



From Enlightenment to Critique: The Intellectual Journey of the Frankfurt School

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Abstract

This article discusses the origins, ideas, and lasting influence of the Frankfurt School, a group of thinkers linked to the Institute for Social Research, founded in Frankfurt in 1923. The Frankfurt School appeared between the two world wars, during a time of capitalism, fascism, and communism. Its main thinkers: Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm, Habermas, and others, developed a critical way of thinking to question the problems of their time. Inspired by Marx, Hegel, Weber, and Freud, they created what is called Critical Theory, which seeks not only to understand society but also to change it by revealing the systems of control and manipulation.

A key work of this school is *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944), which shows how reason and progress turned into tools of domination through what they called the “culture industry.” The article also looks at how Critical Theory influenced the New Left movement, Habermas’s idea of the Public Sphere, and later feminist approaches that studied power, gender, and communication.

Overall, the article shows that the Frankfurt School’s ideas are still important today to understand modern society, where technological progress exists alongside inequality, and where true human freedom is still a goal to be achieved.

Keywords: Frankfurt School, Critical theory, Dialectic of Enlightenment, New Left and Feminism Critique



ملخص:

تتناول هذه المقالة أصول وأفكار وتأثيرات مدرسة فرانكفورت، وهي مجموعة من المفكرين المرتبطين بمعهد البحوث الاجتماعية الذي أسس في فرانكفورت عام 1923. ظهرت مدرسة فرانكفورت بين الحربين العالميتين، في فترة تميّزت بانتشار الرأسمالية والفاشية والشيوعية. وقد طوّرت أبرز مفكراتها، مثل هوركهايمر، أدورنو، ماركوز، فروم، وهابرماس، أسلوباً نقدياً للتفكير هدفه مساءلة مشكلات عصرهم. واستلهم هؤلاء أفكارهم من ماركس، وهيغل، وفيبر، وفرويد، فأنشأوا ما يُعرف بالنظرية النقدية، التي لا تسعى إلى فهم المجتمع فحسب، بل إلى تغييره من خلال كشف أنظمة السيطرة والتلاعب.

ومن أبرز أعمال هذه المدرسة كتاب «جدلية التنوير» (أدورنو وهوركهايمر، 1944)، الذي يُبيّن كيف تحوّل العقل والتقدّم إلى أدوات للهيمنة عبر ما سُمّي بـ«صناعة الثقافة». كما تتناول المقالة تأثير النظرية النقدية في حركة اليسار الجديد، وفي فكرة هابرماس عن «الفضاء العمومي»، وفي المقاربات النسوية اللاحقة التي درست قضايا السلطة والنوع والتواصل.

وفي المجمل، تُظهر المقالة أن أفكار مدرسة فرانكفورت ما تزال ذات أهمية كبيرة لفهم المجتمع الحديث، حيث يتعايش التقدّم التكنولوجي مع استمرار عدم المساواة، وحيث تظل الحرية الإنسانية الحقيقية هدفاً لم يتحقق بعد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مدرسة فرانكفورت، النظرية النقدية، جدلية التنوير، اليسار الجديد، النقد النسوي.



Introduction

The Frankfurt school appeared in the context of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, that was founded in 1923. The term of the Frankfurt school refers to the intellectuals and thinkers that were affiliated with that institute. The institute was founded by Carl Grunberg, a Marxian philosopher at the University of Vienna. (Corradetti, 2011).

The Frankfurt school was founded in the period between the two world wars and consisted of intellectuals who were very critical towards the capitalist, fascist or communist systems of their time. Those intellectuals criticized both capitalism and soviet socialism and wrote about alternative ways to achieve social development. (Held, 2010)

Frankfurt school theorists shared a common paradigm, the Marxian Hegelian one and were preoccupied with similar issues. (Finlayson, 2005). Thinkers like Marx, Kant, Weber, Hegel, and Simmel inspired the Frankfurt school theorists who synthesized the works of their predecessors. (Held, 2010). As to answer questions that were not answered by classical Marxism, they searched for answers within other schools of thought such as existential philosophy, psychoanalysis, anti-positivist sociology and others. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017)

The Frankfurt school as a philosophical tradition is nowadays associated with Max Horkheimer, who was the director of the institute in 1930, and is associated with its most talented theorists including Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017), and was later associated with Jurgen Habermas since the 1960s, especially after his work on linguistic intersubjectivity, communicative reason and what Habermas' philosophical discourse of modernity. (Habermas, 2007)

The frankfurt school most influential thinkers include: Max Horkheimer, Herbet Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Jurgen Habermas, Walter Benjamin, Alfred Schmidt and others.

Frankfurt school appeared in a context of tension in Europe, marked by the two world wars, by the rise of extreme ideologies like Nazism and Fascism. The thinkers that belong to this school represent the struggle in which lived the intellectuals of that time, a struggle between the humanitarian ideas of enlightenment, and the reality in which they lived, that was very different from the values promoted by the enlightenment, a reality that was marked by the cruelty of the war, of the savage capitalism, of the totalitarianism in the Soviet Union and of the fascist and Nazi ideologies. Therefore, these thinkers criticized the ideas of the "enlightenment" and criticized the ideologies of their time.

The most influential theories:

From the Frankfurt philosophical tradition emerged several theories, that became very famous later in the intellectual sphere. We will cite some of them.



Dialectic of Enlightenment:

The book was first published in 1944 and was written by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. It is one of the most representative texts of the critical idea defended by the Frankfurt School.

Dialectic of enlightenment rethinks the age of enlightenment and explores the elements that led to its “failure”, according to the Frankfurt School. The book explores more specifically the socio-psychological status quo that was responsible for the “failure” of the age of enlightenment. (Held, 2010). This text had a crucial effect on the 20th century fields of human sciences: philosophy, politics, culture, sociology... and mainly inspired the New Left that was formed in the 1960s and 1970s. (Held, 2010)

The Dialectic of Enlightenment highlights a certain ambivalence when it comes to the ultimate source of social domination. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). This ambivalence or contradiction engendered the “pessimism” of the Frankfurt school’s critical theory (which we will tackle later) concerning the possibility of human freedom and emancipation. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002).

The Dialectic of Enlightenment was written in the context of the rise of fascism and the weakening of the liberal state and the market. That is why the theoretical perspective that frames the book is inspired from this political and economic context. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). Adorno and Horkheimer thought that history reached the point of the fall down of reason.

The book tackled the issue of culture, and considered the mass culture of that time as part of industry, so the two authors introduced the concept of culture industry. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that in capitalist societies, mass cultural manifestations become a product, like all the other material products, and that mass culture became produced in factories according to certain standards, which engendered standardized cultural goods, made for fast consumption. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). Therefore, films, magazines, radio programs, music... become part of an industry.

In a matter of fact, according to the text, culture is structured by a cultural industry in which radio, written press, films... form a system. The text argues that the cultural industry does not promote human emancipation but promotes instead the domination of the economic logic, authoritarian systems and conformism in the lifestyles.

The Dialectic of enlightenment explores the historical and logical process by which the humanitarian enlightenment values transform to their opposite, and instead of promoting humanitarian progressive ideas, they promote myths and barbarian acts.

The text argues that the enlightenment or the “Aufklärung” (The original term in German for enlightenment) carried the cause of liberating humans from myths and illogical thinking but it is itself submitted to myths. The text argues also that reason has been instrumentalized in the purpose of explaining the world as to dominate the nature. Therefore, reason was not engaged in the emancipation and liberation of human beings as the enlightenment claims. The two authors call then for a destruction of myths by the



reason, a critique of the enlightenment by reason. The text argues that the myths have not disappeared and that the enlightenment engendered a form of regression in which human beings became objectified.

The Dialectic of the enlightenment analyses in a first part the text of Homer, the Odyssey, as a fundamental text of the European culture, full of myths, then it analyzes in a second part the two texts: the novel “Juliette” of Marquis de Sade, that was a scandal in the time it was published, and “On the genealogy of morality” of Nietzsche. The two texts promote an extreme form of immorality. Therefore, through their analyses, Adorno and Horkheimer respond to Kant’s ideas about enlightenment and its supposed morality.

The dialectic of the enlightenment discusses also the issue of antisemitism and considers that antisemitism is not essentially about Jewish people but about a social order that stigmatizes them. The authors argue that is a perverse form of economic and social rationality, and that hatred is directed towards victims without defense but the authors argue also that any kind of group including Protestants, Gypsies, Catholics, Jewish could become the oppressors if they were powerful enough to become the norm of the society. The text argues that the cause of antisemitism is a sort of paranoia in which the subject attributes to the object of paranoia its own taboos and impulses but hides in the same time a secret aspiration. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). The authors also argue that the progress of the industrial society has led to the fall down of reason.

If we analyze the current international context and the cotemporary history since the 20st century, we come up with the conclusion that the ideas argued in the “Dialectic of Enlightenment”. The countries that belong to a European tradition (Europe and the United-States) have caused several wars, have caused the pollution of the earth due to the excessive industrialization, have colonized many countries and are still interfering (even militarily) in many countries like Syria, nourishing the war by doing that. It seems like the concepts and ideas of Enlightenment (of the 17th century) are not applied and it is the opposite that is promoted and done. Adorno and Horkheimer had a concern over the nature, stating that the enlightenment ideas promote the understanding of nature in the aim of dominating it by human beings, and actually, we witness a degradation of the nature that is suffering a lot from pollution that affects the air, water, the soil, from global warming and from the extinction of several species.

The Critical Theory:

Critical theory is a major part of the Frankfurt School philosophical tradition. It is considered as one of the most important theories that this school generated. Critical theory is actually associated with several generations of German philosophers that belonged to the Frankfurt school. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005). In a matter of fact, these philosophers distinguish between a “critical” theory and a “traditional one. For them, a critical theory is distinguished by its purpose, which is the aim at liberating human beings and achieving their emancipation. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005). A critical theory is by extent, a theory that aims at changing the society and not only explaining it as the “traditional” theory does. A critical theory aims by essence to increase freedom and decrease domination, and due to their



character, several critical theories emerged along with social movements. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005).

The critical theory has different methods and goals than the traditional theories. Critical theory finds its roots in the Marxist critique, based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In a matter of fact, Marx and Engels argue that the nature of society is defined essentially by the means of production, which leads to the idea that the base (economy and means of production) is what defines the superstructure (ideas, institutions, ruling ideology...), and that the proletariat are oppressed by the class that owns the means of production and makes profit out of the labor of the workers. The working-class can liberate itself only when it rises against the dominant class. This classical Marxist theory is what we call the “the critique of political economy”. (Steiler, 2017).

Critical theory tackles Cultural Studies in the light of how dominant ideology of a culture expands on the behalf of other ideologies (that are not dominant in a given society) through social institutions such as schools, the media, cultural institutions... (Steiler, 2017). In a matter of fact, critical theory aims at deconstructing existing ideologies by the mean of the dialectic analysis, which is the method of discovering the truth by revealing the contradictions in the arguments and reasoning of the thesis that one wants to refute. For critical theorists, liberation is attained in a struggle for power, only when individuals are aware of the dialectics of opposing forces. (Steiler, 2017).

Adorno and Horkheimer, one of the most influential pioneers of the critical theory presented their critique in the text “Dialectic of Enlightenment”, which we discussed above. We could consider this work, that focused on commercial media, as the first volume of Cultural Studies. (Steiler, 2017).

The Critical Theory and the New Left:

The New Left refers to a political movement that was influential in 1960s and 1970s. In contradiction with the Marxist movement that were more focused on issues like social justice, labor unions, and class struggle, the New Left intellectuals and activists were more concerned with civil rights, freedom of speech, women’s emancipation... and some sections of the New Left rejected the involvement with the Labor movement and the Marxian tradition on the class struggle, while other sections identified with other variants of Marxism like the Maoism, (Gitlin, 2000), initiated by Mao Zedong. Herbert Marcuse, who is one of the intellectuals of the Frankfurt School philosophical tradition is considered as the “Father of the New Left” (Kellner, 2017), along with Habermas.

During the 1970s, Jurgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse were among the most influential figures that helped shaping the New Left doctrine and movement in Germany and later in the United States. (Steiler, 2017). The works of Habermas have helped shaping the New Left because they extend on a wide range of thought and present a coherent view of society and communication. (Steiler, 2017). In a matter of fact, Habermas believed that we should understand society as a combination of three major interests: Work, interaction, and power. (Steiler, 2017).



The New Left has emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s as a response to capitalism and to conservatism of that time but it was distinguished from the Marxian doctrine and had other horizons for itself, and also other battles different than those of the first Marxists. However, the Critical theory takes an important place in the New Left doctrine and movement. The New Left is deeply rooted in the Critical theory.

Habermas and the Public Sphere:

Habermas starts with the work of the Chicago school, in which the Public Sphere was among its main interests. In addition to the Chicago school's works on the Public Sphere, Habermas referred to the works of the Frankfurt School, to which he belongs, and that considered mass media as an oppressive institution (Steiler, 2017). An important part of the Public Sphere is present in every conversation in which private individuals gather as to form a public body, hence, this public sphere is a medium between society and the state. (Steiler, 2017). Therefore, the formation of the public entity is made through communication and conversation.

The role that communication plays in the Public Sphere is very important, either when it comes to the formation of the Public Sphere, or when it comes to nourishing the Public Sphere with debates, ideas and all sort of arguments that represent the diversity of a given society. We deduce that communication in the Public Sphere is essential to preserving diversity and promoting democracy in societies.

The Critical Theory and Feminism:

The Critical theory has been associated in the 1990s with the feminist critique, which is associated with the concepts of gender, power imbalance between men and women, cultural effects on gender roles, patriarchy.

Feminist theorists defend the thesis of multiple ways of knowing, they argue that people develop various and different ways of knowing, depending on their own experiences in their lives. (Steiler, 2017). Some researches on gender, pointed out that men and women develop different ways of communicating because they live in gender-segregated groups, and therefore develop different ways of communicating, knowing and experiencing life. (Steiler, 2017).

Feminist theorists used the critical theory in order to criticize and deconstruct the status quo of gender roles and gender understanding and build new conceptions of gender. Still, the gender theories face a lot of debate because conceptions and understandings differ from a society to another, with several similarities of course, and even now, we notice in some European and American societies, the emergence of anti-gender and anti-feminist movement. We could refer to the Facebook pages: Anti-feminism Canada, Anti-feminism Australia, Anti-feminism Western Europe, UK, Canada and THE USA... These new movements do not criticize feminism because they are opposed to women's emancipation or because they are opposed to women's rights, but they criticize instead the radical forms that some feminist movements and theories are taken today. According to their publications, they criticize a new form of dictatorship and censorship, the new "gender" censorship that tries to impose a specific point of view overall



societies. With a critical thinking and an ironic sense of humor, some publications of these pages criticize some radical feminist arguments that often pictures women as victims and men as guilty by nature, but sometimes, these publications fall into misogynist descriptions of women.

In certain developing countries, there is still a ruling mentality, in some communities, that men are better than women, and some children grew up with the idea that everything is permitted for boys and that girls should not disobey the masculine figures (father, brother, husband, uncle...). For this reason, a lot of effort needs to be accomplished in order to change this mentality and to obtain more rights for larger categories of girls and women, even though the situation is already changing, and more and more girls are getting access to education, higher education and to positions of responsibility. Actually, the matter of feminism is constantly changing with the changes that occur in societies, in laws, in politics, in economics, and we think that we cannot understand and explain the issue of power balance between men and women in a given society separately from elements of: culture, politics, economics, religion, changes in mentalities. we also believe that we cannot study human rights based only on gender, because studying human rights based on gender only, supposes that these rights do not apply for all humans and that women need special rights. Therefore, we believe that a society should work on improving the rights of all humans and focusing on women's rights when there is a certain oppression regarding women, but when a society achieves a developed stage of equality and suppresses all forms of oppression towards women, it should pay more attention to improving the situation and the rights of all its citizens, regardless of their gender, and the ultimate aim should be justice.



Conclusion:

The Frankfurt School was an important intellectual movement that tried to understand the problems of modern society and propose ways to make it better. It appeared in a period full of wars, crises, and political ideologies that affected human life and freedom. The thinkers of this school believed that reason and progress, which were supposed to free people, had instead become instruments of control and domination. Through Critical Theory, they tried to uncover the causes of this contradiction and to find paths toward emancipation.

Thinkers such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and later Habermas connected philosophy, sociology, psychology, and culture. They showed that social change does not come only from economics or politics but also from the way people think, communicate, and live together. Habermas later gave this tradition a new perspective by focusing on communication, dialogue, and democracy.

Today, the ideas of the Frankfurt School still help us understand many problems of our world, mass media influence, economic injustice, environmental issues, and the crisis of values in modern societies. Their work teaches us that we must always question what seems normal, and that critical thinking is essential to build a fairer, freer, and more human world.

To sum up, since the critical theory challenges the status quo and deconstructs existing ideas as to introduce new ones, in the aim of obtaining more social justice and changing society to the best, to become a better place for all human beings, then the critical theory is also constantly changing with the changes that occur in the world, and these changes, this constant movement, are the secret behind the development and progress of humanity through thousands of years of history till today, and more changes are coming.



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