

Northwestern Critical Theory Summer Workshop
Christoph Menke: *Critique of Rights*
September 20, 2021 (on Zoom)

All members of the Northwestern Critical Theory community are cordially invited to participate in a summer workshop on Christoph Menke's recently translated book, *Critique of Rights*. Prof. Menke will be present at the workshop, in person and respond to brief comments from the participating graduate students.

Those interested in participating should signal their interest via email to eskillling2023@u.northwestern.edu, preferably before July 1st. Based on the number of participants, we will decide on the exact format, but the plan is for each participant to comment on one chapter of the book, possibly split between a few people due to the length of the chapters.

On the author: Christoph Menke is Professor of Practical Philosophy at the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main and the author of numerous works on aesthetics, philosophy of right, and German Idealism. He is also a former Max Kade Distinguished Visiting Professor of German at Northwestern.

On the book (from the publisher): Modern political revolutions since the 18th century have swept away traditional systems of domination by declaring that 'all men are created equal'. This declaration of equal rights is a fundamental political act – it is the political act in which the political community creates itself in relation to traditional systems of domination. But because it was generally assumed that the subject of these rights is the individual human being, the political community was subordinated to the individual. Marx discerned, rightly, that this was the paradox at the heart of the declaration of the rights of man. But while Marx was right to highlight this paradox, his proposed solution does not provide us with a sound basis for overcoming it.

In this major new work, Christoph Menke adopts a different approach: he argues that we can address and overcome this paradox only by embarking on a fundamental inquiry into the nature of rights. Rights are a specific configuration of normativity: to have a right is to have a justified and binding claim. But with the equal rights declared by modern revolutions, rights assumed a particular form: the normative claim to equality was combined with an assumption about the factual conditions of social life. In this conception, society is the realm of private individuals pursuing their interests, and private interests are therefore seen as the natural basis for politics – what Menke calls 'the naturalization of the social'. By laying bare this conception which lies at the basis of political liberalism and modern law, Menke is able to criticize and move beyond it, opening up a new way of understanding rights that no longer involves the disempowering of the political community.

