

The Frankfurt School

Dr. Paromita Chakraborty, Surendranath College

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. It is most closely associated with the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse. It was a school of thought associated with scholars at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in Germany.

Working in Frankfurt, Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, theorists such as Max Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm produced some of the first accounts within critical social theory of the importance of mass culture and communication.

In 1930 Max Horkheimer became the director of the Institute and recruited many of the scholars who came to be known collectively as the Frankfurt School. In the aftermath of Marx's failed prediction of revolution, these individuals were dismayed by the rise of Orthodox Party Marxism and a dictatorial form of communism. The Frankfurt School turned their attention to the problem of rule through ideology, or rule carried out in the realm of culture. They believed that technological advancements in communications and the reproduction of ideas enabled this form of rule.

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."

Frankfurt school stated that in the realm of culture, technology produced mass culture that habituated individuals to conform to the dominant patterns of thought and behaviour, and thus provided powerful instruments of social control and domination.

Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno 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.

Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno hence developed an account of the "culture industry" to call attention to the industrialization and commercialization of culture under capitalist relations of production. 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.

Providing historical background to the triumph of the culture industry, another theorist of the Frankfurt School Jurgen 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.

This historical transformation is also 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. 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.

One of the core concerns of the scholars of the Frankfurt School, especially Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse, was the rise of "mass culture." This phrase refers to the technological developments that allowed for the distribution of cultural products—music,

film, and art—on a mass scale. Technology allowed the public to sit passively before cultural content rather than actively engage with one another for entertainment, as they had in the past. The scholars theorized that this experience made people intellectually inactive and politically passive.

Hence mass culture for the Frankfurt School was one that 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 behaviours of the existing society. And yet, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, 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.

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" 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 behaviour. No longer was individual thought and action the motor of social and cultural progress; instead giant organizations and institutions overpowered individuals.

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 behaviour.

The Frankfurt School also argued that this process was one of the missing links in Marx's theory of the domination of capitalism and explained why revolution never came.