CULTURE AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM: CRITICAL THEORY ON THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Critical theorists have taken a stance against modern culture. They have not succumbed to the idea that modern society is more equitable or free than past societies. In contrast, some social theorists have argued that modern societies possess organic solidarity, and are governed by contracts and a universalistic orientation (Durkheim, 1964; Maine, 1970; Parsons, 1966). We are interested in what critical theory can tell us bout modern culture (e.g., Connerton, 976; O'Neil, 1976) rather than on an nalysis, history, or evaluation of critical neory (Jay, 1973; Slater, 1977; Tar, 1977; Buck-Morss, 1977).

Critical theory has been used to analyze the "superstructure" of society (Therborn, 1970). For critical theorists, modern societies are dominated by a culture which limits the emergence of free and rational societies. This analysis by critical theory may help us to understand not simply what "is" but also what is "possible."

THE EVOLUTION OF SUBJECTIVE REASON. Critical theory has argued that since history has not given us "an economically grounded 'mechanism' of emancipation," we must "detach the criticism of exchange rationality from its fundamental exposition in terms of labor value in the ·criticism of political economy, and translate it into a criticism of instrumental reason" (Wellmer, 1971:121, 130). Social relationships have become so reified that critical theory must break through the veil of instrumental (subjective) reason. Instrumental reason refers to the idea of finding means for goals which are adopted in any specific instance. Instrumental reason takes existing ends for granted, and disregards whether the goals are rational or irrational. This view of reason contrasts sharply with a much older view in which reason was to set goals or standards. In this more traditional view, reason was always linked with freedom

and potentiality Marcuse, 1969:9).

The progenitor of modern subjective reason has been positivism in all of its various disguises. The ideal that positivism pursues is knowledge in the form of a mathematically formulated universal science deducible from the smallest possible number of axioms, a system which assures the calculation of the probable occurrence of all events. Society, too, is to be explained in this way" (Horkheimer, 1972:138). For positivism, the distinction between what an entity appears to be and what it actually is disappears. This distinction reduces reason to the adjustment of entities in existence--the status quo. It removes the idea of potentiality of reason to construct alternative thoughts about the way society should be.

Even the concern for fact gathering, in part, has followed the development of industrial production. The division of labor in intellectual life, for the sake of economy and efficiency, is assiduously applied to the development of theories. These theories, of course, must always "be done with an eye unwaveringly on the facts" (Horkheimer, 1972:191). Critical theory suggests that even the development of theory in the modern world has been appropriated by a industrialized culture. We think of theories in terms like "better," "useful," "appropriate," "productive," and " valuable," which are not scientific value-neutral terms (Horkheimer, 1972:207). Ironically, "the positivists seem to forget that nature science as they conceive it is above all an auxiliary means of production, one element among many in the social process" (Horkheimer, 1974a:59).

In part, the predominance of subjective reason has occurred as an indirect consequence of "enlightenment." Enlightenment thinking was oriented toward the control of nature for the sake of human prograss. Enlightenment thought sought to remove the mythical, religious and superstitious beliefs from our cognitive realm. As a mode of thinking, it not only criticized past religious beliefs but also suggested that "science" could improve the human species. Instead of dominating nature we now dominate each other. The denial of the relative autonomy of nature in man has

led in part, to repression in the human realm.

Horkheimer suggests that the mastery of nature also carries implications for the mastery of internal human nature. The exploitation of nature's resources and their subsequent use by humans implies that a peaceful social order is necessary for the just distribution of resources. But continual mastery of nature has not led to the satisfaction of material needs. In part, this is because "the mastery of nature has been and remains a social task, not the appurtenance of an abstract scientific methodology or the coincidence of scientific discovery and technological application" The domination of nature is related to the domination of man and consequently to social conflict. While the machine and factory system have expanded the productivity of labor, there also occurs "a qualitative leap in the intensity of social conflict" (Leiss, 1974:154). Why? Leiss, in a provocative analysis of Horkheimer's work suggests five reasons. First, as economic surplus expands it stimulates the development of new needs and satisfactions and subsequently conflict arises over this surplus. Second, certain natural resources are confined to various geographical regions of the world and the producing countries expand their control into these areas. As a consequence, given the non-equitable distribution of the world's resources, conflict arises between the separated geographical-political units. Third, the mastery of nature is differentially distributed among societies, including the mastery of destructive weapons, as a consequence some societies are subject to whims and caprices of their neighbors. Fourth, is the growth of technological domination through extensive and intensive propaganda. Finally, the rising expectations of the population have a decisive impact on heightening the potential for social conflict (Leiss, 1974: 156-158).

The evolution of subjective reason has had a decisive impact on modern civilization. Critical theories argue that subjective reason has led us away from a concern with ends. Insofar as ends are discussed, it is mainly in terms of survival value for what already exists. More importantly, critical theory suggests the possibility of an objective reason. And, objective reason would mean: 1) truth conceived in non-utilitarian, non-majority and non-relative terms, and 2) a relationship with nature which would not lead to the continued domination of some parts of humanity over other parts.

THE MECHANICS OF CONFORMITY

Although the evolution of subjective reason has been important for determining the characteristics of modern culture, so also the bourgeois family has perpetuated the subjugation of the individual to external authority. Critical theorists analyze the modern bourgeois family from the perspective of what it was once like. From this vantage point, they tend to perceive the family in dialictical relationship both to the larger milieu and to individual behavior. For example, family relationships are developed from authority relations. Whether certain forms of authority are progressive or reactionary can only be understood in the context of their times and their contribution to an emanicpatory philosophy of history. Recently, however, "the relation of individuals to authority is determined by the speical character of the work process in modern times and gives rise, in turn, to a lasting collaboration of social institutions in producing and consolidating the character types which correspond to the relationship" (Horkheimer, 1972:97-8).

The bourgeois family, though it has lost many of its original functions (e.g., education), still prepares youth for adaptability to the market situation. The father is master of the house because he earns or possesses the money and determines how it is to be spent. Wives and children are his possessions. They put their lives in large part into his hands for guidance and orders. The minor son may think what he wants of the father but in practice the father is "always right". The father was no doubt meeting a genuine social need in this educational and governing function when the family was still an economically productive unit. However, when the family has shrunk to a consumer unit, the father's position "is acquired essentially by the money he brings in and involves all the more momentous consequences for his family" (Horkheimer, 1972:108). Because

the family is separated from the father's professional life, and the father is submissive in most cases in social life, he cultivates the same submissive stance in his own children. The children learn to . . .

". . . trace every failure back to its social causes but to remain at the level of the individual and to hypostatize the failure in religious terms as sin or in naturalistic terms as deficient natural endowment." Horkheimer, 1972:109).

The modern bourgeois family has capitulated to the same criteria as modern industry. Marriage must be rich in results. The family becomes another social instrument for the means of production (Horkheimer, 1974b:17, 89). The adolescent soon learns that "the renunciations of instinctual urges expected from him are not adequately compensated, that, for instance, the sublimation of sexual goals required by civilization fails to obtain for him the material security in the name of which it is preached" (1974a:111).

Although, the bourgeois family is one of the major agents for stimulating conformity in modern society, there are others which interact dialiectically and perform the same function. This brings us to the critique of some other dimensions of modern culture. Some phenomena critical theorists have examined are: the loss of interiority, the effects of articles of consumption, modern advertising and concomitantly communications, and the growth of large organizations. All of these elements are viewed, in part, as detrimental for the survival of objective reason in modern society.

Today social power means control over things. Interestingly enough, the more an individual desires to control things the more they will come back to dominate him (Marcuse, 1964). The mind will "be transformed into an automation of formalized reason" (Horkheimer, 1974a:129-130). The modern individual in pursuit of things comes to work for larger and larger organizations. As a consequence of belonging to so many organizations, he/she is no longer an individual (e.g., Work in America, 1974). There is no place to retreat to or stand apart from the web of organizations. Labor unions and their members as well as corporation leaders all begin to resemble each other (Marcuse, 1964:27-31; Mills, 1948:153). 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" (Horkheimer, 1974a:151). The victory of the technological era brings a new kind of injustice. The radiance of the individual person is submerged. Contemporary influences leave the individual no room for spontaneity.

Today the young men leave their families unencumbered by a strong sense of interiority (moral conscience). In the past, as long as a person stayed within the law, the individual was responsbile to no one but his conscience. However, the joy of making personal decisions and freely exercising the imagination has withered away (e.g., Riesman, 1967). "Machinery requires, for its operation no less than its invention, the kind of mentality that concentrates on the present and can dispense with memory and straying imagination". With rapid social mobility and changing social roles, each person must be prepared to have a co-worker later appear as the boss. "This develops in him the reserve and suspicion of strangers which used to be characteristic of village life." Even conversations become superficial and convictions a kind of a burden. Various machines (i.e., radio, television) which do away with conversation have made their appearance at the right time. "They provide models for behavior and give muteness the illusion that something is being said." Contemporary individuals lose all sense of time out from society. "The machinery of mass opinion--newspapers, radio, cinema, television--must provide guidance for men as they relax from their duties , and must carry for them the burden of all divisions not connected with their work" (Horkheimer, 1974b:22; also Vidich and Bensman, 1968).

Even the customer is no longer king, according to critical theorists. In the past,

customers had to be wooed and flattered if the seller was to compete successfully against others. Today, the customer no longer counts. ". . . price and quality are determined somewhere far from the place of the transaction and are minimally subject to bargaining, the resigned gestures of the old-style housewife as she tests the proffered goods may still be justified in exceptional cases but they are nonetheless as antiquated as she is" (Horkheimer, 1974b:128). At one time culture meant the non-obediance to social authority (Birnbaum, 1971:106-166). Today, the opposite is true. "Not to conform means to be rendered powerless, economically and therefore spiritually" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1072:133). Iron-ically, even amusement under capitalism is the extension of work. "It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again" (Ibid:137; also, Hearn, 1975).

Critical theory suggests that modern culture sublimates the individual to an overwhelming, impersonal kind of control. The individual exists in a world that is out of his/her control. Given that the massive production of consumer items raises the material standard of living it also divides and separates people (Horkheimer, 1974b: 140-1). For critical theorists, the modern family, the workplace, articles of consump-tion and the mass media all help structure the loss of individual atuonomy. They, of course, assume that it is possible to re-store individual initiative. In their purview, one of the major losses is moral conscience. In short, the individual lacks a place to step back. The sublimation of the individual, in part, has resulted from the development of scientific-technological legitimation which permeates the modern era.

SCIENTIFIC-TECHNOLOGICAL LEGITI-MATION. According to critical theorists that Marx's critique of capitalism must be extended to include an analysis of a funda-mentally new form of false consciousness--scientism. In Marx's age unmasking the ideology of equivalance exchange was appropriate. But a current critique of modern society must include scrutiny

of science itself. "Scientism" is the funda-mental false consciousness of this age. Scientism consists of the view that: 1) knowledge is inherently neutral; 2) there is a unitary scientific method; 3) the standard of certainty and exactness in the physical sciences is the only explanatory model for scientific knowledge (Schroyer, 1970:210). Scientific-technocratic legitimation separates the subject and object of knowledge. It, for the most part, takes the language of science as if it were observationally given. For critical theorists, this view overlooks a number of distinct aspects: 1) it denies the possibility that predefinitions of the object of knowledge are given to us by prior experience; 2) it overlooks the societal' milieu in which research takes place and the consequences of this for the analysis of theory and data; 3) positive science is unable to reflect on its own presuppositions (Schroyer, 1970:211). In short, positive science operates with the myth of autonomy. It assumes most importantly that scientific-technological progress will automatically bring about social and moral progress.

There is little doubt that science and technology have developed more efficient means of producing material surplus. But is is by no means clear that the human species is better off because of it. In some senses, as outlined in the last section, the potential for social conflict has made a qualitative leap for the worse. Critical theorists, unlike positive science, are inter-ested in analyzing the consequences and role of science in the modern world. They do not take the "self-evident" progress of science and technology for granted. Critical theory undertakes an analysis of how it is that the myth of an autonomous positive science has come to pervade the modern era, and also seeks to eliminate this aspect of false conciousness. The development of a science to control nature which was indirectly as well as directly applied to the human realm is not inherently ideological (Leiss, 1974:179). Nor should the growth of scientism be equated with capitalist development alone (Marcuse, 1961).

For critical theorists, Marx's distinction between the infrastructure (material forces) and superstructure (ideology) is inadequate

for analyzing the plight of modern societies. These Marxian analytic devices are replaced by an analysis of the three subsystems of action--work, language, and power. These analytic devices allow us to apply them to the realm of the sciences themselves. The sciences are analyzed from their guiding cognitive interests, which illuminates whether some sciences are repressive of liberating in their social-historical context (Habermas, 1970, 1975; Marcuse, 1965).

The empirical-analytic sciences (work) are interested in the covariance of particular observable events. Given a set of initial conditions, predictions may be possible when all other things are equal. The cognitive interest of this science is certainty and control--technical exploitability. In part, the emergence of this interest was based on the desire of some humans to control nature and other humans. The historical-hermeneutical sciences are less interested in technical control but more concerned with the extension of intersubjective understanding (language). "Access to the facts is provided by the understanding of meaning, not observation" (Habermas, 1971:309). This practical cognitive interest strives for a consesnus of meaning among various actors. It is interested in the mediation of broken communicative traditions--the re-establishment of a consensus of meaning (Schroyer, 1970). The technical (empirical-analytical) sciences cannot account for their own continued existence from within their own theoretical framework. Science-technology as an end-in-itself is taken to be self-evident. Likewise, the interpretive sciences lack the capability for self-reflection about their own ends and purposes. Why is it important to understand meaning and repair broken communicative traditions? What interest is presupposed in the pursuit of meanings? Critical social science, however, is not satisfied with either producing nomological knowledge or the mediation of broken "meaning" traditions alone. Critical sociology determines the "meaning" or "validity" of propositions through self-reflection. And "self-reflection is determined by an emancipatory cognitive interest" (Habermas, 1971:310).

Jurgen Habermas has indicated that his critical work on the interests of the various sciences (1971, 1974) and the internal crises of modern societies (1975) is meant as a philosophy of history with a practical intent. "The 'meaning of history' is simply its possible future which is realized through action" (Pilot, 1976:258).

Conclusion for critical theorists, modern science tends to be equated with the empirical-analytical sciences and their technical exploitability. More importantly, these sciences have a tendency to be used in the realm of human behavior where the results become exploitative. Social science is used against the workers in support of management. The workers are reduced to objects of manipulation and control. The hermeneutical science, on the other hand, which stress understanding and the importance of language leave society as it is--untouched. It is only from the basis of improving the existing state of affairs that an emancipatory science can make sense. And, indeed, this is the declared purpose of critical theory.

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