

Re-visiting The History of Consumerism: The Emergence of Mass Consumer Culture as a Distinctive Feature of Capitalist Societies

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ABSTRACT

The Frankfurt School was the first school to discern the roles of the media in shaping human thought, influencing politics, and increasing the insatiable demand of consumers in capitalist societies. The analysis brought to the fore by Adorno and Horkheimer regarding the 'Culture Industry' illustrated a model of media as tools of hegemony and social control advanced by Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and Jurgen Habermas. The School also examined the repercussions of mass culture and the rise of the consumer society on the proletariat that was aimed to be the instrument of revolution in the classical Marxian scenario. Another thing that was analyzed is how the culture industries and consumer society were considered as stabilizing forces of contemporary capitalism. Therefore, they were among the first to see the expansion of communication and mass media roles in politics, socialization and social life, culture, and the construction of docile subjects as Foucault puts it. In the present article, I review the contributions to media and social theory advanced by the Frankfurt School. The integration of psychoanalysis, aesthetic theory and the critique of mass culture, and the critique of the Enlightenment are the main components discussed in the present article.

1. Introduction

When most people hear the 'Frankfurt School', they think that it is a physical place where people settled to unfold events related to philosophy. However, the Frankfurt School is rather a school of thought led by German-American theorists and who devoted their time, energy, and intellect to tap deeply into profound analyses that had changed Western capitalist societies entirely since the inception of the classical theory of Karl Marx. When people hear the term 'Frankfurt School', the first thing that strikes their mind is Marxism. Though Marxism's place inside the Frankfurt school is grand, the latter includes theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, Erich Fromm. This group of intellectuals came together for a unified goal; to emancipate the human mind, bringing to the fore radical avant-gardist changes. Before we dive into the realm of these great thinkers, let us first define Critical Theory.

2. The Integration of Psychoanalysis

What is Critical Theory? Critical Theory is often thought of narrowly as referring to the Frankfurt School that began with Horkheimer and Adorno, which can stretch to Marcuse and Habermas. One can think of any philosophical approach with similar practical aims to these individuals. It could be called a 'critical theory'. This includes disciplines such as feminism, critical race theory, and some forms of post-colonial criticism. Critical Theory, when capitalized, can only refer to the Frankfurt School. All other uses of the word are meant in their broader sense. When the term is used in its singular form, 'critical theory' is not capitalized, even if that means that the theory is developed by members of the Frankfurt School in the context of their overall project of Critical Theory (Bohman, 2005). Since we have stumbled on Horkheimer earlier in the article, he argues that a critical theory is only adequate if it meets three criteria: it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. This means that it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, pin down the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (Bohman, 2005). Further, Horkheimer as the Head of the Frankfurt School's Institute for Social Research defines it as: "has as its object human beings as producers of their own historical form of life" (Horkheimer, 1993). In the

light of the practical goal of discerning all the circumstances that put shackles on human freedom, the explanatory goal is of crucial importance. The explanatory goal could be developed through multidisciplinary fields of research that include psychological, cultural, and social dimensions. In the vein of an interdisciplinary approach, it is difficult to appreciate the audacity of the first theorists who proposed the unnatural marriage of Freud and Marx in the 70s (Jay, 1991). Horkheimer thinks that the integration of psychoanalysis into his theory of contemporary society is a final step to examine the development of Critical Theory (Abromeit, 2011). The members of the Institute for Social Research were among the first group of philosophers and social theorists to take psychoanalysis seriously. Theorists seemed to have this drive to psychoanalysis to fill in the missing gaps in Marxian theory that were overlooked by earlier theorists. Marxism, for instance, diminished the psychological, the collective subconscious mind, and the realm to socioeconomic factors. Under Adorno's influence, the Frankfurt School sought to merge cultural modernism with left-wing politics. This is where psychoanalysis played an important role (Whitebook, 1997). Freud's work is something crucial nowadays. One simply cannot talk about psychology without referring to Freud. As Shakespeare wrote in his play called King Lear, "Nothing will come of nothing". Freud's name becomes synonymous with everything related to the works of psychology. "Freud's lexicon has become embedded within the vocabulary of Western society. Concepts he introduced through his theories are now being used by everyday people, such as anal (personality), libido, denial, repression, cathartic, Freudian slip, and neurotic" (McLeod, 2013). Around 1928, Fromm initiated his career to start lecturing at the University of Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research, also known as Critical Theory's birthplace. Despite Freud's own lifestyle and aesthetic conservatism, his brainchild, psychoanalysis, made an incontrovertible contribution to the radical avant-garde that was transforming almost every realm of European culture (Whitebook, 1997).

The Institute for Social Research and the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute shared a physical building to hold their classes in the same rooms. Analysts like Anna Freud, Paul Federn, Hans Sachs, and Siegfried Bernfeld gave lectures to the public, which were supported by the Critical Theorists. Max Horkheimer, as the director of the Institute for Social Research, sat on the board of the Psychoanalytic Institute. Further, Eric Fromm – a trained analyst and member of both institutes – helped the Critical Theorists to educate themselves about the workings of psychoanalytic theory. This contribution encouraged the Institute's studies on Authority and the Family. The work was the first interdisciplinary empirical research that used psychoanalytic theory – in this case, the theory of character – to investigate the relationship between sociological developments and psychological phenomena (Whitebook, 1997). Within the realm of psychoanalysis, Horkheimer ascertains that "Psychology without libido is no psychology" (quoted in Funk, 2000). Horkheimer seems to be differentiating psychology and psychoanalysis because he reportedly viewed psychology as a meaningless vessel without psychoanalysis. He wanted psychoanalysts to join the Institute and integrate the subject with the Institute's other disciplines: including history, philosophy, and economics. The latter interdisciplinary approach was the hallmark of the Frankfurt School. Fromm was a fierce critic of Freudian theory. Moreover, Fromm's idea of merging psychoanalysis with concepts from other disciplines was similar to Max Horkheimer's intentions. Fromm argued that philosophers such as Sartre, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, and others who tried to use psychoanalysis were limited in their understanding of the field because of, he claimed, 'insufficient knowledge of its clinical basis (Fromm, 1970). At this moment, Fromm's skepticism of his peers started to surface. He claimed that his colleagues did not appreciate or accept his increasing empiricist learnings. He sought, therefore, to move forward and advance empirical research while he was at the Frankfurt School. Fromm's skepticism grew, even more, when Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and others were critical of Fromm's manuscript.

3. The Shift: Aesthetic Theory and the Critique of Mass Culture

After many turbulences, resentment, and disagreement, The Frankfurt school had to relocate itself from Germany. Moving from Nazi Germany to the United States, where it experienced the rise of a media culture involving film, popular music, radio, television, and other shapes of mass culture (Wiggershaus, 1994). In America, after the exile, media production was a vessel of commercial enjoyment owned by massive corporations. Horkheimer and Adorno came up with an interesting term called 'culture industry' to usher attention on the industrialization and commercialization of culture under capitalist relations of production (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). This stage was marked in the United States though it had little state aid of film or television industries. At this stage, highly commercial mass culture emerged that came to be a distinctive feature of capitalist societies and a locus of critical cultural studies. The Frankfurt School, during the 1930s, developed a critical and trans-disciplinary approach to communications and cultural studies. The School merged political economy, textual analysis, and analysis of social and ideological effects. They coined the term 'culture industry' to convey the growth of the industrialization of mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives that drove the system. The critical theorists worked on all mass-mediated cultural artifacts within the field of industrial production, in which the commodities of the culture industries exhibited the same features as other products of mass production. Such as commodification, standardization, and massification.

In addition, the critical theorists investigated the cultural industries in a political context as a way of involving the working class in capitalist societies. The Frankfurt School theorists were among the prominent neo-Marxians to inspect the repercussions of mass culture and the emergence of the consumer society in the proletariat, which was to be the means to ignite a revolution in the classical Marxian script. In the "Manifesto of the Communist Party", this class struggle has always existed in every known society.

"Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman" (Marx & Engels, 1848). In other words, there is a higher power that controls society which is referred to as the "oppressor" and the plebs or laymen who are the "oppressed". The Frankfurt School theorists examined the ways that the culture industries and consumer society were stabilizing capitalism and sought new blueprints for political change, agencies of political transformation, and models for political liberation that could serve as norms of social critique and goals for political turbulence and unrest. This project required reshaping Marxian theory and executing many important contributions. The Frankfurt school's main focus was on technology and culture. They indicated how technology was becoming both a major force of production and a formative mode of social organization and control. In Herbert Marcuse's article, 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology', He argued that technology in the contemporary era constitutes an entire "mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination" (Marcuse, 1941, p. 414). In the arena of culture, technology helped harvest mass culture that domesticated individuals to bow to the dominant capitalists that are controlling the instruments of domination (Nealon & Irr, 2012). Technology is seen as a tool that fosters hegemony; in other words, the dominion of a group of people over a society.

The Frankfurt school experienced the instruments of mass culture used by the Nazis to produce submission to fascist culture and society. While in exile in the United States, the members of the Frankfurt school came to believe that American "popular culture" was also highly ideological and worked to promote the interests of American capitalism the same way the Nazis did. Giant corporations controlled culture; the culture industries were organized according to the blueprints of mass production. As a result, it churned out mass-produced products that generated a highly commercial system of culture, which in turn sold the values, lifestyles, and institutions of "the American way of life."

The work of the Frankfurt School gave birth to what Lazarsfeld, one of the designers of modern communications studies, called a 'critical approach' (Lazarsfeld, 1942). He differentiated the latter from the 'administrative research' (Wasko, 2009). The positions of Adorno, Lowenthal and other members of the internal circle of the Institute for Social Research were debated by Walter Benjamin. He is an idiosyncratic theorist loosely affiliated with the Institute. Benjamin, writing in Paris during the 1930s, dug up progressive aspects in new technologies of cultural production such as photography, film, and radio. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin, 1936), Benjamin believed that media culture could plant more critical individuals able to judge and analyze their culture. Also, processing the rush of images of cinema created, Benjamin believed, subjectivities better able to parry and comprehend the flux and turbulence of experience in industrialized societies.

Horkheimer and Adorno replied to Benjamin's positivism in highly significant scrutiny of the culture industry that was published in their book 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'. They cited that the structure of cultural production dominated by film, radio broadcasting, newspapers, and magazines, was strictly controlled by advertising and commercial imperatives. It served to build subservience to the system of consumer capitalism. Later critics voiced their findings as too manipulative, reductive, and elitist. It transmits an important corrective to more populist findings to the media culture that diminish the way the media industries exert power over audiences and help produce thought and behavior that conforms to the existing society.

4. Toward a Philosophy of History: The Critique of the Enlightenment

It all started when the members of the Frankfurt School to have doubts among their crew. For example, Fromm argued that philosophers such as Sartre, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, and others who tried to use psychoanalysis had limited thinking in grasping the field because he claimed they had insufficient knowledge of its clinical basis (Fromm, 1970). The break of some members of the Institute, like Fromm, threatens the very basic tenets of the Critical Theory. Fromm argued that his colleagues didn't appreciate or accept his empiricist learnings. "The Institute had been launched with the intention of synthesizing a broad spectrum of disciplines. Its founders had also hoped to integrate speculation and empirical research (Jay, 1996)". This statement in Martin Jay's book is preaching one of the tenets of Critical Theory that the Institute is trying to account for a broad area of different disciplines. Yet, this contradicts completely with what Fromm had brought up to the school and was rejected by significant members of the school. "Even those parts most heavily influenced by members of the Institute, often departed from the tenets of Critical Theory as they had been articulated in the Zeitschrift (Jay, 1996)". It feels like the Critical Theory had deviated from its true purpose; to enlighten people. Horkheimer felt that there is a need that necessitated him to rethink certain pilgrims of the Frankfurt School's ideas. The work of Horkheimer and Adorno had merged together which gave birth to massive books, which made their names, called "The Dialectic of Enlightenment", "Eclipse of Reason", and "Minima Moralia".

5. Conclusion

In short, it seems that the Frankfurt School not only was relocated from one place to another but also the shift of the social reality with the one in Germany and the other in America. This says that the Frankfurt School started to account for these changes to anticipate the ones that are sailing towards Mankind today. Thus, to better understand the discontinuities that future observers would find disturbing, is there any way for Critical Theory and psychoanalysis to productively reconnect to solve modern pressing matters? It is apparent that mass culture and communication were instrumental in generating the modes of thought and behavior

appropriate to a highly organized and massified social order. The Frankfurt school theory of the culture industry contributed a significant change to a period in which mass consumption and culture were inextricably related to producing a consumer society constructed on homogeneous needs and desires for mass-produced products. A unified society is based on social organization and homogeneity. The Frankfurt School model of the culture industry did raise crucial social roles of media culture during a specific system of capitalists. Is there going to be any interdisciplinary marriage between different fields to raise the modern instruments that are used to manipulate and (re)produce a homogeneous society? Ostensibly, the Frankfurt School highlighted many tools, but did it change anything? Did it take action to change the status of people who were subjected to the power of those above them, the capitalists?

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