



BLOCK 3

CRITICAL THINKERS OF MASS CULTURE

THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

BLOCK 3 CRITICAL THINKERS OF MASS CULTURE

Unit 7 Mass Culture and its Critiques

Unit 8 Theodore W. Adorno: Culture Industry

Unit 9 Herbert Marcuse: One Dimensional Man

UNIT 7 MASS CULTURE AND ITS CRITIQUES*

Structure

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Defining Culture
- 7.3 Popular Culture Vs. Mass Culture
- 7.4 Frankfurt School and Culture Industry
- 7.5 Mass Culture: Other Critiques
- 7.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.7 References
- 7.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

7.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the idea of culture;
- Explain the difference between mass culture and popular culture;
- Determine the developments that led to the rise of mass culture;
- Explain the idea of culture industry as a critical view of mass culture;
- Elucidate the critique of mass culture from the perspective of several important theorists.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

To understand mass culture, one must begin by understanding what is culture and how is it disseminated in a society. These two factors remain significant in understanding what mass culture is. The concepts of mass culture and popular culture are often used interchangeably in common understanding as well as within social sciences. This unit attempts to make a clear distinction between the two with the help of examples from our surroundings. While presenting a critique of mass culture, this unit discusses in detail about the idea of culture industry, which influenced other critical thinkers also to critically analyse the concept of mass culture.

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7.2 DEFINING CULTURE

Culture is such a pervasive human phenomena that its variations across societies and even within a society has often constructed as an intriguing area of enquiry for the sociologists. Theoretical perspectives from the discipline have all articulated their views on culture from the lens of their own understanding - be it evolutionary or Marxist, functional or interpretative, and so on. In fact, it is the passion to decipher the enigma of culture, which led to the emergence of cultural studies. One of the first comprehensive understandings of culture was provided by British anthropologist and the father of cultural evolutionism, Edward B. Tylor. He defined culture as a set of beliefs, practices, morals, customs, knowledge, art and law that an individual acquires by the virtue of being a part of a given society. Gradually all that remained common to a group of people in a given society was included within the purview of culture. After Tylor, others like Malinowski, Boas, Parsons, Kroeber, Kluckohn, Singer and Geertz also tried to explore the idea of culture from different sociological perspectives. Thus, it becomes difficult to provide a singular all-encompassing definition of culture within the scope of this unit.

Box 8.1 Some Prominent Definitions of Culture

Edward B. Tylor (1903): Culture, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1931): Culture comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values -culture in reality is *sui generis* and must be studied as such.

A.L.Kroeber and Clyde Kluckohn (1952): Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of furtheraction.

Most recently in 1990, anthropologist William A. Haviland observed four different characteristics of culture, which can be summed up as following:

- Culture is socially learnt by an individual and it is not acquired naturally by birth.
- In a given society culture is held commonly by a group of people. Thus, it is also something that distinguishes one group of people from another, and one society from another. Understood like this, culture remains an indicator of a distinct identity to a set of individuals.

- Culture is also characterised by a certain set of symbols to which certain value is attached, for instance: an object of worship, texts, rituals, artefacts and images among others. It is through these symbols that culture is passed on from one generation to another. Yet, according to Haviland, culture remains independent of any of these symbols.
- Culture is something that evolves over a period of time and cannot be established through an individual endeavour or through a single incidence.

Culture can be, thus, understood as a society's shared and socially transmitted beliefs, values, language and practices, which may remain significant to individual and collective social behaviour. Since, one is not born as culturally adapt rather it is socially acquired, the cultural behaviour of an individual may include patterns of his everyday behaviour, activities and feelings. Culture is not static, it is constantly evolving and adapting in interaction with factors like economy, politics, education, occupation etc. Thus, culture is omnipresent. Culture can mean wearing a cross around your neck or wearing a sacred thread around your chest, jazz or hard rock, eating on a banana leaf or eating with a folk and knife. As far as a certain act contains some meaning for the actors, which they share and relate to, it remains within the purview of culture. Every act of an individual can be made intelligible as a part of the culture of one of her reference groups, be it her parents, her teachers, friends, colleagues, students, peers or others.

Activity 1

Make a list of cultural symbols that you observe around you within your household and in neighbourhood. Also, write a brief note in front of each stating why you think that symbol is a part of the culture. Compare your list with others at your study centre and also listen to their rationale. Discuss yours with them.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) What is Tylor's definition of culture?

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2) How does Malinowski define 'culture'?

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.....

3) What are the four characteristics of culture, as discussed by Haviland??

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.....

- 4) Which of these is a part of culture, according to you?
- a) Your Hairstyle
 - b) Taking violin lessons
 - c) Celebrating Birthdays
 - d) All of the Above

7.3 POPULAR CULTURE VS. MASS CULTURE

The understanding of culture as all-pervasive is often associated with the classification of culture as ‘popular’ or the pop culture. Till the nineteenth century, culture was divided into two extremities, with high culture or the elite culture on one hand and low culture or folk culture on the other. While the elements of high culture included performing and visual arts, like painting, sculpture, music and literature, they were closely tied to the idea of becoming ‘cultured’, or elite with a good taste. This drew a line between the ruling class with a taste for high art, who did not consider guitar and drums as a part of their culture, and looked down upon the common people with their folk culture. The elements of folk culture included folk tales, cultural dances, ethnic wear, and street talks among others. However, in the nineteenth century, with the emergence of mass media and Industrial Revolution, the margins between these two categories of culture were blurred.

As a result of these developments, the term popular culture replaced the already existing term ‘folk culture’. Owing to the reach of the tools of mass media, popular culture became so pervasive that it was internalised by the society to a level that it almost became invisible. In other words, it led to cultural homogenisation. Everyone had an equal access to all the cultural systems. The hierarchy of taste did not matter anymore. Culture was now mass produced and mass media worked towards its dissemination. And the culture produced as a result of mass mediation was known as mass culture. Now, here lies the transition that classifies mass culture from popular culture. What one needs to understand here is why is it that mass media disseminated culture so comprehensively that the boundary between high and low culture was dissolved.

Mass culture is mass produced, massively distributed and marketed with a capitalist intention of making profit. Popular culture, is the culture that emerges as a result of mass culture. Let us try to understand this through a contemporary example. When music is produced on an industrial scale and distributed through several apps like Gaana, Spotify, YouTube, Wynk or Apple Music, it remains a part of mass culture, which is being marketed to the customers with a profit and loss logic. But, when some particular artist or song starts trending or rises to the top as a result of mass consumption, then this consequence indicates towards popular culture. Thus, mass culture runs on the lines of capitalism and produces its products for mass consumption; and popular culture is that what is consumed by the majority of the audience is not necessarily market driven.

Activity 2

As a student of sociology, you must remain aware of what product of culture do you consume and also think of its relevance in the larger whole of the culture industry. Try to explore your everyday life from the lens of mass and popular culture and try to develop a classification of products, habits, behaviour, attitudes and perspectives - all that makes you a cultural being. Try to see what comes across as mass culture and what remains.

Discuss your observation with your friends at the study centre and try to learn from each other's examples.

So, the culture that is widely distributed by mass media, using latest technology and tools of mass production with an objective of maximising profit, is known as mass culture. The tools of mass distribution like radio, films, TV, ads and internet determine which components of culture could be popularised. All the population get equal exposure to these tools of distribution of mass culture. This leads to the emergence of popular culture with majority of population popularising a particular content. For instance: the popularity of the Bahubali films and the excitement around the question, “Bahubali ne Kattapakokyunmaara?!”(Why did Kattapa kill Bhaubali?!). This is a perfect example to understand popular culture emerging from mass consumption of mass culture. However, both mass culture and popular culture pervade life today under the global overarching influences of capitalism, both doing their part in ensuring the duality of production and consumption.

Going by the discussion so far, one may conclude that culture that is produced within an industrial algorithm of profit and loss is known as mass culture. And consequently, culture based industries are associated with cultural activities that are distributed to a mass audience by technological means, are commercially viable and deal with clearly identifiable cultural commodities, e.g. books, films, videos, records etc.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) Prior to nineteenth century, which classification of culture was dominant? Explain with examples

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.....

2) Cite the development that led to disappearance of classification between high and low.

.....
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- 3) The term ‘folk culture’ was replaced by which of the following terms in the nineteenth century:
- a) Mass Culture
 - b) Low Culture
 - c) Popular Culture
 - d) High Culture
- 4) What is the difference between popular culture and mass culture?

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.....

7.4 FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND CULTURE INDUSTRY

It's important to understand the socio-political context to the mass production of culture that was facilitated by emerging media. Capitalism, as you have well understood by now was system designed for profit and one of its most virulent critique was Karl Marx among others. Marx hope that the conditions would emerge which would make the workers conscious of their marginal subjugated state and therefore would resist the oppressive, all-encompassing capitalist system. However, such situation did not arise which made people break out the false consciousness of the capitalist system. Furthermore, the industrialised Europe saw the rise of Fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany and Italy which made one question the liberation potential of progress, science and development. Mass culture or culture industry in the words of Adorno and Horkheimer undermine the possibility of resistance and made people willing subjects of rising consumerism, giving an added dimension to the ways capitalism operated. Adorno and Horkheimer, among others who belonged to the Frankfurt School were strong critiques of mass culture.

In the sections below we take a look at the Frankfurt School and its critical thinking that tries to understand contemporary culture. We touch upon Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas on culture Industry briefly as we have a whole unit devoted to their thinking in the subsequent units.

7.4.1 The Frankfurt School

The ‘Frankfurt School’ was associated with the Institute for Social Research (Institut fur Socialforschung) established at the Frankfurt University in the late 1920s. It studied contemporary society drawing inspiration from the theories of Karl Marx and his critique of capitalism and the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud. You have already read about Marx in other Units and would be familiar with his work. The renowned scholars of the Frankfurt School were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Eric Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and JurgenHabermas. The rise of Fascism and the Nazis under Hitler in Germany in the 1930s created a dangerous situation for these scholars who were mostly radical Jewish intellectuals. They therefore left Germany and relocated in the

U.S.A where they continued with their researches and produced some very important works. The Institute became affiliated to Columbia University. They turned their lens towards understanding contemporary capitalism and consumerism and the negative impact it had on human freedom. The United States in the 1950s and 1960s was a fertile ground for their studies on advanced industrial societies as it embodied the features of consumerism, consumption, sway of mass media and conservatism.

Under the leadership of Max Horkheimer who took over as its Director in 1930, psychoanalytical perspectives of Sigmund Freud and Marxian materialism were integrated in order to make sense of complex social and political issues and the dynamics of working class struggles. They revised and reinterpreted the classical theories of Marx, Weber, Freud, Nietzsche and others. Kellner observes that they updated Marxian theory and studied how new stages of capitalism and fascism emerged. They also developed further Max Weber's ideas of rationalisation and Nietzsche's critique of mass culture and the decline of individuality. The Frankfurt School critical analysis was referred to as critical theory also.

Critical theory aims at an interdisciplinary understanding of society and social processes by highlighting interconnections between the economic, political, cultural and social realms of society. Critical theorists made important contributions towards understanding advanced capitalist societies of the West and how they enforced conformity. They studied the role of mass communication and culture, science and technology, market, commodities and consumption in the organization of society. They observed how 'mass society' undermined individuality and freedom of the individual and the negative impact on collective action by the working classes and their participation in the democratic process. They could clearly visualise how the 'culture industry' and mass media would keep the populace in control and enforce conformity with the dominant ideology, namely, consumerist capitalism. Herbert Marcuse was probably the most popular figure of the Frankfurt School and became the inspirational figure for the students' movement of the 1960s which protested against the American involvement in the Vietnam War. The students' movement also rebelled against the conservative values embodied in family, church and state.

One of the core ideas of critical theory is that of 'immanent critique', a critique that works from within the categories of existing thought and exposes their contradictions; paving the way for new radical ideas. During an era when fascism, communism and other totalitarian regimes were undermining individual freedoms and human rights, the ideas of freedom, equality, justice born during the Enlightenment could be used as norms against which to evaluate and critique society using its own ideals and values. The contradiction of the seemingly liberating modern era, where people have choices and freedom are brought most pertinently and incisively by Adorno and Horkheimer by their use of the term Culture Industry.

7.4.2 Culture Industry

Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer through their magnum opus *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), concretised the idea of culture industry. The term culture industry signifies the process of the industrialisation of mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives which drive such a system. Thus, one may understand that in the debates on culture industry, the very idea of culture itself assumes a different connotation. In this context, the term culture corresponds to an aesthetic realm, which is ought to remain distinguished from the mundane everyday activities. Used in this sense then culture would be a creative endeavour that which is above the ordinary. Something one appreciates in special settings, may be in gallery, in a cathedral or so on. One definitely does not associate this cultural expression with mass production; something that is produced at an industrial level. By deliberately juxtaposing the idea of mass production with creative pursuit of culture, Adorno and Horkheimer draw our attention to the contradiction of cultural production in our contemporary times.

But when culture gets imbued with the adulterated features of populism forced upon it by the capitalist logic of media industry, it results in culture industry. This gives rise to a culture which is no longer aesthetically elevated rather is a massified or commercialised version of culture. The culture, hence produced becomes tied to the everyday banal activities. David Chaney has, for instance, written about the Departmental Store as a cultural form. In the same vein - cricket industry, keep fit industry, beauty industry, tourism industry, leisure industry, wedding industry and many more everyday activities fall within the domain of popular culture and inherently are commercial ventures would suitably find its place under the broad category of culture industry.

Through the idea of culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer thus, point out that this industry like mass production of culture by mass media restrict the society of its capacity to nourish freedom and individuality. These culture industries aim to produce safe, standardised products in order to satisfy the large demands of the capitalist economy and at the cost of the quality of the product. They believed that science, scientific reason and technology were part and parcel of existing processes of production and social domination, and thus should be mistrusted.

With the rise of media industry, Adorno and Horkheimer observed that capitalists used the various media for controlling individual consciousness. The profit oriented sellers, do not have any larger human goals. For example, the motive for a large food company is to sell its product to the largest number of people then it is not concerned about environment sustainability or health. As a result, cultural products became commodities and the mass culture ushered in as a mix of profit motive, market, technology in the guise of catering to mass' needs. The cultural forms it propagates must, therefore, be compatible with this aim. Advertising or modern media is used to lull, convince people into pursuing pleasure above all else. The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive into

cultural items. Thus, they call culture industry as a devise of mass deception. The culture industry produces for mass consumption and significantly contributes to the determination of that consumption. The consumers simply have no sovereignty of their own. Those with leisure have to accept what the culture manufacturers offer them. This robs the consumers of their intuitive function. There is nothing left for the consumers, to classify, the producers of culture industry have done it for them.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) How did Adorno and Horkheimer view culture?

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2) Which of the following developments led to the rise of Culture Industry:

- a) World War II
- b) Industrial Revolution
- c) Mass Media
- d) Popular Culture

3) What impact did mass media have on culture? Explain with the help of two examples.

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4) What is the ultimate objective of the culture industry? And, what impact does it have on the consumers?

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7.5 MASS CULTURE: OTHER CRITIQUES

While Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the mass culture, as discussed in the previous section of the Unit, can be understood as drawing its inspiration from Marxian critique of capitalism and its role in creating false consciousness, their critique of mass culture initiated an inclination within the Frankfurt School to critically engage with culture through their discussion on different social elements. Let us discuss the critique of mass culture, as it came from the mentioned theorists of the Frankfurt School very briefly, as some of the units in these course will discuss some of these theorist in detail. We will also have a brief understanding of Nietzsche’s ideas and critique of Mass culture which inspired many of the scholars whom we talked about. “Nietzsche carried out the first sustained critique of massculture, seeing it as central to modern social reproduction processes and especially what he saw as the distinctive features of modern societies: massification and levelling out of individuality, creating herd societies and mediocrity” Kellner, 1999:79).

7.5.1 Herbert Marcuse

Herbert Marcuse focus remains on how mass media and other modern technologies have replaced the traditional tools of economic and political administration as what he calls as “the new form of control”. The role of the mass media in the modern society is to contain and stabilise the individuals in the framework set for the consumer society. Such a control mechanism, puts an individual into a one-dimensional society, where his critical thinking to look for alternatives is sabotaged by the newer technologies. You will read more about Marcuse’s views on this aspect of mass culture in our subsequent unit.

7.5.2 Erich Fromm

Culture in the twentieth century, according to Fromm, is advanced by capitalists and their advertising, which socialises consumers to become “homo consumens”, who are motivated to consume more and more. Even in the 21st century, culture still remains capitalist consumer culture. However, in this period the consumers are increasingly becoming a part of the culture they consume. So for instance, let us try to understand this through few contemporary examples: We may self-assemble the furniture, that we buy after being taught by the mass media that it is in trend. Similarly, we may create YouTube content of our own, while consuming digital content from several other sources. This makes us what Fromm called as “prosumers” or the producing consumers. This he observes as the social character of consumption, where culture comes in an interactive relationship with the economy.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) was a German philosopher, whose work has exerted a profound influence on modern scholars. His body of work touched a wide range of topics, including art, music, history, culture, science, religion tragedy and so on. His thoughts on Mass culture are most pertinent to our unit here so we will discuss very briefly Nietzsche’s ideas on mass culture.

Nitzsche saw modernity as a formless amalgamation of fragmentary competing styles, ideas, and works and assailed the excessive rationalism, egotistical individualism, shallow optimism, homegenisation and fragmentation individualism, shallow optimism, homogenisation, and fragmentation as characteristic of modern culture. Nietzsche believed that modern man has nothing he truly creates or possesses; he, in fact, assimilates factual knowledge which does nothing to transform lives. Mass culture, for Nietzsche, is religion, press, beer and nationalism; things that stupefy you and produces mediocre culture and individuals. Nietzsche saw both the modern state and society as leveling individuals, producing mediocrity cultural backwardness, as well as generating mass hysteria such as nationalism. He especially thought that the press and mass culture were forces of degeneration and mediocrity, focusing attention on the trivial, superfluous, and sensational, and creating homogenisation and conformity.

7.5.3 Jurgen Habermas

Jurgen Habermas too was more concerned about the culture produced on a massive scale, rather than the culture produced by the masses. He calls it as a liberal bourgeois culture, which in no way is intended towards making the producers and consumers as identical. Mass culture addresses the masses only as consumers and its anonymous mode of production makes mass culture into a medium which largely serves what he classifies as private property, as opposed to the public sphere. As a result of this, neither does the consumers of mass culture evolve into an active class, as envisioned by Marx, nor do they remain sovereign as they /we, prior to the access to mass culture. They dissolve into an array of groups administered only from the outside. Taking this argument forward, Jurgen Habermas ties it to the idea of public sphere, in which he points out that before the spread of mass culture, the public sphere was liberal in nature, and public opinion was formed as a result of discussions and debates. But in a society of mass-culture, the relation of the individual to the public sphere has been ruptured, and opinion and consent are now manipulated and manufactured by the intervention of mass media. An idea that resonates with the culture industry, as discussed in the previous section.

7.5.4 Leo Lowenthal

Making a case for the institutional totality of culture, Lowenthal argues that culture gets strongly linked to the economic processes. He believed that the relations of production remain interspersed with the relations of authority, wherein the former had more control over the latter. The new culture industry that came up in the twentieth century, led to stereotyping of culture with the loss of individual experience. Such a cultural reproduction, in his understanding also paved for the commodification of the social world. With a standardised system of consciousness emerging as a result of this trend, individual imagination and capabilities to experience were further locked in the hands of those at the helm of the economic processes.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Who of the following said that mass culture is inauthentic, manipulative and unsatisfying:
 - a. F. R. Leavis
 - b. Herbert Marcuse
 - c. Jurgen Habermas
 - d. T. S. Eliot
- 2) According to Habermas Public Sphere was liberal in nature and public opinion was formed as result of discussions and debates. - True or False.

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3) What is the critique of liberal bourgeois culture or the mass culture, according to Jurgen Habermas?

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4) How did Herbert Marcuse critique mass culture?

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5) What did Erich Fromm mean by 'Homo Consumens' while presenting his critique of mass culture?

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6) How did Lowenthal contribute in critiquing mass culture?

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7.7 LET US SUM UP

Even though there can be no one particular definition of the culture, it broadly refers to the values, practices, attitudes, beliefs, morals that an individual acquires socially by the virtue of being a member of particular social group. Culture is associated with a set of symbols, which are loaded with value as a part of that society. Till the nineteenth century, culture was seen as divided between the extremities of high and low. The high culture referred to the cultural set of the elites with a taste for refined arts, music, sports, clothing and all related aspects of lifestyle. And the low culture was basically no culture at all, which was associated with the masses. However, after the emergence of mass media followed by rapid industrialisation and advancement in science and technology, high culture debunked the confines of the elites and was disseminated amongst the masses through the tools of media like radio, TV, films, newspaper and advertising. The cultural homogenisation, which was thus initiated could be seen as intensifying around us with the arrival of internet and at an exasperating pace with the ever-expanding reach of the social media. The culture, as produced by mass media, was seen by the critiques as mass culture, who felt uncomfortable when the high culture was infiltrated by the populism of the masses. They looked at culture as something sacrosanct and thus as distinct from the mundane everydayness of life. But, when mass culture was making a headway into the lives of the masses such thinkers from across the array of disciplines, like sociology, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics amongst others started critiquing the process. They looked at mass culture as culture produced with a capitalist logic of profit maximisation without any consideration of the quality of the set of values being produced. Thus, they were in turn critiquing the capitalist basis of the modern societies using mass culture as their unit of analysis.

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7.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Culture according to Tylor, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.
- 2) Culture comprises inherited artefacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values -culture in reality is *sui generis* and must be studied as such.
- 3) The four characteristics of culture, according to anthropologist William A. Haviland are:
 - Culture is socially learnt by an individual and it is not acquired naturally by birth.

- In a given society culture is held commonly by a group of people.
- Culture is also characterised by a certain set of symbols to which certain value is attached, for instance: an object of worship, texts, rituals, artefacts and images among others.
- Culture is something that evolves over a period of time.

4) d.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Prior to the nineteenth century, culture was divided into two extremities - high culture or the elite culture and low culture or folk culture. While the elements of high culture included performing and visual arts, like painting, sculpture, music and literature, the elements of folk culture included folk tales, cultural dances, ethnic wear, street talks among others.
- 2) With the emergence of mass media and industrial revolution, the margins between the high and the low categories of culture were blurred.
- 3) c.
- 4) Mass cultural is mass produced, massively distributed and marketed with a capitalist intention of making profit. Popular culture, is the culture that emerges as a result of mass culture. The mass culture runs on the lines of capitalism and produces its products for mass consumption; and popular culture is that what is consumed by the majority of the audience.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Adorno and Horkheimer did not want culture to come out of the monopoly of the elites, as they believed that culture should remain beyond the everyday activities of the masses. It should remain a matter of indulgence. The hegemony of high culture should keep existing over its folk counterpart. They believed that the elite culture when produced in bulk by the media industry leads to the emergence of culture industry.
- 2) c.
- 3) Mass media produces culture at mass scale which restricts the society of its capacity to nourish freedom and individuality.
- 4) The culture industry produces for mass consumption and significantly contributes to the determination of that consumption. The consumers simply have no sovereignty of their own. Those with leisure have to accept what the culture manufacturers offer them.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) a.
- 2) True.
- 3) The mass culture, according to Habermas, intended towards making the producers and consumers as identical. But neither does the consumers of mass culture evolve into an active class, as envisioned by Marx, nor do they remain sovereign as they were, prior to the access to mass culture.
- 4) According to Marcuse, mass culture is a new form of control as a result of which consumer's critical thinking to look for alternatives is sabotaged.
- 5) Homo consumens are mass consumers who are motivated to consume more and more.
- 6) According to Lowenthal, the new culture industry that came up in the twentieth century, led to stereotyping of culture with the loss of individual experience.



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UNIT 8 THEODORE W. ADORNO: CULTURE INDUSTRY*

Structure

8.0 Objectives

8.1 Introduction

8.2 Adorno: Life and Times

8.2.1 Adorno: A Biographical Sketch

8.2.2 Cultural and Intellectual Context

8.3 Capitalism and Freedom

8.3.1 Capitalism and Commodities

8.3.2 Enlightenment and Freedom

8.4 Culture as Commodity

8.4.1 Culture Industry and Mass Culture

8.4.2 The Products and Process of Culture Industry

8.4.2.1 Standardisation

8.4.2.2 Pseudo-Individualisation

8.5 Let Us Sum Up

8.6 References

8.7 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the socio-political context of Adorno;
- Discuss the nature of commodity fetishism and capitalism;
- Grasp the fundamental elements of culture Industry;
- Relate Adorno's ideas to your contemporary entertainment industry.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In our previous unit we have tried to capture some of the central ideas that were offered by the Frankfurt School against mass culture, among others. In this unit we will be discussing Theodor. W. Adorno's works, in particular his writings that discuss the Culture Industry.

To fully grasp how the socio-political context which shaped Adorno's writings, we start the unit by understanding the times he lived in and his own life's

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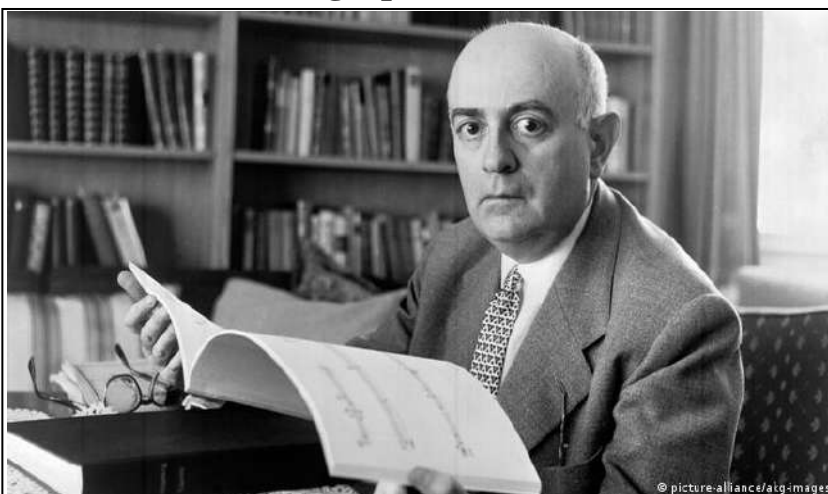
journey. Following this, the unit addresses some essential questions Adorno was addressing such as; why do human beings allow authoritarian regimes and structures and how is that they also become willing subjects of capitalist market regimes?

To answer these questions Adorno turns to Marx and takes by a critique of Enlightenment which was supposed to offer freedom to individuals but it has failed to deliver its promise. We start by delineating two aspects of Adorno's foundational ideas: one which extends Marx's concept of commodity fetishism in the context of affluent consumer society of Post WW II, particularly America. And the second is questioning the enlightenment project. Enlightenment, with its scientific progress instead of liberating human beings enslaved human being. Adorno like other critical theorists, argued that capitalist societies of the West produced conformity, not through coercion but willingly. Adorno studied the role of mass communication and culture and observed how 'mass society' undermined individuality and freedom of the individual and in turn had a negative impact on collective action by the working classes and their participation in the democratic process. The subsequent section deals with the main ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer's work on culture industry.

8.2 ADORNO: LIFE AND TIMES

Adorno is considered one of the foremost philosophers of the 20th Century. His collected works comprise some twenty-three volumes. He wrote on range of themes and subjects, which included philosophical analysis, on music- most notably on jazz, a critical study of astrology for Los Angeles Times etc. Although he wrote on a wide range of subjects, his central concern was human suffering—especially modernity's effects upon the human condition. In trying to understand the writings of this complex philosopher and critique of modernity, one can begin by asking oneself what are his motivations, his life's journey and intellectual influences that inform his writing. We shall have a brief look at his biographical sketch and the various intellectual influences in the sub sections below.

8.2.1 Adorno: A Biographical Sketch



(Pic credit : <https://static.dw.com>)

Theodor
Wiesengrund
Adorno was
born in 1903 in
Frankfurt,
Germany to
relatively
affluent parents
in central
Germany. His
mother Maria
Calvelli-
Adorno della

Piana was a gifted singer, of Italian descent, and his father was a Jewish wine merchant. Adorno grew up with an interest in music, due to his mother and aunts, and could play Beethoven's pieces on the piano at the age of 12 years.

Adorno was musically gifted child who in early 1920 studied music under Alban Berg in Vienna and his talent was recognised by the music greats like Berg and Schoenberg. However, in the late 1920 he joined University of Frankfurt as a faculty where he devoted his time to studying and teaching philosophy.

Adorno's Jewish heritage forced him to seek exile from Nazi Germany, this state of exile was to have deep impact on his life and thinking and which is reflected in his writings. Adorno moved to England in 1934, in the wake of the 'Nazi' oppression of the Jews. He registered as a doctoral student at Merton College, Oxford and then, as a member of the University of Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research, in New York and eventually moving to Southern California. In the US, he worked at 'Princeton' (1938–1941). He later got involved in the 'Research Project on Social Discrimination' at the 'University of California, Berkeley' (1941–1948).

In 1949, Adorno returned to the 'University of Frankfurt' and co-founded the 'Institute for Social Research.' and where he was the professor of philosophy and sociology. He also re-energised the 'Frankfurt School' which was known for its critical thinking, especially on capitalist mass culture. The various scholars who gathered at the Institute such as Herbert Marcuse 1898-1979 (about whom you will learn in the next unit) Mark Horkheimer 1895-1973 Walter Benjamin,1892-1940 Erich From 1900-1980 were grappling with the issues pertaining to the modern industrial capitalist society. Like Karl Marx whose ideas they followed, the critical theorists were also interested to understand the social, political and economic conditions that would make freedom from oppressive structures possible for human beings. The societal conditions of early and mid 20th century Western Europe and North America made them question the liberating possibilities of enlightenment.

8.2.2 The Cultural and Intellectual Context

The Frankfurt School was started in 1923 and was subsequently closed down during the Nazi regime in Germany. Many of the scholars associated with institution had to escape from the persecution of intellectuals in Nazi Germany and took refuge in United States of America. The Frankfurt school focused intently on technology and culture, indicating how technology was becoming both a major force of production and formative mode of social organisation and control. In the realm of culture, technology produced mass culture that habituated individuals to conform to the dominant patterns of thought and behavior, and thus provided powerful instruments of social control and domination.

Adorno and Horkheimer another member of the Frankfurt School, who later collaborated with, observed the use of technology In Nazi Germany both in war fare and in the concentration camps where modern technology and science was deployed to kill Jews in mass scale. They also witnessed the use of broadcast technology in entertainment industry of cinema, radio, newspaper, magazines and advertisement which aided capitalist consumerist oriented market. In both these

cases people seem to willingly accept the dominating power of the authoritarian regime like Nazism or the compelling power of advertisement and consumerism.

Frankfurt School, as we mentioned in our previous unit, was influenced greatly by Marxist ideas. However, the critical school wanted to extend Marx's ideas to contemporary society of 20th century Post World War affluent society. Karl Marx suggested and hoped that capitalism will give way under the force of its own contradictions and the 'revolution of the proletariat' and that it would usher in a new phase of communism; however this did not happen. Capitalist societies of the West had become affluent and seemed to have solved the problems of hunger and want; the working-class seemed to be thoroughly integrated in it and seemed to have lost its revolutionary potential. Social control was not by force but rather by promoting 'false needs' for more and more consumption. In order to fulfil these needs, human beings would cooperate with the system, and not question or challenge it. It was important for Adorno to understand the context that produces a consciousness which was different from the consciousness that was specific to late 19th century society which Marx was talking about.

Let us look at Adorno's central ideas to understand better what he and Horkheimer mean by culture industry.

8.3 CAPITALISM AND FREEDOM

They could clearly visualise how the 'culture industry' and mass media would keep the populace in control and enforce conformity with the dominant ideology, namely, consumerist capitalism. For Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), a member of the Frankfurt School of Critical theory, culture was a serious matter. Culture, according to him, was central to the human condition and as such he argued that culture ought to be reflective of society. Adorno - along with Horkheimer - considered the question of culture carefully because they felt that culture could speak about the nature of society itself. Such a view emerges from their claim that society and culture were not to be treated as two distinct elements but to be seen in totality.

8.3.1 Capitalism and Commodities

As we mentioned earlier, the Frankfurt School was influenced by Karl Marx's thesis on capitalism but wanted to examine his ideas in the light of contemporary culture of mass production. Frankfurt School's critique of capitalism was not just as an economic system but also an ideological one that sustains it. An important concept elaborated by Marx is the notion of commodity fetishism; where commodities are treated as neutral objects. The value that commodities have seem to emanate from itself. The attribution of value to a commodity that does not intrinsically have it, in fact hides the social relations and production processes that have gone into the making of the commodity; especially the human relations which are part of the production process. We understand what we can do with the commodity that is its use value but we do not get to see the various elements that

have given value to the commodity. For instance when we buy a bar of chocolate, we of course enjoy it, but rarely do we know that chocolate comes from cocoa bean sourced from either central Africa or South America where often child labour is employed in the harvesting and production of it. Marx believes that the lack of transparency on the actual production process is a socially important form of mystification; the market society erases the relations of domination and exploitation on which it depends.

Adorno and Horkheimer, like others of the Frankfurt School ask why is that human beings do not seem to not only realise the real exploitative conditions that go into capitalist production but there seems to be very little resistance to such market-oriented mass production. They experienced this in United States' affluence and market oriented consumptive lifestyles during their time there. Adorno and Horkheimer also experienced fascism in Germany, as we mentioned earlier, where people accepted authoritarian regime; such as the Nazism under Hitler willingly, believing that is good for them? Coercion often makes people follow rules, regulations or oppressive systems but Adorno found that people also willingly give into oppressive systems, whether it is capitalism which is exploitative and homogenising or totalitarian regimes. To delve deeper into these questions they turned to Freud and psychoanalysis. Alongside this the Frankfurt School in general and Adorno among them began to question the promise of enlightenment as project which offered dignity and freedom to humankind.

8.3.2 Enlightenment and Freedom

Central to Adorno and Horkheimer's development of the concept of the Culture Industry was the notion that enlightenment, which allowed for a technical domination over nature with advances in science and technology have become mechanism for control; whether they are used for warfare or for industrial and mass production of goods or culture. They cite how technology was used for genocide in Nazi Concentration Camps, they also point to the corporate production of entertainment—the movies, radio etc.

Box 8.1

Enlightenment

Enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. This movement was preceded by scientific revolution and the French Revolution where the monarchy was overthrown by the people and the idea of republic had taken root, along with the ideas of freedom and fraternity. Separation between church and state was sought as an ideal. The enlightenment included range ideas such as human and individual freedom and happiness, the pursuit of knowledge through reason and observation. These ideas found resonances across the globe.

Adorno and Horkheimer urge that we need to address the question as to why inequality, hunger and other forms of human sufferings persist despite advances in science and technology that is supposed to deliver us from these conditions. The root cause, Adorno says, lies in how capitalist relations of production have come to dominate society as a whole, leading to extreme inequality, although this inequality has become deceptive. As people are led to believe that they have choice and freedom they can buy goods, and consume objects of desire and pleasure as long as they work hard and have the money to buy. This deception that you have choice and individuality is cleverly deployed by advertisements and such other narratives through various new technologies of mass media.

This deception works to prevent the development of an autonomous consciousness amongst individuals. Marx believed the workers will eventually rise up against capitalist system for the extreme inequalities it would generate and therefore create its own contradictions. But Marx proved wrong in post-WW II America where consumption that was mass produced by corporations lulled them into a consumerist paradise and prevented a disruption of the social order that was based on the subordination of the working classes. In creating its standardised cultural products that at once brought pleasure but dulled critique, it prevented individuals from thinking and judging for themselves. However an autonomous consciousness and freedom of the individual are critical conditions needed for the survival of a democracy. For political, economic and social freedom to exist therefore, cultural freedom must exist too. For Adorno therefore, if a society was premised on freedom then its culture would reflect the promise of freedom and would enable autonomous individuals to develop. If, however, this is not the case, and we instead find ourselves at a time when society itself is under repression and freedom is limited, then culture will reflect this. Culture Industry was an essay that Adorno and Horkheimer initially wrote as part of their work *Dialectics of Enlightenment*; their concern which underscores their life's work emerges here when they consider the possibility that enlightenment in society is integrally linked to the question of culture.

Adorno's position on culture was reflective of the political times he was living through (the book published in 1944 comes at a time when Nazism in Germany still reigned), but his work was also particularly of interest because it was indicative of the constraints that society - and by extension culture - were suffering under the process of capitalism. It is in light of this that he carefully stipulates on what he terms as mass culture.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) Why did Adorno and Horkheimer escape Germany?

.....
.....

2) What is meant by commodity fetishism?

.....
.....
.....

8.4 CULTURE AS COMMODITY

For Adorno and Horkheimer culture industry involves commodification of art. Whenever one thought of art one thought of creative process that has, perhaps a higher purpose or certain use value. But like commodities, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, art or culture as such became commodified. Many art collectors buy art for investment purposes, an artist is considered successful if he has managed to sell his art work for high price. Culture expression which are not part of the exchange value that is purely for the purpose selling but may be a cultural expression to express inequality or resistance to oppression however can also be subjected to the market driven capitalist logic where selling for the largest number people becomes the crucial thing. When Adorno and Horkheimer were talking of culture industry they were referring to the entertainment industry in particular, which they happen to witness first hand while they were in exile in the USA .

8.4.1 Culture Industry and Mass Culture

When Adorno and Horkheimer talk of culture industry they are referring to standardised cultural corporation produced creations —films, radio programmes, magazines, etc. They argue that consumption of these turns the mass society into passive, unimaginative , non-creative, compliant beings. Mass communication technologies makes it all the more pervasive, this is so true of the present age where there is a widespread use of various digital technologies that facilitate the entertainment industries. No matter how poor or difficult the circumstances the pursuit of pleasure offered by the steady stream of mindless entertainment renders one complacent and passive, says Adorno. The danger of capitalist ideological framework is that it creates false sense of satisfaction and individual choices and opportunities and takes the attention away from the structural inequalities. Take for instances shows which offer opportunities to shine and achieve monetary success such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*; a global franchise which has Indian equivalent in *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. The ‘reality’ setting provided and the supposed escape from the mundane has an appeal that touches not just the deprived but general populace alike. In that sense mass culture creates such cultural products that appeal to a large number of people. Unlike the Marxist notion of polarisation of working class and the wealthy, where each held a separate domain, the consumption of mass produced entertainment erode the distinction between the two classes, both are under the spell of mass entertainment which hides the material and structural inequities,

according to Adorno. Also, Adorno and Horkheimer choose the term culture industry over mass culture, as the common understanding often seems think of mass culture as spontaneous expressions of masses.

In a later essay that Adorno published titled 'The Culture Industry Reconsidered' he explains why he moved away from the term mass culture to culture industry. He writes,

“ 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 culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular culture” (The Culture Industry Reconsidered, 2012, p.98)

What is instructive is that Adorno clearly distinguishes mass culture from popular culture. He is in other words not merely referring to culture that enjoys a wide dissemination particularly amongst the more widespread classes. Rather he is indicating that the nature of culture has shifted. He finds the term culture industry useful in this regard because it clarifies what has changed about the nature of culture; culture now has taken the form of a commodity. It is tied to a purpose, whereas the true nature of art and culture should tend against purposiveness, it should lend itself to a reflection of the human condition. Instead, the culture industry now “transfers the profit motive to cultural forms” (Adorno, The Culture Industry Reconsidered), it turns aspects of culture which should highlight the conflicts and contradictions of the human condition into products that can instead be purchased to dissipate the very tensions that it ought to reflect.

Adorno and Horkheimer especially perceived mass-produced culture industry as dangerous to the more technically and intellectually difficult high arts, as the culture industry is the cultivation of false psychological needs that can only be met and satisfied by the products of capitalism; In contrast, true psychological needs are freedom, creativity, and genuine happiness, which Herbert Marcuse also refers to, which you shall read in your next unit.

Further, culture starts imitating commodities. Mass production and standardisation of it appear to be the norm in the production of culture. Consider for instance the formula film, with its standardised story line. The plot or the formula remains the same, the context shifts- whether it be a college romance, or a romantic story set in the bustle of a city or the quiet settings of a village. There exist the boy and the girl, a villain in the form of a strict unwilling family or father or an external force of some kind, and the happy resolution of the conflict. Nothing changes, it all remains the same. It is this standardisation of culture that Adorno was anxious about; in its depiction of conflict and its resolution it fulfilled two important tasks that highlighted its quality as a product of the culture industry. One, it reduces conflict and brings it to the level of the banal; the conflict represented in the culture industry is not reflective of the contradictions of the times. It creates an individual villain and does not let us

view the system or structures as a problem and resolves these conflicts in a way that is rarely imaginable in the real world. Is the father of the heroine a villain in stopping her from running away or is the system of patriarchy that pushes her to seek his permission to lead her independent life? The second is that it represents culture as being objective and hollows out the division between empirical reality and culture as represented through art. In doing so it begs for itself to be considered true and objective- an illusion of truth, so to speak, is created.

8.4.2 The Products and Process of the Culture Industry

Adorno urges the readers to not take the term culture industry in the literal sense. The reason why the word industry is used is to refer to the process of production in an industrial factory where there is standardisation and where rational production processes are used furthermore they are atomised. Each element is put together by several units and subunits. The standardisation is achieved so as to be able to sell to the largest audience. Look at how movie or music industry is all about sales. In the culture industry, Adorno argues (borrowing from Marxist theory), the standardised products of culture are reduced to their exchange value instead of their use value.

He claims:

“Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself. For consumers the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish—the social valuation, which they mistake for the merit of works of art— becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002:3).

Discussions around the cost of works of art, for instance, as indicative of whether they are good or not, reflect how art has been transformed into a commodity in the culture industry. In such conditions, according to Adorno, high art is reduced to its commodity form through claims of value, while art emerging from the lower rungs of society which have the potential to push for resistance to the system are severely constrained by the force of the culture industry. Take for example hip-hop or rap music, which emerged in the streets and the black neighbourhoods of US. This musical form which emerged organically from the African American people often as an expression of their marginalised lives and resistance thereof, however, soon became fully integrated into the commercial format of the culture industry.

8.4.2.1 Standardisation

The essential characteristic of the culture industry is repetition argue Adorno and Horkheimer. Unlike “serious music” popular music is all about standardisation, as early as 1936, in his essay on Jazz, Adorno points out this essential feature of popular music, even where there is apparent circumventing of standardisation the formulaic elements of which music will have mass appeal will be in place. The different parts of a standardised music have substitutability which is not possible

in serious music. Serious music is a “concrete totality”; “every detail derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece” if a detail is omitted, “all is lost.”(Adorno, 1941:19)

The standardisation of the cultural product leads to the standardisation of the audience. “Man as a member of a species has been made a reality by the culture industry. Now any person signifies only those attributes by which he can replace everybody else; he is interchangeable.” (Adorno, 1947: 147) The standardised products produce gratification for the masses as well as enable order to prevail. In doing so the masses, for whom the products of the culture industry exist, are not the subject but the object itself. The motive of the production of cultural products is predetermined, it serves to provide instant gratification, fun and a sense of escape from the conflict and contradiction ridden social conditions that individuals find themselves in. Adorno invokes the Distraction Thesis. “Distraction” is a correlate of capitalism; this mode of production, “which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its ‘non-productive’ correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all” (Adorno: 1941, 37-38).

8.4.2.2 Pseudo-individualisation

In order to be mass marketed, “a song-hit must have at least one feature by which it can be distinguished from any other, and yet possess the complete conventionality and triviality of all others.” (Ibid: 17). Without pseudo-individualisation, what the marketing industry calls “product differentiation,” the song could not be successfully marketed. Without standardisation, it could not be “sold automatically, without requiring any effort on the part of the customer;” it could not be mass-marketed at all (ibid).

Activity 1

Watch some soap operas from Indian Television; such as the genre of *Saas Bahu* (Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law) Serials. And delineate the various elements that make them popular. How are the different serials similar and different? What makes them standardised and what makes them pseudo-individualised? Share your ideas with your fellow learners at the study centre.

In this regard, the consumers of such products, the masses, are likely aware of the deception at work- yet he argues they buy into it. If it grants them a momentary pleasure, they willingly consume the products because it would appear to them as their life would be more tolerable for it. In a life monopolised by the forces limiting societal freedom, Adorno argues, people willingly give in to the charms of the culture industry because they “know or suspect that this is where they are taught the mores they will surely need as their passport in a monopolised life.” (The Culture Industry Reconsidered, 2012: 92). The role of celebrities and ‘heart-throbs’ is critical in the culture industry, to propagate the notion of a certain way

of life and being, which gives in to commodification completely. Our attempts to dress, act and talk like famous personalities are all borne from our complete immersion in the culture industry. Is there a possibility then for an autonomous consciousness to develop under such conditions?

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) What do Adorno and Horkheimer mean by “culture Industry”?

.....
.....
.....

2) What is distraction thesis according to Adorno?

.....
.....
.....

8.5 LET US SUM UP

We started the unit by locating Adorno in the socio-political context of his time. As you can see his life’s trajectory, his experiences and his many intellectual influences shaped much of his writing. Adorno is influenced by Karl Marx’s ideas which he extends to the contemporary culture. It was important therefore to have a brief discussion on commodity fetishism. It was also important that unlike many traditional Marxist who believed in the possibilities offered by science and enlightenment, Adorno questioned and critiqued the enlightenment project of freedom in the light of how technology has become means of subjugation of society, whether willingly through deception or through coercion.

The culture Industry is the new form of deception or false consciousness that people willingly engage in.

8.6 REFERENCES

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8.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Theodore W. Adorno:
Culture Industry

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Adorno's Jewish heritage forced him to seek exile from Nazi Germany, the Nazism under Hitler persecuted Jewish community in large numbers, Many Jews had to flee Germany in this period. This state exile was to have deep impact on his life and thinking and which is reflected in his writings.
- 2) Commodity fetishism is when commodities are treated as neutral objects. The value that commodities have seem to emanate from the commodity itself. The attribution of value to a commodity that does not intrinsically have it in fact hides the social relations and production processes that have gone into the making of the commodity; especially the human relations which are part of the production process. We understand what we can do with the commodity that is its use value but we do not get to see the various elements that have given value to the commodity. For instance, when we buy a bar of chocolate, we of course enjoy it but rarely do we know that chocolate comes from cocoa bean sourced from either in central Africa or South America where child labour is often employed in the harvesting and production of it.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) When Adorno and Horkheimer talk of culture industry they are referring to standardised cultural corporation produced creations —films, radio programmes, magazines, etc. culture now has taken the form of a commodity. It is tied to a purpose, whereas the true nature of art and culture should tend against purposiveness, it should lend itself to a reflection of the human condition. Instead, the culture industry now transfers the profit motive to cultural forms.
- 2) "Distraction" is an integral aspect of capitalism, where the anxieties, fears, loss etc. which emanate from real conditions of poverty or deprivation or social structures and relations are downplayed by escaping from these anxieties and realities by mindless entertainment that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all.

UNIT 9 HERBERT MARCUSE: ONE DIMENSIONAL MAN*

Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Frankfurt School and Critical Theory
- 9.3 Herbert Marcuse: Life and Times
- 9.4 One Dimensional Man: Major Themes
 - 9.4.1 New Forms of Social Control
 - 9.4.2 Growth of Consumerism and False Needs
 - 9.4.3 Totally Administered Society
 - 9.4.4 Possibilities for Change: 'The Great Refusal'
- 9.5 Relevance of One-Dimensional Man
- 9.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.7 References
- 9.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

9.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Narrate the major ideas of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory;
- Know about the life and major works of Herbert Marcuse;
- Discuss the key ideas of Marcuse with special reference to One Dimensional Man;
- Reflect upon the relevance of Marcuse's ideas in contemporary times.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit will discuss the contributions of Herbert Marcuse, one of the most significant social theorists of the 'New Left', with special reference to his famous book '*One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*'. The book was published in the year 1964, and it had a profound impact in academic and public spheres. In fact, it established Marcuse as a new age

*Contributed by Prof. Shubhangi Vaidya, School of Trans and Interdisciplinary Studies (SOITS), IGNOU

'guru' for a radical rebellious young generation in the 1960s. They actively resisted and protested against the materialistic and militaristic values of Western society and promoted a 'counter-culture' that defied the conservative value system of the older generation. The predictions of Karl Marx that capitalism would eventually break under the force of its own contradictions and the 'revolution of the proletariat' would usher in a new phase of communism were not coming true. Capitalist societies of the West had become affluent and seemed to have solved the problems of hunger and want; the working-class seemed to be thoroughly integrated in it and seemed to have lost its revolutionary potential. Social control was not by force but rather by promoting 'false needs' for more and more consumption. In order to fulfill these needs, human beings would cooperate with the system, and not question or challenge it. This created 'one-dimensional' humans and a one-dimensional society that was driven and governed by consumption and a 'flattening' of discourse; where conformity and compliance were prized and dissent and disagreement frowned upon.

To understand this text better, it is very important to situate it within its historical, sociological and philosophical context. Marcuse was one of the leading scholars of the 'Frankfurt School' of social theory which comprised of Marxist-oriented scholars who were attempting to revise and refine Marx's ideas in order to better understand the realities of advanced industrial societies (both capitalist and communist) in the 20th century. The rise of Fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany and Italy proved a major challenge to these scholars.

We will discuss 'critical theory' which the Frankfurt School is associated with, and then move on to discussing the life and work of Marcuse, with special reference to the text *One Dimensional Man* (ODM).

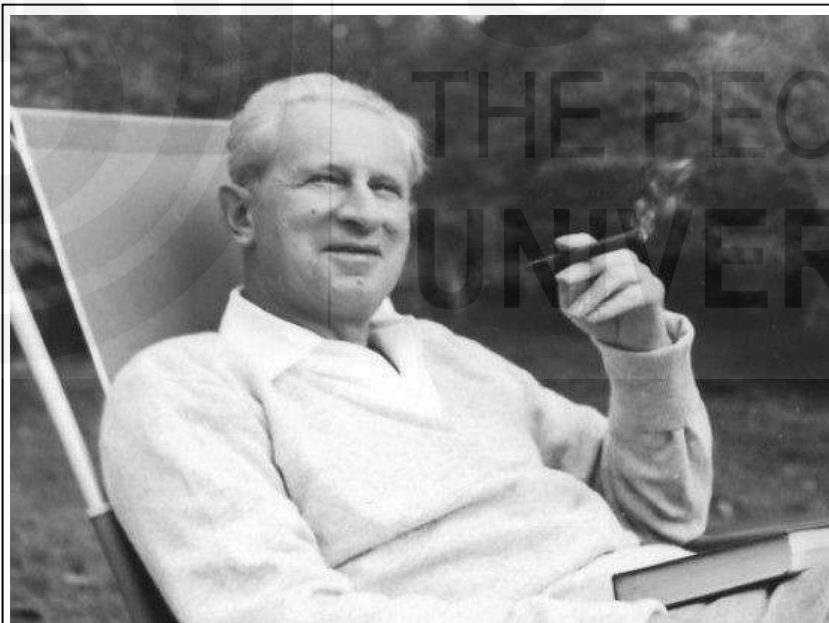
9.2 THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND CRITICAL THEORY

The Frankfurt School about which you have read before in a previous Unit, was involved in analysing and critiquing social processes and social relations and also the traditional concepts and theories used in social science. As mentioned earlier it aimed to take forward Marxist thought which was not adequate to understand the realities of the 20th century. Under the leadership of Max Horkheimer who took over as its Director in 1931, psychoanalytical perspectives of Sigmund Freud and Marxian materialism were integrated in order to make sense of complex social and political issues and the dynamics of working class struggles. The Frankfurt School scholars revised and reinterpreted the classical theories of Marx, Weber, Freud, Nietzsche and others. Kellner observes that they updated Marxian theory and studied how new stages of capitalism and fascism emerged. They also developed further Max Weber's ideas of rationalisation and Nietzsche's discussion on mass society and the decline of individuality.

Critical theory aims at an interdisciplinary understanding of society and social processes by highlighting interconnections between the economic, political, cultural and social realms of society. Critical theorists made important contributions towards understanding advanced capitalist societies of the West and how they enforced conformity. They studied the role of mass communication and culture, science and technology, market, commodities and consumption in the organisation of society. They observed how 'mass society' undermined individuality and freedom of the individual and the negative impact on collective action by the working classes and their participation in the democratic process. They could clearly visualise how the 'culture industry' and mass media would keep the populace in control and enforce conformity with the dominant ideology, namely, consumerist capitalism. Herbert Marcuse was probably the most popular figure of the Frankfurt School and became the inspirational figure for the students' movement of the 1960s which protested against the American involvement in the Vietnam War. The students' movement also rebelled against the conservative values embodied in family, church and state. Let us learn more about Marcuse's background and his significant works.

9.3 HERBERT MARCUSE: LIFE AND TIMES

Marcuse was born in 1898 in Berlin in an upper middle class Jewish family. As a



(pic credit: wikipedia)

young man, Marcuse experienced the First World War (1914-18) and the German Revolution of 1918-1919. The German revolution was a consequence of the social tensions and economic

crisis that the German Empire experienced after it was defeated in the First World War; however, due to the infighting between the left-wing parties, it failed and could not bring in a new socio-political system. This led Marcuse towards a search to understand more about socialism and the Marxian theory of revolution (Kellner 1984: 17). After being released from military service in 1918 Marcuse went to Freiburg to pursue his studies and completed a PhD in Literature. He further pursued the study of philosophy under the influence of Martin Heidegger, one of the leading thinkers of the time. This engagement with philosophy would

continue through his lifetime. In 1933 he left Freiburg to join the Institute for Social Research which was located in Frankfurt at the time, but would shift base to North America during the period of the second World War. He was well renowned for his study of the philosophy of Hegel, and also the early works of Karl Marx. Thus Marcuse came to be highly regarded as an important new figure in German philosophy. He was involved in the interdisciplinary projects of the Institute and deeply identified with the "Critical Theory" of the Institute that we have mentioned before. He worked closely with the stalwarts of the Institute, Adorno and Horkheimer.

As a radical leftist thinker and a Jew, Nazi Germany was not safe for him. He migrated to the United States in 1934, where he lived for the rest of his life. During the 1940s, Marcuse also worked for the U.S. government in the Office of Strategic Services. Later, he joined Brandeis University. In 1941, he published his first major work in English, *Reason and Revolution*. The book explores the ideas of Hegel and Marx and their impact upon social theory. It is regarded as one of the best introductions to Hegel and Marx and the categories and methods of 'dialectical thinking'. Dialectical or negative thinking brings out the inherent contradictions of advanced industrial societies overcoming them through revolutionary practice.

In 1955, Marcuse published one of his important books: *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. The book attempts a synthesis of the ideas of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and those of Karl Marx in a new and original way. The Frankfurt School used psychoanalytical concepts to understand the psyche of the working class and their reluctance to revolt against oppressive social and economic structures. Modifying Freudian ideas, Marcuse spoke of the 'performance principle' in advanced industrial societies. In order to manipulate the worker to conform to the system, the libido is restricted and the individual must internalise the 'laws' that govern the smooth functioning of the system. Individual desires must conform to those of the system. In other words, "he desires what he is supposed to desire" (Marcuse 1955: 46) Thus, human drives and creativity are channelised by the social structure in such a way that they do not live their own lives but perform the functions that society sets out for them. Marcuse called for the end of repression and creation of a society and culture which would promote freedom and happiness. As Western society had more or less solved the problems of hunger and basic human needs were taken care of, it could afford to let go its grip on the desires and creativity of individuals and allow them to freely express themselves and their feelings. His vision of liberation was very influential in the 1960s amongst the young students and activists who rebelled against the conservative values of the previous generations and promoted 'free love', freedom from repression and similar 'counter-cultural' values, as we have mentioned earlier. Marcuse wanted to return *Eros (desire)* to its proper place as equal to *Logos (reason)* as the driver of life. His radical critique of existing society and its values, and his call for a non-

repressive civilization made him acquire cult status within the New Left all over the world. At the same time he was severely criticised by both orthodox Marxists and those who supported capitalism because they considered his ideas as anarchic and leading to breakdown of society.

'*One-Dimensional Man*' (1964) one of his most widely read and acclaimed works, was a critique of both advanced capitalist and communist societies. It was a text that came to be regarded as classic of critical theory. We shall discuss some of its major themes and arguments in the next section. Marcuse continued to influence social movements and radical thinking as a public intellectual. He continued his teaching and writing and received an appointment at the University of California at La Jolla where he remained until his retirement in the 1970s. This was the most influential period in public life, during which he published many articles and gave lectures and advice to student radicals all over the world. He travelled widely and his work was often discussed in the mass media, earning him a mass appeal and limelight. His students had great regard for him and they too obtained influential academic positions and promoted his ideas in the U.S. and beyond. Scholars like Jurgen Habermas, Douglas Keller, Norman O. Brown and Angela Davis were deeply influenced by Marcuse and carried his ideas forward. Marcuse died in 1979 aged 81.

Let us now examine some of the major themes in *One Dimensional Man*. But before that, do check your progress.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) State whether the following statements are True (T) or False (F)
 - a) Critical theorists were engaged in the study of antiquity and ancient societies
 - b) The Frankfurt School used psychoanalytical theories to better understand the psyche of the working class.
 - c) "Mass society" promoted and enhanced individual freedom, according to the Frankfurt School.
- 2) Fill in the blanks with appropriate word/s.
 - a) thinking brings out the inherent contradictions of modern industrial societies, according to the Critical theorists.
 - b) Marcuse's book *Reason and Revolution* brings out the ideas of Marx and
 - c) The Frankfurt School relocated to when Germany was ruled by the Nazis.

Some of the important ideas in the book put forward by Marcuse are:

- The decline of revolutionary potential in capitalist societies and development of new forms of social control
- The creation of 'false needs' in advanced industrial societies
- Mass media, advertising, industrial management, contemporary modes of thought that reproduce the existing system and try to eliminate opposition, critique and negativity
- A 'one dimensional' universe of thought and behaviour, in which the ability for critical thinking withers away (Kellner, 1984).

9.4.1 New Forms of Social Control

One-Dimensional Man analyses the decline of 'dialectical thinking' which is capable of understanding the contradictions within society and the forces of domination that sustain it. The person who thinks critically demands social change. One-dimensional thinking does not demand change. It does not recognise the extent to which the individual is a victim of forces of domination in society. Even those who are successful within it are oppressed by this modern industrial society because the power of consumer culture makes them lose their capacity for critical thinking and sucks them into the system. Thus they are only living a shallow existence, having no critical understanding of the way the system actually works. They live a 'one-dimensional' life of intellectual and spiritual poverty.

The first chapter of *One-Dimensional Man* begins with the following sentence:

"A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress." (Marcuse 1964: 1)

How does this system of social control and regulation work?

- First, the system must make the citizens think that they are freer than they really are.
- Second, the system must provide the citizens with enough goods to keep them pacified.
- Third, the citizens must identify with their oppressors
- Fourth, political discourse must be put under erasure.

To give a simple example, when people from different social groups and classes watch the same films or television programmes or news channels and are constantly exposed to a certain dominant way of life or value system, they may lose the capacity to think critically about what is being shown to them. They may be lulled into forgetting the contradictions within the system and thus become victims of one-dimensional thinking that does not permit them to critically see

the total picture. In this way, they become controlled by the dominant forces in society and lose the capacity for challenging or questioning what is being fed to them by the mass media. They become one with their oppressors even without realising it.

According to Marcuse consumerism and modern "industrial society" is a form of social control. Even if the system may be described as 'democratic', it is actually a 'totalitarian' or dictatorial system, where individuals are not free. Even though they may have all the material goods and comforts, and the society may be an affluent one, the system continues to be exploitative and the mechanisms of dominance and control continue to operate. Because individuals are made to feel that they are getting all the material comforts, they are unable to mobilise against and overthrow the capitalist system. Marcuse argues that in modern consumer societies we are influenced to believe that happiness can be "bought" in the market-place. In this state of "unfreedom", consumers act irrationally by working more than they are required to in order to fulfill these new needs. In the process, they ignore the psychological as well as the environmental damage and waste caused by this desire for material items. They search for social connection through material items.

9.4.2 Growth of Consumerism and False Needs

Consumerism demands the creation of new products, disposing of old ones, and makes us work more in order to buy more and keep the economy ticking. Individuals exist to serve the system and merely become cogs in the wheel of production and consumption, losing their humanity and sociality in the bargain. The need to consume more and more is stimulated by advertising and the mass media and as we have mentioned in the previous paragraph, the idea is promoted that happiness can be bought. This is a psychologically damaging idea.

Marcuse's analysis of capitalism draws upon the Marxian idea of 'alienation'. Marx believed that capitalism was exploiting humans by separating labourers from their productive capacities, thus alienating them and making them 'objects' that served the capitalists. Marcuse argued that capitalism and industrialisation made people see themselves as extensions of the objects they produced. He wrote: "The people recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment." In the present day we may add that they identify themselves with their computers, smart phones and other gadgets.

Consumer society thus makes humans the extensions of the commodities that they buy. Affluent mass technological societies, he argues, are controlled and manipulated. In societies based upon mass production and mass distribution, the individual worker has become merely a consumer of its commodities. False needs are created, which are satisfied only by the consumption of commodities. 'One-dimensional man' and 'one-dimensional society' are based upon the need for people to recognise themselves in their commodities.

The ties that bind an individual to society have changed. Social control is exerted on the individual not through force or punishment, but rather through the new needs that consumer society creates. Consumerism leads to the complete integration of the working class into the capitalist system. As a result, their potential as a revolutionary force for bringing about social change and overthrowing the system (as predicted by Marx) is lost. He claimed the modern-day workers did not rebel against the system, rather they just conformed and cooperated unquestioningly because they wanted to satisfy their needs.

9.4.3 Totally Administered Society

According to Marcuse, modern technology is by nature repressive. In the new "technological society," described by Marcuse, both labour and leisure are restructured. He describes the mechanisms through which consumer capitalism integrates individuals into its world of thought and behaviour. Rather than seeing these developments as beneficial to the individual, Marcuse sees them as a threat to human freedom and individuality in a "totally administered society". Marcuse describes the contemporary capitalist societies as totally administered societies whose economic affluence has not helped, but rather victimised the working class by creating a variety of 'false needs' that need to be continuously satisfied by the very system that created them, as discussed above.

Marcuse observes the destructive tendencies in advanced capitalism and sees irrationality in its so-called rationality. He opines that "society's prosperity and growth are based on waste and destruction, its progress fueled by exploitation and repression, while its freedom and democracy are based on manipulation" (Kellner xxx). Marcuse "sharply criticises the dehumanisation and alienation in its opulence and affluence, the slavery in its labor system, the ideology and indoctrination in its culture, the fetishism in its consumerism, and the danger and insanity in its military-industrial complex" (ibid.) Therefore, despite its achievements and technological advances, Marcuse believes that modern industrial society is fundamentally exploitative and irrational and does not promote human freedom. Kellner notes that Marcuse was one of the first critical theorists to analyse the consumer society and how consumerism, advertising, mass culture, and ideology integrate individuals into and stabilise the capitalist system. He distinguishes between true and false needs and describes how individuals can liberate themselves from the false needs to live a freer and happier life.

Individuals must understand how the system which claims to promote 'freedom' is actually not so. The social, economic and political 'freedoms' in society lose their progressive functions and become instruments of dominance that control individuals and ensure their compliance. For example, the economic freedom to sell one's labour power in the labour market makes the individual a part of an exploitative economic system. Similarly political freedom to vote for very similar candidates who will not change the system becomes meaningless. Intellectual

freedom becomes meaningless when media shapes public opinion and only promotes the dominant views and opposes dissenting voices. Thus it is only when there is freedom from the system of one-dimensional needs and satisfactions that real freedom and liberation can be achieved.

Mass consumer society makes people "blissful slaves", willingly obeying a system which keeps them entertained and distracted with consumption and the lure of the mass media. It dulls their capacity to analyse and think, and understand their real situation. An individual under capitalism is "one dimensional" as he seems to be completely devoid of the conflicts which make him multi-dimensional and capable of change. Hence Marcuse believed that people under Liberal Western capitalism are as unfree as those in totalitarian or dictatorial societies. Capitalism makes us slaves not through violence or repression, but rather through seducing us with consumer goods. Marcuse's 'One Dimensional Man' is thus a product of both consumer society and mass media, both of which work together to promote conformity and not give any space or scope for dissent or challenging the system.

9.4.4 Possibilities for Change: 'The Great Refusal'

As discussed above, Marcuse did not think that the working class could be the architects of social change, because they were completely enmeshed and integrated within the modern industrial societies and had lost their revolutionary consciousness. Marcuse therefore thought that the change could come about through an alliance between radical intellectuals and those groups not yet integrated into one-dimensional society. These groups included persons of different ethnic and racial origins who experienced oppression at the hands of the mainstream society; the unemployed and the unemployable. He believed that by inculcating radical thinking and social critique amongst those who were dispossessed or oppressed by the system, forces of domination could be challenged and overthrown. He was particularly impressed by the feminist movement which had also emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. The feminists raised radical questions about sexism and the way social institutions create and maintain discrimination based on gender.

Because of his support for new, emerging forces of radical opposition, Marcuse was most unpopular with the dominant classes who saw him a rebel against all the values of Western capitalist society. *One-Dimensional Man* was also criticised severely by the traditional Marxists who saw it as a corruption of Marxist thought. However, it had a deep influence on the 'New Left' as it articulated their growing dissatisfaction with both capitalist societies and Soviet communist societies. In the latter, Marxism had taken the form of a rigid, bureaucratic system where the dictatorial State crushed any kind of critical thinking or opposition and ruled with an iron hand. The book was also much admired by the Student Movement and anti-war movements that had emerged in the U.S.A and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, and as mentioned earlier, made

Marcuse a popular figure and an icon. The anti-war movement, civil rights movements and students' movements in the U.S.A. were seen as the 'Great Refusal' that Marcuse had hoped for; namely, the refusal to go along with or support the capitalist state and seek a new alternative.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What, according to Marcuse is 'one dimensional thinking'?
.....
.....
- 2) What is the impact of consumerism on human freedom, according to Marcuse?
.....
.....
- 3) What is a "totally administered society"?
- 4) State whether the following are True (T) or False (F)
 - a) 'One Dimensional Man' was greatly admired by traditional Marxists.
 - b) The 'New Left' was disillusioned by both capitalist and communist societies of the time.
 - c) Marcuse believed that the working class would overthrow the capitalist society and bring about social change.
 - d) Marcuse believed that people under Liberal Western capitalism are as unfree as those in totalitarian or dictatorial societies.

9.5 THE RELEVANCE OF ONE DIMENSIONAL MAN

Douglas Kellner states that One-Dimensional Man continues to be relevant because it accurately depicts the "underlying structures and tendencies of contemporary socio-economic and political development. The scientific and technological rationalities that Marcuse describes are even more powerful today with the emergence of computerisation, the proliferation of media and information, and the development of new techniques and forms of social control". Marcuse draws our attention to the contradictions of society; there is

growing productivity along with destruction; human thought, hopes and fears are subjugated to the decisions of those who hold power. Contemporary capitalist societies are able to project social stability and integration at the cost of human creativity and freedom.

Many of the themes in the book have anticipated our present day realities. The sweep of globalisation, migration, the growth of monopoly capitalism, new forms of labour organisation, changing political and international relations have made the world a much more unequal place. The environmental and ecological challenges that consumerist ways of life have created threaten the very existence of the planet. Human greed and the desire for more and more commodities has led to over-exploitation of natural resources, exploitation of poor people and destruction of habitats and livelihoods. Climate change poses a huge threat to humankind.

At the same time, huge advances in technology and science have completely changed the ways in which we live and work. The 'Information Revolution' has made digital technology almost universally available and accessible. Ways of communicating, socialising and interaction have also changed.

Marcuse wrote about the impact of advertising and mass media on making individuals one-dimensional and reducing their capacity to think critically. However, the growth of social media and internet has further intensified this trend as people fail to distinguish reality from the information that is 'fed' to them online. Fake news, rumours and gossip, unreliable information that spreads hatred and suspicion are all driven by global media corporations who manipulate users. Their nexus with political parties makes this even more dangerous. Consumers believe they are 'free' to make choices, whereas they are being manipulated to think and act in certain ways.

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse draws attention to one-dimensional thinking, namely the uncritical and acceptance of existing structures, norms, and behaviours. He calls for the assertion of individuality and questioning of the status quo by society. Freedom and a better way of living can only come about if we challenge and oppose the exploitation, consumerism, waste and destruction that characterises advanced industrial society. In the contemporary world this diagnosis of the ills of western society are very relevant. At the same time, developing countries that have also adopted and are imitating western style development can draw lessons from his ideas.

9.6 LET US SUM UP

This Unit discussed some of the key ideas of the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse, with special reference to his influential work *One Dimensional Man* first published in 1964. The book launched an intense critique against modern industrial society, both capitalist and communist, and proclaimed that Western capitalist society was no less oppressive than totalitarian ones. The form

of social control it exercised on the populace was not one of force and repression. Rather, through technology and by encouraging and promoting consumerism, it made the working class conform and become integrated within the capitalist system and to keep working in order to fulfill the 'false needs' created by consumerism. Marcuse also explained the role of mass media in maintaining the system. He felt that the real possibility of bringing about social change lay with the radical intellectuals and the most marginalised and oppressed sections of society who were suffering at the hands of the system and were not complicit in its functioning. Marcuse's works found a receptive audience amongst the youthful rebels of the student movements, the anti-war movements and feminist movements that were challenging the status quo and conservative values of the time. Marcuse became a sort of a 'guru' of the radical groups and achieved a celebrity status amongst students and thinkers. The relevance of his ideas in the present day world are a source of reflection and discussion, with special reference to rampant consumerism, ecological destruction and the role of media and new media in shaping attitudes and behaviour.

9.7 REFERENCES

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9.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) F
b) T
c) F
- 2) a) Dialectical
b) Hegel
c) U.S.A.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) One-dimensional thinking is non-critical thinking that does not demand change. It does not recognise the extent to which the individual is a victim of forces of domination in society.

**Critical Thinkers of
Mass Culture**

- 2) Consumerism makes people "blissful slaves", willingly obeying a system which keeps them entertained and distracted with consumption and the lure of the mass media. It dulls their capacity to analyse and think, and understand their real situation
- 3) Marcuse describes the technologically advanced contemporary capitalist societies as totally administered societies. The working class is controlled by creating a variety of 'false needs' that need to be continuously satisfied and both labour and leisure is restructured to meet the needs of the society.
- 4) a) F
b) T
c) F
d) T



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