

Chapter 2

What Happened to the Frankfurt School?

As I mentioned, the Frankfurt School mainly followed the tradition of Western Marxism to explain the failure of revolutionary movements in Europe. Accordingly, in contrast to orthodox Marxists, who mainly emphasize the material and economic aspects of capitalist society and believe that the capitalist system will inevitably collapse by a proletarian revolution, the Frankfurt School theorists emphasize the cultural and intellectual factors which prevent the masses from reaching class consciousness. Thus, studying the problem of cultural domination and distortion of consciousness was one of the main projects of the Frankfurt School. This means that the essence of the Frankfurt School is tied to the issue of cultural domination. But one of the major tools by which the capitalist system creates this domination and distortion of consciousness is the culture industry. Thus, it can be argued that, in comparison to the other theories, the theory of the culture industry has more to do with the essence of the Frankfurt School. In other words, since the problem is cultural and intellectual domination which prevents class consciousness from forming, the theory of the culture industry, which explains this kind of domination, can help the Frankfurt School to reach its goal more than other theories can. The culture industry, by using tools like the media, prevents people from reaching a true understanding of their condition. Moreover, the culture industry, by creating artificial needs for people, distracts them from their real needs. The culture industry manipulates people's understanding in such a way as to ensure the maximum benefit and the minimum risk for the capitalist system. In any case, the cultural domination that was one of the main concerns of the first generation of the Frankfurt School theorists was gradually replaced with other concerns in the second and third generations. Under the influence of Jürgen Habermas, who is known as the main theorist of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, the concerns of the Institute for Social Research shifted to an almost new direction in which the culture industry, formerly one of the most important issues of the Frankfurt School, lost its position. The problem is that the culture industry, as a dynamic phenomenon, is always using new methods and tools to expand its domination. With the growth of the capitalist system, the culture industry is growing too. The culture

industry in the twenty-first century is more sophisticated, advanced, and hidden than the culture industry during Adorno's time. Adorno and Horkheimer couldn't completely foresee how the culture industry would work in our age. Besides, since the culture industry has developed in our age, some of the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer have lost their validity. For example, they mainly considered the masses as passive creatures who only receive messages made and distributed by a dominant class at the top of society. According to them, radio "democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations. No mechanism of reply has been developed, and private transmissions are condemned to unfreedom" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2000, pp. 95, 96). But as we know today, the emergence of advanced technologies makes Adorno and Horkheimer's argument invalid. Nowadays, social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have provided an opportunity for everybody's contribution and interaction through the media. This means that a receiver of messages can also be a producer and distributor of them. Adorno and Horkheimer had considered the culture industry a unilateral form of communication which only allows a monologue. But nowadays the culture industry is also a multilateral form of communication which allows dialogue. As a result, the culture industry in our age uses a different mechanism. Today, people have their own media, and can produce their own messages. But if the reason for lack of class consciousness among the masses is that the dominant class can own and control the media and advertise its values and ideology, then why can't a large group of people with their own media reach class consciousness and change the capitalist system? Why are they still following the values of the dominant class and the ideology of the capitalist system? Therefore, because of these questions, studying the culture industry and its new tools and techniques in our age is essential for the new generations of the Frankfurt School. But, as we will see later, although Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, as the leading theorists of second and third generations of the Frankfurt School, have kept critical theory as the main legacy of the first generation, they have almost forgotten to develop and extend the theory of the culture industry as one of the most important theories of the Frankfurt School. But it must be repeated here that when I say they neglected the culture industry I mean they couldn't create a strong and systematic study of the culture industry and its new techniques. They couldn't gather a group of intellectuals and encourage them to study new forms of the culture industry in our age. This neglect of the culture industry has caused not only a gap between the first generation and the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School but also some difficulties for the theories of Habermas and Honneth.

In one of his early works, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas discusses the public sphere and its emergence and decline. The public sphere, according to Habermas, is a space in which people get together and discuss their problems in a free and equal condition. This freedom is the main feature of the public sphere. In other words, in the public sphere, everyone is totally free to present their ideas to reach a consensus without any fear or pressure. The goal in the public sphere is not to attain a personal interest, but rather to follow public interests.

According to Habermas, in the eighteenth century, people in Europe found an opportunity to get together in salons and coffee houses and discuss different matters. In addition, because of the decline of the feudal system, which was controlled by tradition and religion, people found even more freedom to present their ideas and argue about different subjects. So, by gaining more power, this public sphere even controlled other realms of society such as culture, economy, and even the state. As a result, in that time, people could decide about different matters in society within discussions which sometimes had a critical character (Habermas 1991, pp. 32, 33). But by the end of the nineteenth century, some of the problems caused by the liberalized market prepared an opportunity for the state to interfere in the economy in order to solve those problems. Gradually, the state and its bureaucratic system controlled not only the economy but also other realms of society. As a result, the state started to interfere with the public sphere which was supposed to be not only a sphere for free and equal participation and discussion but also a sphere for criticizing the state. Furthermore, by means of the domination of state over the public sphere this sphere, which had been the producer and controller of cultural products, turned into the consumer of those products. Consequently, by means of destruction of the public sphere, the cultural products whose essence was critical were transformed into commercial products for sale in the market (Edgar 2005, pp. 48, 49).

In his other book, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas argues that any kind of knowledge comes from a particular interest. According to him, the technical interest which takes form in work or instrumental action leads to empirical-analytic knowledge. Man or woman needs to work on nature to utilize it for his or her benefit. Therefore, empirical-analytic knowledge helps people dominate nature by predicting and controlling it. So, this kind of knowledge is the result of human effort to dominate and use nature. But according to Habermas, people also need to communicate with other human beings to understand them. So, the practical interest which takes form in language leads to historical-hermeneutic knowledge. The third kind of interest, according to Habermas, is the emancipatory interest which takes form in power and leads to critical knowledge. This kind of knowledge focuses on distorted forms of communication and understanding (Habermas 1971, pp. 308–314). This division also let Habermas criticize the theories of Marx and the Frankfurt School theorists. According to him, the mistake of Marx and the Frankfurt School was that they only emphasized the technical interest and empirical-analytic knowledge.

Habermas criticizes Marx because according to him Marx couldn't distinguish purposive-rational action or work from social or communicative action. As a result, Marx only emphasizes work and neglects communicative action. Habermas also recognizes instrumental action and strategic action which are two forms of purposive-rational action. Both of them are looking for the best and most efficient means to reach goals. However, while the former is the action of a single person who uses the most efficient means to reach his or her goal, the latter is the action of two or more people who choose the best and most efficient means to pursue their goals. Therefore, "the objective of both instrumental and strategic action is instrumental mastery" (Ritzer 1988, p. 256). In contrast to these forms of action,

whose goal is to reach maximum profits, the goal of communicative action is to reach a common understanding during social relations and attain consensus (Habermas 1987, p. 126). Thus, while Marx sees work as the most important part of human nature and wants to eliminate the limitations of free work, Habermas sees communicative action as the most important part of human nature, and he wants to eliminate the limitations of free and equal communicative action. Therefore, while an ideal society for Marx is the one with undistorted work, for Habermas an ideal society is the one with undistorted communicative action (Ritzer 1988, p. 257).

According to Habermas, the main reason for distortion of communicative action is the domination of system's rationality and logic over the lifeworld. Lifeworld is the sphere in which people communicate and interact socially with one another. Since the lifeworld has intersubjective features, it can lead to a common understanding for people. It is in this lifeworld that communicative action, by which people can understand each other, can take place (Habermas 1987, pp. 126, 131). But the system is the realm of macro-level economic and political structures. According to Habermas, the lifeworld is governed by a communicative rationality while the system is governed by an instrumental rationality. This means that whereas the system's "rationalization involves the institutionalization of a normative system, life-world rationalization involves permitting interactions that are not guided by normatively ascribed agreement but – directly or indirectly – by communicatively achieved understanding" (Ritzer 1988, p. 490).

Habermas believes that the only solution for the emancipation of the lifeworld from the domination of the system is to reinforce communicative action. According to him, the Frankfurt School theorists made a huge mistake which led them to pessimism (Habermas 1984, p. 144). Through the influence of Lukács, the Frankfurt School links "Weber's analysis of rationalization" to "Max's analysis of commodity form". The result of this linkage can be seen "in a many-sided study of reification, of 'false consciousness' and of ideology in late capitalism" (Pusey 1987, p. 33). Therefore, by following Weber's discussion about the iron cage, the Frankfurt School theorists emphasized formal or instrumental rationality which led them to pessimism with respect to rationality itself while formal rationality, according to Habermas, is only one kind of rationality that belongs to the technical interest. Habermas focuses on communicative rationality which is related to the practical interest (Habermas 1984, p. 144). He admits that formal rationality has caused some difficulties, but he doesn't believe that we should reject the whole project of rationality. Rather, we should try to reinforce communicative action. In other words, we should prepare free and equal conditions in which everyone can communicate with others. But because communicative action might be distorted by the technical interest and formal rationality, Habermas uses the third kind of knowledge, which comes from the emancipatory interest, to emancipate communicative action from all sorts of distortion. This is somehow like the Freudian psychoanalytic method. But while Freud uses psychoanalysis for an individual to encourage him or her to think and talk about himself or herself, Habermas is trying to do the same thing for society. As a result, the task of a sociologist is to reveal the distortions in society. So, it can be said that "the psychoanalyst aids the patient in

much the same way that the social critic helps oppressed groups in society” (Ritzer 1988, p. 257). Only by using this method, we may get closer to what Habermas calls the “ideal speech situation” in which a free communicative action can take place. This is a condition in which everyone has an equal right to talk and discuss different matters to reach a consensus or agreement without any kind of pressure or external power (Ibid, p. 258). According to Habermas, the ideal speech situation is neither merely fictitious nor an existing situation. “Thus the concept of the ideal speech situation is not merely a regulative principle in the Kantian sense. For with our first act of linguistic communication we must in fact always already be making this presupposition. On the other hand, the concept of the ideal speech situation is not an existing concept in the Hegelian sense. For there is no historical society that corresponds to the form of life that we anticipate in the concept of the ideal speech situation” (Habermas 2001, pp. 102, 103).

As can be seen, the discussions of Habermas are mostly about the public sphere and communicative action. The culture industry which had been one of the leading concerns of the Frankfurt School, viewed as one of the sources of cultural domination and distortion of consciousness, is simply not at the center of Habermas’s discussions. One may argue that he puts the culture industry under the concept of the system and considers it a part of the system’s domination. One may say that in some books and articles he talks about the effect of the media on the public sphere. One may even point out that he talks about the threat of the culture industry in the part of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* where he shows how the public sphere is controlled and weakened by media and advertising. Nevertheless, compared to the first generation of the Frankfurt School and the number of their books and articles which focused on the culture industry, the Institute for Social Research under the supervision of Habermas didn’t pay enough attention to this topic. The importance of the culture industry and its central position in the first generation of the Frankfurt School demand an independent and permanent study. Besides, while the culture industry is gaining more power and using new techniques to expand its influence, Habermas doesn’t revise or extend the theory of the culture industry. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in this study, Habermas as the leading theorist of the Frankfurt School’s second generation didn’t encourage or gather a group of intellectuals to revise the theory of the culture industry and discover its new techniques in a systematic way. As Anderson says, “by the late 1980s, in fact, the key points of reference for Habermas’ graduate students and associates were more likely to be Donald Davidson, Michael Dummett or John Rawls than Adorno, Lukács or Marx” (Anderson 2011, p. 43). Therefore, what I mean by neglecting the culture industry is that Habermas doesn’t specifically focus on the culture industry and especially its new methods. It is clear that his main subjects are communicative action and the public sphere. The culture industry is only mentioned when it relates to Habermas’s major subjects. Besides, Habermas works with the old version of the culture industry which Adorno and Horkheimer described and which may not be useful anymore for explaining cultural domination in our time. Therefore, Habermas or other members of the current Frankfurt School should revise and extend the theory of the culture industry to make it useful again for our age.

This neglect of the culture industry and its effects on society has had two main consequences. First, this neglect has opened a gap between the first and the second generations of the Frankfurt School. By shifting the focus from cultural domination and distortion of consciousness to other concerns, the Frankfurt School in the second generation moved away from its origins and primary goals. This is a defect for a school focused on the study of cultural domination and deviation of mind in capitalist society. Second, this neglect has even created some problems for the theory of Habermas. As discussed, Habermas emphasizes reinforcement of public sphere and free communicative action as the only solution for emancipating the lifeworld from the domination of system. Only in this way can people achieve agreement and consensus. But the problem is that without considering the impact of the new techniques of the culture industry, it is hard to achieve these goals. In a society dominated by the culture industry, people might be reluctant to participate in communicative action or to construct a real public sphere. In other words, even if we can prepare a public sphere in which actors can participate in free communicative action, it is still probable that under the domination of the culture industry they don't want to. An example of this phenomenon is the form of individualism intensified by some of the new technologies like smartphones. Some people prefer to spend their time with their smartphones rather than with other people. We all know families whose members are sitting together but each of them is busy with his or her smartphone. Another example is the case of those who prefer to spend their time in a hyperreal world instead of the real one. We live in an age in which a large number of our young people are busy playing games on their smartphones. Besides, in a society dominated by the culture industry, even communicative agreement or consensus might support the interests of the capitalist system. Examples include the case of those who get together to discuss fashionable and sexy outfits for women or those who want to choose the sexiest Hollywood actress. In this way, even the public sphere may support the existing system. The important point is that Habermas, by emphasizing the critical sciences, is hopeful that these sciences can eliminate all kinds of distortion and play the role of emancipators of society. However, the problem is that when Habermas doesn't focus on new techniques of the culture industry he cannot be confident that the critical sciences are immune to the culture industry. In my opinion, Habermas doesn't see that even the emancipatory interest and critical knowledge can be influenced and distorted by the culture industry. The fact is that the technical interest and empirical-analytic knowledge can influence not only the practical interest and historical-hermeneutic knowledge but also the emancipatory interest and critical knowledge. For example, as we will see later, power in the age of simulation and hyperreality is different from what Habermas described as "Herrschaft" in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. In a sense, there is not much power in the hyperreal world in which the emancipatory interests can take form and lead to critical sciences. For example, in a hyperreal world desires don't have to be repressed anymore. People can have whatever they want, wherever they want, and in any way they want. This means that the reality principle may no longer be necessary since no one hurts others by satisfying his or her desires. There might be no power or constraint in a hyperreal world from which

people want to emancipate themselves. In this way, the emancipatory interest can be weakened by losing its medium which is power. Besides, people in a hyperreal world can even have their desirable communicative action with desirable hyperreal people and reach a desirable consensus with them. This means that in the future, real social interaction and real communicative action can be in danger as a person can be isolated in a hyperreal world.

Consequently, while Habermas criticizes the pessimism of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, which comes from their emphasis on instrumental rationality and their inability to see communicative rationality, Habermas's excessive emphasis on communicative rationality and his inability to see the influence of instrumental rationality on the critical sciences led him to excessive optimism. As I mentioned, the culture industry is a dynamic and progressive phenomenon which uses new techniques all the time. So, it is important for Habermas or any other theorist who is working in the tradition of the Frankfurt School to study the new techniques of the culture industry. Besides, as I discussed, the culture industry in our age may also use a different mechanism from that which Adorno and Horkheimer described. Therefore, the Frankfurt School theorists need to pay more attention to the culture industry.

In 2001, Axel Honneth became the director of the Institute for Social Research. Honneth is known as the leading theorist of the third generation of the Frankfurt School. He focuses on a different issue from that addressed by the first generation of the Frankfurt School. The most important subject for Honneth is recognition. According to this concept, people need to be recognized and accepted by others in their social relations and interactions. According to Honneth, if people reach this recognition in a society they will feel satisfied. Otherwise, they will probably try to change their condition to one which gives them recognition. Therefore, the origins of some social movements must be traced in struggles and efforts among different groups to reach recognition. Honneth distinguishes three stages or forms of recognition: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. According to him, these forms of recognition can only be shaped intersubjectively in social relations. The first stage begins from the early years of a child's life during which the mother provides full support. This support creates confidence for a child. Now a child knows that his or her mother loves him or her, and she does everything to satisfy his or her needs and keep him or her happy and safe. This confidence will be even reinforced later when the child receives the same support from other members of the family. Therefore, it is clear that love is used here in its extended meaning. "Love relationships are to be understood here as referring to primary relationships insofar as they – on the model of friendships, parent-child relationship, as well as erotic relationships between lovers – are constituted by strong emotional attachments among a small number of people" (Honneth 1996, p. 95). By achieving self-confidence, a person moves to the second stage of recognition which is self-respect. In this stage, people see and understand themselves equal to others in society, and therefore they expect to have equal rights. In this way, the respect that a person receives from society in relation with others completes another stage of recognition and it leads to self-respect. But if a person's equal rights are not

recognized, then, he or she will try to force society to accept those rights. The third stage of recognition is self-esteem. In this form, a person expects society to give him or her recognition not only because of his or her similarity to others but also because of special characteristics which make him or her different from others. These special characteristics and differences can be cultural, political, or economic. Therefore, “social esteem can only apply to those traits and abilities with regard to which members of society differ from one another. Persons can feel themselves to be ‘valuable’ only when they know themselves to be recognized for accomplishment that they precisely do not share in an undifferentiated manner with others” (Ibid, p. 125). In this stage, if society gives recognition to a person or group because of their special characteristics, they can attain self-esteem. Otherwise, people may try to change existing conditions. Therefore, according to Honneth, love relations and emotional support lead to self-confidence; reaching equal rights in a society leads to self-respect, and the recognition of special and different characteristics of a person, which is possible by solidarity, leads to self-esteem. Furthermore, each of these forms of recognition can be disrespected in a different way. According to Honneth, self-confidence can be disrespected by abuse; self-respect can be disrespected by denial of equal rights; and self-esteem can be disrespected by denigration (Honneth 1996, p. 133).

In any case, the culture industry and especially its new techniques in our age are not Honneth’s major concerns. In *The Critique of Power*, he even criticizes Adorno’s theory of the culture industry (Honneth 1991, pp. 78–81). As I said before, the culture industry in our age works with new mechanisms and techniques. Today people have an opportunity to produce their own messages. This means that the culture industry is no longer a unilateral way of communication. The exclusive control of the media by dominant classes or governments is over. Besides, as we will see later, the culture industry is not making its domination only through the media. Therefore, it was essential for the third generation of the Frankfurt school to revise and extend the theory of the culture industry to make it relevant for our age. Honneth, like Habermas, had an opportunity to see the new techniques and technologies that the culture industry uses in today’s world, but he also neglected them. Furthermore, Honneth, like Habermas, didn’t encourage or gather theorists in the Institute for Social Research to study the new techniques of the culture industry in a permanent and systematic way. The neglect of the culture industry and its new methods in the third generation of the Frankfurt School had consequences similar to those affecting the second generation. First, this neglect shifted the third generation of the Frankfurt School to a course divergent from that followed in the first generation. In my conception, this has caused a deficiency for the Frankfurt School which had been based on the study of cultural domination and distortion of consciousness. Second, this neglect of the culture industry has caused some difficulties for the theory of Honneth. Recognition, one of his main concerns, can be affected by the culture industry. The culture industry may manipulate values and beliefs in society to produce a distorted and artificial recognition which can support the interests of the dominant class. In other words, in a society influenced by the culture industry even a person’s effort to achieve self-respect and self-esteem might fulfill the goals of the capitalist system.

Therefore, the question is, how can Honneth be confident in this situation that the achieved self-respect or self-esteem is not distorted? We live in a world in which our values, lifestyles, goals, and beliefs can be manipulated by the culture industry. In any case, it seems that Honneth is now aware of this defect in his theory. In one of his works, *Recognition as Ideology*, he tries to show how false recognition is possible and how it can work as an ideology to support specific interests in society. Honneth says: “the pride that ‘Uncle Tom’ feels as a reaction to the repeated praise of his submissive virtues makes him into a compliant servant in a slave-owning society. The emotional appeals to the ‘good’ mother and housewife made by churches, parliaments, or the mass media over the centuries caused women to remain trapped within a self-image that most effectively accommodated the gender-specific division of labor. The public esteem enjoyed by heroic soldiers continuously engendered a sufficiently large class of men who willingly went to war in pursuit of glory and adventure. As trivial as these examples may be, they do make strikingly clear that social recognition can always also operate as a conformist ideology, for the continuous repetition of identical forms of recognition can create a feeling of self-worth that provides the motivational resources for forms of voluntary subordination without employing methods of repression” (Honneth 2007, pp. 325, 326).

As is evident in this passage, Honneth is now aware of the fact that the distortion of consciousness can lead to a false recognition which might be used to support particular interests. Although Honneth is aware of false and distorted recognition, however, he still doesn’t pay enough attention to the culture industry and its new techniques as a major source of this distortion. Moreover, in a society in which the culture industry’s domination has turned some of our concepts and relations into signs of those concepts and relations, recognition can be achieved through the signs themselves. For example, in a society in which people with unequal rights may think that they have equal rights just because they have the signs of equality like TVs, laptops, or washing machines in their homes, recognition is distorted. This is a semiotic recognition or, in other words, recognition through signs. Furthermore, since Honneth doesn’t study the new techniques of the culture industry, it is hard for him to see the fact that in the future, power and struggle may not be necessary anymore. As we will see later, in a hyperreal world, people can create recognition for themselves without struggling with others because they already can control the hyperreal others. Therefore, the third generation of the Frankfurt School and especially Honneth need to study and explain the culture industry in its new forms. This is the only way Honneth can distinguish true recognition from false recognition.

It is clear that the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School have neglected the culture industry which was one of the main concerns of the first generation, maybe because the later theorists assume that discussions about the culture industry are complete, and there is nothing more to be studied. This mistake may come from the view which considers the culture industry as a static and changeless phenomenon. But as mentioned, the culture industry has at its disposal new methods and ways to continue and expand its domination. Therefore, we need an ongoing study of the culture industry and its new techniques. But for now, we need to fill a gap between the first generation and the second and third generations of

the Frankfurt School. One of the theorists who can help us revise the theory of the culture industry and discover its new techniques is Jean Baudrillard, who, especially in his early works, tried to combine Marxist theory with semiotics. According to Marx, each object has a use value which comes from its function and utility. But in capitalist society, this use value is eclipsed by exchange value which is determined by the market. Baudrillard talks about a third kind of value which is called sign value. According to him, each object can be a sign of different things such as power, prestige, and status. Hence, objects can create social, cultural, political, and economic differences. In a consumer society, these objects create a system in which each object has special meaning. In this way, the system of objects can control people's tastes, needs, beliefs, and behaviors. Baudrillard's goal is to understand and explain this system of objects, its mechanisms and consequences for society. In my opinion, when it comes to the semiotic aspect of the capitalist system, Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry is not strong enough. Revealing this semiotic system and its relation with the culture industry can help us to answer the question, why a large group of people, even after gaining access to the media, are still following the values of the capitalist system? In addition, the time in which Baudrillard lived allowed him to see technologies and new media that Adorno and Horkheimer couldn't anticipate in their time. Therefore, Baudrillard's early interest in Marxism and his later interest in the media make him a good candidate to help us to understand different aspects of the culture industry in our age. Furthermore, although Baudrillard is usually known as a structuralist or post-structuralist, as we will see later, he is also close to the critical theory of the Frankfurt school. For example, the theory of reification, which influenced Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School, also had a deep influence on Baudrillard's thought. The theory of reification explains the relationship between the object and the subject during which the former detaches from the latter and gains an independent power. It shows how during this process the object gradually dominates the subject (Levin 1991, p. 172). This is something that we can clearly see in Baudrillard's early works. But Baudrillard takes reification to an even higher level and he argues that the whole semiotic system of society is reified. The essential point here is that I don't argue that Baudrillard renews the theory of the culture industry by himself because, as we know, in some cases, his ideas might contradict the theory of the culture industry. Rather, what I argue is that some of Baudrillard's ideas might help us revise the theory of the culture industry and reveal its new aspects.

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