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The Frankfurt School and the Problem with Popular Culture: The Culture Industry as Mass Deception Revisited

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Abstract

The turn to the 21st century and the technological advances that came with it have made the culture industry a force to be reckoned with, but at the same time changing the dynamics of the marketing arena. Now more than ever, the Internet has become a marketing entity in its own right. The varying industries of culture are no longer the gatekeepers of public opinion and product critique. With this change, some in the sociological field question whether or not the theories developed by Horkheimer and Adorno can account for these changes. The purpose of this paper is to reexamine the critique of culture production within The Dialectic of Enlightenment and utilize current articles to support the theories that Horkheimer and Adorno put forward. The overarching goal of this paper is to use the most recent empirical work to posit that the concepts Horkheimer and Adorno developed can go beyond time differences and still accurately apply to modern culture production. This article addresses the roles that economic and cultural trends have in the production of culture. From the present research, it seems as if the critical theory presented by Horkheimer and Adorno still provides an accurate prediction of the growth in the culture industry and its powers of mass deception.

Key Terms:
- Cultural Production
- Cultural Consumption
- Culture Industry
- Mass Media
- Capitalism
The overarching goal of this paper is to use the most recent empirical work to posit that the concepts Horkheimer and Adorno developed can go beyond time differences and still accurately apply to the production of culture in late capitalism (modernity). However, to promote a more well rounded view of the social influences that inspired the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, this paper will give a brief history of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and discuss the main objective behind *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001).

After World War I, sociologists and social theorists found themselves in a state of disillusionment when the revolutionary changes Marxism promised did not become a reality (Jay, 1973). Instead of creating a socialist utopia, Germany (and the rest of Europe) was focusing on holding war torn areas together and rebuilding severely weakened social infrastructure. But what happened? Why didn’t society reform itself after the war broke the hold of capitalist ideology? To find the answers to these questions, sociologists reanalyzed Marx’s theoretical concepts and found that the problem dwelled within the spaces where theory and praxis should have combined, but failed to do so (Jay, 1973). Praxis was an essential component to making Marxism a reality because it encompasses both practical thought and the implementation of that thought; praxis is the physical means in which philosophical thought is put into action. However, connecting Marxist theory to praxis was easier said than done because it lead to criticizing the newly formed political parties in Germany, which later became a threat to German solidarity. Forsaking political solidarity for intellectual gain, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research dedicated itself to successfully linking Marxist Theory with praxis (Inglis, 1993).

The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research first started as a week-long series of meetings called the First Marxist Work Week. Hosted by the future founder, Felix J. Weil, German sociologists specializing in Marxist Theory came to these meetings to exchange ideas or have discussions regarding articles they published (Jay, 1973). The first week of meetings was so successful that Weil was encouraged to make them a permanent fixture in German academia, thus, the Frankfurt Institute was founded in 1922 (Inglis, 1993). Not only was the Institute focused on perfecting and extending Marxist Theory, it was also established to break the tradition of educating students in narrow minded theoretical courses and address social topics these universities ignored as well (e.g. anti-Semitic attitudes in German society) (Jay, 1973). The ultimate goal was to create scholars that promoted social change and challenged the status quo (Jay, 1973).

However, under the direction of Carl Grunberg, the institution’s initial focus was on historical aspects of the labor movement in Germany (Jay, 1973). It was not until Max Horkheimer replaced Grunberg in 1931 that the Frankfurt Institute focused on theoretical scholarship (Inglis, 1993). From then on, a revitalization of Critical Theory occurred through the work of the Institute’s members (Jay, 1973). According to Arato and Gebhardt (1982), Critical Theory is a combination of Kant’s critical philosophy and a Marxist critique of Germany’s political economic structure. With such a foundation, critical theory provides the intellectuals of Frankfurt with the perfect arena for critiques of theoretical thought, praxis, and social functioning (Arato & Gebhardt, 1982).

After Hitler’s Nazi Regime came into power, the Institute went through a period of nomadism, eventually resettling in New York (Inglis, 1993). During this time there was a change in Horkheimer’s, and by extension the Institute’s, literary tone. Such changes included censorship of discourse utilizing words like Marxism, communism, or social collapse and shifts of
interest toward cultural critique (Jay, 1973). This was also a time when Adorno gained attention with the Institute for his work on culture and artistic expression (Jay, 1973).

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno were born into elite society and had firsthand experience with the power struggle between the social classes (Inglis, 1993). They observed how those who controlled the means of production produced and reproduced culture for capitalist gain. Horkheimer and Adorno pointed to the culture industry’s reliance on “advertising, popular music, and the glamour of cinema to invent new (and largely useless) desires for consumer goods, all to be fulfilled through shopping and entertainment” (Grazian, 2010, p.48). Grazian (2010) states that thorough the use of advertising, popular music, and film, the culture industry creates markets for “products sold by department stores, fashion houses, jewelers, cosmetic firms, tobacco and liquor companies, the automobile industry, and, of course, the film studios and record companies that helped to manufacture the desires for such things in the first place” (p.49).

From such observations, Horkheimer and Adorno analyzed mass cultural production to shine light on the intellectually restrictive contradiction of the culture industry to society (Inglis, 1993). The objective of their work in The Dialectic of Enlightenment was to show how the Enlightenment’s (and society’s) emphasis on reason was the source of this restriction Methodology, the tool of reason, has become what Inglis (1993) calls “psychotic circularity,” a compulsion that unceasingly starts and repeats itself. The desire to produce has become the obsession that leads to the compulsion to compute, measure, question, and categorize. Through capitalistic deception, reason has gradually been twisted from its true purpose and shaped into a means by which nature and the human condition are standardized. The greatest example modern society has of such corruption is the culture industry.

**The Enlightenment, Culture and Mass Production**

The culture industry is a system of production and consumption that assimilates mass culture, turning it into products that can be sold to the public (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975). Corporations like Sony, Walt Disney, and Coca-Cola are examples of the culture industry because they create products that are sold for public consumption (Grazian, 2010). Horkheimer and Adorno described how the media in the 20th century was becoming a powerful force that fueled the culture machine. The turn to the 21st century and the technological advances that came with it have made the culture industry a force to be reckoned with, but at the same time changing the dynamics of the marketing arena. Now more than ever, the Internet has become a marketing entity in its own right. The varying industries of culture are no longer the gatekeepers of public opinion and product critique. With websites like MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, culture industries have to compete with the all-powerful blogs of the consumer. Grebb (2004) states that:

> The Internet is by far the biggest, baddest, most incredibly influential monster to utterly turn a multi-billion dollar industry upside down since... well, since never, really... It’s a new world. And the old powers are searching desperately for a way to survive without the gatekeeper—and spending millions in the process (para. 4-5).

In order to stay fresh in the minds of the public, the culture industry has made itself a part of the social network age as well. With this change, some in the sociological field question as to whether or not the theories developed by Horkheimer and Adorno can account for it. To
answer this question we will revisit their work in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, starting with the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment era was a time of philosophical thought and a turn to reason. How people regarded their environment was no longer influenced by myth, fantasy, or superstition. From this point on animals, people, land masses, and even rock formations were categorized and given order. Answers to life’s questions became governed by steps, measures, and scientific methods. To attest to this, Horkheimer and Adorno (2001) state that “the program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy” (p. 3). The technology developed from then on is only an extension of the Enlightenment’s disenchantment with nature. Technology has a solidifying effect on the standardization of natural processes: “It does not work by concepts and images, by the fortunate insight, but refers to method, the exploitation of others work, and capital” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001, p. 4).

However, the mythology that the Enlightenment sought to eradicate has become the looking glass in which it can see and recognize itself. It accomplished this by opposing “as superstition the claim that truth is predictable of universals” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001, p. 6). Under the Enlightenment, the universal truth was that anything that could not be calculated and reduced to its most basic state is pushed off to the side, categorized as myth and made irrational. Through the destruction of myths the Enlightenment’s “principle of dissolvent rationality” is acknowledged and reaffirms its existence. Ironically, the movement started by the Enlightenment became its undoing as the pursuit of reason, knowledge, and truth became a pursuit for power, domination, and wealth (i.e. capitalism) (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001).

There is a distinct difference between mass culture and the culture industry. According to Adorno and Rabinbach (1975), mass culture is a spontaneous burst of human creativity, “the contemporary form of popular art” (p. 12). Conversely, the culture industry is a system of production and consumption that assimilates mass culture, turning it into a valuable commodity (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975). The mass media corporations exemplify this because they use advertising to produce consumer demands for products. Over time, the process of the Enlightenment saturated every aspect of civilization. Ergo, culture was not able to withstand the effects of the Enlightenment. The technology that is used to produce culture has forced it into uniformity (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001). Culture had become a commodity to be monopolized and because of this monopoly, corporations profiting from it no longer hide the fact that culture is standardized and devoid of human creativity. Corporations do not make the effort to hide their control over the culture industry because the ordered nature of cultural production tricks the public into believing that control is required to meet consumer needs. In reality, this is an illusion put in place by the culture industry. The consumer is not a subject, but an object within the culture industry (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975).

Consequently, corporations have eliminated any threat of resistance from the general population. Through the consumer culture created by capitalism, individual consciousness has been suppressed. To keep their hold on public opinion, corporations within the culture industry use radio, television, film, and the internet to give their products consumer appeal (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001). Adorno and Rabinbach (1975) state that the culture industry uses its power over mass communication to “duplicate, reinforce, and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable” (p. 12). This shapes the general population into the culture industry’s ideal
image and conceals the fact that the culture industry’s entire existence is dependent upon mass consumption and consumer demand (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975).

The Culture Industry in the 21st century

If the power of the culture industry is as far reaching as Horkheimer and Adorno believe, then does the original conceptualization of what the culture industry constitutes still accurately define it now? According to Miller (2009), this may no longer be the case. Through the power of discourse, all industries are a form of culture if:

Creativity refers to an input, not an output. This bizarre shift in adjectival meaning makes it possible for anything that makes money to be creative, just as Mato’s assertion that all industries have cultural components makes it possible for anything that makes money to be cultural (Miller, 2009, p. 95).

Miller (2009) states that the concerns Horkheimer and Adorno had about culture industries were just another example of Conflict Theory. The real concern was power distribution among the elite and working classes. The rise of culture production and consumer culture was a reaction to the new consciousness that developed among the working class through the sharp increase of public literacy (Miller, 2009).

The Internet has also created a new consciousness among the consumer population and the struggle to maintain the balance of power begins anew. Horkheimer and Adorno (2001) stated that, “The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them” (p. 167). Because products of the culture industry are transparent, resistance to its ideology takes on a new form, especially with access to the Internet. To combat this threat, culture industries provide the public with resistance to the system themselves. In the past few years or so, media personalities like Perez Hilton have grown in popularity with their bashing of culture industry tailored celebrities. Hilton’s promise to say what people are really thinking made him a hit on his blogger website. He states that, “I’m doing things on my own terms. I don’t have to answer to anyone but me” (Navarro, 2007, para. 5). This claim is hard to believe since culture industries have all left their mark on him: “Mr. Lavandeira’s [Hilton] blog commands as much as $9,000 a week for a single advertisement and $45,000 for the most expensive ad package... His demographics... lure ads from fashion brands, spirits companies and, of course, Hollywood” (Navarro, 2007, para. 21).

Another form of resistance to culture industry was the rise of punk rock and goth cultures. In the beginning, people that associated themselves with this group were against mainstream popular culture and fashion. To those who identified themselves with mainstream popular culture, punk and goth personalities were seen as being social deviants because they did not adhere to cultural norms. Gillespie (2010) states that:

Punk music and fashion, once a grim specter threatening Western civilization, have gone mainstream now that punk’s romance with skulls and pret-a-porter bondage pants is never farther away than your local mall’s Hot Topic store (p. 60).

With the emergence of music artists like punk rocker, Avril Lavigne, and the gothic style of Marilyn Manson, punk and goth have become a part of pop culture, another object to be sold.

Rap was a form of opposition to the culture industry as well (Martinez, 1997). The goal of the culture industry is to generalize human existence and marginalize individualism. This plan was
formed around an ideal based on the viewpoint of certain human experiences of the world. As such, the culture industries subtly push people to conform to the dominant cultural group in society. By the late 1980s and 1990s, rap had developed as resistance to and a critique of dominant culture and the culture industries that marketed it (Martinez, 1997). An example of this is Public Enemy’s song *Fight the Power*. Within their lyrics, Public Enemy tell listeners to utilize their freedom of speech, be psychologically strong, and remain socially aware to combat the dominant culture (Public Enemy, 1990).

If true art is a spontaneous burst of creativity from the human soul and any technique governing it “is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic” (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975, p. 14), then rap may have been one of the few true artistic expressions that existed. Waldman (1977) said it best when she wrote, “Genuine art always contains an element of protest, a utopian element, a vision of the ‘other’ society” (p. 43). However, this too changed when rap became incorporated into the culture industry. From this point on, the hard hitting verses and hooks that groups like NWA and Public Enemy used to critique social injustices and resist dominant culture had become glamorized and marketable. Modern rap artists give the illusion of resistance to the culture industry, while in reality; they have become a mechanism for branding (Eshun, 2005). As an example, in 2003, rap artist 50 Cent mentioned 31 different brands in his songs (www.uic.edu).

As stated before, the production of culture is connected to the advancements of science and technology. It is powered by economics, politics, and the use of discourse (Spitulnik, 1993). Horkheimer and Adorno (2001) called the Enlightenment’s emphasis on rationale and methodology a movement toward totalitarianism. The entities grasping at totalitarian power are corporations backed by the wealth acquired through capitalism. Since the court of 1886 granted corporations the same freedoms under the law as “persons flesh and blood,” these freedoms have expanded over time. Chomsky (2010) notes that:

… the control of corporations over the economy was so vast that Woodrow Wilson described “a very different America from the old,… no longer a scene of individual enterprise… individual opportunity and individual achievement,” but an America in which “Comparatively small groups of men,” corporate managers, “wield a power and control over the wealth and the business operations of the country,” becoming “rivals of the government itself… (para. 9).

What makes this statement even more alarming is that there are no standards by which government organizations can distinguish between media corporations with the intent to broadcast information for profit and corporations with the only purpose of “providing news and opinion in an unbiased fashion” (para. 10).

According to Jeffcutt, Pick and Protherough (2000), “the production of cultural commodities has become an international multi-billion-dollar industry” (p. 132); now culture production is seen as an essential financial investment in the political arena. International governments support culture industries under the belief that it “reinforces the economic industry, by providing jobs and improving living conditions” (Jeffcutt et al., 2000, p. 133). This argument in favor of supporting the culture industry shows how inescapable its illusions are in the social world. Horkheimer and Adorno (2001) warn us about such illusions, saying:

The city housing projects designed to perpetuate the individual as a supposedly independent unit in a small hygienic
The homogenizing effects of the culture industry can be seen best in Japanese advertising agencies (Kawashima, 2006). According to Kawashima (2006), there is “quality deterioration in Japanese television commercials” and they are “witnessing a major shift in television advertisements away from cultural expression to become a tool of sales promotion, a change beyond their control” (p. 395-396). Such cultural decline has come from the need of funding to keep programs on the air. As television stations turn to advertisement corporations for funding, they become assimilated into the marketing systems of culture industry. The more stations a corporation can take into the system, their “target audience” becomes “easier to predict and, crucially, it is guaranteed that the advertiser’s competitors in the same product category are excluded from the same sponsorship deal” (Kawashima, 2006, p. 402). Horkheimer and Adorno (2001) posit that companies like this were successful at utilizing culture as a form of advertisement. As a result, they gain enough socio-economic power that they no longer have to make an effort to advertise.

Due to the competitive environments capitalism and technological advancements create, corporations within the culture industry use strategies as “a means of monitoring and accounting for the activities of producers, artists and recording industry personnel. They also provide a means of rationalizing and ordering the activities of consumers and audiences” (Negus, 1998, p. 364). Digital advancements increase the power marketing entities have over populations because it provides them with the ability to create statistics, graphs, and other databases concerning consumer activity. People aid culture industries in gathering such data by willingly providing advertisement agencies with their personal information. Consumers never find anything wrong with their willingness to be reduced to percentages because of the culture industry’s false concern with serving the public’s needs (Klinenberg & Benzecry, 2005).

The ultimate goal for corporations in culture production is to become a trademark. Trademarked businesses usually have the ability to increase their market shares which in turn attract more investors and new products (Negus, 1998). Within the culture industry, human beings can become trademarks as well. Hollywood celebrities are the best example of this because their names no longer make them unique individuals. Instead, celebrities become a living embodiment of culture industry ideology. The humanity of the celebrity is replaced with the roles or slogans that brought them their fame (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001). As such, consumers don’t idolize the celebrity; they idolize the things celebrities personify.

Orend and Gagne (2009) have noted the increased popularity of having brand names tattooed onto the body. What was once a statement of individuality and rebellion has become a mass marketed trend with the illusion of resistance. Through celebrity worship; people are given “faux
needs” and an idea that the body is something to be bought and sold. Consumers willingly trademark themselves, replacing their own humanity with a meaningless brand name (Orend & Gagne, 2009).

From the present research, it seems as if the critical theory presented by Horkheimer and Adorno still provides an accurate prediction of the growth in the culture industry and its powers of mass deception. Any entity within society that dares to hang onto its own autonomy is quickly becoming a rare and dying breed. The most disconcerting aspect of this is that the public is fully aware of the culture industry’s illusions, but live in a constant state of paralysis induced by popular culture that prevents it from taking action against systems of social control.

References


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