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CRITICAL THEORY

Key Concepts

Max Horkheimer
- Negate
- Subjective Reason
- Objective Reason

Theodor Adorno
- Negate
- Culture Industry

Herbert Marcuse
- Negate
- Individualistic Rationality
- Technological Rationality
- Surplus Repression
- Repressive Desublimation

Culture is only true when implicitly critical, and the mind which forgets this revenges itself in the critics it breeds.

~Adorno (1967:23)
Many of us find living in a modern, industrial society to be pleasant. While such societies certainly are not without their problems, countries like the United States, France, England, and Japan offer their citizens many avenues for educational and occupational success as well as a seemingly unending supply of technological advances and modern conveniences. If ever there was a time and a place to enjoy the “good life,” it is now and in democratic nations such as those noted above. For theorists in the critical tradition, however, life in the “land of opportunity” is not all that it is cracked up to be. On the contrary, critical theorists find in so-called progress a source of domination and dehumanization. For them, culture, science, and technology are ideological forces that distort consciousness and, thus, prevent individuals from recognizing and satisfying their true human interests. So, the next time you tune in to your favorite show on your widescreen TV, download tunes to your MP3 player, or marvel over the easy access to your cash at the ATM, keep in mind that the pleasures such conveniences bring are not without potential pitfalls. In fact, these technological wonders are in part responsible for perpetuating the very dehumanizing conditions that they are advertised to alleviate.

In this chapter we outline the main arguments of critical theory by emphasizing the work of three of its leading exponents. Before turning to a discussion of the central theoretical ideas, however, we first provide a look into the personal lives of those who were most responsible for shaping their development. Doing so will offer a glimpse into the historical conditions that profoundly shaped their outlook as they crafted this branch of social theory.

HORKHEIMER, ADORNO, AND MARCUSE: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Max Horkheimer (1895–1973)

Max Horkheimer was born in Stuttgart, Germany, on February 14, 1895. His father was a successful businessman and owner of several textile factories. While his father intended for him to take over the family business, Max’s radical political leanings and sympathies with the working class left him ill equipped for embracing the role of a capitalist. Instead, the younger Horkheimer pursued an academic career, taking up graduate studies in philosophy and psychology while attending the University of Frankfurt. During the course of his studies Horkheimer also spent a year at the University of Freiburg, where he worked with the preeminent philosopher Edmund Husserl and his assistant, Martin Heidegger, who would go on to become a leading intellectual in his own right.

After completing his doctorate in 1925, Horkheimer began work at the University of Frankfurt as an unsalaried lecturer, and then, in 1928, he was hired as a salaried member of the faculty. The start of his academic career also saw his marriage to Rose Riekher, with whom he had developed a ten-year relationship. Eight years his senior, Rose was the elder Horkheimer’s private secretary. Father and son had clashed over the relationship from its beginning, not least of which because of Rose’s humble family background. Yet, for Max, his attraction to Rose only confirmed his feelings of compassion for the plight of

1It is important to note that “critical” is not used here as a generic, derogative term. Critical theory, instead, refers to a specific theoretical tradition that first took shape in Frankfurt, Germany.
the working class and his distaste for “domineering businessmen like his father” (Wiggershaus 1994:44). His personal identification with the injustices suffered by those “without money” and sense of culpability on the part of the capitalist class is revealed in passages such as the following taken from his personal notes:

Without money, without any economic security, we are at their mercy. It is certainly a dreadful punishment: having the daily grind wearing you down, being shackled to trivial business, having petty worries day and night, being dependent on the most despicable people. Not just we ourselves, but all of those we love and for whom we are responsible fall with us into this daily treadmill. We become victims of stupidity and sadism. (Quoted in Wiggershaus 1994:48)

Theodor Adorno (1903–1969)

Sharing Horkheimer’s deeply felt concerns over social and economic inequalities was Theodor Adorno, whom he had met in the early 1920s. Adorno also shared his friend’s comfortable family origins. He was born on September 11, 1903, in Frankfurt. Adorno’s mother, who was descended from a member of the Corsican nobility, had been a successful singer before her marriage, while his father was the owner of a wholesale wine business. Following in his mother’s footsteps (and his aunt’s, a well-known pianist who lived with his family), the precocious Adorno began his formal studies of music composition at the age of sixteen. The following year he entered the University of Frankfurt, where he studied philosophy, psychology, sociology, and musicology. Although he earned his doctorate in philosophy in 1924, it was in the fields of music criticism and aesthetics that Adorno made his first mark. Indeed, he published nearly a hundred articles on the topics between 1921 and 1932, while his first publication in philosophy appeared only in 1933. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that Adorno’s original professional ambitions lay with becoming a composer and concert pianist (Wiggershaus 1994:70–72).

Adorno’s interests in composing and performing music, however, were tied to his broader philosophy of aesthetics. For Adorno, music, or at least “real” music, offered an expression of truth itself, a truth defined in dialectic terms such that the value of music is measured by its freedom from conformity to existing forms. The rarified place Adorno held for music, and art more generally, stemmed from his view that it alone was capable of transcending the alienated, “soulless” world ushered in by the advance of capitalism and totalitarian political systems. In classic Marxist fashion, Adorno saw in dominant musical forms a reflection of existing material conditions or property relations that fueled the exploitation of one class by another. Thus, in order to perform its socially progressive function, music must escape the restraints imposed by previous forms. It is in this vein that Adorno lavished praise on the work of the pianist Arnold Schoenberg, in whose development of the twelve-tone scale and modernist compositions he saw a critique of corrupted bourgeois society. Meanwhile, he relentlessly attacked popular, “standardized” music for allegedly dumbing-down the masses and perpetuating oppressive social conditions.
Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979)

The third figure to be considered in this section is Herbert Marcuse. Born in Berlin on July 19, 1898, Marcuse, like his counterparts, was raised in a well-to-do German family. His mother was the daughter of a factory owner, while his father had worked his way up to become part owner of a textile factory and a real estate entrepreneur. Marcuse served in the military during World War I, although because of vision problems he was spared from combat. As he witnessed the outbreak of strikes, riots, and general social unrest in Berlin during the war years, his views became increasingly politicized and he joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD), a socialist political party that represented working-class interests. Discontented with the actions and policies of the SPD, Marcuse dedicated himself to his studies at Humboldt University in Berlin, where he took up modern Germany history. Soon thereafter he left for Freiburg, where he studied philosophy and economics, completing his doctorate in 1922. It was here that Marcuse met Horkheimer and, with him, attended Husserl’s lectures.

After earning his degree, Marcuse returned to Berlin, where for the next six years he worked in the book business, his father having provided him with a share in a publishing company. Active in literary and artistic circles, Marcuse’s path took a fateful turn upon reading Martin Heidegger’s newly published *Being and Time* (1927). He saw in Heidegger’s work a crucial addition to Marxist theory, which had come to be the focal point of his intellectual outlook. Determined to pursue an academic career in philosophy, Marcuse abandoned the book business and returned to Freiburg with his wife and young son to study again with Husserl as well as with Heidegger, with whom he served as an assistant.

Having met one another during the course of their respective studies, these three figures’ relationship was solidified through their association with the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. The Institute was established on February 3, 1923, through the patronage of Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy grain merchant who, to his father’s displeasure, sought to advance the ideals of socialism. It is here that the roots of critical theory, a Marxist-inspired social philosophy, were planted. While early on the Institute was home to a number of leading intellectuals, including the psychologist Erich Fromm (1900–1980), it would come to be dominated by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. Together, they reshaped the direction of the Institute, changing what was initially a diverse, empirically oriented research program dedicated to reappraising Marxist theory in light of the defeat of the communist revolution throughout central Europe. With Horkheimer’s appointment as director in 1930, a new course was established for the Institute. The study of history and economics was replaced with a critical social philosophy that attacked the scientific enterprise as a form of bourgeois ideology. Thus, the empirical sciences were regarded not only as incapable of revealing a true understanding of social life, but also of sanctioning the status quo and ushering in new forms of “technocratic” domination (Bottomore 1984:29). Far from leading to progress and the emancipation of humanity, science was leading civilization “into a new kind of barbarism” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002/1944:xiv). Thus, the “critical” in critical theory ultimately refers to a critique of empirical sciences and the philosophy of positivism on which they are based.

To account for the critical theorists’ rejection of science, and positivism more generally, we need to recall the broader social milieu in which the Institute was formed. Not
only had the communist revolution, modeled on Marx’s scientific prophecy, failed to turn Europe into a utopia, but the Bolsheviks’ victory in Russia and Germany’s defeat in World War I brought in their wake ruthless, totalitarian regimes. While the communist dream was turning into a nightmare under the dictatorship of Josef Stalin, the crippling of the German economy and sense of national humiliation left that nation vulnerable to the rise of fascism and with it, the rise of Hitler to political power. Moreover, the rampant anti-Semitism that spread through Germany and elsewhere in Europe had a profound impact on the Frankfurt School, for all of its leading members were Jewish.

Well aware of the impending danger the Nazis posed (his house had been occupied by Nazi storm-troops), Horkheimer left for Geneva, Switzerland, where he conducted the affairs of the Institute in exile. In the spring of 1933, the Gestapo (the secret police) closed the Institute and seized its possessions under the charge that it had “encouraged activities hostile to the state” (Wiggershaus 1994:128). Horkheimer was summarily expelled from his position in Frankfurt. Adorno was fired from his teaching position because he was “half-Jewish” (his father was Jewish), at which time he left for London, while Marcuse joined Horkheimer and the Institute in Geneva in 1933. The Institute’s relocation to Geneva would be temporary, however. Concerned about the spread of fascism and anti-Semitism throughout Europe, Horkheimer immigrated to New York in May 1934, where he established a new home for the Institute at Columbia University. Marcuse arrived two months later, and Adorno in 1938.

During the next seven years, Horkheimer and his associates worked on a limited number of studies while publishing few essays and articles. Maintaining the academic independence of the Institute while meeting the expectations of the officials of Columbia University was proving to be a difficult task. For many of the Institute’s members, affiliation with the University was a mixed blessing. Although it provided needed resources, the type of applied social research expected by the University was not fitting to the temperaments of the ideologically committed critical theorists. Moreover, increasing financial pressures as well as mounting personal and intellectual differences further jeopardized developing productive, collaborative research projects. Sensing the widening gap between his vision for the Institute and the realities that accompanied ties to external institutions, Horkheimer relocated to Pacific Palisades, just outside Los Angeles, in April 1941. Marcuse arrived the following month, and Adorno in November. Marcuse’s stay would be short-lived, however. Receiving only a minimal stipend from the Institute’s endowment, he returned to the East Coast, where he began work for the government in the Office of Strategic Services. Here he was assigned the task of determining ways of depicting foreign enemies in the press and in films.

Marcuse’s move to Washington, D.C., marked the beginning of his permanent separation from the Institute. Although he desperately wanted to return to Los Angeles and continue his association with Horkheimer, his theoretical views were moving away from Horkheimer’s and, even more so, Adorno’s. Moreover, the need for steady income kept him working for the State Department until 1954, at which time, at the age of fifty-six, he was offered a full professorship from Brandeis University. In 1965 he took a position at the University of California, San Diego, where he remained until his retirement in 1976. His early years in San Diego sparked much controversy. Not surprisingly, his Marxist views were met with much resistance from the politically conservative community surrounding the University. With the Vietnam War intensifying fears over the spread of communism, some local organizations sought to have Marcuse, nearly seventy years old, expelled from the city, while other residents were content with sending him death threats. Meanwhile, then-governor Ronald Reagan, who regarded Marcuse as an enemy of the country, and the Board of Regents pressured the University to fire Marcuse, but to no avail. In an important sense, however, Marcuse was a
real threat to conservative defenders of the status quo. By the late 1960s he had become the most widely read social theorist among those fighting for progressive change. (His books *Eros and Civilization* [1955] and *One-Dimensional Man* [1964], excerpted below, garnered the most attention.) With his fame spreading across Europe and America, antiwar activists, feminists, and disciples of the New Left and Black Power movements all saw in his writings an explanation of their discontent and a justification for their political action. And it was in the protests of “the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” that Marcuse placed a guarded hope for the establishment of a truly democratic society (1964:256). He died of a stroke in 1979, with his hopes unfulfilled.

For their part, while in Los Angeles Horkheimer and Adorno produced several important works including *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002/1944), a masterpiece of critical theory. The former was the product of a large-scale research project and appeared as part of the *Studies in Prejudice* series that was edited by Horkheimer and Samuel Flowerman. The series examined anti-Semitism from a range of perspectives including psychology, sociology, history, and psychoanalysis. In *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno and his coauthors administered extensive questionnaires and interviews in an effort to determine the personality traits of persons prone to harboring anti-Semitic views in particular and fascist attitudes more generally. In developing the “F-scale” (fascism scale), the authors concluded that socialization within the family as well as broader social conditions shape an individual’s potential for developing a “fascist” personality—one that is characterized, among other things, by submissiveness, a rigid conformity to dominant values, and contempt for “outsiders” and “deviants.”

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno developed a principal theme of critical theory, namely, that the Enlightenment had produced contradictory developments. Not only did it break the shackles of traditions and religious superstitions, ushering in an epoch of progress through the rise of science, technological advances, and the cultivation of individual freedom; the Age of Reason also created its own Frankenstein: the “irrationality of rationality.” In other words, reason, far from offering a path to human liberation, had been transformed into an irresistible force for new forms of domination. “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. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002/1944:1). Driven by reason and rationality, social life was becoming increasingly bureaucratized and dehumanized, while ever more efficient means of death and destruction were being deployed, as demonstrated by the horrors of World War II and the Nazi campaign of genocide.

With the book’s translation into English in the 1970s, the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* became iconic figures among the New Left activists. Their claim that the Enlightenment, instead of fostering individual autonomy, “is totalitarian” struck a chord with those challenging the legitimacy of the existing social order. Yet, Horkheimer and Adorno’s response to their newfound acclaim contrasted with that of Marcuse. As head of the Institute, Horkheimer had early on established a policy of political abstinence. Not only were associates to refrain from engaging in political activity or supporting the political efforts of others, but even their writings were to contain no direct references to ongoing political events or explicit condemnations of governmental or economic systems, whether fascist or capitalist (Wiggershaus 1994:133). No doubt Horkheimer’s avoidance of activism was shaped, at least in part, by his “outsider” status, first as a Jew in Germany and later as an émigré living in the United States. Nonetheless, Horkheimer would become increasingly pessimistic.
In developing their theoretical perspective, the critical theorists drew from a number of scholars. In addition to those already mentioned (Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger), their works owe a debt to the idealist philosophies of Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, as well as to their contemporary Georg Lukács (1885–1971). Lukács’s groundbreaking book *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) played a pivotal role in the critical theorists’ reevaluation of Karl Marx’s concept of class consciousness and ideology. In this chapter, however, we confine ourselves to a discussion of the three scholars who arguably made the most decisive impact on the central ideas of the Frankfurt School thinkers: Karl Marx (1818–1893), Max Weber (1864–1920), and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). To be sure, the critical theorists’ mining of the ideas of Marx, Freud, and Weber was by no means identical. Nevertheless, that their perspectives profoundly influenced the work of the critical theorists is undeniable.

**Marx, Weber, and the Revolution That Wasn’t**

The critical theorists developed a framework that at once extends and departs from central Marxist ideas. Like Marx, the critical theorists saw in modern, industrial societies an oppressive, dehumanizing social order. And like Marx, their aim was not simply to construct a theory capable of explaining the real workings of society, but, in Horkheimer’s words, the goal of critical theory “is man’s emancipation from slavery” (Horkheimer 1972b:246). Yet, the critical theorists offered a picture of the sources of domination and the struggle to overcome them that was very different from that posited by Marx.

According to Marx’s theoretical system, “historical materialism,” “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (1848/1978:473). In other words, the dynamics of historical changes are rooted in opposing class interests that are themselves a product of the distribution of private property. With private property comes economic classes—those who own the means of production and those who work for them—that necessarily are pitted against each other. While it is in the interest of the former to maintain the status quo, it is in the interest of the latter to radically transform the existing distribution of resources and thereby bring an end to their exploitation and subordination. History has evolved according to this dialectic process, wherein every stage of development contains within it the seeds of its own destruction, as private property perpetually ignites economic conflicts that inevitably will sweep away existing social arrangements and give birth to new classes of oppressors and the oppressed.

In the capitalist stage of development, society is divided into “two great classes”: the bourgeoisie or capitalist and the proletariat or worker. However, the class conflict
between these two factions was to be like no other previous struggle, for the proletariat heralded the redemption of humankind from the “wretchedness,” exploitation, and alienation that, for Marx, characterized capitalism. As they made up a vast majority of the world’s population, the victory of the proletariat over bourgeoisie was inevitable. In the wake of their victory, the proletariat would abolish private property—the catalyst of class conflict—and thus usher in “the end of prehistory.” Marx maintained that once the means of production becomes collectively owned, exploitation of the worker is no longer possible. This is because the surplus value (i.e., profit) produced by the worker is not appropriated or siphoned off by an individual owner. Instead, it is distributed among the workers themselves. Alienation is also ended, as the worker, now a part owner of the enterprise, is able to direct the production process and maintain control over the products she creates. In turn, the worker is no longer estranged from herself and the “species being” (the creative essence of humanity). Finally, the competition for profit that characterizes bourgeois capitalism is brought to a close and, with it, recurring economic crises. Periods of “boom or bust” and their accompanying disruptions to employment are replaced by a more stable form of economic planning that produces according to the needs of the population and not the whims of an unpredictable market. Thus, the communist revolution was the historically necessary path to utopia.

This (albeit simplified) overview reveals the central role Marx assigned to economic relations. Indeed, for Marx the mode of economic production formed the “base” of society on which rests the “superstructure,” or “the social, political, and intellectual life processes in general” (1859/1978:4). The superstructure, in short, consists of everything noneconomic in nature, such as a society’s legal, political, and educational systems, as well as its stock of common-sense knowledge. As a result, an individual’s very consciousness, how one views the world and defines one’s interests, is determined not by one’s own subjectivity. Instead, ideas about the world and one’s place in it are structured by, or built into, the objective class position occupied, for “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (1859/1978:4). This perspective, moreover, yields a radical conclusion: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (1846/1978:172). In other words, Marx maintains that the dominant economic class controls not only a society’s means of material production, but the production of ideas as well.

This raises a vexing obstacle for prophesizing the downfall of capitalism. For how can the working class develop a revolutionary consciousness when a society’s prevailing or dominant ideas (regarding private property rights or market competition, for example) serve to legitimate the very system that they are allegedly destined to overthrow? While Marx portended that historically necessary economic crises would instill the necessary class consciousness, later Marxists noted that changing economic circumstances alone are incapable of mechanically transforming the consciousness of the working class. Thus, Horkheimer concluded (following Lukács) that

the situation of the proletariat is... no guarantee of correct knowledge. The proletariat may indeed have experience of meaninglessness in the form of continuing and increasing wretchedness and injustice in its own life. Yet this awareness is prevented from becoming a social force by the differentiation of social structure which is still imposed from above and by the opposition between personal class interests... Even to the proletariat the world superficially seems quite different than it really is. (1972a:213, 214).

Given this state of affairs, Horkheimer and his colleagues looked elsewhere for the sources of emancipation, and, not surprisingly, they found them in critical theory. This signaled a major shift from orthodox Marxism, as the critical theorists abandoned
analyses of economic conditions and no longer cast the working class in the role of savior of humanity. Moreover, in placing what limited hope they had for the establishment of a just society in the hands of critical theoreticians, they drew inspiration from the work of Georg Hegel and his followers—the Young Hegelians—whose philosophy Marx subjected to a scathing critique. In essence, the critical theorists turned away from Marx’s doctrine of historical materialism to Hegelian idealism to better focus their analysis of culture and ideology, for it was not economic arrangements that were primarily responsible for the barbarism of humanity but ideas and the irrationality of reason. But if the critical theorists were skeptical of the revolutionary potential of the working class itself, or of the ability of a revolutionary communist party vanguard to advance “correct knowledge” of the proletariat’s condition (as Lukács theorized), then it would be left to them to realize a free and peaceful society. For critical theory “was not just an extension of proletarian thought, but a means of thinking about the social totality that would aid in the movement from the empirical proletariat’s necessarily still partial view of society from its own class position to the achievement of a classless society, one not structured on injustice” (Calhoun 1995:21).

Nevertheless, aside from asserting that the task of the critical theorist is “to reduce the tension between his own insight and oppressed humanity in whose service he thinks” (Horkheimer 1972:221) or claiming that “truth becomes clearly evident in the person of the theoretician” (ibid.:216), Horkheimer and his associates would fail to offer a specific account of the mechanisms for social change and who, precisely, the agents of such change would be.2 Exactly how the critical theorist was to enlighten the class “in whose service he thinks” was a question that remained unanswered. This neglect would in turn heighten the sense of pessimism that pervaded the critical theorists’ political outlook.

The bleak (if not realistic) picture of the future painted by the critical theorists was not simply a product of the shortcomings of their theoretical model. Instead, it stemmed more directly from what they saw as the changing nature of domination. It was not the exploitation inherent in capitalism that was responsible for the oppression of humanity but rather forms of thought, and in particular, the totalitarianism of reason and rationality. Here again the critical theorists draw from the work of Hegel as well as from Max Weber. For his part, Hegel argued that the essence of reality lies in thought or ideas, because it is only in and through the concepts that order our experiences that experiences, as such, are known. Thus, as our knowledge changes, so does the reality of experience. Moreover, Hegel combined aspects of Christian theology and Enlightenment philosophy to argue that as history evolves through a dialectical progression of ideas, humankind’s knowledge comes ever closer to the perfected realization of “Spirit” or “Absolute Idea” as revealed by God. The perfectibility of humankind is reached once the utopia of “Truth” and “Reason” resolves the contradictions between ideas and reality. At this point in the evolution of consciousness or ideas, humankind will become truly free as we become fully self-conscious and able to recognize that the objective world is a product of human creation.

In suggesting that history is marked by a separation of the True from the real, it follows that we are alienated from Absolute Idea or Spirit. The alienation of humanity and the obstacles to realizing a perfected social order lie in distorted consciousness. As we noted earlier, the critical theorists located the source of distorted consciousness in the “irrationality of rationality.” Reason itself had become corrupted, leaving individuals unable to negate or develop a critique of “objective truths,” which alone enables us to resist the domination of the status quo. In short, the power of negative thinking to

2Jürgen Habermas (see Chapter 9), a sometime student of Adorno and leading contemporary theorist, addressed this very issue in his reworking of critical theory.
subvert the established social order and the oppressive conditions it fosters has been lost. Here, the critical theorists draw not only from Hegel but also from Weber. For it was Weber who offered a vision of the future in which “not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness” (Weber 1958:128).

To what did Weber attribute his own pessimistic outlook? According to Weber, the development of capitalism in the West was predicated on an instrumental worldview that had ushered in an increasingly impersonal and bureaucratic society. This worldview was born out of the Protestant ethic that originally had promised individuals a path to religious salvation in the form of economic success. Eventually, the religious injunction to carry out one’s worldly affairs on the basis of methodical and rational planning was shed. The ethical imperative to avoid idleness and enjoyment of luxuries while saving and investing one’s wealth in service to God no longer stood as divinely granted proof of one’s state of grace. Profit and efficiency were now twin demands that were pursued for their own sake. The rational and bureaucratic structures necessary to ignite the growth of modern capitalism rendered obsolete the religious spirit that first had imbued it with meaning. Unleashed from its religious moorings, the process of rationalization transformed the West into a disenchanted “iron cage” from which the modern individual is left with little power to escape. As it is one of the most compelling passages ever written in sociology, we quote Weber at length:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day [sic] determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. . . .

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. To-day [sic.] the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. . . . For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity images that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” (1904/1958:180, 181)

Along with this transition, “formal rationality” supplanted “substantive rationality” as the motivating force in human action. While substantive rationality provides for an ethic or value principle according to which actions are guided, formal rationality is grounded in rule-bound, matter-of-fact calculations. Thus, substantive rationality establishes ultimate ends that give meaning to our actions, while formal rationality is based on establishing impersonal, calculable procedures. Formal rationality is the lifeblood of the bureaucratic administration of human affairs. And for Weber, it is precisely the bureaucratic form of rationality that is most responsible for creating an oppressive, overly routinized, and depersonalized society. Bureaucracy is the “iron cage” that has stifled individual freedom.

This theme has formed the core of critical theory. For instance, Horkheimer drew a distinction between “subjective reason” and “objective reason.” Parallel to Weber’s notion of formal or instrumental rationality, subjective reason is “essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken

1Horkheimer’s distinction between subjective and objective reason parallels not only Weber’s discussion of rationality but also the work of his contemporary Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), who drew a contrast between “functional rationality” and “substantial rationality.” (See Karl Mannheim, Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction, London: Routledge and Kegan.)
for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable” (Horkheimer 1947:3). While subjective reason may allow us to determine the most efficient way of achieving our goals, it cannot in itself offer a guide for determining what is a “reasonable” goal. Subjective reason is the guiding force of the technician, the bureaucrat, who, while adept at carrying out functional, procedural rules, is blind to the ethical basis of them. It is the form of reason that at its most heinous allows for the callous torturing of others, demonstrated by the Holocaust during Horkheimer’s time and today by the war with Iraq.

Conversely, **objective reason** speaks to the relative value of the **ends** of action and thus provides a basis for determining what is ethical, right, and just. It is premised on the notion that

the existence of reason [is] a force not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world—in relations among human beings, between social classes, in social institutions, and in nature and its manifestations. It aims at evolving a comprehensive system, or hierarchy, of all beings, including man and his aims. The degree of reasonableness of a man’s life could be determined according to its harmony with this totality. Its objective structure, and not just man and his purposes, was to be the measuring rod for individual thoughts and actions. (Horkheimer 1947:4)

For his part, Marcuse (1941) emphasized the distinction between “individualistic rationality” and “technological rationality.” (The latter term was adopted by most of the Frankfurt theorists.) Analogous to Horkheimer’s notion of objective reason, he defined **individualistic rationality** as “a critical and oppositional attitude that derived freedom of action from the unrestricted liberty of thought and conscience and measured all social standards and relations by the individual’s rational self-interest” (1941:433). Individualistic rationality allows for negating all that is established in order to critically understand one’s world, develop personal objectives, and achieve them through rational methods. The individual’s ability to transcend the status quo was “liquidated,” however, as the organization of society moved from the era of liberal, competitive capitalism to industrial, corporate capitalism. In the earlier stage, an individual’s self-directed efforts enabled him to develop his unique identity and potential while contributing to the needs of society. In the modern era of mechanized, rationalized production, it is society that creates and “administers” all the individual’s needs. And “with the disappearance of independent economic subjects, the subject as such disappears” (Horkheimer 1941:377).

This shift in the form of production altered individual consciousness, as technological rationality replaced individualistic forms of thought. **Technological rationality** is marked by the scientific approach to all human affairs. Social relations as well as humanity’s relationship to nature are now understood as “problems” to be efficiently solved. And with solutions comes control. While this form of reason has led to unprecedented material gains, under its sway “individuals are stripped of their individuality, not by external compulsion, but by the very rationality under which they live” (Marcuse 1941:421). As Marcuse notes:

Autonomy of reason loses its meaning in the same measure as the thoughts, feelings and actions of men are shaped by the technical requirements of the apparatus which they have

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4Marcuse’s argument here recalls Marx’s theory of the relationship between forms of economic production and consciousness. However, unlike Marx, Marcuse and the critical theorists did not contend that consciousness was tied to particular class positions, for no one can escape the numbing effects of technological rationality.
themselves created. Reason has found its resting place in the system of standardized control,
production, and consumption. ... Rationality here calls for unconditional compliance and
coordination, and consequently, the truth values related to this rationality imply the sub-
ordination of thought to pregiven external standards. ... 

The point is that today the apparatus to which the individual is to adjust and adapt himself
is so rational that individual protest and liberation appear not only as hopeless but as utterly
irrational. The system of life created by modern industry is one of the highest expediency,
convenience, and efficiency. Reason, once defined in these terms, becomes equivalent to an
activity which perpetuates this world. Rational behavior becomes identical with a matter-of-
factness which teaches reasonable submissiveness and thus guarantees getting along in the
prevailing order. (ibid.: 421, 423)

Technological rationality represented a worldview that had come to dominate all
spheres of life. Unquestioned conformity to the dictates of efficiency, convenience, and
profit now “govern[s] performance not only in the factories and shops, but also in the
offices, schools, assemblies, and finally, in the realm of relaxation and entertainment”
(ibid.: 421). For the critical theorists, this meant that “reason [had] liquidated itself as
an agency of ethical, moral, and religious insight” (Horkheimer 1947: 18). Scientific-
technological progress had become the god of modern society, and only a “crank”
would refuse to worship before its idols. Paradoxically, then, it was science itself—the
bastion of reason—that had promoted the destruction of humanity. Indeed, the critical
theorists maintained that science, in claiming that the empirical world can be objec-
tively known, could at best produce a superficial understanding of the natural and social
worlds. Based in “traditional theory” and “positivism,” science mistook the world of
appearances or “facts” for the world of essences. However, “the so-called facts ascer-
tained by quantitative methods, which the positivists are inclined to regard as the only
scientific ones, are often surface phenomena that obscure rather than disclose the
underlying reality” (ibid.: 82). Moreover, in treating “surface phenomena” as necessary,
inescapable givens, science is unable to transcend the established order and thus repro-
duces an oppressive social system.

In contrast, the critical theorists claimed that all knowledge is finite; there are no
timeless, empirical truths subject to scientific discovery and proof. Because objective
knowledge is nothing but a fiction (albeit a comforting one), it is imperative for theo-
rists to recognize that fact and value cannot be separated. Unlike the aloof intellectual
who falsely proclaims the truth on the basis of his supposedly neutral and detached
reflections on society, the critical theorist found truth “in personal thought and action,
in concrete historical activity” (Horkheimer 1972: 222). Departing from Weber’s claim
(and many others, including Karl Mannheim), the critical theorists argued that the
notion of a free-floating intellectual, who somehow stands above or apart from the
object of his investigation, is a self-aggrandizing myth. It serves to mask the real,
although unintended, social consequences of the scientist’s findings—perpetuation of a
system of technological domination. For their part, the critical theorists recognized that
their ideas were equally influenced by the conditions in which they lived and the con-
cepts by which they thought. Thus, they abandoned all pretenses to objectivity and
instead sought to develop a theoretical system morally committed to the emancipa-
tion of humanity. Their sword was Reason, for it alone cleared the path to the ultimate
value: individual freedom.

Technology and science had reneged on their promise to usher in a just and reason-
able world. While industrial and administrative advances had made possible the domi-
nation of nature and production of wealth on a scale that would have been unimaginable
to the early prophets of the Enlightenment, modern society continued to be plagued by inequality, oppression, destruction, and poverty. While science has made it possible to feed, educate, and care for all the inhabitants of the world, many are left to starve, illiterate, poor, and ravaged by preventable illness. And for those whose “needs” are satisfied, “in the unjust state of society the powerless and pliability of the masses increase with the quantity of goods allocated to them” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002/1944:xvii). It is no longer possible to justify—to find reasonable—the sacrifices of the many for the privileges of the few in the name of progress. The root of the inhumanity of the modern condition was not a result of a lack of economic or scientific development. Rather, it was the result of technological or instrumental rationality coming to form the basis of the dominant ideology. In other words, the logic of technological rationality, which emphasizes means and aims at answering the question “how?” was now the authority for determining legitimate courses of action. But this form of rationality is divorced from ethics and value judgments; it is not oriented to answering
the question “why?” As the dominant ideology, however, the beliefs, concepts, and worldview that inform technological rationality serve as the taken-for-granted reality that shapes social life more generally. It provides the common-sense knowledge by which all groups understand the nature of society and the relationship between individuals. And it is this pervasive ideology, and not class-based exploitation as Marx contended, that is primarily responsible for sustaining oppression in modern society. Thus, it was to ideology that the critical theorists turned when attempting to articulate a theory of social change that envisioned a free and just society.

While German philosophers planted the roots of critical theory, their influence was not confined within national boundaries. In America, the sociologist who most took up the charge of the critical theorists was C. Wright Mills. Born in Texas, Mills’s foray into academics was launched when he won a research fellowship to attend the University of Wisconsin. After earning his doctorate, Mills went on to Columbia University, where he remained until his untimely death at the age of forty-six. Despite his passing at a young age, his penetrating analyses of American political, social, and intellectual life have led at least one reputable observer to consider Mills “the greatest sociologist the United States has ever produced” (Mills 1963:20).

To what did Mills owe such a reputation? Committed to a vision of a more just and moral society, he was throughout his career a relentless critic of the self-congratulatory hypocrisy that in his view pervaded American culture. His condemnation of the status quo, not surprisingly, made Mills his share of enemies in the “Establishment.” For instance, in *The Power Elite* (1958), he detailed the undemocratic character of America’s allegedly democratic governance. Far from being subject to the “will of the people,” American politics is becoming dominated more and more by a small, interconnected group of political, economic, and military leaders. Power has become increasingly centralized within “the big three” institutions, while the public or *demos* has been transformed into an impotent “mass society,” and elected representatives in Congress have become increasingly servile and ineffectual. In American society, important decisions are made by a more or less unified circle of individuals who move from leadership positions in one institutional domain to another. One need only look at the current roster of cabinet members in the executive branch to see how the revolving door works.

In *White Collar* (1951), Mills turns his attention to the plight of the American middle classes who, owing to their “status panic,” are unable to realize a meaningful existence. A sense of powerlessness often characterizes the growing ranks of white-collar professionals as their daily lives have become increasingly routinized and regimented under the demands of bureaucratic efficiency. While white-collar professionals may have achieved a semblance of economic security, they have traded it for a sense of purpose and the ability to control their destiny. Alienated from their work and insecure about their status, white-collar professionals often turn to the world of leisure to provide succor. For Mills, this state of affairs has produced psychologically and politically fragmented individuals who are unable to recognize the true sources of their discontent. Reminiscent of the
Frankfurt School theorists, he feared that the malaise of the middle classes and their embracing of a vacuous mass culture left society vulnerable to the rise of authoritarianism.

Not one to avoid controversy, Mills turned his critical outlook onto his own peers. His classic introduction to sociology, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), not only offers the definitive statement on the task of the discipline; it also reproaches those who are charged with carrying it out. First, Mills exalts sociology as uniquely able to “grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (1959:6). In doing so, the sociological imagination enables its possessor to make the essential distinction between “the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure” (ibid.). Yet, to Mills’s dismay, the promise of sociology was being lost, to the extent that academic research is rooted in an “abstracted empiricism” that concerns itself less with addressing pressing human needs than with uncovering scientific facts. Again recalling the misgivings of the critical theorists, Mills saw in his fellow sociologists’ quest for facts an abdication of their social responsibility to advance a more humane, democratic society.

This ideology is disseminated primarily through the *culture industry*. This “industry” encompasses all those sectors involved in the creation and distribution of mass-culture products: television, film, radio, music, magazines, newspapers, books, and the advertisements that sell them. Geared toward entertaining and pacifying the masses, the culture industry administers “mass deception” by churning out a never-ending supply of mass-produced, standardized commodities that “aborts and silences criticism” (Bottomore 1984:19). Manufactured movie and television stars act as its leading spokespersons, promoting its superficial, conformist vision of the happy life both in their performances and in their revolving appearances on the cycle of vacuous, ever-the-same talk shows. Suggestive of the effectiveness of the culture industry, most people seem to prefer its familiar, predictable offerings to alternatives that require active contemplation. For instance, how many TV show theme songs can you hum? How many Mozart concertos?

Tied directly to the standardization of products is the “pseudo-individualization” that endows “cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself” (Adorno 1941:25). Here is the “parade of progress,” the world of the “new and improved” that masks an eternal sameness. Deodorants and shampoos, hit songs and movie formulas, cars and soft drinks—each is made to closely resemble its competitors in order to conform to the consumer’s pregiven expectations, but offers just the slightest difference in order to capture his attention:

Although the consumer is, so to speak, given his choice, he does not get a penny’s worth too much for his money, whatever the trademark he prefers to possess. The difference in quality between two equally priced popular articles is usually as infinitesimal as the difference in the nicotine content of two brands of cigarettes. Nevertheless, this difference, corroborated by “scientific tests,” is dinned into the consumer’s mind through posters illuminated by a thousand electric light bulbs, over the radio, and by use of entire pages of newspapers and magazines, as if it represented a revelation altering the entire course of the world rather than an illusory fraction that makes no real difference, even for a chain smoker. (Horkheimer 1947:99)

Despite, or perhaps because of, the superficial differences that distinguish one commodity from the next, the culture industry advertises its products with the promise of
Photo 3.5  The culture industry fabricates a world where, in Marx’s famous aphorism, “all that is solid melts into air.” Nowhere is this condition more conspicuously promoted than in advertising. Above, Nissan, a Japanese auto maker, “sells” the values of freedom and hope to potential consumers in Harlem, New York, a predominately African-American neighborhood that for decades has been denied precisely what is being sold.

SOURCE: Scott Appelrouth; used with permission.

Photo 3.6  Advertising Happiness: Spirituality and Fashion—it’s all the same.

SOURCE: Scott Appelrouth; used with permission.
an “escape from reality but it really offers an escape from the last thought of resisting that reality (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002/1944:116). Such are the movies where the audience can momentarily forget the drudgery and “defeat” of daily life through the ever-predictable triumph of the good guys; the commercials in which weight-loss pills, whitening toothpaste, and the latest clothing fashions will land you the object of your desires and everlasting happiness; car advertisements that pitch their mass-produced product to a mass audience with the slogan, “Engineered for those who never applaud conformity”; and the music industry in which your favorite band’s anti-establishment message can be bought for a mere $17. Yet, none of the offerings of the culture industry actually fulfills its promise. In fact, they are not designed to, and although we know this, we are unable to envision an alternative. And this, above all else, marks the power that the culture industry possesses. The essential lesson is that individuals are not to be treated as autonomous, freethinking persons. Rather, in the pursuit of efficient profit-making, individuals themselves are to be “created” in order to fit into a standardized model that mirrors the standardized products being sold to them.

The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises. . . . This principle requires that while all needs should be presented to individuals as capable of fulfillment by the culture industry, they should be so set up in advance that individuals experience themselves through their needs only as eternal consumers, as the culture industry’s object. Not only does it persuade them that its fraud is satisfaction, it also gives them to understand that they must make do with what is offered, whatever it may be. . . . That is the triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002/1944:111, 113, 136)

In the end, the culture industry combines with technological rationality to produce a totalitarian social order that transcends any particular economic or political arrangement. Whether a society is organized according to capitalist or socialist, fascist or democratic principles makes little difference, for all advanced, industrial societies are administered alike. Each is rooted to an all-encompassing culture industry that trumpets its conformist products as the avenue for individual success and happiness. No one, regardless of class position, is able to escape its ever more effective and “pleasant” method of control.

Walter Benjamin was an associate of the Institute for Social Research, his main connection to the group coming in the form of freelance contributions to the Institute’s Journal of Social Research. While his philosophical treatises addressed a range of topics, it is his studies on the nature of art in modern societies that have made the most enduring mark in the social sciences. Benjamin had met Adorno in 1923 while attending the University of Frankfurt, and the two established a close correspondence. However, despite the mutual respect each had for the other’s ideas, Benjamin’s profound influence on Adorno would be tempered as the two clashed over the revolutionary role assigned to works of art.

(Continued)
While Adorno saw in popular forms of musical and artistic expression a fetishized “standardization” that bred social conformity and the abandonment of reason, Benjamin perceived a potentially revolutionary form of politics. In his classic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Benjamin contended that technological advances promised to destroy the elitism of art (an elitism that Adorno was himself guilty of advocating). Specifically, lithography, photography, and film, in producing mechanical reproductions of works of art, had removed the distance or separateness that up to that point characterized the relationship between art and those who viewed it. In doing so, it undermined the source of art’s aura or sacredness and, in turn, challenged conservative, elitist understandings and uses of art. (The work of Andy Warhol and the debates over its artistic merit illustrate well Benjamin’s argument.) Authenticity, considered a hallmark of “true art,” is rendered obsolete as images can be endlessly reproduced—popularized—and thus appropriated by “the masses.” In Benjamin’s own words:

. . . the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. (1936/1968:223)

The intellectual dispute between Adorno and Benjamin would not be resolved. Tragically, Benjamin, a German of Jewish descent, took his own life when attempting to escape the Nazis through the Pyrenees Mountains.

**Freud and the “Unhappy Consciousness”**

The final influence on the critical theorists considered here is the work of Sigmund Freud, whose ideas had a particularly profound impact on Herbert Marcuse. The critical theorists’ turn to psychoanalysis is in large measure a reflection of their emphasis on consciousness, reason, and individual freedom and how ideology distorts human potential. Moreover, Marcuse saw in Freudian theory the basis of an explanation for the continuing repression and unhappiness of individuals and a pathway toward the end of human toil and suffering.

Central to the critical theorists’ perspective is Freud’s notion of the “pleasure principle” and the “reality principle.” The pleasure principle refers to the individual’s instinctual drive for the immediate and painless gratification of desires. According to Freud, this unconscious impulse is inimical to the development of civilization, because civilization demands cooperation between individuals in order to achieve social (as opposed to personal) aims, and cooperation entails the delay, if not denial, of...
self-gratification. Restraining the free play of the pleasure principle is the “reality principle.” The reality principle serves as a precondition for entering into associations with others that alone are able to secure basic needs. Essentially, an unconscious trade-off is made as powerful—and at times destructive—instinctual pleasures are exchanged for less satisfying, sublimated pleasures that, nevertheless, make social life possible. As a result, the apparent freedom to do and think and say what one wants actually is based on an essential unfreedom. The necessary repression of the instincts that accompanies the transfer to the reality principle is a form of psychological domination as the socially imposed restraint of instinctual pleasures is internalized within one’s own psyche. “The repressive transformation of the instincts becomes the biological constitution of the organism: history rules even in the instinctual structure; culture becomes nature as soon as the individual learns to affirm and to reproduce the reality principle from within himself” (Marcuse 1970:11).

For Freud, the domination of instincts is bound to the development of civilization. Humanity’s struggle for existence amid scarcity compels the repression of selfish instincts if civilization is to progress beyond barbarism. Because the progress of civilization requires engaging in unpleasurable tasks and the denial of gratifications, the influence of the pleasure principle must be tamed. Herein lies the “discontent of civilization”: the evolution of society is based on the redirecting of instinctual energies from unrestrained, immediate pleasure to the burden of socially useful labor that refuses instinctual desires. The “result is not only the conversion of the organism into an instrument of unpleasurable labor but also and above all the devaluation of happiness and pleasure as ends in themselves, the subordination of happiness and gratification to social productivity without which there is no progress in civilization” (Marcuse 1970:35). As Freud himself stated on the matter, “What we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery” (Freud 1961:38).

This dynamic results in a “vicious circle of progress” (Marcuse 1970:36) in which the civilizing advances produced through the denial of instinctual satisfaction do not lead to individual happiness. For the very reason that such advances are achieved at the expense of psychological inhibitions, they cannot be fully enjoyed. Yet, frustrated, unfulfilling satisfactions lead to a rise in repressed instinctual energies that find release in ever more socially approved, although individually malign, forms of “progress.” And so the vicious circle continues.

Over the course of evolution, however, civilization has now advanced to such a degree that the repression of instinctual energies in the name of progress is no longer necessary. Humanity’s technical control over nature has increased the capacity to fulfill needs to the point where scarcity, not only in regard to life’s essentials but also in terms of liberating “free play,” is now a choice and not the result of technological obstacles. Enough wealth is produced to ensure the security and comfort of most, if not all, of humankind. Nevertheless, the world’s population continues to toil unnecessarily in repressive, alienated labor that fails to provide satisfaction of individual needs and true happiness. Under conditions of increased productivity and enhanced intelligence, unfreedom in the form of instinctual denial is increasingly irrational, as scarcity and the struggle for existence can no longer justify the continued repression of individual happiness. To the extent that technology reduces the amount of labor time required to produce life’s necessities, it creates the possibility for eliminating repression and satisfying needs beyond those of basic necessity. “But the closer the real possibility of liberating the individual from the constraints once justified by scarcity and immaturity, the greater the need for maintaining and streamlining these constraints lest the established order of domination dissolve... If society cannot use its growing
productivity for reducing repression (because such usage would upset the hierarchy of the status quo), productivity must be turned against the individuals; it becomes itself an instrument of universal control. Totalitarianism spreads over late industrial civilization wherever the interests of domination prevail upon productivity, arresting and diverting its potentialities” (Marcuse 1955:93; emphasis in the original). Such is a world dominated by the production of waste, where auto lots are filled with new cars that will never be driven and grocery stores are stocked with food that will rot before it’s bought. Meanwhile, workers are left to live paycheck to paycheck, unable to purchase the very goods they produce.

A question arising from Freud’s analysis is whether the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle must inevitably lead to the repression of instinctual pleasure and thus the “misery” of humankind. While Freud himself ambivalently suggested that repression is an inescapable condition of civilization, Marcuse asserted the possibility of a world where “the expanding realm of freedom becomes truly a realm of play—of the free play of individual faculties” (Marcuse 1955:223). Indeed, the real mark of progress is measured by the extent to which the historically conditioned capacity to satisfy human needs is used to advance individual happiness or to meet technological demands for productivity. The degree of freedom and domination is thus not fixed or immutable, nor is it somehow limited by the psychological or instinctual makeup of individuals. In a sense, then, freedom can be “objectively” measured by comparing the needs of individuals to the productive capacity for satisfying such needs during a given period of development. The more the available means are organized so as to minimize instinctual repression in meeting the needs of the individual and of society, the freer a society is.

While the reality principle and the repressive control of instinctual energies that it demands are inherent in the continuing development of civilization, “the specific historical institutions of the reality principle and the specific interests of domination introduce additional controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association” (Marcuse 1955:37; emphasis in original). These additional controls represent surplus repression: the portion of repression “which is the result of specific societal conditions sustained in the specific interest of domination” and that unnecessarily impedes the gratification of instinctual desires (ibid.:88). In other words, although the reality principle is intrinsically opposed to the pleasure principle, the specific form that it takes is determined by the prevailing method of social domination—the existing system of social institutions, norms, and values that guides the necessary control of the instincts. Thus, whether a society’s mode of production is based on private or collective property, a market or planned economy, or whether all of its members work to secure their survival or only particular groups do so, the content of the reality principle will be affected and, thus, the scope and degree of instinctual repression. The extent of surplus repression, then, provides a standard of measurement according to which the repressiveness of a society can be gauged.

Given that repression is not “natural” but rather is socially conditioned, “psychology in its inner structure must reveal itself to be political” (Marcuse 1970:1). The politics of psychology are, for Marcuse, most evident in the spheres of free time and sexuality. As we noted above, technological progress has all but eliminated, at least in potential, scarcity and want as a necessary fate of the human condition. Consequently, advanced societies are objectively able to reduce the amount of time individuals spend in burdensome, alienated labor, without compromising the ability to provide the population with a “rational” level of comfort. Yet, advanced societies remain needlessly competitive, antagonistic, and enslaved to continued expansion. As a result, individuals needlessly spend the majority of their time engaged in labor “for an apparatus which
they do not control, which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they want to live... Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions... [L]abor time, which is the largest part of the individual’s time, is painful time, for alienated labor is absence of gratification, negation of the pleasure principle” (Marcuse 1955:45).

Even when the individual is not laboring for the “apparatus,” the limited free time available to him remains tightly controlled. As we discussed previously, the lifeblood of the culture industry is filling individuals’ leisure with standardized, conformist commodities, including information. But more than this, leisure is controlled by the very length of the working day and the nature of the dulled, mechanized work experience. Too tired from the day’s labor, the individual has only enough energy to passively consume mindless “entertainment” in preparation for the next day’s work. If the status quo, the prevailing system of domination, is to be maintained, free time can serve no other purpose because “the individual is not to be left alone. For if left to itself, and supported by a free intelligence aware of the potentialities of liberation from the reality of repression” (Marcuse 1955:48), individuals may begin to challenge the legitimacy of the established social order. Herein lies the political dimension to free time: in the name of the sacred values of progress and productivity, humanity has become increasingly repressed and, thus, incapable of realizing true progress in the form of freedom. While earlier stages of civilization required for their development repressive labor, its persistence and the “need” for increasing material wealth lead not to human happiness but to technological unfreedom.

Like his perspective on repression and the politics of leisure, Marcuse’s view of sexuality is deeply indebted to Freud. Individuals in their early developmental stages are dominated by the pleasure principle. Thus, before the reality principle is internalized, individuals are controlled by “sexual” instincts that seek polymorphous bodily pleasures. As part of their indoctrination into the repressive social order, individuals must be “desexualized”; that is, sexual energies must be densensualized in “love” in order to sustain the monogamous, patriarchal family structure. For this family structure is itself an essential accomplice to the administered, repressive society. Sex is now tolerated only so long as it furthers the propagation of the species and, thus, existing relations of domination. Meanwhile, sexuality is transformed from the experience of the entire body as a locus of pleasure to a constraining fixation on genitalia. Once tamed by repressive moral codes, the individual’s sexuality is no longer a source of uninhibited, total pleasure as it is put into the service of society’s needs and not one’s own (Marcuse 1970:9).

Marcuse does recognize, however, that relative to the nineteenth century, sexual mores and behavior have been “desublimated” or liberalized. Yet, the modern liberation of sexuality provides only a false freedom. The conflict between sexuality (a central source of the pleasure principle) and society (the source of the reality principle) has produced a state of repressive desublimation or “institutionalized desublimation” as it “is managed by a controlled liberalization which increases satisfaction with the offerings of society” (Marcuse 1970:57). As Marcuse noted:

[T]he degree to which sexuality is sanctioned and even encouraged by society (not “officially,” of course, but by the mores and behavior considered as “regular”), it loses the quality which, according to Freud, is its essentially erotic quality, that of freedom from social control. In this sphere was the surreptitious freedom, the dangerous autonomy of the individual under the pleasure principle... . . . Now, with the integration of this sphere into the realm of business and entertainment, the repression itself is repressed: society has enlarged not individual freedom, but its control over the individual. (ibid.)
Marcuse saw in the supposed loosening of sexual mores neither a threat to existing civilization, as conservatives may have feared, nor a mark of a freer society. Instead, sexual liberation was but another sign of “business as usual,” a sign vividly illustrated today by the growing pornography industry in which “uninhibited” sex is bought and sold. Nevertheless, as an essential force of the pleasure principle, embracing non-repressive sexuality is necessary to the creation of an authentically liberated society.

CRITICAL THEORISTS THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

From our discussion to this point, it should be clear that critical theory possesses the elements of a multidimensional approach to the central issues of action and order. Drawing principally from Marx, Weber, and Freud, critical theory incorporates concepts that range from an emphasis on institutionalized class relations to the instinc-tual disposition of individuals. This range is suggested in Figure 3.1, which depicts a number of the concepts outlined in the previous section.

Despite the multidimensionality of their conceptual tool-kit, we consider the critical theorists primarily collectivist and rationalist in their theoretical orientation. This view is based on a distinction between the critical theorists’ view of the world as it should be and how it actually is. Undoubtedly, the critical theorists yearn for the creation of a society in which social order is maintained according to dictates of individuals’ true needs and desires, where society allows for the realization of goals and aspirations that are determined by the individual’s own consciousness and autonomous capacity for reason. But the progress of civilization has not unfolded under such an individualistic dynamic. Instead, repressive, dehumanizing collectivist forces (the culture industry, technology,
modes of economic production) have undermined the ability for individuals to develop a society free from domination. Although such forces are the products of human creativity, they have become reified or seemingly immutable. As such, they now confront their creators as alien, abstract powers that operate according to their own logic: the apparatus has a life of its own beyond the control of humans. Horkheimer points to this dynamic when he notes that “the substance of individuality itself, to which the idea of autonomy was bound, did not survive the process of industrialization. . . . With the decline of the ego and its reflective reason, human relationships tend to a point wherein the rule of economy over all personal relationships, the universal control of commodities over the totality of life, turns into a new and naked form of command and obedience” (1941:376, 379).

Ultimately, then, it is large-scale, institutional forces that account for the creation and re-creation of the social order, albeit in one that is founded on oppression. While the critical theorists focus on individual consciousness as the source of human liberation, their account of the social order rests on the broader cultural transformations that have distorted the individual’s capacity to reason.

Concerning the issue of action, we again need to distinguish between the critical theorists’ understanding of the world as it is and as it should be. In their view, modern society is fueled by a positivist, technological rationality that is incapable of providing an objectively meaningful source of human purpose. Driven by strategic calculations, individuals are motivated to pursue efficiency—a style—above all else in their everyday lives without exercising their own consciousness to determine what the purpose—a substance—of their life should be. While such motivations may prove “rational” insofar as they effectively coordinate means and ends, they fall short of being “reasonable.” It is precisely this form of rationality that the critical theorists condemn for supplanting the primacy of morals and values in human affairs. For it is nonrational motivating factors that must guide consciousness and the act of reasoning if modern civilization is to stem the tide of “progress” and create a truly humane society as “the collapse of reason and the collapse of the individual are one and the same thing” (Horkheimer 1941:376).
Readings

The readings that follow explore the central theme of critical theory, namely, how progress has rendered the essence of individuality—negating—obsolete. This argument is based on the premise that individuals in advanced industrial societies live under a radically different set of conditions from those that prevailed during the previous period of competitive capitalism. During the era of “free” capitalism, the family was the center of economic and moral life. The survival of individuals was won and lost through the private family enterprise, which at the same time provided an avenue for them to express their own interests and abilities. Moreover, it was the family that trained youth and instilled in them the dominant social values. Thus, the process of socialization and the instinctual conflicts it created were tied to personal relationships between children and their parents. And it is the personal nature of this struggle that allows for the development of individuality.

Under the rule of economic, political, and cultural monopolies, however, the nature of the modern family has changed and with it the nature of the individual. The conflict between the child and the parents as authority figures and administrators of punishment and justice has been replaced. The child learns that it is not his parents that provide for his well being, but rather the “system” for which they labor. With the parents’ loss of power and authority, it is no longer the family but external, standardizing forces to which the individual must adjust and submit. Yet, the reach of such forces is pervasive. The culture industry combines with the economic/political apparatus to erode the distinction between public and private domains. With no autonomous space from which to freely develop their own interests, individuals are unable to confront or oppose the established order. Individuals now identify themselves with and through the interests of the apparatus. Their very consciousness invaded by the apparatus, individuals become objects of technical administration as the whole of their existence has been absorbed by “pleasant” means of domination.

Introduction to Max Horkheimer’s

Eclipse of Reason

In this reading, Horkheimer gives expression to the theme just outlined. In doing so, he argues that modern society is a “totality” that subjects all to its dehumanizing effects; worker and businessman alike are unable to escape the decline of individuality. This decline is most apparent in the modern form of consciousness that is unwilling and unable to image alternative truths. Indeed, “the very idea of truth has been reduced to the purpose of a useful tool in the control of nature, and the realization of the infinite potentialities inherent in man has been relegated to the status of a luxury. Thought that does not serve the interests of any established group or is not pertinent to the business of any industry has no place, is considered vain or superfluous” (1947:142, 143). This is a world in which “usefulness” is defined on technological grounds. Thinking in itself is useless or superfluous. Truth is found in “productivity” not critique. While “technocrats maintain that superabundance of goods produced on super-assembly lines will automatically eliminate all economic misery” (ibid.:151), human suffering continues. Yet, such misery and suffering
are largely unnecessary, for the technological means to eliminate them are available. Without the ability to reason or find purpose in other than technological terms, humankind is destined to a future in which the “idolization of progress leads to the opposite of progress” (1947:153). For it is not technology or productivity in itself that makes for the decline of the individual, but loss of the ability to critically define humane principles according to which real progress must unfold. Perhaps, then, not all hope should be lost; the tide of “progress” may yet still be reversed. As Horkheimer desperately portends:

Industrial discipline, technological progress, and scientific enlightenment, the very economic and cultural processes that are bringing about the obliterati of individuality, promise—though the augury is faint enough at present—to usher in a new era in which individuality may reemerge as an element in a less ideological and more humane form of existence. (ibid.:160, 161)

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**Eclipse of Reason (1947)**

Max Horkheimer

**RISE AND DECLINE OF THE INDIVIDUAL**

The crisis of reason is manifested in the crisis of the individual, as whose agency it has developed. The illusion that traditional philosophy has cherished about the individual and about reason—the illusion of their eternity—is being dispelled. The individual once conceived of reason exclusively as an instrument of the self. Now he experiences the reverse of this self-deification. The machine has dropped the driver; it is racing blindly into space. At the moment of consummation, reason has become irrational and stultified. The theme of this time is self-preservation, while there is no self to preserve. In view of this situation, it behooves us to reflect upon the concept of the individual.

When we speak of the individual as a historical entity, we mean not merely the space-time and the sense existence of a particular member of the human race, but, in addition, his awareness of his own individuality as a conscious human being, including recognition of his own identity. This perception of the identity of the self is not equally strong in all persons. It is more clearly defined in adults than in children, who must learn to call themselves ‘I’—the most elementary affirmation of identity. It is likewise weaker among primitive than among civilized men; indeed, the aborigine who has only recently been exposed to the dynamic of Western civilization often seems very uncertain of his identity. Living in the gratifications and frustrations of the moment, he seems but dimly aware that as an individual he must go on to face the hazards of tomorrow. This lag, it need hardly be said, partly accounts for the common belief that these people are lazy or that they are liars—a reproach that presupposes in the accused the very sense of identity they lack. The qualities found in extreme form among oppressed peoples, such as the Negroes, are also manifested, as a tendency, in persons of oppressed social classes that lack the economic fundaments of inherited property. Thus, stunted individuality is found also among the poor white population of the American South. If these submerged people were not conditioned to imitation of their superiors, blatant advertising or educational appeals exhorting them to cultivation of personality would inevitably seem to them condescending, not to say hypocritical—an effort to lull them into a state of delusional contentment.

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Individuality presupposes the voluntary sacrifice of immediate satisfaction for the sake of security, material and spiritual maintenance of one’s own existence. When the roads to such a life are blocked, one has little incentive to deny oneself momentary pleasures. Hence, individuality among the masses is far less integrated and enduring than among the so-called elite. On the other hand, the elite have always been more preoccupied with the strategies of gaining and holding power. Social power is today more than ever mediated by power over things. The more intense an individual’s concern with power over things, the more will things dominate him, the more will he lack any genuine individual traits, and the more will his mind be transformed into an automaton of formalized reason.

In the era of free enterprise, the so-called era of individualism, individuality was most completely subordinated to self-preserving reason. In that era, the idea of individuality seemed to shake itself loose from metaphysical trappings and to become merely a synthesis of the individual’s material interests. That it was not thereby saved from being used as a pawn by ideologists needs no proof. Individualism is the very heart of the theory and practice of bourgeois liberalism, which sees society as progressing through the automatic interaction of divergent interests in a free market. The individual could maintain himself as a social being only by pursuing his own long-term interests at the expense of ephemeral immediate gratifications. The qualities of individuality forged by the ascetic discipline of Christianity were thereby reinforced. The bourgeois individual did not necessarily see himself as opposed to the collectivity, but believed or was prevailed upon to believe himself to be a member of a society that could achieve the highest degree of harmony only through the unrestricted competition of individual interests.

Liberalism may be said to have considered itself the sponsor of a utopia that had come true, needing little more than the smoothing out of a few troublesome wrinkles. These wrinkles were not to be blamed on the liberalistic principle, but on the regrettable nonliberalistic obstacles that impeded its complete fruition. The principle of liberalism has led to conformity through the leveling principle of commerce and exchange which held liberalistic society together. The monad, a seventeenth-century symbol of the atomistic economic individual of bourgeois society, became a social type. All the monads, isolated though they were by moats of self-interest, nevertheless tended to become more and more alike through the pursuit of this very self-interest. In our era of large economic combines and mass culture, the principle of conformity emancipates itself from its individualistic veil, is openly proclaimed, and raised to the rank of an ideal per se.

Liberalism at its dawn was characterized by the existence of a multitude of independent entrepreneurs, who took care of their own property and defended it against antagonistic social forces. The movements of the market and the general trend of production were rooted in the economic requirements of their enterprises. Merchant and manufacturer alike had to be prepared for all economic and political eventualities. This need stimulated them to learn what they could from the past and to formulate plans for the future. They had to think for themselves, and although the much-vaunted independence of their thinking was to a certain extent nothing more than an illusion, it had enough objectivity to serve the interests of society in a given form and at a given period. The society of middle-class proprietors, particularly those who acted as middlemen in trade and certain types of manufacturers, had to encourage independent thinking, even though it might be at variance with their particular interests. The enterprise itself, which, it was assumed, would be handed down in the family, gave a businessman’s deliberations a horizon that extended far beyond his own life span. His individuality was that of a provider, proud of himself and his kind, convinced that community and state rested upon himself and others like him, all profess edly animated by the incentive of material gain. His sense of adequacy to the challenges of an acquisitive world expressed itself in his strong yet sober ego, maintaining interests that transcended his immediate needs.

In this age of big business, the independent entrepreneur is no longer typical. The ordinary man finds it harder and harder to plan for his heirs or even for his own remote future. The contemporary individual may have more opportunities than his ancestors had, but his concrete
prospects have an increasingly shorter term. The future does not enter as precisely into his transactions. He simply feels that he will not be entirely lost if he preserves his skill and clings to his corporation, association, or union. Thus the individual subject of reason tends to become a shrunken ego, captive of an evanescent present, forgetting the use of the intellectual functions by which he was once able to transcend his actual position in reality. These functions are now taken over by the great economic and social forces of the era. The future of the individual depends less and less upon his own prudence and more and more upon the national and international struggles among the colossi of power. Individuality loses its economic basis.

There are still some forces of resistance left within man. It is evidence against social pessimism that despite the continuous assault of collective patterns, the spirit of humanity is still alive, if not in the individual as a member of social groups, at least in the individual as far as he is let alone. But the impact of the existing conditions upon the average man’s life is such that the submissive type mentioned earlier has become overwhelmingly predominant. From the day of his birth, the individual is made to feel that there is only one way of getting along in this world—that of giving up his hope of ultimate self-realization. This he can achieve solely by imitation. He continuously responds to what he perceives about him, not only consciously but with his whole being, emulating the traits and attitudes represented by all the collectivities that enmesh him—his play group, his classmates, his athletic team, and all the other groups that, as has been pointed out, enforce a more strict conformity, a more radical surrender through complete assimilation, than any father or teacher in the nineteenth century could impose. By echoing, repeating, imitating his surroundings, by adapting himself to all the powerful groups to which he eventually belongs, by transforming himself from a human being into a member of organizations, by sacrificing his potentialities for the sake of readiness and ability to conform to and gain influence in such organizations, he manages to survive. It is survival achieved by the oldest biological means of survival, namely, mimicry.

Just as a child repeats the words of his mother, and the youngster the brutal manners of the elders at whose hands he suffers, so the giant loud-speaker of industrial culture, blaring through commercialized recreation and popular advertising—which become more and more indistinguishable from each other—endlessly reduplicates the surface of reality. All the ingenious devices of the amusement industry reproduce over and over again banal life scenes that are deceptive nevertheless, because the technical exactness of the reproduction veils the falsification of the ideological content or the arbitrariness of the introduction of such content. This reproduction has nothing in common with great realistic art, which portrays reality in order to judge it. Modern mass culture, although drawing freely upon stale cultural values, glorifies the world as it is. Motion pictures, the radio, popular biographies and novels have the same refrain: This is our grove, this is the rut of the great and the would-be great—this is reality as it is and should be and will be.

Even the words that could voice a hope for something besides the fruits of success have been pressed into this service. The idea of eternal bliss and everything relating to the absolute have been reduced to the function of religious edification, conceived as a leisure-time activity; they have been made part of the Sunday-school vernacular. The idea of happiness has similarly been reduced to a banality to coincide with leading the kind of normal life that serious religious thought has often criticized. The very idea of truth has been reduced to the purpose of a useful tool in the control of nature, and the realization of the infinite potentialities inherent in man has been relegated to the status of a luxury. Thought that does not serve the interests of any established group or is not pertinent to the business of any industry has no place, is considered vain or superfluous. Paradoxically, a society that, in the face of starvation in great areas of the world, allows a large part of its machinery to stand idle, that shelves many important inventions, and that devotes innumerable working hours to moronic advertising and to the production of instruments of destruction—a society in which these luxuries are inherent has made usefulness its gospel.

Because modern society is a totality, the decline of individuality affects the lower as well as the higher social groups, the worker no less
than the businessman. One of the most important attributes of individuality, that of spontaneous action, which began to decline in capitalism as a result of the partial elimination of competition, played an integral part in socialist theory. But today the spontaneity of the working class has been impaired by the general dissolution of individuality. Labor is increasingly divorced from critical theories as they were formulated by the great political and social thinkers of the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact not theory but its decline furthers surrender to the powers that be, whether they are represented by the controlling agencies of capital or those of labor. However, the masses, despite their pliability, have not capitulated completely to collectivization. Although, under the pressure of the pragmatic reality of today, man’s self-expression has become identical with his function in the prevailing system, although he desperately represses any other impulse within himself as well as in others, the rage that seizes him whenever he becomes aware of an un-integrated longing that does not fit into the existing pattern is a sign of his smoldering resentment. This resentment, if repression were abolished, would be turned against the whole social order, which has an intrinsic tendency to prevent its members from gaining insight into the mechanisms of their own repression. Throughout history, physical, organizational, and cultural pressures have always had their role in the integration of the individual into a just or unjust order; today, the labor organizations, in their very effort to improve the status of labor, are inevitably led to contribute to that pressure.

There is a crucial difference between the social units of the modern industrial era and those of earlier epochs. The units of the older societies were totalities, in the sense that they had grown into hierarchically organized entities. The life of the totemistic tribe, the clan, the church of the Middle Ages, the nation in the era of the bourgeois revolutions, followed ideological patterns shaped through historical developments. Such patterns—magical, religious, or philosophical—reflected current forms of social domination. They constituted a cultural cement even after their role in production had become obsolete; thus they also fostered the idea of a common truth. This they did by the very fact that they had become objectified. Any system of ideas, religious, artistic, or logical, so far as it is articulated in meaningful language, attains a general connotation and necessarily claims to be true in a universal sense. . .

The earlier totalities, which were supposed to conform to an abstract spiritual model, contained an element that is lacking in the purely pragmatic totalities of industrialism. The latter likewise have a hierarchical structure; but they are thoroughly and despotically integrated. For example, promotion of their functionaries to higher ranks is not based on qualifications related to any spiritual ideals. Almost exclusively it is a matter of their ability to manipulate people; here purely administrative and technical skills determine the selection of governing personnel. Such capacities were by no means lacking in the hierarchical leadership of former societies; but the dissolution of relation between leadership capacities and an objectivized framework of spiritual ideals is what gives the modern totalities their distinctive character. . .

Social theory—reactionary, democratic, or revolutionary—was the heir to the older systems of thought that were supposed to have set the patterns for past totalities. These older systems had vanished because the forms of solidarity postulated by them proved to be deceptive, and the ideologies related to them became hollow and apologetic. The latter-day critique of society for its part refrained from apologetics, and did not glorify its subject—not even Marx exalted the proletariat. He looked upon capitalism as the last form of social injustice; he did not condone the established ideas and superstitions of the dominated class whom his doctrine was supposed to guide. In contrast to the tendencies of mass culture, none of those doctrines undertook to ‘sell’ the people the way of life in which they are fixed and which they unconsciously abhor but overtly acclaim. Social theory offered a critical analysis of reality, including the workers’ own warped thoughts. Under the conditions of modern industrialism, however, even political theory is infected with the apologetic trend of the total culture. . .

As religious and moral ideologies fade, and political theory is abolished by the march of economic and political events, the ideas of the workers tend to be molded by the business
ideology of their leaders. The idea of an intrinsic conflict between the laboring masses of the world and the existence of social injustice is superseded by the concepts relating to the strategy of conflicts between the several power groups. It is true that workers of earlier days did not have any conceptual knowledge of the mechanisms unveiled by social theory, and their minds and bodies bore the marks of oppression; yet their misery was still the misery of individual human beings, and therefore linked them with any miserable people in any country and in any sector of society. Their undeveloped minds were not continually being prodded by the techniques of mass culture that hammer the industrialistic behavior patterns into their eyes and ears and muscles during their leisure time as well as during working hours. Workers today, no less than the rest of the population, are intellectually better trained, better informed, and much less naive. They know the details of national affairs and the chicanery of political movements, particularly of those that live by propaganda against corruption. The workers, at least those who have not gone through the hell of fascism, will join in any persecution of a capitalist or politician who has been singled out because he has violated the rules of the game; but they do not question the rules in themselves. They have learned to take social injustice—even inequity within their own group—as a powerful fact, and to take powerful facts as the only things to be respected. Their minds are closed to dreams of a basically different world and to concepts that, instead of being mere classification of facts, are oriented toward real fulfillment of those dreams.

Modern economic conditions make for a positivistic attitude in members as well as in leaders of labor unions, so that they resemble one another more and more. Such a trend, although constantly challenged by contrary tendencies, strengthens labor as a new force in social life.

It is not that inequality has decreased. To the old discrepancies between the social power of single members of different social groups, further differences have been added. While unions dealing in certain categories of labor have been able to raise their prices, the whole weight of oppressive social power is felt by other categories, organized or unorganized. There is, furthermore, the cleavage between members of unions and those who for any one of various reasons are excluded from unions, between the people of privileged nations and those who, in this contracting world, are dominated not only by their own traditional elite, but also by the ruling groups of the industrially more developed countries. The principle has not changed.

At the present time, labor and capital are equally concerned with holding and extending their control. The leaders in both groups contend to an increasing extent that theoretical critique of society has become superfluous as a result of the tremendous technological progress that promises to revolutionize the conditions of human existence. The technocrats maintain that superabundance of goods produced on superssembly lines will automatically eliminate all economic misery. Efficiency, productivity, and intelligent planning are proclaimed the gods of modern man; so-called 'unproductive' groups and 'predatory' capital are branded as the enemies of society.

It is true that the engineer, perhaps the symbol of this age, is not so exclusively bent on profitmaking as the industrialist or the merchant. Because his function is more directly connected with the requirements of the production job itself, his commands bear the mark of greater objectivity. His subordinates recognize that at least some of his orders are in the nature of things and therefore rational in a universal sense. But at bottom this rationality, too, pertains to domination, not reason. The engineer is not interested in understanding things for their own sake or for the sake of insight, but in accordance with their being fitted into a scheme, no matter how alien to their own inner structure; this holds for living beings as well as for inanimate things. The engineer’s mind is that of industrialism in its streamlined form. His purposeful rule would make men an agglomeration of instruments without a purpose of their own. . . .

It is not technology or the motive of self-preservation that in itself accounts for the decline of the individual; it is not production per se, but the forms in which it takes place—the interrelationships of human beings within the specific framework of industrialism. Human toil and research and invention is a response to the challenge of necessity. The pattern becomes absurd only when people make toil, research, and
invention into idols. Such an ideology tends to supplant the humanistic foundation of the very civilization it seeks to glorify. While the concepts of complete fulfillment and unrestrained enjoyment fostered a hope that unshackled the forces of progress, the idolization of progress leads to the opposite of progress. Arduous labor for a meaningful end may be enjoyed and even loved. A philosophy that makes labor an end in itself leads eventually to resentment of all labor. The decline of the individual must be charged not to the technical achievements of man or even to man himself—people are usually much better than what they think or say or do—but rather to the present structure and content of the ‘objective mind,’ the spirit that pervades social life in all its branches. The patterns of thought and action that people accept ready-made from the agencies of mass culture act in their turn to influence mass culture as though they were the ideas of the people themselves. The objective mind in our era worships industry, technology, and nationality without a principle that could give sense to these categories; it mirrors the pressure of an economic system that admits of no reprieve or escape.

As for the ideal of productivity, it must be observed that economic significance today is measured in terms of usefulness with respect to the structure of power, not with respect to the needs of all. The individual must prove his value to one or other of the groups engaged in the struggle for a greater share of control over the national and the international economy. Moreover, the quantity and quality of the goods or services he contributes to society is merely one of the factors determining his success. Nor is efficiency, the modern criterion and sole justification for the very existence of any individual, to be confused with real technical or managerial skill. It inheres in the ability to be ‘one of the boys,’ to hold one’s own, to impress others, to ‘sell’ oneself, to cultivate the right connections—talents that seem to be transmitted through the germ cells of so many persons today. The fallacy of technocratic thinking from St. Simon to Veblen and his followers has lain in underestimating the similarity of the traits that make for success in the various branches of production and business, and in confusing rational use of the means of production with the rational proclivities of certain of its agents.

If modern society tends to negate all the attributes of individuality, are its members not compensated, it may be asked, by the rationality of its organization? The technocrats often maintain that when their theories are put into practice, depressions will become a thing of the past and basic economic disproportions will disappear; the whole productive mechanism will work smoothly according to blueprints. Actually, modern society is not so far from having realized the technocratic dream. The needs of the consumers as well as of the producers, which under the liberal market system made themselves felt in distorted and irrational forms, in a process culminating in depressions, can now to a great extent be forecast and satisfied or negated in accordance with the policies of economic and political leaders. The expression of human needs is no longer distorted by the dubious economic indicators of the market; instead, these needs are determined by statistics, and all kinds of engineers—industrial, technical, political—struggle to keep them under control. But if this new rationality is in one way closer to the idea of reason than the market system, it is in another way farther from it.

Dealings between the members of different social groups under the older system were really determined not by the market but by the unequal distribution of economic power; yet the transformation of human relations into objective economic mechanisms gave the individual, at least in principle, a certain independence. When unsuccessful competitors went to the wall or backward groups were reduced to misery under the liberalistic economy, they could preserve a sense of human dignity even though they were economically cast down, because responsibility for their plight could be thrown upon anonymous economic processes. Today individuals or entire groups may still suffer ruin through blind economic forces; but these are represented by better organized, more powerful elites. Although the interrelations of these dominant groups are subject to vicissitudes, they understand each other well in many respects. When concentration and centralization of industrial forces extinguish political liberalism in its turn, the victims are doomed in their entirety. Under totalitarianism, when an individual or group is singled out by the elite for discrimination, it is...
not only deprived of the means of livelihood, but its very human essence is attacked. American society may take a different course. However, the dwindling away of individual thinking and resistance, as it is brought about by the economic and cultural mechanisms of modern industrialism, will render evolution toward the humane increasingly difficult.

By making the watchword of production a kind of religious creed, by professing technocratic ideas and branding as ‘unproductive’ such groups as do not have access to the big industrial bastions, industry causes itself and society to forget that production has become to an ever greater extent a means in the struggle for power. The policies of economic leaders, on which society in its present stage more and more directly depends, are dogged and particularistic, and therefore perhaps even blind with respect to the real needs of society than were the automatic trends that once determined the market. Irrationality still molds the fate of men. . . .

Every instrumentality of mass culture serves to reinforce the social pressures upon individuality, precluding all possibility that the individual will somehow preserve himself in the face of all the atomizing machinery of modern society. The accent on individual heroism and on the self-made man in popular biographies and pseudo-romantic novels and films does not invalidate this observation. These machine-made incentives to self-preservation actually accelerate the dissolution of individuality. Just as the slogans of rugged individualism are politically useful to large trusts in seeking exemption from social control, so in mass culture the rhetoric of individualism, by imposing patterns for collective imitation, disavows the very principle to which it gives lip service. . . .

The objection that the individual, despite everything, does not entirely disappear in the new impersonal institutions, that individualism is as rugged and rampant in modern society as ever before, seems to miss the point. The objection contains a grain of truth, namely, the consideration that man is still better than the world he lives in. Yet his life seems to follow a sequence that will fit any questionnaire he is asked to fill out. His intellectual existence is exhausted in the public opinion polls. Especially the so-called great individuals of today, the idols of the masses, are not genuine individuals, they are simply creatures of their own publicity, enlargements of their own photographs, functions of social processes. The consummate superman, against whom no one has warned more anxiously than Nietzsche himself, is a projection of the oppressed masses, King Kong rather than Caesar Borgia. The hypnotic spell that such counterfeit supermen as Hitler have exercised derives not so much from what they think or say or do as from their antics, which set a style of behavior for men who, stripped of their spontaneity by the industrial processing, need to be told how to make friends and influence people.

The tendencies described have already led to the greatest catastrophe in European history. Some of the causes were specifically European. Others are traceable to profound changes in man’s character under the influence of international trends. Nobody can predict with certainty that these destructive tendencies will be checked in the near future. However, there is increasing awareness that the unbearable pressure upon the individual is not inevitable. It is to be hoped that men will come to see that it springs not directly from the purely technical requirements of the production, but from the social structure. Indeed, the intensification of repression in many parts of the world in itself testifies to fear in face of the imminent possibility of change on the basis of the present development of productive forces. Industrial discipline, technological progress, and scientific enlightenment, the very economic and cultural processes that are bringing about the obliteration of individuality, promise—though the augury is faint enough at present—to usher in a new era in which individuality may remerge as an element in a less ideological and more humane form of existence.

Fascism used terroristic methods in the effort to reduce conscious human beings to social atoms, because it feared that ever-increasing disillusionment as regards all ideologies might pave the way for men to realize their own and society’s deepest potentialities; and indeed, in some cases, social pressure and political terror have tempered the profoundly human resistance to irrationality—a resistance that is always the core of true individuality.
The real individuals of our time are the martyrs who have gone through infernos of suffering and degradation in their resistance to conquest and oppression, not the inflated personalities of popular culture, the conventional dignitaries. These unsung heroes consciously exposed their existence as individuals to the terroristic annihilation that others undergo unconsciously through the social process. The anonymous martyrs of the concentration camps are the symbols of the humanity that is striving to be born. The task of philosophy is to translate what they have done into language that will be heard, even though their finite voices have been silenced by tyranny.

Introduction to Theodor Adorno’s
“The Culture Industry Reconsidered”

In this selection, Adorno discusses how the culture industry has furthered the collapse of reason. Equating culture with the “high arts,” Adorno describes culture as a form of protest “against the petrified relations” (1991:100) under which individuals live. The purpose of culture is to render the impossible possible, to offer alternatives to existing social conditions. To the extent that culture (art) is free from the profit-motive, it is able to develop according to its own internal logic and thus voice essential social critiques.

In advanced societies, however, culture has become synonymous with industry and hence subject to the rule of efficient production and standardization that is its hallmark. The relationship between mass culture and the individual is one akin to that of seller and buyer. However, “the customer is not king, as the culture industry would like to have us believe, not its subject but its object” (ibid.:99). Individuals, themselves objects of production, are left to consume mass-produced, prepackaged ideas that instill an uncritical consensus that strengthens established authority. Hit songs and movies are not the making of popular tastes but of marketing campaigns that predetermine what will be heard and seen while excluding potentially “disruptive” alternatives. Because culture is now a product of the machine and not the imagination, it is incapable of negating the oppressive conformity by the culture industry. Nor can mass culture critique prevailing patterns of social relations, for they, too, are a reflection of machine production. Culture no longer prods—it pacifies:

The categorical imperative of the culture industry no longer has anything in common with freedom. It proclaims: You shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence. The power of the culture industry is that conformity has replaced consciousness. The order that springs from it is never confronted with what it claims to be or with the real interests of human beings. (ibid.:104)

While the culture industry claims to be a producer of choice, freedom, and individual identity, it instead provides its customers with a totalitarian, conformist social landscape. It thus “cheats its consumers out of the same happiness which it deceitfully projects” (ibid.:106). So while we are repeatedly instructed to “Just Do It,” what “it” is is never truthfully revealed: BUY.
The term culture industry was perhaps used for the first time in the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Horkheimer and I published in Amsterdam in 1947. In our drafts we spoke of ‘mass culture.’ We replaced that expression with ‘culture industry’ in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme. The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. The individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap. This is made possible by contemporary technical capabilities as well as by economic and administrative concentration. The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total. Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object. The very word mass-media, specially honed for the culture industry, already shifts the accent onto harmless terrain. Neither is it a question of primary concern for the masses, nor of the techniques of communication as such, but of the spirit which sufflates them, their master’s voice. The culture industry misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable. How this mentality might be changed is excluded throughout. The masses are not the measure but the ideology of the culture industry, even though the culture industry itself could scarcely exist without adapting to the masses.

The cultural commodities of the industry are governed, as Brecht and Suhrkamp expressed it thirty years ago, by the principle of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation. The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms. Ever since these cultural forms first began to earn a living for their creators as commodities in the market-place they had already possessed something of this quality. But then they sought after profit only indirectly, over and above their autonomous essence. New on the part of the culture industry is the direct and undisguised primacy of a precisely and thoroughly calculated efficacy in its most typical products. The autonomy of works of art, which of course rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, and was always permeated by a constellation of effects, is tendentially eliminated by the culture industry, with or without the conscious will of those in control. The latter include both those who carry out directives as well as those who hold the power. In economic terms they are or were in search of new opportunities for the realization of capital in the most economically developed countries. The old opportunities became increasingly more precarious as a result of the

same concentration process which alone makes the culture industry possible as an omni-present phenomenon. Culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honouring them. In so far as culture becomes wholly assimilated to and integrated in those petrified relations, human beings are once more debased. Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer also commodities, they are commodities through and through. This quantitative shift is so great that it calls forth entirely new phenomena. Ultimately, the culture industry no longer even needs to directly pursue everywhere the profit interests from which it originated. These interests have become objectified in its ideology and have even made themselves independent of the compulsion to sell the cultural commodities which must be swallowed anyway. The culture industry turns into public relations, the manufacturing of 'goodwill' per se, without regard for particular firms or saleable objects. Brought to bear is a general uncritical consensus, advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement.

Nevertheless, those characteristics which originally stamped the transformation of literature into a commodity are maintained in this process. More than anything in the world, the culture industry has its ontology, a scaffolding of rigidly conservative basic categories which can be gleaned, for example, from the commercial English novels of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. What parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little as the profit motive itself since the time it first gained its predominance over culture.

Thus, the expression 'industry' is not to be taken too literally. It refers to the standardization of the thing itself—such as that of the Western, familiar to every movie-goer—and to the rationalization of distribution techniques, but not strictly to the production process. Although in film, the central sector of the culture industry, the production process resembles technical modes of operation in the extensive division of labour, the employment of machines and the separation of the labourers from the means of production—expressed in the perennial conflict between artists active in the culture industry and those who control it—individual forms of production are nevertheless maintained. Each product affects an individual air; individuality itself serves to reinforce ideology, in so far as the illusion is conjured up that the completely reified and mediated is a sanctuary from immediacy and life. Now, as ever, the culture industry exists in the 'service' of third persons, maintaining its affinity to the declining circulation process of capital, to the commerce from which it came into being. Its ideology above all makes use of the star system, borrowed from individualistic art and its commercial exploitation. The more dehumanized its methods of operation and content, the more diligently and successfully the culture industry propagates supposedly great personalities and operates with heart-throbs. It is industrial more in a sociological sense, in the incorporation of industrial forms of organization even when nothing is manufactured—as in the rationalization of office work—rather than in the sense of anything really and actually produced by technological rationality. Accordingly, the misinvestments of the culture industry are considerable, throwing those branches rendered obsolete by new techniques into crises, which seldom lead to changes for the better.

The concept of technique in the culture industry is only in name identical with technique in works of art. In the latter, technique is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic. In contrast, the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore always remains external to its object. The culture industry finds ideological support precisely in so far as it carefully shields itself from the full potential of the techniques contained in its products. It lives parasitically from the extra-artistic technique of the material production of goods, without regard for the obligation to the internal artistic whole implied by its functionality (Sachlichkeit), but also without concern for the
laws of form demanded by aesthetic autonomy. The result for the physiognomy of the culture industry is essentially a mixture of streamlining, photographic hardness and precision on the one hand, and individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism on the other. Adopting Benjamin’s designation of the traditional work of art by the concept of aura, the presence of that which is not present, the culture industry is defined by the fact that it does not strictly counterpose another principle to that of aura, but rather by the fact that it conserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist. By this means the culture industry betrays its own ideological abuses.

It has recently become customary among cultural officials as well as sociologists to warn against underestimating the culture industry while pointing to its great importance for the development of the consciousness of its consumers. It is to be taken seriously, without cultured snobbism. In actuality the culture industry is important as a moment of the spirit which dominates today. Whoever ignores its influence out of scepticism for what it stuffs into people would be naive. Yet there is a deceptive glitter about the admonition to take it seriously. Because of its social role, disturbing questions about its quality, about truth or untruth, and about the aesthetic niveau of the culture industry’s emissions are repressed, or at least excluded from the so-called sociology of communications. The critic is accused of taking refuge in arrogant esoterica. It would be advisable first to indicate the double meaning of importance that slowly worms its way in unnoticed. Even if it touches the lives of innumerable people, the function of something is no guarantee of its particular quality. The blending of aesthetics with its residual communicative aspects leads art, as a social phenomenon, not to its rightful position in opposition to alleged artistic snobbism, but rather in a variety of ways to the defence of its baneful social consequences.

The importance of the culture industry in the spiritual constitution of the masses is no dispensation for reflection on its objective legitimation, its essential being, least of all by a science which thinks itself pragmatic. On the contrary: such reflection becomes necessary precisely for this reason. To take the culture industry as seriously as its unquestioned role demands, means to take it seriously critically, and not to cower in the face of its monopolistic character.

Among those intellectuals anxious to reconcile themselves with the phenomenon and eager to find a common formula to express both their reservations against it and their respect for its power, a tone of ironic toleration prevails unless they have already created a new mythos of the twentieth century from the imposed regression. After all, those intellectuals maintain, everyone knows what pocket novels, films off the rack, family television shows rolled out into serials and hit parades, advice to the lovelorn and horoscope columns are all about. All of this, however, is harmless and, according to them, even democratic since it responds to a demand, albeit a stimulated one. It also bestows all kinds of blessings, they point out, for example, through the dissemination of information, advice and stress reducing patterns of behaviour. Of course, as every sociological study measuring something as elementary as how politically informed the public is has proven, the information is meagre or indifferent. Moreover, the advice to be gained from manifestations of the culture industry is vacuous, banal or worse, and the behaviour patterns are shamelessly conformist.

The two-faced irony in the relationship of servile intellectuals to the culture industry is not restricted to them alone. It may also be supposed that the consciousness of the consumers themselves is split between the prescribed fun which is supplied to them by the culture industry and a not particularly well-hidden doubt about its blessings. The phrase, the world wants to be deceived, has become truer than had ever been intended. People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them. They force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured. Without admitting it they sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer cling to satisfactions which are none at all.
The most ambitious defence of the culture industry today celebrates its spirit, which might be safely called ideology, as an ordering factor. In a supposedly chaotic world it provides human beings with something like standards for orientation, and that alone seems worthy of approval. However, what its defenders imagine is preserved by the culture industry is in fact all the more thoroughly destroyed by it. The colour film demolishes the genial old tavern to a greater extent than bombs ever could: the film exterminates its imago. No homeland can survive being processed by the films which celebrate it, and which thereby turn the unique character on which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness.

That which legitimately could be called culture attempted, as an expression of suffering and contradiction, to maintain a grasp on the idea of the good life. Culture cannot represent either that which merely exists or the conventional and no longer binding categories of order which the culture industry drapes over the idea of the good life as if existing reality were the good life, and as if those categories were its true measure. If the response of the culture industry’s representatives is that it does not deliver art at all, this is itself the ideology with which they evade responsibility for that from which the business lives. No misdeed is ever righted by explaining it as such.

The appeal to order alone, without concrete specificity, is futile; the appeal to the dissemination of norms, without these ever proving themselves in reality or before consciousness, is equally futile. The idea of an objectively binding order, huckstered to people because it is so lacking for them, has no claims if it does not prove itself internally and in confrontation with human beings. But this is precisely what no product of the culture industry would engage in. The concepts of order which it hammers into human beings are always those of the status quo. They remain unquestioned, unanalysed and undialectically presupposed, even if they no longer have any substance for those who accept them. In contrast to the Kantian, the categorical imperative of the culture industry no longer has anything in common with freedom. It proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence. The power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness. The order that springs from it is never confronted with what it claims to be or with the real interests of human beings. Order, however, is not good in itself. It would be so only as a good order. The fact that the culture industry is oblivious to this and extols order in abstracto, bears witness to the impotence and untruth of the messages it conveys. While it claims to lead the perplexed, it deludes them with false conflicts which they are to exchange for their own. It solves conflicts for them only in appearance, in a way that they can hardly be solved in their real lives. In the products of the culture industry human beings get into trouble only so that they can be rescued unharmed, usually by representatives of a benevolent collective; and then in empty harmony, they are reconciled with the general, whose demands they had experienced at the outset as irreconcilable with their interests. For this purpose the culture industry has developed formulas which even reach into such non-conceptual areas as light musical entertainment. Here too one gets into a ‘jam,’ into rhythmic problems, which can be instantly disentangled by the triumph of the basic beat.

Even its defenders, however, would hardly contradict Plato openly who maintained that what is objectively and intrinsically untrue cannot also be subjectively good and true for human beings. The concoctions of the culture industry are neither guides for a blissful life, nor a new art of moral responsibility, but rather exhortations to toe the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests. The consensus which it propagates strengthens blind, opaque authority. If the culture industry is measured not by its own substance and logic, but by its efficacy, by its position in reality and its explicit pretensions; if the focus of serious concern is with the efficacy to which it always appeals, the potential of its effect becomes twice as weighty. This potential, however, lies in the promotion and exploitation of the ego-weakness...
to which the powerless members of contemporary society, with its concentration of power, are condemned. Their consciousness is further developed retrogressively. It is no coincidence that cynical American film producers are heard to say that their pictures must take into consideration the level of eleven-year-olds. In doing so they would very much like to make adults into eleven-year-olds.

It is true that thorough research has not, for the time being, produced an airtight case proving the regressive effects of particular products of the culture industry. No doubt an imaginatively designed experiment could achieve this more successfully than the powerful financial interests concerned would find comfortable. In any case, it can be assumed without hesitation that steady drops hollow the stone, especially since the system of the culture industry that surrounds the masses tolerates hardly any deviation and incessantly drills the same formulas on behaviour. Only their deep unconscious mistrust, the last residue of the difference between art and empirical reality in the spiritual make-up of the masses explains why they have not, to a person, long since perceived and accepted the world as it is constructed for them by the culture industry. Even if its messages were as harmless as they are made out to be—on countless occasions they are obviously not harmless, like the movies which chime in with currently popular hate campaigns against intellectuals by portraying them with the usual stereotypes—the attitudes which the culture industry calls forth are anything but harmless. If an astrologer urges his readers to drive carefully on a particular day, that certainly hurts no one; they will, however, be harmed indeed by the stupefication which lies in the claim that advice which is valid every day and which is therefore idiotic, needs the approval of the stars.

Human dependence and servitude, the vanishing point of the culture industry, could scarcely be more faithfully described than by the American interviewee who was of the opinion that the dilemmas of the contemporary epoch would end if people would simply follow the lead of prominent personalities. In so far as the culture industry arouses a feeling of well-being that the world is precisely in that order suggested by the culture industry, the substitute gratification which it prepares for human beings cheats them out of the same happiness which it deceitfully projects. The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which, as Horkheimer and I have noted, enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. These, however, would be the precondition for a democratic society which needs adults who have come of age in order to sustain itself and develop. If the masses have been unjustly reviled from above as masses, the culture industry is not among the least responsible for making them into masses and then despising them, while obstructing the emancipation for which human beings are as ripe as the productive forces of the epoch permit.

Introduction to Herbert Marcuse’s
One-Dimensional Man

Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man was one of the most widely read and influential books among advocates for social change during the 1960s. Although his message to the New Left was written more than forty years ago, Marcuse’s insights ring just as powerfully today.
As we outlined previously, Marcuse describes contemporary, advanced societies—whether capitalist, communist, or socialist—as totalitarian social orders. For “totalitarian” does not refer only to a particular type of government. It “is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a nonterroristic economic-political coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole” (1964:3). Totalitarian societies are thus characterized by coordinated systems of domination that render all protest obsolete. Instead of being based on fear of external coercion or force, however, the methods of domination in advanced societies are based more on the manipulation of consciousness.

With the development of the industrial capacity to free individuals from want, the working class, the source of revolutionary change under Marxist theory, has been assimilated into the prevailing social order. Under the domination of technological rationality and the benefits it offers, “the intellectual and emotional refusal ‘to go along’ appears neurotic and impotent” (ibid.:9). For why would anyone contest the satisfactions that the apparatus delivers through the progress of science and technology? The claim that the working class is alienated now becomes questionable as its members identify with, and literally buy into, the very system that is the source of their oppression. Once adversaries who harbored conflicting interests, capitalists and workers are united in their unquestioned, welcomed perpetuation of the status quo.

At the root of this social union lies the fabrication of new “needs” that maintain the existing way of life. Such needs do not spring from the consciousness of the individual; instead, they are a product of technological advances. (Do you really “need” a Blackberry or five-disc CD changer?) While the satisfaction of these false needs is advertised to be a path for happiness, they further the repression of true needs. Technology, then, is not neutral; rather it is a means for preserving domination. Indeed, its effectiveness as a dominating force resides in the fact that it appears to be neutral while it actually enslaves individuality. The creation of needs and the products dispensed to meet them serve to “indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life—much better than before—and as a good way of life it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe” (ibid.:12; emphasis in original).

This one-dimensional society intensifies repressive or institutionalized desublimation in which all opposition, whether political, cultural, or instinctual, is absorbed and thus defused by the very apparatus that it intended to oppose. With the range of alternative ideas and actions reduced to one, the indoctrination of the “Happy Consciousness” leaves individuals unable to grasp the essential unfreedom that characterizes advanced industrial society. Satisfied with the offerings and “liberties” of the established order, their loss of conscience leads to acceptance of the status quo and rampant conformity. As Marcuse argues:

Under the rule of a repressive whole, liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination. The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual. . . . Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear. (ibid.:7, 8)
A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress. Indeed, what could be more rational than the suppression of individuality in the mechanization of socially necessary but painful performances; the concentration of individual enterprises in more effective, more productive corporations; the regulation of free competition among unequally equipped economic subjects; the curtailment of prerogatives and national sovereignties which impede the international organization of resources. That this technological order also involves a political and intellectual coordination may be a regrettable and yet promising development.

The rights and liberties which were such vital factors in the origins and earlier stages of industrial society yield to a higher stage of this society: they are losing their traditional rationale and content. Freedom of thought, speech, and conscience were—just as free enterprise, which they served to promote and protect—essentially critical ideas, designed to replace an obsolescent material and intellectual culture by a more productive and rational one. Once institutionalized, these rights and liberties shared the fate of the society of which they had become an integral part. The achievement cancels the premises.

To the degree to which freedom from want, the concrete substance of all freedom, is becoming a real possibility, the liberties which pertain to a state of lower productivity are losing their former content. Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way in which it is organized. Such a society may justly demand acceptance of its principles and institutions, and reduce the opposition to the discussion and promotion of alternative policies within the status quo. In this respect, it seems to make little difference whether the increasing satisfaction of needs is accomplished by an authoritarian or a non-authoritarian system. Under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole. Indeed, at least in so far as the necessities of life are involved, there seems to be no reason why the production and distribution of goods and services should proceed through the competitive concurrence of individual liberties.

Freedom of enterprise was from the beginning not altogether a blessing. As the liberty to work or to starve, it spelled toil, insecurity, and fear for the vast majority of the population. If the individual were no longer compelled to prove himself on the market, as a free economic subject, the disappearance of this kind of freedom would be one of the greatest achievements of civilization. The technological processes of mechanization and standardization might release individual energy into a yet uncharted realm of freedom beyond necessity. The very structure of human existence would be altered; the individual would be liberated from the work world’s imposing upon him alien needs and alien possibilities. The individual would be free to exert autonomy over a life that would be his own. If the productive apparatus could be organized and directed toward the satisfaction of the vital needs, its control might well be centralized; such control would not prevent individual autonomy, but render it possible.

This is a goal within the capabilities of advanced industrial civilization, the “end” of technological rationality. In actual fact, however, the contrary trend operates: the apparatus imposes its economic and political requirements for defense and expansion on labor time and free time, on the material and intellectual culture. By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For “totalitarian” is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole. Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a “pluralism” of parties, newspapers, “countervailing powers,” etc.

Today political power asserts itself through its power over the machine process and over the technical organization of the apparatus. The government of advanced and advancing industrial societies can maintain and secure itself only when it succeeds in mobilizing, organizing, and exploiting the technical, scientific, and mechanical productivity available to industrial civilization. And this productivity mobilizes society as a whole, above and beyond any particular individual or group interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole. Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a “pluralism” of parties, newspapers, “countervailing powers,” etc.

The intensity, the satisfaction and even the character of human needs, beyond the biological level, have always been preconditioned. Whether or not the possibility of doing or leaving, enjoying or destroying, possessing or rejecting something is seized as a need depends on whether or not it can be seen as desirable and necessary for the prevailing societal institutions and interests. In this sense, human needs are historical needs and, to the extent to which the society demands the repressive development of the individual, his needs themselves and their claim for satisfaction are subject to overriding critical standards.

We may distinguish both true and false needs. “False” are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. Their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability (his own and others) to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease. The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what realization are needed, corresponding to the new capabilities of society.

Such new modes can be indicated only in negative terms because they would amount to the negation of the prevailing modes. Thus economic freedom would mean freedom from the economy—from being controlled by economic forces and relationships; freedom from the daily struggle for existence, from earning a living. Political freedom would mean liberation of the individuals from politics over which they have no effective control. Similarly, intellectual freedom would mean the restoration of individual thought now absorbed by mass communication and indoctrination, abolition of “public opinion” together with its makers. The unrealistic sound of these propositions is indicative, not of their utopian character, but of the strength of the forces which prevent their realization. The most effective and enduring form of warfare against liberation is the implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of the struggle for existence.

The aesthetic, the satisfaction and even the character of human needs, beyond the biological level, have always been preconditioned. Whether or not the possibility of doing or leaving, enjoying or destroying, possessing or rejecting something is seized as a need depends on whether or not it can be seen as desirable and necessary for the prevailing societal institutions and interests. In this sense, human needs are historical needs and, to the extent to which the society demands the repressive development of the individual, his needs themselves and their claim for satisfaction are subject to overriding critical standards.

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others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.

Such needs have a societal content and function which are determined by external powers over which the individual has no control; the development and satisfaction of these needs is heteronomous. No matter how much such needs may have become the individual’s own, reproduced and fortified by the conditions of his existence; no matter how much he identifies himself with them and finds himself in their satisfaction, they continue to be what they were from the beginning—products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression.

The prevalence of repressive needs is an accomplished fact, accepted in ignorance and defeat, but a fact that must be undone in the interest of the happy individual as well as all those whose misery is the price of his satisfaction. The only needs that have an unqualified claim for satisfaction are the vital ones—nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture. The satisfaction of these needs is the prerequisite for the realization of all needs, of the unsublimated as well as the sublimated ones. For any consciousness and conscience, for any experience which does not accept the prevailing societal interest as the supreme law of thought and behavior, the established universe of needs and satisfactions is a fact to be questioned—questioned in terms of truth and falsehood. These terms are historical throughout, and their objectivity is historical. The judgment of needs and their satisfaction, under the given conditions, involves standards of priority—standards which refer to the optimal development of the individual, of all individuals, under the optimal utilization of the material and intellectual resources available to man. The resources are calculable. “Truth” and “falsehood” of needs designate objective conditions to the extent to which the universal satisfaction of vital needs and, beyond it, the progressive alleviation of toil and poverty, are universally valid standards. But as historical standards, they do not only vary according to area and stage of development, they also can be defined only in (greater or lesser) contradiction to the prevailing ones. What tribunal can possibly claim the authority of decision?

In the last analysis, the question of what are true and false needs must be answered by the individuals themselves, but only in the last analysis; that is, if and when they are free to give their own answer. As long as they are kept incapable of being autonomous, as long as they are indoctrinated and manipulated (down to their very instincts), their answer to this question cannot be taken as their own. By the same token, however, no tribunal can justly arrogate to itself the right to decide which needs should be developed and satisfied. Any such tribunal is reprehensible, although our revulsion does not do away with the question: how can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?

The more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more un imaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation. To be sure, to impose Reason upon an entire society is a paradoxical and scandalous idea—although one might dispute the righteousness of a society which ridicules this idea while making its own population into objects of total administration. All liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude, and the emergence of this consciousness is always hampered by the predominance of needs and satisfactions which, to a great extent, have become the individual’s own. The process always replaces one system of preconditioning by another; the optimal goal is the replacement of false needs by true ones, the abandonment of repressive satisfaction.

The distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation—liberation also from that which is tolerable and rewarding and comfortable—while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society. Here, the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity; the need for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefication; the need for maintaining such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets.

Under the rule of a repressive whole, liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of
domination. The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual. The criterion for free choice can never be an absolute one, but neither is it entirely relative. Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation. And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls.

Our insistence on the depth and efficacy of these controls is open to the objection that we overrate greatly the indoctrinating power of the “media,” and that by themselves the people would feel and satisfy the needs which are now imposed upon them. The objection misses the point. The preconditioning does not start with the mass production of radio and television and with the centralization of their control. The people enter this stage as preconditioned receptacles of long standing; the decisive difference is in the flattening out of the contrast (or conflict) between the given and the possible, between the satisfied and the unsatisfied needs. Here, the so-called equalization of class distinctions reveals its ideological function. If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer, if the Negro owns a Cadillac, if they all read the same newspaper, then this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population.

Indeed, in the most highly developed areas of contemporary society, the transplantation of social into individual needs is so effective that the difference between them seems to be purely theoretical. Can one really distinguish between the mass media as instruments of information and entertainment, and as agents of manipulation and indoctrination? Between the automobile as nuisance and as convenience? Between the horrors and the comforts of functional architecture? Between the work for national defense and the work for corporate gain? Between the private pleasure and the commercial and political utility involved in increasing the birth rate?

We are again confronted with one of the most vexing aspects of advanced industrial civilization: the rational character of its irrationality. Its productivity and efficiency, its capacity to increase and spread comforts, to turn waste into need, and destruction into construction, the extent to which this civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man’s mind and body makes the very notion of alienation questionable. The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.

The prevailing forms of social control are technological in a new sense. To be sure, the technical structure and efficacy of the productive and destructive apparatus has been a major instrumentality for subjecting the population to the established social division of labor throughout the modern period. Moreover, such integration has always been accompanied by more obvious forms of compulsion: loss of livelihood, the administration of justice, the police, the armed forces. It still is. But in the contemporary period, the technological controls appear to be the very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests—to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible.

No wonder then that, in the most advanced areas of this civilization, the social controls have been introjected to the point where even individual protest is affected at its roots. The intellectual and emotional refusal “to go along” appears neurotic and impotent. This is the sociopsychological aspect of the political event that marks the contemporary period: the passing of the historical forces which, at the preceding stage of industrial society, seemed to represent the possibility of new forms of existence.

But the term “introjection” perhaps no longer describes the way in which the individual by himself reproduces and perpetuates the external controls exercised by this society. Introjection suggests a variety of relatively spontaneous
processes by which a Self (Ego) transposes the “outer” into the “inner.” Thus introjection implies the existence of an inner dimension distinguished from and even antagonistic to the external exigencies—an individual consciousness and an individual unconscious apart from public opinion and behavior. The idea of “inner freedom” here has its reality: it designates the private space in which man may become and remain “himself.”

Today this private space has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality. Mass production and mass distribution claim the entire individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the factory. The manifold processes of introjection seem to be ossified in almost mechanical reactions. The result is, not adjustment but mimesis: an immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with the society as a whole.

This immediate, automatic identification (which may have been characteristic of primitive forms of association) reappears in high industrial civilization; its new “immediacy,” however, is the product of a sophisticated, scientific management and organization. In this process, the “inner” dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down. The loss of this dimension, in which the power of negative thinking—the critical power of Reason—is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition. The impact of progress turns Reason into submission to the facts of life, and to the dynamic capability of producing more and bigger facts of the same sort of life. The efficiency of the system blunts the individuals’ recognition that it contains no facts which do not communicate the repressive power of the whole. If the individuals find themselves in the things which shape their life, they do so, not by giving, but by accepting the law of things—not the law of physics but the law of their society.

I have just suggested that the concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction. This identification is not illusion but reality. However, the reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation. The latter has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification; before their tribunal, the “false consciousness” of their rationality becomes the true consciousness.

This absorption of ideology into reality does not, however, signify the “end of ideology.” On the contrary, in a specific sense advanced industrial culture is more ideological than its predecessor, inasmuch as today the ideology is in the process of production itself. In a provocative form, this proposition reveals the political aspects of the prevailing technological rationality. The productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces “sell” or impose the social system as a whole. The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life—much better than before—and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension. . . .

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The change in the function of the family here plays a decisive role: its “socializing” functions are increasingly taken over by outside groups and media.
One-dimensional thought is systematically promoted by the makers of politics and their purveyors of mass information. Their universe of discourse is populated by self-validating hypotheses which, incessantly and monopolistically repeated, become hypnotic definitions or dictations. For example, “free” are the institutions which operate (and are operated on) in the countries of the Free World; other transcending modes of freedom are by definition either anarchism, communism, or propaganda. “Socialistic” are all encroachments on private enterprises not undertaken by private enterprise itself (or by government contracts), such as universal and comprehensive health insurance, or the protection of nature from all too sweeping commercialization, or the establishment of public services which may hurt private profit. This totalitarian logic of accomplished facts has its Eastern counterpart. There, freedom is the way of life instituted by a communist regime, and all other transcending modes of freedom are either capitalistic, or revisionist, or leftist sectarianism. In both camps, non-operational ideas are non-behavioral and subversive. The movement of thought is stopped at barriers which appear as the limits of Reason itself.

Such limitation of thought is certainly not new. Ascending modern rationalism, in its speculative as well as empirical form, shows a striking contrast between extreme critical radicalism in scientific and philosophic method on the one hand, and an uncritical quietism in the attitude toward established and functioning social institutions. Thus Descartes’ ego cogitans was to leave the “great public bodies” untouched, and Hobbes held that “the present ought always to be preferred, maintained, and accounted best.” Kant agreed with Locke in justifying revolution if and when it has succeeded in organizing the whole and in preventing subversion.

However, these accommodating concepts of Reason were always contradicted by the evident misery and injustice of the “great public bodies” and the effective, more or less conscious rebellion against them. Societal conditions existed which provoked and permitted real dissociation from the established state of affairs; a private as well as political dimension was present in which dissociation could develop into effective opposition, testing its strength and the validity of its objectives.

With the gradual closing of this dimension by the society, the self-limitation of thought assumes a larger significance. The interrelation between scientific-philosophical and societal processes, between theoretical and practical Reason, asserts itself “behind the back” of the scientists and philosophers. The society bars a whole type of oppositional operations and behavior; consequently, the concepts pertaining to them are rendered illusory or meaningless. Historical transcendence appears as metaphysical transcendence, not acceptable to science and scientific thought. The operational and behavioral point of view, practiced as a “habit of thought” at large, becomes the view of the established universe of discourse and action, needs and aspirations. The “cunning of Reason” works, as it so often did, in the interest of the powers that be. The insistence on operational and behavioral concepts turns against the efforts to free thought and behavior from the given reality and for the suppressed alternatives. Theoretical and practical Reason, academic and social behaviorism meet on common ground: that of an advanced society which makes scientific and technical progress into an instrument of domination.

“Progress” is not a neutral term; it moves toward specific ends, and these ends are defined by the possibilities of ameliorating the human condition. Advanced industrial society is approaching the stage where continued progress would demand the radical subversion of the prevailing direction and organization of progress. This stage would be reached when material production (including the necessary services) becomes automated to the extent that all vital needs can be satisfied while necessary labor time is reduced to marginal time. From this point on, technical progress would transcend the realm of necessity, where it served as the instrument of domination and exploitation which thereby limited its rationality; technology would become subject to the free play of faculties in the struggle for the pacification of nature and of society.

Such a state is envisioned in Marx’s notion of the “abolition of labor.” The term “pacification of existence” seems better suited to designate the historical alternative of a world which—through an international conflict which transforms and suspends the contradictions within the established societies—advances on the brink of a global war. “Pacification of existence” means the
development of man’s struggle with man and with nature, under conditions where the competing needs, desires, and aspirations are no longer organized by vested interests in domination and scarcity—an organization which perpetuates the destructive forms of this struggle.

Today’s fight against this historical alternative finds a firm mass basis in the underlying population, and finds its ideology in the rigid orientation of thought and behavior to the given universe of facts. Validated by the accomplishments of science and technology, justified by its growing productivity, the status quo defies all transcendence. Faced with the possibility of pacification on the grounds of its technical and intellectual achievements, the mature industrial society closes itself against this alternative. Operationalism, in theory and practice, becomes the theory and practice of containment. Underneath its obvious dynamics, this society is a thoroughly static system of life: self-propelling in its oppressive productivity and in its beneficial coordination. Containment of technical progress goes hand in hand with its growth in the established direction. In spite of the political fetters imposed by the status quo, the more technology appears capable of creating the conditions for pacification, the more are the minds and bodies of man organized against this alternative.

The most advanced areas of industrial society exhibit throughout these two features: a trend toward consummation of technological rationality, and intensive efforts to contain this trend within the established institutions. Here is the internal contradiction of this civilization: the irrational element in its rationality. It is the token of its achievements. The industrial society which makes technology and science its own is organized for the ever-more-effective domination of man and nature, for the ever-more-effective utilization of its resources. It becomes irrational when the success of these efforts opens new dimensions of human realization. Organization for peace is different from organization for war; the institutions which served the struggle for existence cannot serve the pacification of existence. Life as an end is qualitatively different from life as a means.

Such a qualitatively new mode of existence can never be envisaged as the mere by-product of economic and political changes, as the more or less spontaneous effect of the new institutions which constitute the necessary prerequisite. Qualitative change also involves a change in the technical basis on which this society rests—one which sustains the economic and political institutions through which the “second nature” of man as an aggressive object of administration is stabilized. The techniques of industrialization are political techniques; as such, they prejudge the possibilities of Reason and Freedom.

To be sure, labor must precede the reduction of labor, and industrialization must precede the development of human needs and satisfactions. But as all freedom depends on the conquest of alien necessity, the realization of freedom depends on the techniques of this conquest. The highest productivity of labor can be used for the perpetuation of labor, and the most efficient industrialization can serve the restriction and manipulation of needs.

When this point is reached, domination—in the guise of affluence and liberty—extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives. Technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe. . . .

**THE CLOSING OF THE POLITICAL UNIVERSE**

The new technological work-world thus enforces a weakening of the negative position of the working class: the latter no longer appears to be the living contradiction to the established society. This trend is strengthened by the effect of the technological organization of production on the other side of the fence: on management and direction. Domination is transfigured into administration. The capitalist bosses and owners

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*Is it still necessary to denounce the ideology of the “managerial revolution”? Capitalist production proceeds through the investment of private capital for the private extraction and appropriation of surplus value, and capital is a social instrument for the domination of man by man. The essential features of this process are in no way altered by the spread of stock-holdings, the separation of ownership from management, etc.*
are losing their identity as responsible agents; they are assuming the function of bureaucrats in a corporate machine. Within the vast hierarchy of executive and managerial boards extending far beyond the individual establishment into the scientific laboratory and research institute, the national government and national purpose, the tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the façade of objective rationality. Hatred and frustration are deprived of their specific target, and the technological veil conceals the reproduction of inequality and enslavement. With technical progress as its instrument, unfreedom—in the sense of man’s subjection to his productive apparatus—is perpetuated and intensified in the form of many liberties and comforts. The novel feature is the overwhelming rationality in this irrational enterprise, and the depth of the preconditioning which shapes the instinctual drives and aspirations of the individuals and obscures the difference between false and true consciousness. For in reality, neither the utilization of administrative rather than physical controls (hunger, personal dependence, force), nor the change in the character of heavy work, nor the assimilation of occupational classes, nor the equalization in the sphere of consumption compensate for the fact that the decisions over life and death, over personal and national security are made at places over which the individuals have no control. The slaves of developed industrial civilization are sublimated slaves, but they are slaves, for slavery is determined “neither by obedience nor by hardness of labor but by the status of being a mere instrument, and the reduction of man to the state of a thing.”

This is the pure form of servitude: to exist as an instrument, as a thing. And this mode of existence is not abrogated if the thing is animated and chooses its material and intellectual food, if it does not feel its being-a-thing, if it is a pretty, clean, mobile thing. Conversely, as reification tends to become totalitarian by virtue of its technological form, the organizers and administrators themselves become increasingly dependent on the machinery which they organize and administer. And this mutual dependence is no longer the dialectical relationship between Master and Servant, which has been broken in the struggle for mutual recognition, but rather a vicious circle which encloses both the Master and the Servant. Do the technicians rule, or is their rule that of the others, who rely on the technicians as their planners and executors?

. . . the pressures of today’s highly technological arms race have taken the initiative and the power to make the crucial decisions out of the hands of responsible government officials and placed it in the hands of technicians, planners and scientists employed by vast industrial empires and charged with responsibility for their employers’ interests. It is their job to dream up new weapons systems and persuade the military that the future of their military profession, as well as the country, depends upon buying what they have dreamed up.

As the productive establishments rely on the military for self-preservation and growth, so the military relies on the corporations “not only for their weapons, but also for knowledge of what kind of weapons they need, how much they will cost, and how long it will take to get them.” A vicious circle seems indeed the proper image of a society which is self-expanding and self-perpetuating in its own preestablished direction—driven by the growing needs which it generates and, at the same time, contains.


Ibid.
Discussion Questions

1. Given the critical theorists’ reservations regarding the scientific pursuit of knowledge, how might a sociologist conduct “valid” research? If the scientific method is rejected, what criteria can be used to assess a researcher’s findings? More generally, if not science, what might serve as a basis for accepting anyone’s claim to speak the “truth”?

2. Do you think that individuals living in advanced, capitalist societies are as “pacified” as the critical theorists argue? Has individuality been “liquidated” as the critical theorists suggest? What evidence can you point to in support of your view?

3. While the critical theorists presented here deride mass culture and technology for corrupting our ability to reason, what role, if any, might education play in promoting a “totally administered society”? Second, as a form of technology, do you consider the Internet a potential source of liberation or domination? Why?

4. According to the critical theorists, how, in modern industrial societies, does rationality lead to the oppression and/or alienation of the individual? Do you agree that the United States is a “totalitarian” society? Why or why not?

5. Many musical groups express in their songs a discontent with existing social conditions and a mistrust of those in positions of authority. What effect, if any, does such music have on the broader society? How might such “protest” songs paradoxically reinforce the very social order they aim to criticize?