Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) was a German and Jewish philosopher, and director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. He was exiled from Germany during the Nazi regime; he continued to run the Institute in the United States, which he reopened in Frankfurt from 1949 until its closure in 1958. Major works translated into English include *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937), *The Eclipse of Reason* (1947), and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* with Theodor Adorno (1947).

Max Horkheimer was a German philosopher and social scientist. He was the founder of critical theory. Horkheimer's intellectual sources included the philosophies of the French Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx. He also drew on ideas from sociology and psychoanalysis. Between 1931 and 1958, Horkheimer served as the director of the Institute of Social Research of Frankfurt am Main, Germany (also known as the Frankfurt School). The 1933 National Socialist takeover forced Horkheimer, who was of Jewish origin, to immigrate to America, where the institute was temporarily set up. He returned to Germany in 1948. Horkheimer ranks as one of Europe's most prominent twentieth-century social thinkers. His work has shaped the projects of Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, and many others.

Horkheimer's 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory” is widely read as a programmatic statement of critical theory. Horkheimer rejects theory's “traditional” role as a scheme for classifying data. A critical theory of society determines the basic structure and processes of the capitalist condition, notably class relations and commodity exchange, and examines their operation on individual life and specific social phenomena. Critical thought also surpasses theory's traditional status as a set of hypotheses to be tested by empirical observation. Since even perception and theoretical thought—decisive components of humankind's interaction with nature—are socially predetermined, critical theory cannot accept empirical data as representations of reality but must scrutinize factual and theoretical knowledge claims with regard to their hidden social dimension. Traditional theory, Horkheimer further alleges, denies the connection between science and socially transformative practice, thus serving to perpetuate the status quo. Critical theory, by contrast, consciously combines social analysis with social critique and opposition in the interest of humanity's “emancipation from slavery” (1972, 246) and the “happiness of all individuals” (248).

Horkheimer's development of critical theory is linked to his critique of the dominant modes of thinking in capitalist society. Human thought, he argues in *Eclipse of Reason*, has been reduced to a “subjective” instrumental rationality essentially concerned with calculating the most effective means to given ends (good or evil). Thinking has been aligned with industrial commodity production. The capacity of “objective” reason to determine truly rational ends congruent with the attainment of human fulfillment is atrophying. Instrumental reason chiefly aids mankind's domination and exploitation of external nature, which culminates in people's domination of their inner nature, especially their desires, and in the subjugation of others. When nature “revolts” against its repression, it releases forces—notably instinctual energies—that become susceptible to mobilization by violent political movements.
Dialectic of Enlightenment, which Horkheimer coauthored with Adorno in the 1940s, interconnects these considerations with a vehement critique of mass culture. Horkheimer and Adorno highlight the culture industry’s capacity to cultivate widespread consumer demand for its products. These cultural commodities in turn have the power to shape their consumers' consciousness to the effect of enlisting the masses in the maintenance of the capitalist order. For example, popular literature, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, and cinema depict life primarily in its familiar, everyday mundanity. Unlike genuine art, mass culture never critically judges social reality, failing to convey the possibility and desirability of improved conditions. The message is plain: “This is reality as it is and should be and will be” (2004, 96). Moreover, many TV programs and films are structured according to patterns of punishment and reward for their characters. Thus, deviance is repeatedly admonished, while socially acceptable behavior is glorified, sometimes even dictated. In fact, the very distinction between leisure and labor drawn by the culture industry is illusory. “Entertainment,” argue Horkheimer and Adorno, “is the prolongation of work under late capitalism” (2002, 109): the consumption of mercilessly standardized cultural artifacts resembles the mechanized operations of the industrial workday; the time set aside for amusement and relaxation mainly functions to re-create the individual’s labor power for production. The culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno warn, encourages people to adapt to the capitalist condition, to silence their urge for material fulfillment, and to surrender their social resistance.

See also:
Adorno, Theodor, Capitalism, Commodities, Culture Industries, False Consciousness/False Needs, Mass Culture (Frankfurt School), Rationalization, Sociology

Further Readings


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