

# Frankfurt School of Cultural Studies: History, Theory and Facts.

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**Abstract:** *Cultural Studies can be practically defined as a study of culture with the intention to understand a society and its politics. Cultural Studies has flourished as an important branch of knowledge and has widened its scope by formulating new branches of knowledge by incorporating itself with other branches of knowledges. It has become multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary in nature. As an important branch of knowledge it is decisive to study in detail about various aspects of cultural Studies. This research paper is an attempt to explain the history, theory and practice of Frankfurt school of cultural studies, which is a major school in Cultural Studies.*

**Key Words:** *Cultural Studies, Frankfurt school, Literary Criticism, Literary Theory, Cultural Studies Theory.*

## 1. Introduction

In the first half of 1930s, an interesting development took place. Under the guidance of philosopher Max Horkheimer, a group of social scientists collectively formed a school of philosophy and social theory - the Institute for Social Research at the Goethe University Frankfurt. Much before this gathering, Weil (1898–1975) a young Marxist, had done his doctoral thesis on the concrete difficulties of applying socialism. He organized symposiums and seminars with an expectation of bringing diverse tendencies of Marxism together. He asked the government to establish an institution and to give it University status. This was the primary attempt to establish Institute for Social Research. The institute first followed Hegel's philosophy as its mission: to apprehend its own time in thoughts. Its own time, which was the concluding years of the Weimar Republic. Many of these theorists assumed that traditional system could not effectively explain the wild and unpredicted development of capitalist societies in the twentieth century. They shared the Marxist and Hegelian premises. The school's leading figures wanted to debate the works of such diverse thinkers as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Weber, and Lukács. The nature of Critical Theory transformed due to the steadiness of Nazi supremacy and the

evident Stalinization of Soviet socialism. Since the 1960s, Frankfurt School critical theory has increasingly been guided by Jürgen Habermas's work on communicative reason, linguistic intersubjectivity and what Habermas calls "the philosophical discourse of modernity"<sup>1</sup>. Early members of the Frankfurt School were: Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Leopold Neumann, Henryk Grossman, Leo Löwenthal and Erich Fromm. Later theorists with a background in Frankfurt School critical theory include Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Albrecht Wellmer, Claus Offe, Alfred Schmidt and Oskar Negt.

The way Lukács was indebted to reject his *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1923 and possibly a major motivation for the work of the Frankfurt School, specified that freedom from the Communist Party was crucial for genuine theoretical works. Publication in the 1930s of Marx's *Economic-Philosophical Documents* and *The German Ideology* showed the continuity with Hegelianism that underlay Marx's thought. The political commotion of Germany's uneasy interwar years prominently affected the School's expansion. National Socialism became ever more aggressive, its organizers decided to shift the Institute out of the nation. Resulting Adolf Hitler's rise to authority in 1933, the Institute left Germany for Geneva, formerly moving to New York City in 1935. Following Marx, they were regarded with the situations that allow for social transformation and the formation of rational institutions. Still the philosophical tradition of Frankfurt school is obliged to Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. Institute of Social Research could continue to exist in exile for a long time but the Institute was formally re-established in Frankfurt on 1953.

## 2. Frankfurt School of Cultural Studies

Whenever the designation "Frankfurter Schule" is employed, three things are meant: (1) the continuing tradition of classical Critical Theory; The "Frankfurt School" - Critical Theory of Society (2) the work of

Habermas; and (3) the work of the Institute of Social Research after Adorno's death.

The Frankfurt School found aesthetic and intellectual modernism to be central to the emerging Critical Theory of society. Moving well beyond the traditional roles of sociologist or critic, the members of the Frankfurt School sought to incorporate aspects of Weimar modernism into their emerging social theory. This led members of the group to study psychoanalysis, modernist literature, and atonal music, as well as to develop a more general theory of art that concentrated on its capacity to criticize contemporary reality and to offer fleeting glimpses of utopian possibilities 2.

Frankfurt School was trying to find answers for the failure of the working-class revolution in Western Europe. World witnessed the rise of Nazism later in Germany, the place where Marx predicted working class revolution. Frankfurt School brought a new approach to critical theory to answer all this questions:

The original aim of critical theory was to analyze the true significance of "the ruling understandings" generated in bourgeois society, in order to show how they misrepresented actual human interaction in the real world, and in so doing functioned to justify or legitimize the domination of people by capitalism. The Frankfurt theorists generally assumed that their task was mainly to interpret the areas of society Marx had not dealt with, especially in the superstructure of society.3.

Frankfurt school's approach to culture and cultural studies is relevant in the context of the principle of cultural relativism. It is an idea that diverse cultures exist at the same time. Even though all of these cultural realities are correspondingly valid, some are supplementary prevalence than others. Frankfurt school which has witnessed both Nazi regime and American capitalistic era, tries to bring out the cause of domination of a particular culture over other. That dominant culture in terms of Frankfurt school is known as 'pop culture' or 'popular culture'. Popular culture is generally defined as that culture transferred on a large scale mutually through individual and mediated communication. Frankfurt school stressed on two terms namely popular culture and Cultural market to explain the effects of culture on human lives. Curiosity in the arena of pop culture has amplified since the sixties. The idea was, if we learn pop culture we study how society works, which rules and facts are in place and where power resides. Paul

Gorman in his book *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* explains the role of popular culture.

Progressives, and later Communists, shared the conservatives' dislike for mass art, but instead of condemning the consumers of popular culture, they began to view the masses as passive and innocent victims of ruthless commercial interests that ignored the welfare of the nation, its people, and its culture. Industrialization had created leisure time, but it also produced an urban working class so impoverished by the monotony of labor and harsh living conditions that this new leisure could be easily exploited by the corrupt producers of mass culture. Instead of offering the same kind of refinement crosstown traffic 165that the conservative defenders of high art preferred, mass entertainment corrupted the morality of the nation by appealing to the lowest common denominator. Communists, drawing on the Marxian critique of ideology, likewise but more specifically condemned mass culture as capitalist propaganda that offered psychological escape from the material conditions that bred revolutionary, working-class consciousness and thus subtly bolstered particular aspects of the bourgeois worldview.4.

Popular culture had a major role to play that society. Pop culture was often seen as a replication of mainstream society. Due to the influence of social constructionism pop culture was regarded as the building block of a collective social reality. Frankfurt school found the fame of popular culture as a danger and they explained popular culture is as fake culture, or a fake consciousness. Paul Gorman explains:

The aesthetic theory of the Communist Party took form under the guidance of Mike Gold. His Proletarian Culture movement sought to develop an authentic workers' art that opposed both the high culture of the bourgeoisie and the commercial popular culture that was corrupting the minds of the masses. By encouraging experimentation among working-class artists and their allies, the Communists hoped to fashion true expressions of working-class consciousness that would ultimately transform art into a "working-class weapon."5.

Popular culture was a tool created by powerful members of the elite, who governed the media landscape. The main function of pop culture was to maintain the current power structures. The elite

class made a culture and structured it into popular culture. On the other hand the popular culture helped the elite class to maintain their power. It was designed to keep the masses ignorant. Popular culture distracted the audience and kept their thoughts away from the partial distribution of wealth and power in the world. Pop culture is used to teach people to obey the law and obey powerful institutions. The power to spread the message and create propaganda was the criteria for choosing popular culture. The only reason that Stalinists and Nazis rejected Modernism was that it was less popular and thereby harder to use for propaganda purposes.<sup>6</sup> Popular culture spread through all carriers of culture like language, arts, film, mediums of communication and many things. Theodor W. Adorno one of the most important proponents of Frankfurt school in his book *The Culture Industry*, describes the role of literature in spreading popular culture:

According to the studies of the English sociologist Ian Watt, the English novels of that period, particularly the works of Defoe and Richardson, marked the beginning of an approach to literary production that consciously created, served, and finally controlled a 'market'. Today the commercial production of cultural goods has become streamlined, and the impact of popular culture upon the individual has concomitantly increased.<sup>7</sup>

This theory was first developed by members of the Frankfurter School who were not only scientists but also very active politically and who aspired for social change and emancipation. They tried to clarify why the revolution that Marx had foreseen, revolution of the laborers of the world, hadn't happened. Their answer in short, it was because popular culture, transferred through mass media, was unambiguously created to prevent it. It was used to keep us obedient. In a way, the media served as 'opium for the people', creating a docile viewers that is doubtful to start a revolution. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass deception" explains the role of media in the failure of revolution.

The city housing projects designed to perpetuate the individual as a supposedly independent unit in a small hygienic dwelling make him all the more subservient to his adversary – the absolute power of capitalism. Because the inhabitants, as producers and as consumers, are drawn into the center in search of work and pleasure, all the living units crystallize into well-organized complexes. The striking unity of

microcosm and macrocosm presents men with a model of their culture: the false identity of the general and the particular.<sup>8</sup>

The tools that culture industry made use of were mass persuasion, manipulation, consumerism, controlled gratification, arts and culture. They also explained how art has become a tool in the hand of powerful people:

The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce.<sup>9</sup>

The first focus of Frankfurt school was the question how pop culture was created and how it related to a larger societal context. After its encounter with American capitalism they coined a new term Culture Industry (German: Kulturindustrie) and expanded their field of study to a wider platform. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer defines Culture Industry that it is when popular culture is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods—films, radio programmes, magazines, etc.—that are used to manipulate mass society into passivity (Adorno and Horkheimer 107). Adorno and Horkheimer who had a greater interest to study the working of cultural industry have described its operation among the working class in their essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass deception".

The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world of everyday perceptions), is now the producer's guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen. This purpose has been furthered by mechanical reproduction since the lightning takeover by the sound film.<sup>10</sup>

For people in Frankfurt school media played a big role in the promotion of popular culture. They were not in a position to accept popular culture as a leading form of culture. For them it was a fake culture promoted by cultural industry to promote their products and mislead individuals. Says Andrew

Arato in his introduction to the text *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (2007)

In fact, as Adorno was to show (and Benjamin himself noted), the new media themselves were open to a fake and manufactured aura which a capitalist culture industry might develop for a sales effort equally functional for the advertisement of movie stars, merchandise and fascist regimes... The culture industry indeed represents for Adorno the tendency toward the "Aufhebung" of art-but it is a false and manipulative abolition in mass culture.11.

According to the vision of Frankfurt school, reason is fundamentally a form of control over nature which has regarded as humanity since its establishment, that is, since those efforts meant at providing a mythological clarification of cosmic forces. The purposeful work for such instrumental rationality was basically that of upholding self-preservation, even if this ironically turned into the division of bourgeois individuality which, once deprived of any basic value, became merely ceremonial and thus determined by external impacts of "mass-identity" in a context of "cultural industry". So upholding of a particular popular culture has created a struggle between individual's natural identity and the supposed identity highlighted by the popular culture. This execution of identity struggle is carried over through the media available in the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer describes the role of movies in this process:

Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies. The sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who are unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story; hence the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality.12.

As Frankfurt school was against the cultural industry, they characterized its function and results with the term deception. For them there is nothing real in popular culture. It is not even a neutral aspect of culture. It is fundamentally made by those powerful in the society to maintain their power. The illusion and amuse that cultural industry produces is addressed with the term 'deception' by Adorno and Horkheimer:

The deception is not that the culture industry supplies amusement but that it ruins the fun by allowing business considerations to involve it in the

ideological clichés of a culture in the process of self-liquidation. Ethics and taste cut short unrestrained amusement as 'naïve' – naïveté is thought to be as bad as intellectualism – and even restrict technical possibilities. The culture industry is corrupt; not because it is a sinful Babylon but because it is a cathedral dedicated to elevated pleasure.13.

Adorno and Horkheimer believed that commodified culture was closing all possibilities for genuine cultural experience. They were against the more unnatural experience that popular cultural provided was destroying the original nature of the natural culture. This attempt to make a Pseudo-individuality and Pseudo-culture is revealed through the writings of Frankfurt school writers.

The peculiarity of the self is a monopoly commodity determined by society; it is falsely represented as natural. It is no more than the moustache, the French accent, the deep voice of the woman of the world, the Lubitsch touch: finger prints on identity cards which are otherwise exactly the same, and into which the lives and faces of every single person are transformed by the power of the generality. Pseudo-individuality is the prerequisite for comprehending tragedy and removing its poison: only because individuals have ceased to be themselves and are now merely centers where the general tendencies meet, is it possible to receive them again, whole and entire, into the generality. In this way mass culture discloses the fictitious character of the 'individual' in the bourgeois era, and is merely unjust in boasting on account of this dreary harmony of general and particular.14.

Frankfurt school made the first attempt to address the questions how pop culture was created and how it is associated to a larger societal framework. Though widely accepted in the beginning, later they were accused of the limitations of their approach that it fitted nicely only within the old mass audience paradigm. They were highly criticized for the negative views they had on popular culture and it was often seen as somewhat elitist too. Though Frankfurt School does not have many supporters today their views have still relevance in this stage of advanced capitalistic society.

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