

The Frankfurt School

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The “Frankfurt School” refers to a group of German-American theorists who developed powerful analyses of the changes in Western capitalist societies that occurred since the classical theory of Marx. Working at the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt, Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, theorists such as Max Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, and Erich Fromm produced some of the first accounts within critical social theory of the importance of mass culture and communication in social reproduction and domination. The Frankfurt School also generated one of the first models of a critical cultural studies that analyzes the processes of cultural production and political economy, the politics of cultural texts, and audience reception and use of cultural artifacts (Kellner 1989 and 1995).

Moving from Nazi Germany to the United States, the Frankfurt School experienced at first hand the rise of a media culture involving film, popular music, radio, television, and other forms of mass culture (Wiggershaus 1994). In the United States, where they found themselves in exile, media production was by and large a form of commercial entertainment controlled by big corporations. Two of its key theorists Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno developed an account of the “culture industry” to call attention to the industrialization and commercialization of culture under capitalist relations of production (1972). This situation was most marked in the United States that had little state support of film or television industries, and where a highly commercial mass culture emerged that came to be a distinctive feature of capitalist societies and a focus of critical cultural studies.

During the 1930s, the Frankfurt school developed a critical and transdisciplinary approach to cultural and communications studies, combining political economy, textual analysis, and analysis of social and ideological effects of. They coined the term “culture industry” to signify the process of the industrialization of mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives that drove the system. The critical theorists analyzed all mass-mediated cultural artifacts within the context of industrial production, in which the commodities of the culture industries exhibited the same features as other products of mass production: commodification, standardization, and massification. The culture industries had the specific function, however, of providing ideological legitimation of the existing capitalist societies and of integrating individuals into its way of life.

Adorno's analyses of popular music, television, and other phenomena ranging from astrology columns to fascist speeches (1991, 1994), Lowenthal's studies of popular literature and magazines (1961), Herzog's studies of radio soap operas (1941), and the perspectives and critiques of mass culture developed in Horkheimer and Adorno's famous study of the culture industries (1972 and Adorno 1991) provide many examples of the Frankfurt school approach. Moreover, in their theories of the culture industries and critiques of mass culture, they were among the first social theorists its importance in the reproduction of contemporary societies. In their view, mass culture and communications stand in the center of leisure activity, are important agents of socialization, mediators of political reality, and should thus be seen as major institutions of contemporary societies with a variety of economic, political, cultural and social effects.

Furthermore, the critical theorists investigated the cultural industries in a political context as a form of the integration of the working class into capitalist societies. The Frankfurt school theorists were among the first neo-Marxian groups to examine the effects of mass culture and the rise of the consumer society on the working classes which were to be the instrument of revolution in the classical Marxian scenario. They also analyzed the ways that the culture industries and consumer society were stabilizing contemporary capitalism and accordingly sought new strategies for political change, agencies of political transformation, and models for political emancipation that could serve as norms of social critique and goals for political struggle. This project required rethinking Marxian theory and produced many important contributions -- as well as some problematical positions.

The Frankfurt school focused intently on technology and culture, indicating how technology was becoming both a major force of production and formative mode of social organization and control. In a 1941 article, "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," Herbert Marcuse 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" (414). In the realm of culture, technology produced mass culture that habituated individuals to conform to the dominant patterns of thought and behavior, and thus provided powerful instruments of social control and domination.

Victims of European fascism, the Frankfurt school experienced first hand the ways that the Nazis used the instruments of mass culture 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. Controlled by giant corporations, the culture industries were organized according to the strictures of mass production, churning out mass-produced products that generated a highly commercial system of culture which in turn sold the values, life-styles, and institutions of "the American way of life."

The work of the Frankfurt School provided what Paul Lazarsfeld (1942), one of the originators of modern communications studies, called a critical approach, which he distinguished from the "administrative research." The positions of Adorno, Lowenthal, and other members of the inner circle of the Institute for Social Research were contested by Walter Benjamin, an idiosyncratic theorist loosely affiliated with the Institute. Benjamin, writing in Paris during the 1930s, discerned 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" (1969), Benjamin noted how new mass media were supplanting older forms of culture whereby the mass reproduction of photography, film, recordings, and publications replaced the emphasis on the originality and "aura" of the work of art in an earlier era. Freed from the mystification of high culture, Benjamin believed that media culture could cultivate more critical individuals able to judge and analyze their culture, just as sports fans could dissect and evaluate athletic activities. In addition, 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, urbanized societies.

Himself a collaborator of the prolific German artist Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin worked with Brecht on films, created radio plays, and attempted to utilize the media as organs of social progress. In the essay "The Artist as Producer" (1999 [1934]), Benjamin argued that progressive cultural creators should "refunction" the apparatus of cultural production,

turning theater and film, for instance, into a forum of political enlightenment and discussion rather than a medium of "culinary" audience pleasure. Both Brecht and Benjamin wrote radio plays and were interested in film as an instrument of progressive social change. In an essay on radio theory, Brecht anticipated the Internet in his call for reconstructing the apparatus of broadcasting from one-way transmission to a more interactive form of two-way, or multiple, communication (in Silberman 2000: 41ff.)-- a form first realized in CB radio and then electronically-mediated computer communication.

Moreover, Benjamin wished to promote a radical cultural and media politics concerned with the creation of alternative oppositional cultures. Yet he recognized that media such as film could have conservative effects. While he thought it was progressive that mass-produced works were losing their "aura," their magical force, and were opening cultural artifacts for more critical and political discussion, he recognized that film could create a new kind of ideological magic through the cult of celebrity and techniques like the close-up that fetishized certain stars or images via the technology of the cinema. Benjamin was thus one of the first radical cultural critics to look carefully at the form and technology of media culture in appraising its complex nature and effects. Moreover, he developed a unique approach to cultural history that is one of his most enduring legacies, constituting a micrological history of Paris in the 18th century, an uncompleted project that contains a wealth of material for study and reflection (see Benjamin 2000 and the study in Buck-Morss 1989).

Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno answered Benjamin's optimism in a highly influential analysis of the culture industry published in their book Dialectic of Enlightenment, which first appeared in 1948 and was translated into English in 1972. They argued that the system of cultural production dominated by film, radio broadcasting, newspapers, and magazines, was controlled by advertising and commercial imperatives, and served to create subservience to the system of consumer capitalism. While later critics pronounced their approach too manipulative, reductive, and elitist, it provides an important corrective to more populist approaches to media culture that downplay the way the media industries exert power over audiences and help produce thought and behavior that conforms to the existing society.

The Frankfurt School also provide useful historical perspectives on the transition from traditional culture and modernism in the arts to a mass-produced media and consumer society. In his path-breaking book The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Jurgen Habermas further historicizes Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry. Providing historical background to the triumph of the culture industry, Habermas notes how bourgeois society in the late 18th and 19th century was distinguished by the rise of a public sphere that stood between civil society and the state and which mediated between public and private interests. For the first time in history, individuals and groups could shape public opinion, giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice. The bourgeois public sphere made it possible to form a realm of public opinion that opposed state power and the powerful interests that were coming to shape bourgeois society.

Habermas notes a transition from the liberal public sphere which originated in the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolution to a media-dominated public sphere in the current stage of what he calls "welfare state capitalism and mass democracy." This historical transformation is grounded in Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the

culture industry, in which giant corporations have taken over the public sphere and transformed it from a site of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity. In this transformation, "public opinion" shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion, and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts. For Habermas, the interconnection between the sphere of public debate and individual participation has thus been fractured and transmuted into that of a realm of political manipulation and spectacle, in which citizen-consumers ingest and absorb passively entertainment and information. "Citizens" thus become spectators of media presentations and discourse which arbitrate public discussion and reduce its audiences to objects of news, information, and public affairs. In Habermas's words: "Inasmuch as the mass media today strip away the literary husks from the kind of bourgeois self-interpretation and utilize them as marketable forms for the public services provided in a culture of consumers, the original meaning is reversed" (1989: 171).

Habermas's critics, however, contend that he idealizes the earlier bourgeois public sphere by presenting it as a forum of rational discussion and debate when in fact many social groups and most women were excluded. Critics also contend that Habermas neglects various oppositional working class, plebeian, and women's public spheres developed alongside of the bourgeois public sphere to represent voices and interests excluded in this forum (see the studies in Calhoun 1992). Yet Habermas is right that in the period of the democratic revolutions a public sphere emerged in which for the first time in history ordinary citizens could participate in political discussion and debate, organize, and struggle against unjust authority. Habermas's account also points to the increasingly important role of the media in politics and everyday life and the ways that corporate interests have colonized this sphere, using the media and culture to promote their own interests.

The culture industry thesis described both the production of massified cultural products and homogenized subjectivities. Mass culture for the Frankfurt School produced desires, dreams, hopes, fears, and longings, as well as unending desire for consumer products. The culture industry produced cultural consumers who would consume its products and conform to the dictates and the behaviors of the existing society. And yet, as Walter Benjamin pointed out (1969), the culture industry also produces rational and critical consumers able to dissect and discriminate among cultural texts and performances, much as sports fans learn to analyze and criticize sports events.

In retrospect, one can see the Frankfurt school work as articulation of a theory of the stage of state and monopoly capitalism that became dominant during the 1930s. This was an era of large organizations, theorized earlier by Austro-Marxist Rudolf Hilferding as "organized capitalism" (1980 [1910]), in which the state and giant corporations managed the economy and in which individuals submitted to state and corporate control. This period is often described as "Fordism" to designate the system of mass production and the homogenizing regime of capital which wanted to produce mass desires, tastes, and behavior. It was thus an era of mass production and consumption characterized by uniformity and homogeneity of needs, thought, and behavior producing a mass society and what the Frankfurt school described as "the end of the individual." No longer was individual thought and action the motor of social and cultural progress; instead giant organizations and institutions overpowered individuals. The era corresponds to the staid, conformist, and conservative world of corporate capitalism that was dominant in the 1950s with its organization men and women, its mass consumption, and its mass culture.

During this period, mass culture and communication were instrumental in generating the modes of thought and behavior appropriate to a highly organized and massified social order. Thus, the Frankfurt school theory of the culture industry articulates a major historical shift to an era in which mass consumption and culture was indispensable to producing a consumer society based on homogeneous needs and desires for mass-produced products and a mass society based on social organization and homogeneity. It is culturally the era of highly controlled network radio and television, insipid top forty pop music, glossy Hollywood films, national magazines, and other mass-produced cultural artifacts

Of course, media culture was never as massified and homogeneous as in the Frankfurt school model and one could argue that the model was flawed even during its time of origin and influence and that other models were preferable, such as those of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, and others of the Weimar generation and, later, British cultural studies. Yet the original Frankfurt school model of the culture industry did articulate the important social roles of media culture during a specific regime of capital and provided a model, still of use, of a highly commercial and technologically advanced culture that serves the needs of dominant corporate interests, plays a major role in ideological reproduction, and in enculturating individuals into the dominant system of needs, thought, and behavior.

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