

## CRITIQUES OF ADORNO AND HORKHEIMER ON MODERN SOCIETY: A PESSIMISTIC APPROACH

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**Abstract:** Critical Theory that has been developed by Frankfurt School is one of the most important schools of thought that criticizes modern society with a Marxist manner but at the same time they differentiate themselves from classical Marxist approach in some aspects. In this paper, the critiques of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno towards modern society will be covered with the light of their article of Culture Industry; Enlightenment as a Mass Deception. The discussion will mainly cover the bringing of modernity including Enlightenment era with its rational, instrumentalist and positivist manner and also culture industry which is one of the most criticized aspect of capitalist order by them. Their critiques of culture industry will be analyzed in more details and it will help us to see how Critical Theory has a more pessimistic approach than classical Marxism in terms of understanding and evaluating modern world that is surrounded by a manipulated culture industry.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, Modernity, Culture Industry

### Introduction

The modernity or modern society that cannot be separated from reason, science, technology, progress and positivism has been considered by some philosophers as the emancipation of humankind especially with arise of “Enlightenment” that is thought as the end of irrational but the beginning of liberated man. However, the modernity and the enlightenment with their enormous consequences have not been celebrated by all of the thinkers that they have been the centre of accusations for the problematic aspects of society and the system. Critical Theory developed by Frankfurt school, is one of the important school of thought that criticize the modern society with a Marxist manner but at the same time they differentiate themselves from Marxist approach in some aspects. In this paper, the critiques of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno towards modern society and enlightenment will be covered with the light of their books of Dialectic of Enlightenment. During this discussion, how they are differentiating from Marx and how they have a pessimistic tendency about the social transformation will also took place as an important issue.

To start with brief information about the formation of Frankfurt school seems to be better in order to understand historical background of the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer taking place especially in Dialectic of Enlightenment. David Held also emphasize that “In order to grasp the axes around which critical theory developed it is essential to understand the turbulent events which were at the roots of its founders’ historical and political experience.”(1980:16). Frankfurt Institute for Social Research that was founded in 1923 in Germany is the actual school associated with Frankfurt school. In the first sense, the Institute is known as an interdisciplinary Marxist school of social theory, however the Institute appears with the claim that traditional Marxism isn’t able to explain the capitalism of twentieth century and also they are highly critical about the Soviet socialism. From this point, the school develops a theory named as critical theory that differentiates them from traditional and scientific theories. In 1930, Max Horkheimer becomes the director of Institute but in these years fascism in Germany also gets more powerful that in 1933 Hitler achieves to come to power. The rise of fascism in Germany and Soviet socialism make the social theorists of Frankfurt school to see that traditional Marxism failed in the prediction of any revolution in a capitalist society, instead they experience how the workers

suppressed and how there is a great popular support for fascism and also how Soviet socialism is turning into a totalitarianism with violence. As a result of this fascist pressure in Germany, they have to move the Institute to USA until the reestablishment of it in Frankfurt in 1953.

### **Critiques of Modern Society**

As it is stated before, the critique of modern society and enlightenment is one of the central points of critical theory that most of the social theories from this school of thought have written on this from different aspects and approaches. As it is expected, Adorno and Horkheimer, coming from critical theory approach, tries to create a portrait of modern society from a radical perspective. Their critiques of modern society starts with a traditional Marxist approach by engaging with capitalism and its exploitation but also their critique has some other dimensions. The Enlightenment and its bringing of reason and rationality or positivism put into the center of critiques. Also, they go further of Marxism and focus on not only capitalism but cultural structure of modern society is examined deeply to see how the domination is consolidated over society. In the following part of the paper, Adorno and Horkheimer's portrait of modern society will be tried to drawn by examining their critiques of the capitalism, culture industry and Enlightenment. By examining each of the concepts, we will try to see how they rationalize their claims , but most important thing is we will try to answer the question of whether there is a possibility of emancipation from the captivation and domination of these systems by seeing how they differ from Marx in that sense.

In the critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer on modern society and modernity, it is better to start with the concept of Enlightenment that they mostly associate with modern system. In this sense, it can be easily said that Dialectic of Enlightenment, written by Adorno and Horkheimer, is one of the most important texts to understand their view of Enlightenment and modern society. The book, as a text of critical theory, briefly tries to demonstrate that how the modern society with its capitalist system and Enlightenment itself created domination over individuals although it promised the freedom. According to them, the enlightenment that they define as “ Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters.” (2002: 1) started with the promises that the reason and new way of positivist approach help people to release from their slavery by using their reason; however Enlightenment could not achieve this because besides to its promises what Enlightenment brought created another myth that is domination over individuals by exposing instrumental system. In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer tries to shows how Enlightenment is actually a myth for domination in different sections such as; “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (2002: xviii) and in another place as “Enlightenment's program was disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.”(2002: 1). As these statements shows that they were suspicious about what Enlightenment brought and gifted to modern society.

Firstly, it is better to mention about the positivism that is promoted by the Enlightenment era and anti-positivist approach of critical theory. Positivism that is based on epistemological view highly depends on the objectivity and the facts derived from natural sciences. In positivist approach, the subjectivity is denied as not being a fact and social facts are ignored. In that point the positivism is started to be criticized especially by Weber and then Frankfurt School theorists. Firstly, by Frankfurt school and Horkheimer, positivism is seen as a kind of reduction because everything is tried to be explained by natural sciences. Another point of critique is that positivism admits the knowledge that is easily visible in objective world as fact, and those that can be generalized, so this approach can not explain social relations and facts. Second critique is about the suppression that is created by positivism, because critical theory claims that positivism

prevents any challenging action with because of its conservative manner about the knowledge and facts. Since positivism only depends on facts, it only reproduces the status quo without giving any room for challenge and reflection toward society. In the book of Raymond Geuss, he states about it as: “Positivism is no particular obstacle to the development of natural science, but is a serious threat to the main vehicles of human emancipation, critical theories. One basic goal of the Frankfurt School is the criticism of positivism and the rehabilitation of ‘reflection’ as a category of valid knowledge.” (1981:2).

Another point that Adorno and Horkheimer criticize is ‘instrumental reason’ that gets more powerful with increasing rationalization process in modern societies. In instrumental reason and rationalization process, people starts to make decision based on more rational choices that they only consider the efficiency and make always calculations about what a decision or action will bring to them. This leads to ignorance of morality of means to reach the end. As Weber, critical theorists see this as a product of modern societies, because the instrumental reason serves for capitalism, modern science and modern state. In capitalism for example, it is important to give rational decision and it is legitimized to use every means for the interest or the end that is aimed. In the discussion of culture industry of Adorno and Horkheimer that will take place in the following part of the paper, instrumental reason is a critical aspect of system. According to them, the rationality and instrumentality of modern societies have also conquered the culture, because the value of a cultural product depends on whether it has any purpose or it is a mean of something else. In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, this is mentioned as “Everything is perceived only from the point of the view that it can serve as something else, however vaguely that other thing might be envisaged.” (2002: 128). Moreover, in terms of science and technology, the instrumental reason is a key because these concepts are based on this instrumentality and claims that manipulation and control of nature is essential and rational. The instrumentalization of nature is also criticized for being an idea of Enlightenment as Rolf Wiggershaus states “They (Frankfurt School) wanted to blame the disaster on Enlightenment, but again and again blamed it on a form of enlightenment qualified as bourgeois, as domination over nature and so on...” (1995: 333). However, in that point we see that critical theorists claim that this instrumental reason now also starts to control and manipulate human nature, because it becomes a part of social life. In that point, we see that theorists refers to the Weber’s iron cage concept that means rationality creates a system similar to iron cage and people can not emancipate from this cage because it is attached to their lives and dominated all of the society. David Held mentions about this subject as follows:

*They shared Weber’s view as to the probability of the continuing expansion of rationalization and bureaucratization. They also shared his pessimism as to the dangers and risks involved which Weber called the ‘iron cage’ of a highly bureaucratized division of labor. The extension of formal means-end rationality to ‘the conduct of life’ becomes a concern as a form of domination: means becoming end, social rules becoming reified objectifications commanding directions. (1980:66).*

The concept of ‘culture industry’ developed by Adorno and Horkheimer and explained in detail in their book of Dialectic of Enlightenment, is crucial and significant concept for understanding the critiques of them toward modern society and capital system. Culture industry term is used by them for the new form of cultural artifacts in capitalist world. This term is chosen intently instead of mass culture in that way in order to emphasize how the culture becomes a commodity in modern world. Their critique of mass culture is interpreted as “For the first time, popular culture was attacked from a radical rather than a conservative direction” by Martin Jay (1996:217). The technological developments and capitalist system created such a system and monopoly that dominated the culture and individuals. In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer tell “No mention is made of the fact that the basis on which technology acquires

power over society is the power of those whose economic position in society is strongest. A technological rationality is the rationality of domination” (2002: 95)

The first characteristic of culture industry is its mass production style. In that style, all of the cultural products are produced in masses like a commodity by losing all of its value. In this system, all cultural artifacts faces with the fact of being all same like a principle and as it is stated in as “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness.... Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together.” (2002:94). In this system, standardization and massification becomes the key points that all of the products lack of any imagination of audiences and ends of all products are easily predictable since they serve for and reproduce the status quo. The culture only produce and reproduce the world we everyday perceive and it duplicates the outside world. People who consume the products of culture industry can not distinguish them from reality because they are trained to identify them with reality without questioning. (2002:100). All of the products of culture industry are also structured and produced for easy consumption, by this way they penetrate in all phases of life without making itself so much disturbing and noticeable. This characteristic of culture industry creates inertia in society according to Adorno and Horkheimer because people get used to consume everything easily so they lose their potentiality to question and broader perception of world. The amusement of culture makes all people sleep in their routines of lives, they are only prepared to the other day that they will serve for capitalist world. This situation leads to a great conformism in society also and it is a significant critique of Adorno and Horkheimer about the modern society. As it is stated before, system demands the obedience and conformism of society. However, it does not do this apparently that it says you can think and behave different than system, but when it happens, it pushes them out of the society and labeled as ‘other’. Anyone who does not conform is condemned to an economic impotence which is prolonged in the intellectual powerlessness of the eccentric loner.” (Adorno, Horkheimer, 2002: 106). This hidden suppression coming from the requirement of conformism also aims to abolition of individuality and any form of objection and resistance. In this modern capitalist system, culture industry takes the power of individual and presents a new pseudo-individuality to deceive them. The individuality and self also becomes a monopoly product of culture that all uniqueness of the individual is lost. However, the most important aspect of this situation is that not the attempt of culture industry to abolish individuality but also acceptance of society. It is the fact that the most critical and crucial part of the culture industry for Adorno and Horkheimer is the attitude of society and individual towards the domination and enslavement of culture industry. People do not resist but instead they conform because they like the easiness and comfortableness of the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer criticize it by stating that “They insist unwaveringly on the ideology by which they are enslaved. The pernicious love of the common people for the harm done to them outstrips even the cunning of the authorities.” (2002: 106). The reason of lack of resistance is showed as the capitalist system surrounding the society because they can not go out of the system, and the worst thing they even do not want to go out of it as Adorno and Horkheimer said “Capitalist production hems them in so tightly, in body and soul, that they unresistingly succumb to whatever is proffered to them.” (2002: 106). They also become a part of the system and strongly attached to it. This system is so well organized for deception that it does not remain any room for the emancipation and people resign and dedicate themselves to the continuity of the system. It is told in the book as “...but the necessity, inherent in the system, of never releasing its grip on the consumer, of not for a moment allowing him or her to suspect that resistance is possible.” (2002: 113).

Although Adorno and Horkheimer are coming from Marxist approach, they did not remain in the same place and a transition from Marx in some extent occurred in their Critical Theory. In general, they follow the Marxist view for explaining the system by emphasizing on capitalist system, its exploitation and class struggles, but their political and historical experiences

show that in practice especially Marxism failed to response to the modern society. David Held explains this transition as “Following Marx, they were preoccupied, especially in their early work with the forces which moved society towards rational institutions- institutions which would ensure true, free and just life. But they were aware of the many obstacles to radical change and sought to analyze and expose these.” (1980: 15) They were thus concerned both with interpretation and transformation The first point that they contradict with Marx is his conception of history and idea of progress. When we look at the Marx’s conception of history, we see that he believes there is progress in history. He claims briefly and basically that history has stages in itself and in these stages the classes derived from mode of production conflicts with each other and this struggle leads to the revolution and to the transformation of a new stage. This materialistic conception of history is however not shared by Adorno and Horkheimer as other Frankfurt school theorists. They think that this understanding of history does not work because there is no such a progress coming from the struggle. Martin Jay indicates the views of Frankfurt school on that “The hope for a radical transformation of conditions, indeed, any confidence in the possibility of historical progress at all, seemed to be without substance.” (1996: 228). The denial of the progress by Adorno and Horkheimer differentiate them from Marx in another subject; that is the hope for revolution. Since there is progress in history and the stages are transformed by the revolutions for Marx, this means that Marx claims the current capitalist system will be replaced with socialism and at the end communism. In this sense, Marx believes that it will be achieved with the revolutionary potentiality of working class, especially in developed capitalist societies. However, Adorno and Horkheimer does not agree with this, because they think there is no more revolutionary potentiality of working class in this modern system of capitalist societies. The reason why they do not approve Marx is their experiences in their times. In these years, Adorno and Horkheimer witnesses that there is no tendency of revolution in working class, instead there is a great support for fascism especially in Germany. The working class loss its potential for revolution in Western capitalist societies with the suppression and domination of capitalist system, and even they starts to conform status quo.”(Martin Jay, 1996: 228) The prediction of Marx about the place of revolution appears to be incorrect because the only revolution takes place in Russian Empire that is not a developed capitalist Western state. This revolution is seen as the actualization of Marxist theory by many, but Frankfurt school also criticizes it by seeing as a kind of totalitarian and authoritarianism that is similar to instrumentality of positivism. This positivist tendency of Soviet socialism is seen as legitimization of violence and a new form of oppression. However, besides to all of these differences, the most important difference is the pessimistic tendency of Adorno and Horkheimer according to Marx.

## Conclusion

Until to this point, we see the critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer on the modern society by referring the Enlightenment, capitalist system and its culture industry and also their reinterpretation of Marx in some subjects. All of the critiques and claims showed that they believes we are all dominated and captivated by this iron system of modern society supported by capitalism and Enlightenment ideas. Now, it is time to answer to the question of whether it is possible for Adorno and Horkheimer to be emancipated from this domination by a social transformation. Although it is not easy to give an absolutely true answer, we can derive from their works that they are so pessimistic about such emancipation. They believe that there is highly no way for resistance and transformation. Here it can be better to rationalize their pessimism by rewording some discussions above. Firstly, the instrumental reason that is the product of Enlightenment is getting more powerful in the modern societies that it creates as Weber suppose a iron cage, and Adorno and Horkheimer believes that it is not possible to overcome this rationalization because it is in the all part of our lives and it is highly supported by capitalist system. Secondly, the culture industry of capitalist system increases their pessimism, because

they observe that the culture industry not only deceives people but also dominates them by preventing any resistance. In culture industry, they see the system is perfectly organized for the enslavement of individual and suppression of society, but as stated before, the worst thing is the fact that people conform to that system because of inertia and love to not to resist this easy consumable culture. Also their criticism of traditional Marxism is another crucial point in their pessimism. As it is told before, they do not believe any progress in the history and possibility of revolution as Marx claims, since they see how the working class loses its potential to revolve and failure of Soviet socialism in the practice of Marxism. As Martin Jay indicates “A growing satisfaction with Marxism, even in its Hegelianized form, led him as it had Horkheimer and Adorno to examine the psychological obstacles in the path of meaningful social change. Whereas in their cases it strengthened a deepening pessimism and helped foster a retreat from political activism, in his, it led to a reaffirmation of the utopian dimension of his radicalism.” (1996: 107). In short, the pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer caused by the reasons mentioned above does not include so much real possibility for emancipation and any social transformation.

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