# Conceptions of Popular Culture: Frankfurt vs. Birmingham

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**Abstract**

*The study of popular culture has over its long history been outlined by opposing conceptions of the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. These leading orthodox schools on culture emerged to institutionalize critical methods of academic interests on popular culture in the social sciences and in the humanities. This paper critically examines salient points of consensus and dissensus on the vast field of popular culture studies. By so doing, the Frankfurt School's critical theory with especial emphasis on popular culture, and the tenets of the CCCS are contextualised in the Nigerian cultural purview. It is found that the opposing approaches can be utilised at various points of interest to produce different results in the analysis of texts and practices of popular culture.*

**Keywords:** ***Popular culture, Frankfurt School, CCCS, Critical theory, Marxism, Culture industry.***

## Introduction

The emergence of different schools of thought on the broad subject of culture and popular culture in particular, was the result of the complex phenomenon of culture and the eventual controversial reactions it generated. While some approaches to culture looked down from elitist perspectives, others analysed culture from the masses viewpoint. The fruit of such controversy is the contentious philosophies of high culture versus

popular culture as represented respectively in the theories of the two most influential schools on culture: the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS).

Although these two renowned schools of thought are the major thrust of this essay, the presence of other schools is worth highlighting. At the time the CCCS was established, a number of other developments also became institutionalized in the field of media and popular culture. A few examples include the Centre for Television Research set up in 1966 at Leeds; the Centre for Mass Communication Research established in 1966 at the University of Leicester; the Glasgow Media Group which charted an empirical and interpretative approach to news report was established between 1974 and 1982 at the University of Glasgow; the Open University's Mass Communication and Society course established in 1977 which opened up the Open University's degree programme in popular culture; the Manchester Institute of Popular Culture which emerged to redefine cultural studies as 'popular cultural studies' through its popular culture researchers at Manchester Metropolitan University; the Institute for Cultural Research at the University of Lancaster and; the numerous centres of cultural studies and media at the University of London. The work of the Frankfurt School is argued to "set the terms of debate and analysis for the subsequent study of popular culture . . . . It would be very difficult to understand the study of popular culture without understanding the work of the Frankfurt School" (Strinati, 2004, p. 47).

**The Frankfurt School**

The Frankfurt school, like the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies emerged to institutionalize critical methods of academic interests on popular culture in the social sciences and humanities. The term "Frankfurt School" is an informal description of the thought patterns and eventual works of social theory and critical philosophy scholars and intellectuals of the Institute for Social Research an affiliate institution at Goethe University Frankfurt Am Main Germany. The Institute for Social

Research was founded by Carl Grunberg, a Marxist professor of Law at the University of Vienna, and was funded and established in 1923 by Felix Weil (1898- 1975), a wealthy student and son of Herman Weil who became rich from exporting grains to Europe from Argentina.

Felix Weil's Marxist interest in finding a solution to the practical problems of implementing socialism in the 20th Century, led him to organize the first Marxist Workweek in 1922 aimed at harmonizing the methods of various Marxist Schools of Thought. Perplexed by the success of the workweek which witnessed the presence of scholars like Georg Lukacs, Karl Korsch and Friedrich Pollock, Felix Weil moved for the formal establishment and approval of an institute for social research. The approval from the Ministry of Education came with the appointment of a university professor as the director of the Institute for Social Research signalling the birth of the Frankfurt School as a university institution and as the first German Marxist Institution, which in the 1960s earned the epithet "Karl Marx University." The Frankfurt School became the engine room of *Critical Theory:* a brand of philosophy that seeks to drive social change through a critique of society and culture by meshing neo-Marxist philosophy with Freudian psychoanalysis. It is the Frankfurt School that engaged with the original critique of popular culture at a time, and without an understanding of the School together with its scholars, a good grasp of popular culture will be quite difficult.

**Generations of Critical Theory Scholars**

Following the formal establishment of the Institute for Social Research in 1923, Carl Grunberg, a professor of Law at the University of Vienna became the first official appointed director. Grunberg managed the institution for seven years (1923- 1929) and created what is called the *Grunberg Archiv*, a historical archive on the study and engagements of the labour movement. The Institute under Grunberg gained little or no success in expanding Marxist Theory but Grunberg tried to "uncover the laws of economic

development and verify the Marxist critique of political economy" (Hamlin, 2011, p.4).

In 1930, Max Horkheimer became the director of the institute after Grunberg fell seriously ill and stepped down from the directorship. Horkheimer invited a core of intellectuals who strongly followed his critical perspective and with him at the centre, Theodor W. Adorno, Pollock Lowenthal, Eric Fromm and Herbert Marcuse completed the group that is now called the *First Generation of Critical Theory Scholars.* This first generation of intellectuals greatly contributed to the later development and success of the Frankfurt School.

> In Particular, with Fromm's development of a psychoanalytic trend at the Institute and with an influential philosophical contribution of Horkheimer, it became clear how under his directorship the institute faced a drastic turning point characterizing all its future endeavours (Corradetti, 2013, p.4).

This group of intellectuals, academics and political nonconformists were influenced by a paradigm for critical investigation which incorporated an open-ended, self-critical approach and practical objectives to the study of critical theory. Marxist concepts like the *Enlightenment, Commodity fetishism, monopoly capitalism*, and *false needs* amongst several others were important features of the approach in which the Frankfurt School's analysis of popular culture and the mass media developed and spread. The School is argued to be a variant of Marxism because it dealt heavily on Marxist theories to buttress its stance on modern capitalism and culture industry even though it ended up criticizing it.

The Frankfurt School linked the 'enlightenment' as discussed by Marx himself to modern capitalism and the culture industry by arguing that rational domination is the domination of the masses in modern capitalist societies. More importantly, it related Marxist theory of 'commodity fetishism' to culture industries by restating that money which is merely the price of commodities or goods defines social relations in capitalist societies.

Instead of venerating the quality of what has been paid for, people concentrate more on the amount of money spent on the commodity. By this, the School argued that popular culture will ideologically continue to dominate capitalism as long as money is believed to rule the world.

Marx distinguished between the exchange value of a commodity and its use value. The exchange value refers to the value of money a commodity can be exchanged for in the market, while use value refers to the value of the commodity to the consumer, i.e. its utility as a commodity. Marx sums that in capitalist societies which can be translated today to mean modern economies; exchange value will always dominate use value. This is because the ideology behind the production, distribution and consumption of commodities will always dominate and suppress 'real needs' of people. The Frankfurt School weaves the capitalist culture and by extension modern culture into this by arguing that money is the basic definition of the commodity's value in capitalist societies. For example, instead of emphasizing the value of a concert or vacation, people are 'blinded' to place more emphasis on how much it is worth. As a result, it is exchange value, not use value that determines the production and consumption of cultural commodities. In plain terms, consumers worship the price of a commodity rather than the value of the commodity itself because they are victims of commodity fetishism. Marxist theory of commodity fetishism is integral to Frankfurt School's interpretation of modern capitalism and the concept of the culture industry. Also, the Frankfurt School builds upon this to argue that the rise of monopoly capitalist corporations (e.g. culture industries) which exact control over the needs of the masses create 'false needs' in the masses by constantly stimulating and suppressing them into accepting these false needs as authentic needs.

In contemporary society, the ideas of commodity fetishism and false needs account for what might be called *fads* in the society. People are conditioned to accept only the best of what is available as their needs even when these are nowhere near their real needs. As a result, standardizations of products become ever increasing in order to keep people in *trend* of these

needs. In politics, religion, and social spheres, the presence of commodity fetishism accounts for what qualifies people as *classy* or not elegant. This is why for instance a table that can only accommodate ten adults will be sold for as much as one million naira ($2,800) in the same concert that 'popular' tickets sell for as low as five thousand naira ($12). The pleasure which the consumer derives here is not the show itself but the price of the show.

Critical theory grew through the influence of Hegel's notion of dialectics and Marx's theory of economy and society. According to Corradetti;

> Critical theorists. . . have attempted to clarify the specificity of what it means for social theory to be "critical". A primary broad distinction that Horkheimer drew was that of the difference in method between social theories, scientific theories and critical social theories. While the first two categories have been treated as instances of traditional theories, the latter connoted the methodology the Frankfurt School adopted (Corradetti, 2013, p.8).

Max Horkheimer described a theory as critical insofar as it seeks to free human beings from the forces of slavery. Frankfurt theorists drew on the critical methods of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, and coined the idea that ideology is the sole obstacle of human liberation. Horkheimer categorized critical theory as a radical, emancipatory form of Marxism, and questioned what he and his colleagues saw as the covert positivism and authoritarianism of orthodox Marxism and communism. Critical theory took up a normative style by criticizing the society from generally accepted values and norms, and by criticizing the society through its own espoused values. Critical theorists of the Frankfurt have been tagged "Neo- Marxist, Marxist Humanism, Hegelian Marxist, in an attempt to pigeonhole critical theory into an ideal-type" (Hamlin, 2011, p.7).

In spite of the theoretical stance, it proves quite impossible to pigeonhole critical theorists into a single variant of Marxism as on the contrary, critical theorists assume a multifaceted base. Two core concepts of critical theory are extant: (1) that critical social theory should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity (i.e. how it came to be configured at a specific point in time), and (2) that critical theory should improve understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences, including geography, economics, sociology, history, political science, anthropology and psychology (Corradetti, 2013; Hamlin, 2011; and Jay, 1996).

In the same token, it was Max Horkheimer who directed the Institute's mission towards an interdisciplinary integration of the social sciences, encouraging members of the Institute to challenge a wider scope of "economic, social, political and aesthetic topics, ranging from empirical analyses to philosophical theorization" (Corradetti, 2013, p. 3). The Frankfurt School focused on reinterpreting psychoanalysis by combining Freud and Marx.

> Its consideration in the School was clearly due to Horkheimer, who encouraged his researchers to direct their attention to the subject. It was Fromm, nevertheless, who best produced an advancement of the discipline; his central aim was to provide, through a synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis, the missing link between ideological superstructure and social-economic base (Corradetti, 2013, p. 4).

Horkheimer's research program was presented in his 1937 essay *Traditional and Critical Theory*. Prior to this time, the School's intellectual development came from a number of earlier successful publications such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (1932) and the *German Ideology* (1932). In 1933, soon after Adolf Hitler's rise to power and the surge of Nazism which led to political violence and anti-intellectual threat, the founders and members of the Institute for Social Research moved out of

Germany to Geneva, and then to New York City in 1935, where the School became affiliated to the Columbia University. It was two years later in 1937 that Horkheimer published the ideological manifesto of the School in his *Traditional and Critical Theory.* In 1938, Adorno joined the Institute and assumed an important position which led to the co-publication with Horkheimer, of one of the milestones of critical theory: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1947. In this, the main critique of the school emerged, as Adorno and Horkheimer expressed the thought that "the promise of the Enlightenment to extend human freedom through scientific and rational progress had turned into a nightmare because science and rationality were instead stamping out human freedom" (Strinati, 2004, p. 48-9).

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the now popular term 'culture industry.' "The concept of 'the culture industry' captures the continuing commitment to Marxism (industry as the basic power of capitalism) and the original character of the School's contribution (culture as a causal factor in its own right)" (Strinati, 2004, p. 49). In Adorno's view, the culture industry renders the masses powerless, as ultimate power rests with the culture industry which standardizes ideological products that encourage conformity and consensus thereby ensuring loyalty and eventual stability to the exploitative economic system. 'Culture industry' was a designation to label all products and processes of popular culture as two-faceted: i.e. identical and predictable.

> Film, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part . . . all mass culture is identical. As soon as the film begins, it is quite clear how it will end, and who will be rewarded, punished, or forgotten. In light music [popular music], once the trained ear has heard the first notes of the hit song, it can guess what is coming and feel flattered when it does come. . . . The result is a constant reproduction of the same thing (Adorno & Horkeimer, 1993, pp. 1-8).

Adorno argues that the 'unmistakable message' of authentic high culture is always quite impossible to establish, but the 'hidden message' of popular culture is not at all difficult to discern. Commercialization devalues high authentic culture by making it rampant, easily accessible and difficult to counter. According to Adorno:

> Today anyone who is incapable of talking in the prescribed fashion, that is, of effortlessly reproducing the formulas, conventions and judgments of mass culture as if they were his own, is threatened in his very existence, suspected of being an idiot or an intellectual (as cited in, Storey, 2009, p. 64).

The Frankfurt School attacks mass culture because it threatens cultural standards and depoliticizes the working class, while the culture and civilization tradition condemns mass culture for threatening cultural standards and social authority. Under Nazi-Germany, "the Institute remained the only free voice publishing in German" (Corradetti, 2013, p. 5). After an internal division of the School between its bases in New York and California, the Institute was officially invited to return back to Frankfurt University in 1946.

Horkheimer, on 14 November 1951, presented his inaugural speech for the reopening of the Institute, and became the new rector of Frankfurt University a week later. Adorno returned to Germany in 1953 having dual citizenship with Germany and US, and began his empirical research of combining quantitative and qualitative methods. In 1955 and 1957, Adorno took over the position as director of the Institute for Social Research and was appointed full professor in philosophy and sociology respectively. Adorno's most significant achievement was in the area of music theory and aesthetics leading to such works by him as *Philosophy of Music* (1949) and *Negative Dialectics* (1966) published a decade after his retirement. Other significant works also emerged same season. Examples include Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1956), and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) which introduced the notion of *educational dictatorship* stating that for there to be

change and liberation, there should be advancement of material conditions for the realization of a higher notion of the good. Jurgen Habermas (1929-till date) who was Adorno's assistant took over the Institute's directorship 1956, and ushered in the *second generation of the Frankfurt School theorists*. Horkheimer was not very pleased with the Habermas's philosophical debate, so he rejected the text *Students and Politics* from been published in the series *Frankfurt Contributions to Sociology.* In 1962, after successfully publishing same text somewhere else, Habermas came out with *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* and was later appointed a professor at Heidelberg.

Habermas brought a degree of success to the Institute by creating a critical self-awareness of the socialist students' groups and by publicly labelling the Dutschke's positions as "left-wing Fascism" (Corradetti, 2013, p. 6). In Habermas's works, critical theory was developed towards American pragmatism, tilting away from its theoretical roots in German idealism. He queried the views of Adorno and Horkheimer as presented in their earlier critically acclaimed work *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* Thus, Habermas was the first scholar to diverge from Horkheimer's research program, and from this, emerged the second generation of the Institute's theoreticians. Habermas bridged the continental and analytical traditions of the first generation of the Frankfurt scholars by integrating aspects of American pragmatism, anthropology and semiotics with Marxism and critical social theory. "Habermas provided a model of social complexities and action coordination based upon the original interpretation of classic social theorists as well as contemporary philosophy of language . . . ." (Corradetti, 2013, p.7).

Habermas is the most important German philosopher of the second half of the 20th century. He is generally identified with the critical social theory, communicative rationality, post-metaphysical philosophy, discourse ethics, deliberative democracy, universal pragmatics, communicative action, and the structural transformation of the public sphere. His other notable ideas include his criticism of structuralism,

rational reconstruction, performative contradiction, constitutional patriotism, and his critique of subjects-centred reason. Habermas's theoretical system is aimed at unravelling the true possibility of reason, emancipation and the pursuit of national interest. Since his retirement from Frankfurt in 1993, Habermas has remained intellectually active till date with remarkable honorary awards including the highest honour in German research in 1986 and the 2005 Holberg International Memorial Prize of over half a million euros (€520,000).

Axel Honneth (1949-till date), highly influenced by Habermas became the director of the Institute for Social Research in 1996 and remains so till date. His reign "inaugurated a new phase of critical theory both in terms of generation (*the third generation*) and in terms of philosophical research as Honneth revived the Hegelian notion of recognition on social and political enquiry" (Corradetti, 2013, p. 7). Honneth's work focuses on relations of power, recognition and respect. His main tenet, the struggle for recognition became a constant motif in his greatest text *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (1986). The message Honneth tries to pass across is that critical theory should be advanced to explore the notion of conflict in society and among societal groups. This inter-subjectivity of understanding social relations is what best characterizes the struggle for emancipation by social groups which in turn "represents a negative experience of domination- a form of domination attached to misrecognitions" (Corradetti, 2013, p. 7). Honneth introduced a new phase of critical theory that engaged French post-modern philosophers and legitimate interpreters of the Frankfurt School like Derrida.

The Frankfurt School from the foregoing views popular culture as a history-stopping, forced culture of political operations, and as a result, presented a limited approach to the exploration of texts and practices of popular culture. According to Strinati, "those familiar with the study of popular culture might well ask if it is worth bothering any longer with the Frankfurt School. Even if it still has something relevant to say, there are now better ways of saying it" (2004, p. 46). A more optimistic approach to the

study of popular culture revolves around British cultural studies coalescing in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies which shall be briefly discussed under the next heading.

**The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies**

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was a postgraduate research centre at the University of Birmingham, England. It was founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964 who consequently became its pioneer director and his work directed the Centre's attention. The main focus of the Centre was to develop a new approach to the study of culture by rejecting the cultural views of the Frankfurt School and directing itself to "cultural forms, practices and institutions, and their relation to society and social change" (Turner, 2003, p. 62). The CCCS therefore emerged as a reactionary school against the Frankfurt School by observing that the ethnocentrism established by the branding of high culture as superior to popular culture creates an unhealthy development which relegates the masses to the background. Hence, the aim of the Birmingham School was to give voice to the voiceless masses. It is on this standpoint that the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was established. With limited staff strength of not more than three at a time, the CCCS centred on postgraduate research and could not offer undergraduate degree programmes for most of its history until late 1980s.

Contrary to the elitist perspective of the Frankfurt School in which high culture was highly valorised, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies gave prominence to the study of culture in such a way that the culture of the masses was duly venerated. The Centre integrated such fledging areas as subculture, popular culture and media studies into its curriculum. The Centre further took a revolutionary approach to the study of culture by incorporating various fields like Marxism, culturalism, Post-structuralism, feminism and critical race theory. As a result, the Centre's publications made significant contributions to academic and public awareness by dominating the field of popular culture. For instance, the

Birmingham School investigated the representations of many groups in mass media and accessed the impact of these representations on the audience. The Centre developed the careers of notable scholars like Dick Hebdige, Paul Willis, Angela McRobbie, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Richard Johnson among others.

Stuart Hall who became the Centre's director in 1968 developed seminal models like *Encoding/Decoding*. Under his leadership, the emphasis of the CCCS shifted from the inquiry into structures of power and the politics of the media to the relations between media and ideology through exploration of signifying practices in media texts. The histories of resistance and incorporation of subcultures as well as their construction in relation to dominant cultures became the focus of interest of the CCCS. One of the most significant works of the Centre was the collective research that led to publishing of the book, *Policing the Crises* (1978). According to Webster (2004), the research Centre known as the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies had theorists like Stuart Hall who emphasized culture as the product of the masses as against the cultural texts of Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School scholars who placed emphasis on the media as an ideological culture industry (p. 848). Hall was succeeded by Richard Johnson in 1979, before the directorship was passed on to Jorge Lorrain who masterminded an important change in the CCCS's institutional methods from the late 1980s.

As a result of the Centre's political radicalism, serious disagreement ensued between the CCCS and the university. Consequently, the CCCS was dissolved and the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology was established with fulltime courses offered in the fields of cultural studies and sociology. The new department was also unexpectedly shut down in 2002 on the grounds of restructuring and an alleged under performance of the department in the 2001 UK's Research Assessment Exercise. The closure led to several protests by students and staff of the department who called for a reopening of the department. The protesters accused the management of closing the school as a 'belated punishment' for its past political radicalism.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, during the Weimar Republic (1918–33) which culminated to the European interwar years of 1918-1939, the development of critical theory and by extension, the Frankfurt School was bottlenecked. Thus, the Institute's intelligentsias drew inspiration from the failure of the Communist's German Revolution and the German fascism (Nazism) to build upon a thought pattern of critical investigation with an open-ended approach. This gave birth to three generations of philosophers at the Institute for Social Research, although scholars argue that there is evidence of a fourth generation of the Frankfurt School intellectuals coalescing around Rainer Forst.

As a trend of the Frankfurt School's philosophy, 'Cultural Marxism' was a label for their critique of industrialization and mass-produced culture by what was widely termed *The Culture* Industry, which they claim has an overall negative effect on the society, an effect which can reify an audience away from perceiving a more authentic sense of human values. The School's interpretation of popular culture draws from its theory of modern capitalism (economy) and the powerful influence it sees the culture industry exerting over the thoughts and actions of the masses. Expressing similar views, Strinati (2004) argues that the "culture industry reflects the consolidation of commodity fetishism, the domination of exchange value and the ascendancy of state monopoly capitalism. It shapes the tastes and preferences of the masses, thereby moulding their consciousness by instilling the desire for false needs" (pp. 55-56). Under this influence, genuine needs of the masses, stiff political oppositions, radical theories and alternative concepts that genuinely threaten the status quo are controlled. Popular culture is critiqued as portraying the status quo and ideologically changing the tastes and preferences of the masses, thereby reconstructing their consciousness by giving them false hopes. According to Strinati, "the culture industry deals in falsehoods not truths, in false needs and false solutions, rather than real needs and real solutions" (2004, p. 58). It succeeds

in achieving this corrupting and manipulative ideology in such a way that the masses do not realize it.

Ideology presents the ruling ideas as the norm and common sense of all classes. However, critical theorists view ideology as one which misleads by concealing as much as it claims to reveal about the society. Thus, the task of critical theorists is to provide a sociological analysis and philosophical enquiry into the true areas of social-relation in the superstructure of a capitalist society as left untouched by Marx in the 19th century. Following a vibrant criticism of the Frankfurt School, leading to intellectual responses from the second generation of scholars, notably Habermas, "it seems therefore that the new challenge critical theory is facing consists precisely in detecting key concepts at the crossroads of both the Anglo-Saxon and the Continental tradition" (Corradetti, 2013, p. 15).

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies disengaged with the culture and civilization tradition and with the empirical aspects of social science research. It shifted its focus towards exposing what might be called the ideological nature of the media as a "major cultural and ideological force … standing in a dominant position with respect to the way in which social relations and political problems were defined and the production and transformations of popular ideologies in the audience addressed" (Hall, as cited in Turner, 2003, p. 64).

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