CRITICISM OF MASS CULTURE: THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL REVISITED

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Abstrak

Mazhab Frankfurt, melalui pemikiran tokoh-tokohnya seperti Adorno, Horkheimer, dan Marcuse, mengembangkan Teori Kritis yang berupaya menganalisis struktur sosial, ekonomi, dan budaya modern. Teori ini lahir dari kegelisahan intelektual terhadap perkembangan kapitalisme, totalitarianisme, serta peran budaya massa dalam memperkuat dominasi ideologi. Budaya dipandang bukan sekadar sarana ekspresi, tetapi juga instrumen pengendalian sosial yang menimbulkan alienasi dan pasifitas individu. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji ulang kontribusi Mazhab Frankfurt dalam mengkritik budaya massa, dengan fokus pada konsep industri budaya, ideologi, dan dialektika negatif. Pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kajian pustaka digunakan untuk menelaah karya-karya primer para pemikir Frankfurt serta literatur sekunder terkait penerapan Teori Kritis dalam konteks kontemporer. Analisis tematik dan wacana diterapkan untuk mengungkap pola pemikiran serta relevansi teorinya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemikiran Mazhab Frankfurt memiliki pengaruh luas dalam filsafat sosial, studi media, dan gerakan sosial modern seperti feminisme, gerakan mahasiswa, serta hak-hak sipil. Meski dikritik sebagai pesimistis dan deterministik, gagasan tentang industri budaya dan alienasi tetap relevan untuk memahami dinamika masyarakat digital masa kini. Dengan demikian, Teori Kritis dapat menjadi kerangka penting untuk mengkaji budaya populer dan media modern, sekaligus menawarkan landasan normatif bagi transformasi sosial menuju masyarakat yang lebih adil dan manusiawi.

Kata Kunci: *Mazhab Frankfurt, Teori Kritis, Budaya Massa, Industri Budaya, Alienasi, Emansipasi*

Abstract

The Frankfurt School, through the works of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, developed Critical Theory as a framework for analyzing modern social, economic, and cultural structures. Emerging from intellectual dissatisfaction with capitalism, totalitarianism, and the rise of mass culture, this theory views culture not merely as an expression but as an instrument of social control that fosters alienation and individual passivity. This study aims to revisit the Frankfurt School's contribution to the critique of mass culture, focusing on the concepts of the culture industry, ideology, and negative dialectics. A qualitative literature review method was employed by analyzing primary works of Frankfurt thinkers alongside secondary literature on the application of Critical Theory in contemporary contexts. Thematic and discourse analyses were applied to uncover recurring ideas and the relevance of their critique. The findings reveal that the Frankfurt School significantly influenced social philosophy, media studies, and modern social movements such as feminism, student activism, and civil rights struggles. Although often criticized as overly pessimistic and deterministic, its ideas on the culture industry and alienation remain relevant for understanding digital-age society. Thus, Critical Theory continues to serve as a vital framework for analyzing popular culture and modern media, while offering a normative foundation for social transformation toward a more just and humane society.

Keywords: Frankfurt School, Critical Theory, Mass Culture, Culture Industry, Alienation, Emancipation

INTRODUCTION

The Frankfurt School, also known as the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, was a group of intellectuals that developed at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, in the early 20th century. This group included prominent thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, who collectively contributed to the development of Critical Theory as an intellectual approach that critiques existing social and economic structures and promotes ideas of liberation (Howard, 2000; Piccone & Held, 1983; Ray, 1980). Critical Theory emerged as a response to the dominance of more traditional social theories, particularly positivism and idealism, which were

seen as insufficient in addressing inequality, oppression, and power dynamics within society (Howard, 2000). The figures of the Frankfurt School argued that social science should not merely be descriptive but also normative, meaning it should be able to critique and transform unjust social structures (Hrubec, 2022). The emergence of the Frankfurt School was rooted in intellectual dissatisfaction with societal developments, particularly after World War I and in the context of the rise of totalitarian ideologies such as fascism and communism (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024).

The Frankfurt School emerged as a response to the social-political conditions evolving in Europe, particularly after World War I and the rise of totalitarianism, both in the form of fascism (as seen in Germany) and Stalinism (in the Soviet Union) (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024). Frankfurt thinkers criticized various forms of oppression, whether in political, economic, or cultural systems. They recognized that the development of capitalist economies had created profound social inequality and alienation in individuals (Hrubec, 2022). However, the Frankfurt School also criticized Marxist thought for being overly economic in its focus, specifically the idea that class struggle and economics were the central forces of social change (Varkhotov, 2023a). In place of this approach, they developed Critical Theory, focusing on the roles of ideology, culture, and psychology in maintaining social dominance structures (Howard, 2000).

Adorno and Horkheimer, in their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, explained how the culture industry (such as film, music, and media) functions as a tool of domination, transforming individuals into passive consumers. Culture as a Tool of Control is a key theme in Critical Theory, particularly in the works of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse from the Frankfurt School. They argued that in capitalist and modern societies, culture not only serves as a means of expression or entertainment, but also as a tool for control, preserving social dominance (Hrubec, 2022). In other words, culture, in its various forms—whether music, film, mass media, or art—becomes an instrument of power that functions to reinforce the status quo and thwart potential social change (Marcuse, H. 1964). Critical Theory aims not only to analyze society but also to change it (Varkhotov, 2023a). The Frankfurt School thinkers believed that social science should be used as a tool for emancipation and the liberation of humanity from oppressive social structures (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024).

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School offers a profound perspective on modern society, particularly in the context of capitalism

(Hrubec, 2022). The core of this theory is a critique of the ideologies that dominate and sustain unjust power structures. The Frankfurt School argued that ideologies do not merely reflect reality but also shape it (Howard, 2000). They analyzed how ideologies create legitimacy for social and economic inequality. Furthermore, this theory emphasizes the importance of viewing social issues in a broader context, namely the relationships between economics, culture, and politics (Sholahudin, 2020). With an interdisciplinary approach, Frankfurt thinkers combined various academic disciplines to understand social phenomena comprehensively. One key concept in Critical Theory is alienation (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024). This concept describes the condition of being estranged or disconnected from oneself, from work, and from society. Alienation is reinforced by the process of reification, which occurs when social relationships are treated as if they were things or objects. In capitalist societies, individuals often feel alienated from the products they create and from the production process itself (Howard, 2000). As a result, they lose control over their lives and become victims of a larger system (Varkhotov, 2023a). Thus, Critical Theory urges us not merely to accept social reality as it is, but to actively question and change it (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024).

LITERATUR REVIEW
Mass Culture Products, Passive Individuals, and the Influence of Consumerism

In the context of mass culture products, individuals become passive and tend to accept the dominant values within society. In today's digital world, the influence of the culture industry has become more widespread and profound, creating a homogenized culture and encouraging excessive consumerism. This concept provides us with a more critical understanding of how culture can be used as a tool to maintain power and divert attention from social injustices (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024).

Oppression and Empowerment

Herbert Marcuse, a key figure of the Frankfurt School, developed the idea of how modern culture and technology can be used to enslave individuals, but can also serve as a means of emancipation if understood and used correctly (Kellner, 1984; Ray, 1980). Oppression and empowerment are two sides of the power dynamics in society. Oppression is a condition where individuals or groups are harmed by an unjust system, whereas empowerment is the process of liberating these individuals or

groups from such oppression (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024). Critical Theory, often associated with the Frankfurt School, is a philosophical and social approach that seeks to explore and critique existing power structures within society. This theory goes beyond simply analyzing social issues, aiming to create change (Sholahudin, 2020). One important principle of this theory is that social sciences should not merely be objective or neutral but must be critical and oriented toward the liberation of humans from oppression. Critical Theory is a broader and evolving approach that seeks not only to understand the social world but also to change it. This theory emphasizes the importance of critiquing existing social structures and striving to influence social change (Benkler, Y. 2006).

Negative Theory

The Frankfurt School, particularly through the thought of Herbert Marcuse, offers a sharp critique of modern society, especially capitalism (Ray, 1980). Marcuse developed the concept of "negative dialectics," which highlights contradictions within the social system and how technology and rationality, which appear to be progressive, actually reinforce oppression. This theory encourages us to challenge dominant values and open the path to true liberation (Barria-Asenjo et al., 2024; Kellner, 1984). In other words, Marcuse urges us not to merely accept social reality as it is, but to actively seek change toward a more just and humane society. Nevertheless, the Frankfurt School also faces criticism. Some critics argue that their theory is overly pessimistic and deterministic, and that it fails to consider the role of the individual and the more complex dynamics of society (Piccone & Held, 1983; Ray, 1980; Sholahudin, 2020). Thinkers such as Habermas, Giddens, and Bourdieu have offered more comprehensive alternatives. They emphasize the importance of dialogue, social interaction, and more gradual social change. Contemporary developments in social theory continue to enrich our understanding of society and provide more nuanced perspectives in analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of modern society (Sholahudin, 2020). The Frankfurt School, especially through Marcuse's thinking, provides a sharp critique of modern capitalist society. Their theory encourages us to look behind the scenes and uncover the contradictions and injustices within the social system. However, this theory also faces criticism, and contemporary social theory developments continue to enrich our understanding of society (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach to deeply explore and understand the central concepts in Frankfurt School thought and its application in contemporary social contexts. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to comprehend social phenomena in a holistic and in-depth manner. The data collection methods used in this study include: (1) Literature Review (Ridder et al., 2014): Conducting a comprehensive review of the seminal works of Frankfurt School thinkers such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas. Additionally, secondary literature discussing the application of Critical Theory in various social contexts is also reviewed; (2) Document Analysis: Analyzing historical documents, social movement manifestos, and relevant popular culture texts related to the research theme. This document analysis aims to identify how the concepts of Critical Theory are interpreted and used in social practice. The data obtained from these various sources is then analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis is carried out by identifying recurring themes in the data, grouping, and interpreting these themes (Abidin & Murtadlo, 2020). In this analysis, the researcher will strive to uncover patterns, relationships, and contradictions within the data. Additionally, discourse analysis techniques are used to uncover the underlying meanings behind the language and discourse employed by the informants. Discourse analysis enables the researcher to identify how power and ideology function in shaping meaning and social reality (Ritonga et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The Influence and Contribution of the Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt School has had a significant influence across various fields, including social sciences, communication, and philosophy (Piccone & Held, 1983; Ray, 1980). They developed Critical Theory, which questions power and social structures, as well as critiques capitalism and its effects on society. Thinkers such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse made substantial contributions to the critique of modern rationality, critical ethics, and social philosophy. The influence of the Frankfurt School can be seen in social movements such as the 1968 student movements, feminism, and civil rights movements. The Frankfurt School is an intellectual movement that has shaped modern social and political thought. They developed Critical Theory to challenge power structures, capitalism, and consumer culture. The works of Max Horkheimer, Theodor

Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse have enriched the understanding of society, communication, and power (Piccone & Held, 1983; Ray, 1980; Sholahudin, 2020). The Frankfurt School's influence is evident in various social movements, including feminism, civil rights, environmentalism, and anti-war movements. The Frankfurt School is a significant intellectual movement in the history of modern social and political thought. This movement, which began in the 1920s at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, developed Critical Theory to challenge power structures, capitalism, and consumer culture.

The Frankfurt School focused on critiquing capitalism, imperialism, and fascism, while also questioning the role of technology and media in shaping public opinion. They also developed the concept of "Critical Theory," which emphasizes the importance of understanding the relationship between individuals and society. The influence of the Frankfurt School is evident in various social movements, including feminism, civil rights, environmentalism, and anti-war movements (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024; Varkhotov, 2023a). The Frankfurt School made significant contributions to the development of 20th-century social and critical theory. Their ideas had a profound impact across disciplines, from sociology, psychology, philosophy, to cultural studies and mass media (Howard, 2000; Hrubec, 2022; Penner & Tikhonova, 2024). Some key impacts of the Frankfurt School include:

1. **Cultural and Media Studies**

The Frankfurt School made invaluable contributions in mapping the complex relationship between mass media, popular culture, and power. Thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer sharply criticized what they called the "culture industry." According to them, this industry does not just produce cultural products but also acts as a machine for producing consciousness. Through mass production mechanisms and standardized homogenization, the culture industry creates what they termed as "false culture." This false culture, far from being an authentic reflection of human life, serves as a tool for controlling and distracting the masses from more fundamental social issues (Sholahudin, 2020; Varkhotov, 2023a). The Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry is rooted in their view that culture is not neutral but always tied to the interests of power. The culture industry, in this sense, becomes a tool for elites to maintain the status quo and legitimize their dominance. By controlling the production and distribution of culture, elite groups can shape public opinion, control

public tastes, and inhibit the emergence of critical thought. In a consumer society dominated by the culture industry, individuals tend to become passive consumers who prioritize instant gratification over critical reflection (Piccone & Held, 1983; Ray, 1980; Reynolds, 2021).

The Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry has sparked intense debates and various interpretations. Some critics argue that the Frankfurt School's view is overly pessimistic and underestimates the ability of audiences to critically interpret media messages (Penner & Tikhonova, 2024; Ray, 1980; Sholahudin, 2020; Varkhotov, 2023a). Other critiques focus on the changes in the media landscape since the time of Adorno and Horkheimer, noting that the emergence of social media and the internet has transformed how we consume and produce culture. Nevertheless, the legacy of the Frankfurt School's ideas remains relevant today. Their critique of the culture industry has inspired various social and cultural movements advocating for freedom of expression, cultural diversity, and social justice. In the increasingly complex digital age, critical understanding of media and popular culture is more important than ever to combat information manipulation, disinformation, and social polarization (Hrubec, 2022; Penner & Tikhonova, 2024; Varkhotov, 2023a). The Frankfurt School has made significant contributions in understanding the dynamics between media, culture, and power. Their critique of the culture industry remains relevant today and continues to inspire research and activism across various fields. By understanding the legacy of the Frankfurt School's thought, we can be more critical of popular culture and mass media phenomena, as well as play an active role in shaping a more just and democratic society (Howard, 2000).

2. Contemporary Critical Theory

Critical Theory, whose roots trace back to the Frankfurt School, has become an important lens for understanding the complexities of modern society. This school of thought offers a critical approach to the existing social, political, and economic structures. Instead of accepting the status quo, Critical Theory invites us to delve deeper and question the assumptions underlying our social system. Frankfurt thinkers like Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse sharply criticized how capitalism, the culture industry, and mass media work together to reinforce inequality and control public minds (Barria-Asenjo et al., 2024; Kellner, 1984). They argued that the popular culture produced by these industries often functions as a tool to numb the masses and divert attention from more fundamental

structural issues. Thus, Critical Theory is not only concerned with analyzing social phenomena but also offers an emancipatory project aimed at transforming society into a more just and democratic one. The influence of Critical Theory spans across various disciplines, including sociology, philosophy, and cultural studies (Ray, 1980; Sholahudin, 2020; Varkhotov, 2023a).

Critical thinkers have made significant contributions to understanding phenomena such as globalization, consumerism, and the commodification of culture. Additionally, Critical Theory has inspired various social movements, from anti-capitalist movements to identity movements. One of the most important contributions of Critical Theory is its emphasis on the importance of dialogue and communication in achieving social change. Critical thinkers argue that genuine social change cannot be achieved through violence or sudden revolution, but rather through an ongoing process of dialogue and active participation from all members of society. Therefore, Critical Theory offers an alternative to more deterministic and structural approaches to understanding social change (Howard, 2000; Hrubec, 2022; Penner & Tikhonova, 2024; Varkhotov, 2023a).

3. Contribution of Critical Theory to Political Philosophy

Critical Theory, particularly as developed by the Frankfurt School, represents a significant intellectual shift in the history of political philosophy. Thinkers such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse moved away from traditional metaphysical inquiries that dominated earlier philosophy—such as abstract debates on justice, the nature of the state, or moral absolutes—towards a more grounded critique of concrete social realities. They emphasized that political philosophy should not remain detached from the lived experiences of individuals, but rather interrogate how power, ideology, and institutions operate in everyday life to restrict autonomy and reproduce domination. By linking philosophy with sociology, psychology, and cultural analysis, the Frankfurt School demonstrated that oppressive structures are not only found in political institutions but also deeply embedded in cultural forms such as media, education, and even consumer practices. This perspective makes Critical Theory both diagnostic and normative: it identifies the mechanisms through which inequality and alienation are maintained, while simultaneously envisioning pathways for emancipation and greater human freedom (Howard, 2000; Hrubec, 2022; Penner & Tikhonova, 2024).

Political philosophy from the Frankfurt School thus redefined the very scope and purpose of critical reflection. Instead of accepting the status quo or offering minor reforms, Critical Theory sought to expose hidden mechanisms of oppression that conventional theories often ignored or normalized. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this meant unmasking the ideological functions of culture and technology, which often perpetuate conformity and limit possibilities for radical social change. Marcuse extended this critique by showing how advanced industrial societies create "false needs" that pacify individuals and sustain capitalist domination. Hence, political philosophy in this tradition is not an abstract exercise but a transformative project aimed at transcending established boundaries of thought and practice. It insists that concepts such as freedom, justice, and democracy must be interrogated in relation to material conditions and cultural processes that either enable or constrain them. This radical orientation allows Critical Theory to serve as both a critique of existing social arrangements and a normative guide for envisioning alternative futures where human emancipation and social justice are central (Boucher, 2021; Varkhotov, 2023).

4. Key Concepts in Political Philosophy of Critical Theory

One of the central tenets in the political philosophy of Critical Theory is its systematic critique of capitalism as more than just an economic system. For Frankfurt School thinkers, capitalism entrenches extreme economic inequality, consolidates wealth and power in the hands of a few, and simultaneously corrodes the very fabric of human values. Individuals, under capitalism, are reduced to objects within a system of production and consumption, leading to alienation not only from their labor but also from authentic social relations. This critique goes beyond a Marxist economic reading by exploring the cultural and psychological dimensions of domination, showing how consumer culture creates "false needs" that pacify individuals while perpetuating the capitalist system. Importantly, Critical Theory connects this critique to the vision of radical democracy, insisting that genuine justice can only emerge when citizens are actively engaged in decision-making processes that shape their lives. Such participation is not viewed as a mere procedural act but as the foundation for a more egalitarian and emancipatory political order (Boucher, 2021; Buchstein, 2020; Ray, 1980; Varkhotov, 2023b).

Equally significant in Critical Theory is its emphasis on the dynamics of power and oppression. Frankfurt thinkers argued that power does not

merely manifest through visible institutions such as governments or legal systems but also operates subtly and invisibly through ideology, media, and social institutions that normalize inequality. By shaping consciousness, these mechanisms ensure compliance and sustain systems of domination without overt coercion. This understanding broadens the scope of political philosophy to include cultural critique as an essential dimension of resistance. At its core, Critical Theory insists on the necessity of emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression. Liberation here is not limited to economic exploitation but encompasses freedom from gender-based subordination, racial hierarchies, and other structural injustices that circumscribe human dignity and autonomy. Emancipation, therefore, is envisioned as a holistic transformation of social relations, enabling individuals to reclaim agency and live authentically beyond the confines of oppressive systems (Buchstein, 2020; Cluley & Parker, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The fundamental principle of the Frankfurt School is an effort to analyze and critique capitalist and modern societies through an interdisciplinary approach, aiming to deconstruct ideologies, and advocating for the liberation and emancipation of humanity from various forms of oppression and alienation. Through a deeper understanding of social, cultural, and political structures, they hoped to transform society into a more just and humane condition. Overall, the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory focus on a profound analysis of social injustices, critique of capitalism and modernity, and the effort for emancipation. This theory emphasizes that social change occurs not only at the structural level but also in the consciousness and culture of society. This makes Critical Theory an essential tool for critiquing and understanding the dynamics of power in modern society.

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