

# Adorno's Critical Theory of "Cultural Industry" and its Enlightenment

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**Abstract:** Adorno's critical theory of cultural industry mainly analyzes the commercialization attribute, standardization characteristics and ideological function of cultural industry. However, this theory has certain historical limitations, including the failure to critique the capitalist system, disregarding the positive role of technical rationality, and ignoring individual subjectivity. Nonetheless, this theory also provides us with some modern insights, such as the importance of actively developing the cultural industry to drive economic growth, constructing a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics, and utilizing the power of the internet and big data to drive cultural industry development.

**Keywords:** Adorno; Cultural industry; Critical Theory of Cultural Industry.

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## 1. Introduction

Adorno's critical theory of cultural industry is one of the important theories of Western Marxism. It argues that man created technology, but technology controls man; The enlightenment consciousness is gradually lost, and the overall cultural quality of the society is reduced. Under the role of cultural products, people's subjective initiative is constantly reduced, and eventually culture can not play the role of enlightenment. But the culture industry is not without merit. We should recognize the positive and negative effects of cultural industry from a dialectical and scientific point of view, and correctly view the role of critical theory through an accurate understanding of cultural industry.

## 2. The Main Content of the Critical Theory of Cultural Industry

### (1) Commercialization attribute

Cultural workers reflect on the nature of universe, society and man and present them in the form of cultural works to meet the psychological and aesthetic needs of the public. Although cultural works are different from material goods in general. When they appear on the market, they are no longer pure works of art, but become exchangeable commodities. The mission of cultural works is to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the public, and its fundamental attribute is artistry. The emergence of cultural industry is also to meet the needs of the public spiritual world. However, after its formation, its goal is no longer the public, but the accumulation of capital. Therefore, the ultimate goal of cultural industrial products is to realize exchange value, and its focus has always been exchange value, rather than the use value which emphasizes humanistic care and life reflection.

### (2) Standardization characteristics

In the capitalist society, the emergence of cultural works is no longer the result of simply satisfying people's spiritual and cultural needs, but is controlled by capital and becomes a mass production of commodities on the production line of cultural industry. When cultural works become cultural industrial products, the creative process also becomes a

mechanized assembly line operation. In order to maximize profits, capital constantly requires the cultural industry to reduce production costs and improve production efficiency. However, independent and imaginative cultural workers found it difficult to meet this requirement. Therefore, mechanized and mass-produced copies have replaced artists' free creation, making cultural works with diverse forms and contents lose individuality and characteristics, and completely become industrial products with unified production procedures and content. Although cultural industrial products still have cultural attributes, due to the lack of individuation, they can only meet the spiritual and cultural needs of some people to a certain extent. Therefore, it is difficult to realize the cultural prosperity of a hundred schools of thought contending and a hundred flowers blooming in the cultural industry.

### (3) Ideological function

In the early stages of capitalist development, the bourgeoisie used simple and crude means to control the public, such as economic sanctions and military repression. However, with the advent of the era of monopoly capitalism, the proletariat also became more mature in terms of theoretical support and practical exercise. With the increasing revolutionary spirit and free will, the revolutionary means of the proletariat have become more powerful and effective, and the goals pursued have been constantly improved. Therefore, the ruling class chooses an even more subtle and deceptive means-- the products of cultural industry to dominate the public. All of them appear in the name of entertainment or enjoyment and consumer satisfaction. They use cultural products as a cloak to wrap the ideology of the ruling class. The huge figure of the ruling is hidden behind the veil of tenderness, which creates the illusion that the ruling industry has disappeared or died out. Adorno pointed out that this ideology would derive its rule either from non-alienated forms of social organization, such as so-called centralization, or from consciousness, i.e. reason, abstracted from real processes. So, on the surface, cultural industry products satirize the capitalist system, but in fact, can't really attack and shake capitalism. However, this shallow and hypocritical culture will make the public fall into a state of numbness that

the spiritual and cultural needs have been satisfied after the consumption of cultural industry products. The result of this false satisfaction is that the public lose the ability to enlightenment criticism and creation, and fall into the cultural framework of capitalism, thus unconsciously maintain the current order and obeying the control of capital. Therefore, in the opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the products of cultural industry actually play a buffer role and safeguard the rule of capitalism.

### **3. The Historical Limitations of the Critical Theory of Cultural Industry**

#### **(1) It does not rise to criticism of the capitalist system**

After the outbreak of the First World War, Marxist revolutionary theory was first tested in Russia and achieved great success. However, in the relatively developed capitalist countries of Europe, proletarian revolutions have repeatedly failed. The fundamental purpose of Adorno's criticism of "culture industry" is to seek a way out for the development of capitalist society from "mass culture". He believes that the proletarian revolution includes not only economic changes, but also an ideological revolution—a revolution of the will. The revolution of the will plays a leading or decisive role in the task of overthrowing the capitalist system. It can even be said that the revolution of the will is more fundamental than the economic change in achieving the mission of overthrowing capitalism. However, culture does not have the power to overthrow the capitalist system. Physical force can only be destroyed by physical force. Capitalism can be completely eliminated only by eliminating the economic relations of exploitation. In addition, Adorno himself, as a supporter of bourgeois elite culture, could not really criticize capitalism. Criticism of capitalism from a cultural point of view cannot produce a complete overthrow effect, which is just scratching the surface.

#### **(2) Ignoring the positive role of technological rationality**

Adorno believes that cultural industrial products exaggerate the role of technical rationality and ignore value rationality. First of all, Adorno criticized technical rationality, and believed that the cultural industry realized large-scale production and efficient communication with the help of mass media technologies such as printing and the Internet, and was widely accepted by the public. In fact, it has formed a cultural monopoly. There is no denying that technical rationality has promoted the mechanization and form of the production of cultural industrial products. However, the efficient production and communication mode brought by technical rationality makes culture and art no longer the exclusive of the elite and aristocratic class. The continuous reduction of production costs enables the general public to feel, enjoy and create culture, which is conducive to breaking the monopoly of culture by the ruling class. Secondly, Adorno maintains that value rationality should be the primary attribute of cultural works. The work of art itself should not be exchanged, otherwise it will lose its artistic value and cultural connotation. Adorno's criticism of the cultural industry is influenced by his status as a bourgeois elite, which shows a utopian aesthetic. The culture he endorsed was an absolutely pure and refined elite culture divorced from the reality of the lives of the vast majority of working people. However, cultural works are created for everyone, not only the elite, but also ordinary working people who need to meet their spiritual and cultural needs. Due to the different educational background, economic

conditions and social status, the public's demand for cultural works is also different. Therefore, cultural works should not be completely biased towards elegance or popular. Therefore, although limited by low production costs, cultural industrial products cannot guarantee complete originality in form and content, they can still meet certain needs of the public to a certain extent.

#### **(3) Ignoring human subjectivity**

Cultural industrial products have two basic functions: economic and political. First of all, from the perspective of economic function, cultural industry pursues capital multiplication and requires reducing production costs, which will inevitably affect the use value of cultural industry products. Although there are many kinds of cultural industry products, there is a lack of diversity in content. In the capitalist market, there is a serious problem of homogenization of cultural industrial products. On the surface, the public have the right of free choice when choosing and consuming cultural industry products. In effect, they are passively accepting a lot of shoddy products. Secondly, from the point of view of political function, because of its special cultural attributes, cultural industrial products infiltrate the ideology of the ruling class. When the public consume cultural industrial products, they inevitably come into contact with the ruling will of the bourgeoisie and are subtly influenced by it. Adorno believes that when cultural industrial products play economic and political functions, the public is powerless and always in a passive position. In fact, the creation of spiritual and material culture cannot be separated from the efforts of the people. Even if the cultural industry products can't fully embody creativity and artistry, it can still meet some secular spiritual and cultural needs of the public. In addition, in the sale of cultural industry products, it is not one-way. With the diversification of information access channels and the improvement of people's cognitive level, as the creators of history, people will not unconditionally submit to anything, but will become more rebellious and critical consciousness and ability driven by subjective initiative.

### **4. The Modern Enlightenment of the Critical Theory of Culture Industry**

#### **(1) Developing the economic potential of cultural industries**

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, China's gross domestic product in 2022 was 1,210,207 billion yuan, up 3.0 percent from the previous year. In view of the current domestic economic slowdown and the reduction of demographic dividend, we urgently need to vigorously develop the cultural industry as a new engine of China's future economic growth. However, last year, the operating income of enterprises in culture and related industries was 12.180.5 billion yuan, an increase of only 0.9 percent year-on-year, accounting for only about 10 percent of the country's GDP. This data shows that the cultural industry's driving role in economic growth is still not obvious. Therefore, it is necessary to further strengthen cultural construction. It is worth noting that some cultural enterprise operators tend to ignore the innovation and uniqueness of cultural products in the process of pursuing economic benefits. When a new cultural product emerges, they will rush to imitate it, resulting in serious homogenization of cultural products and even the phenomenon of cultural copycat. However, letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend is

the basic policy of our country's cultural development, and it is also the basic prerequisite for culture to boost economic growth. Therefore, the current development of China's cultural industry needs to constantly explore new connotations, innovate communication methods, and strive to achieve great cultural development and prosperity.

#### (2) Building a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics

In the current context of globalization, the exchanges and cooperation between China and capitalist countries are constantly deepening. However, this exchange and cooperation has also brought new cultural challenges and conflicts. Culture can use its own advantages to break through all kinds of restrictions, cross invisible borders, import the culture of strong countries to weak countries, and manipulate people's spiritual world. For example, the impact of individualism and utilitarianism has become increasingly obvious, which has put forward a severe test to the socialist values. Faced with this situation, we urgently need to strengthen the construction of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics. In order to cope with these challenges, we need to take a series of measures to strengthen cultural construction. First of all, strengthen the research and inheritance of the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation, so that it can be spread and carried forward among the younger generation. At the same time, we should make full use of modern scientific and technological means to promote China's excellent traditional culture and improve people's recognition of the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation. Second, we should focus on cultivating core socialist values. By supporting literary and artistic creation and cultural industries, we will improve the quality and influence of cultural products, guide people to establish a correct outlook on word, life and values, and shape positive value pursuit. Only by adhering to the fine traditional culture of the Chinese nation as the foundation, taking the core socialist values as the essence, and promoting the diversified development of cultural industries, can we better cope with the current cultural situation, maintain the diversity and uniqueness of culture, and promote the sustained prosperity and development of socialist culture.

#### (3) Driving the cultural industry with Internet plus and big data

Adorno mentioned in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* that the rise of cultural industry is the result of the intrusion of technological reason into the cultural field. He believes that to criticize the cultural industry, we must also criticize the driving force of technical rationality. From Adorno's life experience, modern science and technology were widely used in the two world wars, which brought great disasters to mankind and the nature. Therefore, Adorno could not correctly understand the unified relationship between technical rationality and value rationality in cultural development, especially ignored the role of science and technology as the primary productive force in promoting

social development. Compared with western developed countries, China's cultural industry started late. Therefore, it is more necessary to use the power of science and technology to promote its development. In the current Internet + era, while making full use of big data, it can not only avoid the mistakes that Western developed countries have made in the development of cultural industry, but also better guide the development of cultural industry, properly guide the emergence of new situations and new things in the network environment, and effectively regulate Internet culture and guide Internet public opinion work.

## 5. Conclusion

Adorno believes that the cultural industry weakens the judgment and resistance of information recipients. The cultural industry seems to be flourishing, but in fact it limits the development of popular culture and inhibits aesthetic taste. At the same time, he believes that culture and art are objectified as commodities. And commodity fetishism sustains all capitalist society. As for Adorno's critical theory of cultural industry, in today's socialist China, it is neither totally negative nor totally positive, and it should be treated rationally in combination with the actual situation of our country. Adorno's strong criticism of the cultural industry has specific historical reasons. In addition, when the cultural industry prospered in capitalist society, it is worth learning to critically analyze the spirit of cultural industry. This is of great significance to the development of China's cultural industry today.

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