

Is adorno and  
horkheimer's concept  
of the "culture  
industry" culturally  
elitist?



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*It has been argued that Adorno & Horkheimer's concept of the " Culture Industry" is culturally elitist, and an overly pessimistic account of the role of the mass media for culture. Do you agree?*

Max Horkheimer was born in February 1895 and deceased in July 1973. He was a German sociologist and a philosopher, known to have been the director of the Institute of Social Research, a member of the ' Frankfurt School' and one of the founders of critical theory.

Theodore W. Adorno was born in September 1903 and deceased in August 1969, he also was a German philosopher and an official member of the Institute of Social Research. The two philosophers mentioned are founding members of the ' Frankfurt School' (Frankfurter Schule) which was a school of social theory and critical philosophy. During World War II, the collaboration of Adorno and Horkheimer began with their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* published in 1944. In this book, they strictly criticize what they call the ' Culture Industry', a term used and preferred to ' Mass Culture' which they consider misleading and suggesting that the masses are the true producers of this culture, when in fact they are considered the victims. Adorno and Horkheimer are the first to use this terminology. This essay will demonstrate with examples and theories, the definition of ' Culture Industry' and if it is an overly pessimistic account of the role of the mass media for culture.

Firstly, if we were to think of the definition of ' Culture Industry' in economics, it refers to all the companies and enterprises producing goods according to the industrial methods. These goods are to have essential values which lie in their content, such as films, music, books... Having said

that, the philosophy and sociology of Culture has a critical dimension and opens up doors to the vision of ' Culture Industry' and the media. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the ' Culture Industry' is an " enlightenment as mass deception" a system formed by film, press, radio and television. Their main focus was on the power and the hegemonic ideology authorized through the mass media. They argue that each of its sectors is " the monotony and uniformity of present culture" (Adorno and Horkheimer) aiming to suppress originality and create a standardised version of it. The ' Culture Industry' robotises production and distribution, it can be explained in terms of the rise of technology, because nowadays technology is intended for a large number of people and therefore requires means of production providing standardized and identical goods in order to meet identical demands. Presumably, production standards are based on the needs of consumers. Although, in reality, technical rationality is the rationality of domination, and that is the coercive character of alienated society (Marx). The spectators are considered like the alienated worker in Marx's theory, whose condition consists in the fact that he lost all functions and all critical capacity. His consciousness becomes in the era of mass media a machine that performs ' standardised operations'. The rise of technology has led to mass production and the productions of the ' Culture industry' are considered nothing more than commodities. They argued that today's capitalist society has only one purpose which is the interest of profit. The charge against the media is indeed extreme, they blame them for making the public look ' passive', reduced to absorbing all the material presented to him. The media would turn citizens into objectified and dehumanised consumers. The agreements between the categories and the phenomena are <https://assignbuster.com/is-adorno-horkheimers-concept-of-the-culture-industry-culturally-elitist/>

no longer the will of the subject, but rather the 'consciousness of the production team' whom draw and construct for the consumers, in their place, the frames allowing them to seize reality. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that even self-identity, which is built within the circle of intimacy, is affected by the media world, and would be no more than 'a product determined by society', constantly being what the so called 'Culture Industry' imposes on him. Individuals are being forced into the system, they become "links", "machines" with no control, not more than "devices".

According to the two philosophers, the media is an overly pessimistic account of the role of the mass media for culture, it is the fall of the modern man, the defeat of the thoughts of the man. The media seems to be completing the movement of "self-destruction". Disagreeing with Kant in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), they think that it is not the subject that has become powerful, but the domination and power that overgrew it all: "Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of his function, its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him. (...) it is in fact forced upon the latter by the power of society, which remains irrational, however we may try to rationalize it."

Furthermore, the 'Culture Industry' nevertheless remains the entertainment industry. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, this entertainment, which in our society no longer requires effort, the individual thinks less. Due to mass production, today's art no longer provides real and impactful messages through it, it's only produced for "the interest of profit".

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Only the most profitable, conformist and competitive artists can broadcast their work: “ But what completely fettered the artist was the pressure (and the accompanying drastic threats), always to fit into business life as an aesthetic expert” – Adorno and Horkheimer. To survive and exist, the artist must conform to social norms and constraints, the ‘ Culture industry’ excludes anything new or out of the ordinary. Serious art and entertainment are not opposed, they are just considered two different goods produced by the same culture industry: “ Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again”. The philosophers argue that human activity is characterized by “ the automatic succession of standardized operations” in both leisure and work. Cultural entertainment becomes a stultification to everyday life and the intellectual effort is avoided for the spectator who must think for himself.

In his analysis of capitalism, Max Weber argues that it would develop only as a disenchantment and rationalization of society. This rationalization being then understood in the sense of the calculation to all human activities. Capitalism has become planetary today, and it seems that the process described by Weber has come to an end. Now, as a result of rationalization, this term seems to be “ downfalling” into the most worrying irrational. It procreates spiritual misery from which reason has disappeared as the reason for hope: as Kant put it: “ reign of ends”: as the disappearance of any horizon of expectation, of any religious, political, or libidinal belief, whether loving, subsidiary or social, constituting of solidarities which no society is possible, what Aristotle called the “ philia”. The absolute disenchantment

strikes particularly those who think they have nothing to expect from the development of hyper industrial societies. These desperate are “desperados”, and they will be more and more numerous. But to have nothing to wait means just as well to have nothing to fear, which is also the meaning of the Greek Elpis: expectation that carries both hope and fear. In despair, there is no fear and repressive mechanisms which try to lessen the effects of the loss of authority that is also the loss of mind, because they are less and less effective. Because ultimately, they generate more and more the opposite of what they are made for, in extreme forms, and totally irrational, that is to say unpredictable. Therefore, the society we live in today is seen to be capitalist and consumer driven. However, Adorno and Horkheimer focus on traditionally neglected issues. The bourgeoisie philosophy is content to dissert on the aesthetic in an abstract and pompous way. Marxism refuses to evoke “the ideological superstructure” which would be only a simple reflection of the material production. Adorno and Horkheimer offer a real critical reflection on culture.

The both philosophers show the influence of culture on everyday life. Entertainment helps to impose social practices and a standardized imagination. This ‘culture industry’ is not a mere harmless setting but conditions a form of passivity and artificialisation of human existence. Culture does not allow individuals to express their desires and creativity but reduces them to the status of consumers condemned to passivity. The Frankfurt School highlights the different forms of social conditioning and the colonization of everyday life by market logic. The phenomena described by Adorno and Horkheimer have only intensified since their critical analysis of

1947. The cultural industry has become globalized and extends to all areas, from music to cinema. The leisure market is accompanied by cultural globalization. The phenomenon of standardization of the commercial civilization crosses all the continents.

On the other hand, Adorno and Horkheimer do not take into account the emancipatory potential that can come from popular cultures. There are forms of counterculture that develop in the margins of market logic. Their movements express an imaginary challenge to the existing order. But, like the punk movement, the counterculture becomes another stall in the cultural industry. However, the history and revolt expressed by popular cultures cannot be denied. For example, the media provides impactful social movements which raise awareness for sensitive causes online, such as, #Blacklivesmatter, Say her Name, #JesuisCharlie, Occupy Wall Street... Secondly, popular culture is not only this steamroller of the market standardization described by Adorno and Horkheimer. Even in a campaign of merchandise like Hollywood, can come out creative and original works. Above all, there is an ambiguity in the reception of cultural works. Films and music offer a dry fantasy most often reduced to the importance of individual success and very little happiness. However, music, movies or TV series can also express a challenge to the social order.

To conclude, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that the concept of “ Culture Industry” is culturally elitist, and an overly pessimistic account of the role of the mass media for culture. Both philosophers state that this concept causes a standardisation of society, it leads to humanity being more imitators rather than thinkers and creators. Society becomes passive and the

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people of society are considered the victims of this “ culture industry” dominating the human brain and developments. However, research shows that Adorno and Horkheimer neglect the positive impacts in which popular culture had on society, due to the rise of technology having not only negative influences.

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