and its practical and socio-cultural aspects.
7. CIRE has been demonstrated to enhance critical thinking, tolerance, and self-reflection at the personal level, as well as the values of empathy and mutual respect, justice, and respect for other religious and non-religious worldviews at the social level. The absence of critical and educational awareness of gender, culture, and religious difference has the potential to result in the development of negative attitudes and values that give rise to a culture characterized by suspicion, fear, hatred, and rejection of difference and diversity.
8. CIRE encourages Muslim students to engage in comparative analysis of the perspectives held by Muslim scholars on controversial theological issues and contemporary modern problems, and to adopt an informed and critical stance on these issues. These issues may include the relationship between Islam and democracy in Muslim-majority countries; women's status and rights; the treatment of religious and non-religious others; the practice of religious freedom and freedom of speech; and the meaning of Jihad.
9. CIRE challenges the prevailing Western Orientalist academic discourses that depict Islam as being in opposition to the West, there-

by labeling it as anti-humanist, anti-modernist, and anti-democratic. Furthermore, it serves to mitigate the dichotomy between Islam and the West. Muslim-majority societies emerged in reaction to the trauma of colonialism (Saada and Magadlah 2020, 212).

Theologically, CIRE aspires to liberate the Muslim mind from stagnation in Muslim theology and law. It seeks to establish intellectual discourse that prioritizes the reading of the Quran and religious interpretations through ideals of rationality, freedom, egalitarianism, and justice. Ultimately, critical Islamic education enables Muslim students to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between openness and rootedness in comprehending the ethos and praxis of Islam. This equilibrium facilitates the successful negotiation of their distinct religious and civic identities.

Islamic Critical Theory

Critical theory is fundamentally concerned with promoting transformative changes for marginalized communities. When applied to the context of Muslim populations, critical theory seeks first to analyze and understand the prevailing socio-political and cultural conditions, subsequently providing explanations and proposing strategies for meaningful transformation. Muslim scholars have undertaken significant efforts to reinterpret the normative teachings of Islam, yielding a distinctive approach that diverges from both prevailing Western secularism and Islamic fundamentalism. This approach advocates for the integration of moral and ethical considerations, thereby merging religious and political domains. Consequently, the religious dimension permeates all aspects of life, influencing Muslim behavior and fostering the development of law-abiding citizens. In alignment with the principles of critical theory, this perspective can enhance the visibility of Muslims in societal discourse and empower them to engage in dialogue from their own cultural and intellectual frameworks (Duderija 2013, 69).

Critical Islamic Theory remains an underexplored domain within contemporary scholarship. Nevertheless, several foundational characteristics can be delineated. Firstly, it is predicated upon the belief in an omnipotent God and His imperative for humanity to advocate for and realize social justice. Secondly, it acknowledges the concept of divine judgment, wherein individuals will be held accountable in the afterlife for their conduct in this world. Thirdly, Critical Islamic Theory fosters a nuanced understanding of societal dynamics through the lenses of justice, humanitarian service, and devotion to God. It operates under the premise that human beings possess a consciousness that makes them aware of the potential for erroneous thoughts and actions resulting from their circumstances and choices (Gilani-Williams 2014, 22–23).

Moreover, Islamic Critical Theory qualifies as a critical framework because it is explicable, practical, and normative in nature. It posits that traditional Islamic theory has often been rendered invisible or marginalized. By employing critical methodologies, this approach aims to transcend that silence and facilitate a more profound development of Islamic theoretical constructs.

Islamic critical theory remains an area with limited references; however, it has been addressed by several scholars, including Yedullah Kazmi, Sharify-Funk, Sadek, and, more recently, Fawzia Gilani-Williams. Kazmi posits that the critical process initiates once a Muslim articulates their faith through the shahada. He argues that mere verbal affirmation of the oneness of God is insufficient; individuals must actively engage in actions that fulfill this commitment (Kazmi 2000, 394–95).

Kazmi's interpretation of Islamic critical theory centers on the individual's existential struggle within the framework of their relationship with both God and the world. He emphasizes the significance of justice and its correlation with the circumstances of one's birth. As he asserts, "Justice results when human beings realize that life is just a test and endeavor to excel in that test." Furthermore, Kazmi contends that all possessions and faculties are held in trust, implying a moral responsibility to utilize them wisely. His Islamic critical theory is fundamentally anchored in the Declaration of Faith (Shahadah) and operates on the principle that the pursuit of justice and the quest for self-knowledge are intertwined within the divine context. Kazmi elucidates, "In Islam, the paths to social justice and personal justice are not distinct; rather, they constitute a singular highway. One cannot attain one without recognizing the necessity of the other" (Kazmi 2000, 398).

Sharify-Funk critically engages with Islamic theory, particularly addressing the male-dominated interpretations of the Qur'an that perpetuate the oppression of Muslim women. She delineates the distinctions between critical Islamic theory and Western critical theory, arguing that the latter often presupposes a counter-progressive agenda of religion, leading to a silence or indifference in confronting injustices. Sharify-Funk advocates for a reexamination of knowledge that challenges the predominant notion of it being "context-free," asserting instead that such knowledge is intrinsically biased towards male perspectives. She consequently calls for an alternative framework that prioritizes communal values and underscores the interplay among the text, the interpreter, and the socio-cultural context. Furthermore, Sadek contributes to the discourse by initiating the development of an Islamic critical theory. He articulates, "The dissertation, therefore, takes initial steps in developing an Islamic critical theory by proposing a radically democratic conception of Islamic politics." This approach seeks to reconceptualize Islamic political thought through a lens that embraces democratic ideals (Gilani-

Williams 2014, 20–21).

Despite ongoing developments, a unified conceptual framework for critical Islamic theory has not yet been established. Essential elements of critical Islamic theory include foundational belief in Allah and adherence to divine rules, with the expectation that actions will be rewarded in the afterlife. Through a critical approach, according to Nurcholis Madjid, truth is dynamic and subject to change, except for the immutable truth found in the Qur'an. Consequently, the pursuit of truth remains an ongoing process. The factors influencing the determination of truth are interdependent and vary across temporal and spatial contexts. As a result, truth is not absolute, and further critical inquiry is necessary to achieve a more nuanced and progressive understanding (Haq, 2021, 298).

Islamic Critical Theory provides a framework for evaluating moral values, while ultimate guidance comes from Allah SWT. The Al-Qur'an encourages critical thinking, observation, and reflection to keep divine values central in intellectual pursuits. Islam present various styles of thinking that relate to critical and creative thinking such as Intuitive thinking (Q.S. At-Tawbah [9]: 96 and Q.S. Al-Qaṣaṣ [28]:7), scientific thinking (Q.S. Fuṣṣilat [41]: 11 and Q.S. Al-Anbiyā' [21]:30–33), rational thinking (Q.S. Al-Anbiyā' [21]: 22 and Q.S. Al-Mu'minūn [23]: 91), perceptual thinking (Q.S. Al-Baqarah [2]: 216 and Q.S. Al-Ḥujurāt [49]: 13), positive thinking (Q.S. Yūsuf [12]: 87 and Q.S. Āli 'Imrān [3]: 154), Analogical thinking (Q.S. Al-Furqān [25]: 39 and Q.S. Ibrāhīm [14]: 24–25), and Inquisitive thinking (Q.S. Al-Baqarah [2]: 28 and 255) (Inda and Sihes 2022, 21). This approach benefits humanity and highlights what distinguishes humans from other creatures.

Conclusion

The critical theory of the Frankfurt School emerged as a product of the Enlightenment and is often referred to as the theory of societal criticism. Its evolution through successive generations has shed light on the root causes of modern society's structural inequalities. Critical Theory aims to expose the underlying structures that dominate contemporary society, enabling individuals to understand the foundational causes of oppression and injustice that affect them. In essence, the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, developed across generations, serves as an emancipatory framework. Furthermore, it warns modern individuals about the ways they are being oppressed or dominated by false consciousness, which is perpetuated by prevailing ideologies. Thus, Critical Theory engages in a critique of ideology to illuminate the interests it serves.

The application of critical theory in education is particularly important in light of the rapid developments worldwide. The application of critical theory to critical pedagogy is a multifaceted endeavor that encompasses not only the cultivation of values but also the promotion

of critical awareness. The contemporary challenges faced by traditional Islamic education, particularly its perceived inadequacy in addressing the religious and pedagogical demands of modern Muslims, underscore this discourse. Nevertheless, the awareness or necessity of fulfilling these religious and pedagogical needs has inspired the birth of critical Islamic theory. Despite the paucity of extant references addressing this issue, it remains a subject that can be developed further by other philosophers. A thorough review of relevant scriptural sources reveals no explicit prohibition against the adoption of critical theory as critical Islamic theory. A careful examination of the Qur'an reveals that Allah SWT strongly encourages His servants to always think critically in the pursuit of knowledge. It is anticipated that the dissemination of this knowledge will yield positive outcomes for society.

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