

An Orwellian Mockery of Critical Theory

written by Javier Sethness | August 4, 2026



Gabriel Rockhill's *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* (or *Pipers*) is a neo-Stalinist hatchet job targeting the German intellectuals, most of them Jewish, who associated with the Frankfurt-based Institute for Social Research before, during, and in some cases after Adolf Hitler's Nazi dictatorship. The collective work of the Institute, otherwise called the Frankfurt School, is widely known as Critical Theory. In *Pipers*, Rockhill accuses the dissident Western Marxist tradition, of which Critical Theory has played an important part, of accommodating and even advancing capitalism and Western imperialism during the Cold War.

In line with *Monthly Review*'s Marxist-Leninist politics, Rockhill leaves no doubt that he intends to defend the so-called Second Camp—the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, or PRC—in *Pipers* (27–33, 64). To this point, in his review of *Pipers*, Russell Jacoby asks: “[Rockhill] never mentions North Korea, but why not?”¹ Given the author's explicit allegiances, for him to present simplistic and reductive takes on the Frankfurt School is to be expected. Still, in *Pipers*, the misinformation is in overdrive.

After all, Rockhill's tedious and repetitive style reads like a mix of Soviet agitprop, rants by Lyndon LaRouche (as Matt McManus points out), and the “salacious gossip column” that Radhika Desai oddly hails in her promotional blurb.² Rockhill reproduces the Stalinist-Dengist myth that only the Western ruling classes are imperialist, thus ignoring the continuities linking the Tsarist Empire, the USSR, and post-Soviet Russia on the one hand, and Imperial China and the PRC on the other (33–4, 64, 155). As John Rees explains in his review, Rockhill is thus “keen to set up a mutually reinforcing dualism where there is only ‘really existing socialism’ and ‘CIA funded anti-communism.’”³

Beyond ignoring the myriad atrocities perpetrated by the managers of Soviet and Chinese state capitalism, this binary approach in favor of the Second Camp lends itself to exaggeration and spectacle. It excludes the possibility of Third-Camp socialism, which rejects the hegemony of Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Indeed, notes Richard Gilman-Opalsky, the author views even “Trotskyists and left-wing communists” as “imperialist tools.”⁴ As a matter of fact, Rockhill writes about “plenty of evidence” for a “Trotskyism-to-CIA pipeline,” while citing none—in keeping with the Stalinist school of falsification (261).⁵

In reality, as Charles Reitz emphasizes in his review, the Critical Theorist Herbert Marcuse wrote “33 Theses toward the Military Defeat of Hitler-Fascism” in 1947. “33 Theses” predicts that, in the post-World War II context, the victorious Western powers would become increasingly neo-fascist and aggressively anti-Soviet. As such, writes Reitz, it “does *not* draw social theory into a camp compatible with U.S. imperialism,” but “quite the contrary.”⁶ Later, Marcuse penned the militant essay “Repressive Tolerance” (1965), which calls for the “revocation of free speech rights to fascists [and] racists,” in Reitz's words.⁷ Unsurprisingly, Rockhill ignores both of these Marcusean essays and only briefly mentions the right-wing threats made against Marcuse's life following the

publication of “Repressive Tolerance” and its author’s outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War (179, 306).

In this review, I will challenge Rockhill’s ahistorical approach, debunk the author’s reductive equation of Critical Theory with “anticommunism,” and contest his claim that Marcuse was a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) asset.

Rockhill’s Distortions

Rockhill ahistorically presents the “actually existing socialist” (AES) regimes as “seek[ing] the uplift of all,” while ignoring the plight of workers, peasants, women, colonial subjects, and sexual and ethno-religious minorities in the USSR and PRC (46). Rockhill announces that he seeks to “rejuvenate class struggle in theory,” yet fails to recognize class struggle within “projects of socialist sovereignty” (54–5). He cites Vladimir Lenin’s criticism of the social sciences’ defense of wage-slavery, but fails to mention Lenin’s own enthusiasm for Taylorism and state capitalism, and the Bolshevik leader’s imposition of bourgeois management onto enterprises that had previously come to be self-managed by workers in the Russian Revolution (73–5). Rockhill suggests that AES “has not been an unmitigated disaster,” but rather is “preferable for the overwhelming majority of people and the planet,” without acknowledging China or the Soviet Union’s vast nuclear stockpiles and carbon emissions, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the desiccation of the Aral Sea, the Gulag, the Tiananmen Square massacre, or genocide perpetrated in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (171).

In Orwellian fashion, Rockhill misrepresents Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union as anti-fascist, hence glossing over not only the Stalinist betrayal of the Republic and the workers during the Spanish Civil War, but also the Nazi-Soviet Pact that partitioned Poland and launched World War II. Rockhill denounces McCarthyism and the FBI’s targeted assassinations, but not the KGB or the Stalinist Terror. He observes that West German “intelligence services [were] stocked with former Nazis,” but forgets that much of the same was true of the Stasi, the East German secret police (207).⁸ He objects to “the practice of academically laundering state propaganda” and intellectual “[c]ollaboration with powerful state agencies” in the West, but not, apparently, under AES (34, 38–9, 220).

Orwell considered one’s openness to condemning the USSR to be “*the* test of intellectual honesty” for fellow leftists.⁹ Rockhill would have utterly failed his test. After all, the author of *Pipers* cannot appreciate Jacoby’s point, that, “[h]ad the Frankfurt scholars fled to the ‘really existing socialism’ of the Soviet Union and not the United States, they would have *ceased to really exist* in Soviet camps” (emphasis added). He never mentions the former Makhnovist Peter Arshinov, whom the Stalinist regime executed in 1937 for ostensibly attempting to resurrect anarchism in the USSR, much less the allegorical fate of the fictional love interest Larissa Antipova in Boris Pasternak’s novel *Doctor Zhivago* (1957): namely, to perish in the Gulag.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Rockhill gleefully highlights the CIA’s opportunistic role in publishing *Doctor Zhivago* in Russian (138).

Rockhill falsely equates Critical Theory and Western Marxism with “imperial theory” and “imperial Marxism,” respectively, and accuses the Critical Theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno of being “radical recuperators” (47, 145, 178). He renames the Frankfurt School the “Washington School,” given that many of its associates worked for the U.S. government at one time or another. He does so, while barely acknowledging that the Frankfurt School legal scholar Franz Neumann served as a prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials (244–5).

In reality, Rockhill excludes what Adorno identified as the “new categorical imperative imposed by Hitler upon unfree [humanity]”: to “arrange [our] thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.”¹¹ He guards silence around Marcuse’s equivalent formulation: “[t]he goal of radical change today is the emergence of human beings who are

physically and mentally incapable of inventing another Auschwitz.”¹² In this vein, Gilman-Opalsky, McManus, and fellow reviewers Doug Greene and Harrison Fluss rightly emphasize that *Pipers* features “naught but the most fleeting consideration of the historical confrontation” with antisemitism and the Holocaust in the post-World War II context, much less sympathy for the Critical Theorists as leftist and Jewish exiles fleeing Nazi Germany.

Communist Critical Theory

There is plenty of counter-evidence to *Pipers*’ main claims about the history of the Frankfurt School—especially to Rockhill’s complaint that Critical Theory is irredeemably “anticommunist” and pro-Western imperialism. These charges fail on practical and theoretical grounds.

To begin with, in winter 1926–1927, Institute affiliate Walter Benjamin visited Moscow, where he witnessed the Kremlin “trying to bring about a suspension of militant communism.” Reading *Pipers*, one would not know either that Benjamin had been contemplating joining the German Communist Party at the time, or that his Latvian partner, Asja Lacis, would be imprisoned in the Gulag.¹³ Tellingly, Rockhill’s own research reveals that Neumann served as a Soviet spy (codename “Ruff”) during World War II (252–9). This finding seriously undermines Rockhill’s whole argument about Critical Theory’s “anticommunism,” as does *Pipers*’ revelation that the KGB was interested in recruiting none other than...Marcuse himself! Plus, the FBI files on Adorno and Marcuse that Rockhill shares in the Appendix describe the former as mingling with “Communist[s]” at a 1944 “Musicians’ Congress” in California, and the latter as a dangerous “Extremist” and “Key Activist” of the New Left! (370–89)

Theoretically speaking, Horkheimer’s early writings also disprove Rockhill’s claims. Meditating in his diaries *Dawn & Decline*, the young Horkheimer declares, “One has to fight for socialism [...]” He decries “the horrible exploitation apparatus at work in the partly or wholly colonial territories,” adding that “the mass misery in India, China, Africa boggles the mind.” He expresses loyalty to the Soviet experiment:

It is extremely difficult to say what conditions are like there. I do not claim to know where the country is going; there is undoubtedly much misery [...]. Anyone who has the eyes to see will view events in Russia as the continuing painful attempt to overcome this terrible social injustice. At the very least, he will ask with a throbbing heart whether it is still under way.¹⁴

Clearly, this is not the “compatible” theory to which Rockhill reduces Critical Theory (183). While there is much for which to criticize Horkheimer and Adorno—including their opportunistic collaboration with the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF, 183–4), and, above all, Horkheimer’s support for the Vietnam War—a dialectical analysis would give credit to Horkheimer’s revolutionary youth. Likewise, the fragments of Adornian radicalism that persisted until a premature death (provoked partly by student protests) should be acknowledged, from Adorno’s co-editing of *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) and writing of *Minima Moralia* (1951), to his identifying the Vietnam War as the continuation of Auschwitz, calling on a “self-conscious global subject [to] develop and intervene,” and affirming the principle of hope in *Negative Dialectics* (1969) and “Resignation” (1969).¹⁵ It is notable, too, that Edward Said declares in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) that Adorno is a “cultural and philological criti[c] whom I revere.”¹⁶

Besides Marcuse, Neumann, and Horkheimer and Adorno (at least partly), Benjamin further refutes Rockhill’s allegation about the Frankfurt School being accommodationist. As with the numerous gaps in his coverage of Critical Theory overall, Rockhill does not dwell on the messianic revolutionism expressed in Benjamin’s writings, such as the unfinished *Arcades Project* or “On the Concept of History” (1940). Instead, he seeks to portray Horkheimer as abandoning his ostensible

comrade Benjamin to near-certain death in Nazi-occupied Europe (197–200). Fearing imminent deportation to the Nazis, Benjamin took his life in 1940 in the Catalan border-town of Portbou after failing to cross undetected from France through the Pyrenees mountains. The alleged text of his suicide note, which requests that his “thoughts” be transmitted “to my friend Adorno,” and for “the situation in which I find myself” to be explained to him, goes unmentioned in *Pipers*—as does Marcuse’s tribute to him at the close of *One-Dimensional Man* (1964).¹⁷

In terms of international politics, it is undeniable that Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse criticized the Second Camp during the Cold War. Still, Rockhill cannot concede that they had good reason to do so as Critical Theorists, given that AES has long shielded itself from criticism by presenting itself as faithfully following Marxist prescriptions. Accordingly, Marcuse presents a brilliant critique of the USSR’s evident betrayal of Marxian theory and adoption of technological rationality in *Soviet Marxism* (1958), while Adorno condemned Russian fascism in socialist guise and the “murder of countless millions” carried out by AES regimes (186).¹⁸

Marcuse: A Revolutionary Intellectual, Not a CIA Agent

Before joining academia in the mid-1950s, Marcuse worked at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the State Department—not the CIA. Following his separation from government service, Marcuse became increasingly open about his revolutionary perspectives. The Marxian imperative of transforming the world clearly resonates in *Eros and Civilization* (1955), a utopian volume that Rockhill mentions only once, briefly—just as he mentions Freud, the book’s object of dialectical criticism, only in passing (15, 326–7). As a movement elder, Marcuse publicly supported his former graduate student Angela Davis during her persecution by the U.S. government and subsequent political imprisonment, and he donated to the Black Panther Party, as Rockhill’s own research shows (311n228). Writing in *The Marcusean Mind* (2025), Sid Simpson observes that Marcuse “largely ignores the dynamics occurring in the colonies,” though I believe that the thinker’s public opposition to the Vietnam War and the analysis he provides of the political situation in several post-colonies in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972) may provide mitigating circumstances.¹⁹

By contrast with the false version propagated in *Pipers*, whereby Marcuse only saw the proverbial light late in life (306–9), the thinker was nearly a lifelong radical: as a conscript during World War I, he joined the Social Democratic Party and defended Berlin’s Alexanderplatz from right-wing gangs during the German Revolution. His doctoral dissertation, *The German Artist-Novel* (1922), links authentic art with revolutionary social change—a theme Marcuse revisits in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978). As the recently deceased junior Critical Theorist Jürgen Habermas would do later, Marcuse broke with his former mentor Martin Heidegger for embracing Nazism. In *Reason and Revolution* (1941), Marcuse presents a progressive-revolutionary interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel and German Idealism. “Repressive Tolerance” is a call to arms that resonates to this day.

In sum, Marcuse was a revolutionary, anti-fascist intellectual: he was no “agent of empire” (267–71). Although Rockhill links Horkheimer and Adorno to the CCF, he must try a different tack to try to discredit Marcuse. To clarify, although the author of *Pipers* sometimes equates “OSS/CIA” (246), the OSS (1942–1945) was *not* the CIA (1947–present). Whereas Rockhill includes evidence of the CIA connections of several of Marcuse’s mentors and contacts while at OSS and State, this does not prove that Marcuse worked for the CIA. Neither does the fact that the Agency distributed some of his books in Eastern Europe during the Cold War (137, 271–88). The comment by Habermas that Rockhill cites about Marcuse returning to post-war Germany as an “officer of the U.S. army” likely refers to his being an OSS intelligence officer rather than an officer of the CIA, which didn’t exist at the time (269).

Most controversially, Rockhill cites the Soviet mouthpiece *Pravda*, articles published in the late

1960s in the Marxist-Leninist *Progressive Labor* magazine, and claims made by the journalist Leo Matthias as the basis for the charge that Marcuse was an “Agent of Imperialism” and/or a CIA agent (268–9). Rockhill does not care to mention the antisemitic tropes Matthias employed in thus slandering Marcuse, as highlighted by his friend Günther Anders.²⁰ In fact, historian Tim Müller, one of Rockhill’s main sources, candidly told him in a 2024 YouTube interview that he could “not find anything in the sources that would support” the claim made by Matthias.²¹ That did not stop Rockhill from repeating it in *Pipers*.

Conclusion

In closing, *Pipers* amounts to absurdist theater. It is a warmed-over reprise of the dystopian falsification that underpinned the Stalinist Show Trials. Rockhill defames the Critical Theorists, especially Marcuse, in keeping with this Orwellian tradition of falsification. Lamentably, *Pipers* plays on antisemitic conspiracy theories about “cultural Marxism” while underplaying the importance that Critical Theory places on identifying and overcoming antisemitism, other forms of racism, and authoritarianism.²² Rockhill expresses disdain toward the Frankfurt School’s “esthetes” and “intellectual free agents,” whose Critical Theory carries on the legacy of the radical Enlightenment through its “generalized critique of domination,” in line with his pushing of obscurantism and lies in defense of state capitalism and the Second Camp (151, 187–8).

Notes

1. Russell Jacoby, “No, Western Marxism Wasn’t a CIA Plot,” *Jacobin*, April 18, 2026.
2. Matt McManus, “Western Marxism through the Looking Glass,” *Damage Magazine*, April 8, 2026.
3. John Rees, “Not a Rockhill to die on,” *Counterfire*, Jan. 2, 2026.
4. Richard Gilman-Opalsky, “‘Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?’” *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*, April 2, 2026.
5. Doug Greene and Harrison Fluss, “Theory Betrayed: An Essay on Gabriel Rockhill’s *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* (Part One),” *Historical Materialism*.
6. Charles Reitz, “When Marxist Intellectuals Collaborated with the CIA,” *CounterPunch*, 12 Dec. 2025 (emphasis in original).
7. Charles Reitz, *Herbert Marcuse as Social Justice Educator: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2025), 7.
8. Deutsche Welle, “Book Claims Stasi Employed Nazis as Spies,” *DW*, 31 Oct. 2005.
9. Eric Laursen, *The Duty to Stand Aside: Nineteen Eighty-Four and the Wartime Quarrel of George Orwell and Alex Comfort* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2018), 115 (emphasis in original).
10. Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno, Anarchy’s Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine 1917–1921*, trans. Paul Sharkey (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), 283.
11. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 365.
12. Herbert Marcuse, *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Emancipation: Collected Papers*, Vol. 5, eds. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge), 213.

13. Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 9n3, 53.
14. Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline: Notes, 1926-1931 & 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 36, 66, 72.
15. Theodor W. Adorno, "Progress," in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 85.
16. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 316.
17. Samantha Rose Hill, "Walter Benjamin's Last Work," *LA Review of Books*, Dec. 9, 2019.
18. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto," trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 2011), 49.
19. Sid Simpson, "Herbert Marcuse and the Post-Colonial: Missed Connections with Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Winter, and Aimé Césaire," in *The Marcusean Mind*, eds. Eduardo Altheman C. Santos et al. (London: Routledge), 71.
20. Günther Anders, *Gut, dass wir einmal die hot potatoes ausgraben*, eds. Reinhard Ellensohn and Kerstin Putz (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2022), 127. Thanks to Ulrich Plass for this citation.
21. Gabriel Rockhill, "Marcuse and the U.S. National Security State: Cold War Discourse, with Tim Müller," *YouTube*, 13 July 2024.
22. Lars Rensmann, *The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2017).