

## Does Capitalism and the Culture Industry Create False Needs? A study of Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer

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### Abstract

The world as we know it nowadays has evolved into an entity characterized by different political and economic systems. Each of these systems affects human mentality in a certain way. When focusing on capitalism and its culture industry, one cannot help but notice the different needs that are created as a result of different components of this system. To achieve an understanding of the needs, or rather, false needs created by the culture industry, a study of the latter would be provided at first. Furthermore, this paper aims at understanding whether it is only capitalism that creates a culture of false and unnecessary needs, in order to create a studying basis for future analysis where other systems could be analyzed and compared to the it. While implementing these societal analyses, it can then be possible to implement positive aspects of other systems, at least theoretically, into the capitalist system, providing therefore an economic system without false needs. The framework of this paper was characterized by the analysis of the three main minds that affected the Frankfurt School approach. Marx, Weber, and Lukacs' theories were analyzed and their effect to the critical theorists was compared with the main works of Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism; Weber's instrumental action and reasoning; and Lukacs' reification of consciousness were all concepts that affected the latter thinkers in one way or another, allowing them to create a pivotal change in the academic and scholarly thinking on capitalism. In essence, this paper will describe, list, and analyze the aspects of capitalism that create our false needs.

**Keywords:** *Capitalism, Economy, Politics, Psychology, Society.*

### Introduction

Many scholars have considered Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* as the most significant work in the study of the capitalist culture industry and its false needs, together with Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Katz, 1982, 151 & Durham-Peters, 2003, 66). These works represent a stepping stone as well as an important development in the formation of the Critical Theory focused on the human capitalist interests (Outhwaite, 1988, 5-8). These theories came to be in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, whether a theory is right or wrong is a subject that should always be studied. It is important to see whether what a theory claims is true. On this point, this paper will examine whether the culture industry creates false needs; arguing that it does in fact do so, supporting the theories of the previously mentioned proponents. This analysis will focus on scholars such as Marx, Weber, and Lukacs, who really gave what could be considered the start of this theory. This will allow pointing out what the

components of this theory are and how the term culture industry came to be. For each of these contributors, an examination of how this culture industry forms false needs will be pursued by providing theories and examples given by supporters of the theory such as Scannell, Durham-Peters, and Hansen. Furthermore, counter-arguments by critiques such as Wiggerhaus and Witkin, will be provided in order to provide a more reliable comparison. Simply put, through an analysis of the above mentioned works and scholars, this paper will argue that capitalism and culture industry cultivate and satisfy false needs within society.

To acquire an understanding of how culture industry creates false needs, it is important to define capitalism first as it is the source of these needs, together with culture industry.

According to Heilbroner,

“Capitalism is a unique historical formation with core institutions and distinct movements. It involves the rise of a mercantile class, the separation of production from the state, and a mentality of rational calculation. Its characteristic logic revolving around the accumulation of capital reflects the omnipresence of competition. It displays broad tendencies to unprecedented wealth creation, skewed size distributions of enterprise, large public sectors, and cycles of activity” (Heilbroner, 2008, 418).

It is in fact through these features of capitalism that lead to the creation of a culture industry based on false needs due to an unavoidable mass-production whose end result is a monopoly over a homogenized and passive consumer audience (Durham-Peters, 2003, 45, 71). This is what is considered by Adorno and Horkheimer as the “total power of capitalism” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944, 94). On this point, Marcuse believes this drastic effect came to be in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the free capitalism changed into an organized one where monopolies undermined the power and values of the individual which were now standardized by the culture industry (Marcuse, 1987, 96-97).

Pursuing this further, examples of such monopolies taken under consideration by Adorno and Horkheimer include all the processes of production such as novel, films, and music which are meant to impress the future working individual regardless of plot because of their show of potential commodities that can be achieved through work through a capitalist system (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, 98). Taking from Marx, one of the thinkers that inspired these scholars, the commodities and impressive aspects of the mass-production are fetish objects where money is the main fetish of commodity (Marx, 1990, 187). One could claim that these fetishes even lead to a devaluing of human social life (Scannell, 2007, 40). Therefore, leading to a more materialistic mind frame, giving more importance to material means rather than social ones. On this matter, Walter Benjamin, although a proponent of aesthetic theory himself, would argue with Adorno and strike at the heart of his argument regarding fetishism by stating that such objects of mass production could be very abstracted (Witkin, 2003, 54). This was due to the fact that for Benjamin, some sources of need for people could be seen in art, which if produced in mass could lead to a decrease in its level of need as the mass production and increase of availability would alter the relationship between the buyer and art (Benjamin, 1992, XII). However, Benjamin did not consider one thing; the cultural alterations that come as a result of society imposing

needs on the people that affects the scope of a person's desires and wants which gratifies them altering also their perception of what is useful and represses their actual visceral needs (Marcuse, 1987, 14-15).

Furthermore, this is where Webber's influence on these thinkers comes into being with his instrumental reasoning theory (Scannell, 2007, 37-44). In Weber's theory, the way false needs were created and imprinted in people's mind by society was the "highest form of rational conduct" (Scott, 1997, 570). One can see the resemblance. An example for this theory can be seen by the effect of Hollywood on people's minds and culture as a whole; or "Hollywood at its most classica, American mass culture at its most Fordist" (Hansen, 1992, 46). For Adorno and Horkheimer this represented the end of personality as one knows it as now as needs are now shared through society and even the idea of something slightly different than what this society would adopt is deemed as a peculiar abstraction (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, 136). Furthermore, this has led to a change in primal human needs where for example money is now considered not only a means to a person's false needs but also the end result itself, the need (Marcuse, 1987, 93).

Advertising is a further concept that should be taken under consideration when trying to analyze the creation of false needs. MTV can be considered an example where advertising reaches the person's mind and creates false needs coming from a collage of music videos and ads that display seductive items that capture the mind and make one want to need them due to what can be considered "an aura of magic and divinity" that surrounds these items in the spots (Durham & Kellner, 2006, xxii-xxiii). This advertising therefore did not only create a culture industry but it led to the false needs being publicized on everyone's TVs. "That is the triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, 136). Thus, this a society where the needs of humans are false due to what they perceive as needed through advertising.

Last but not least, Lukacs' reification of consciousness plays an important role in the formation of the Frankfurt School scholars (Scannell, 2007, 37-44). This theory required that a society would learn to satisfy its needs in terms of commodity, which would imply a change in its needs (Lukacs, 1923, 4). The connection between Lukacs' theory and Adorno specifically can be seen in the latter's idea of "redefinition of needs" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, 43). This redefinition of needs had basically become a condition within society which Wiggershaus would argue against, claiming that it contrasted with the references taken by Adorno leading him to an unconventional conclusion with a disastrous condition (Wiggershaus, 1995, 617, 622). However, one can see that the way society works "bears witness to the attempt to turn oneself into an apparatus meeting the requirements of success, an apparatus which, even in its unconscious impulses, conforms to the model presented by the culture industry" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, 136). Therefore these changes are evident. Consequently, one could say that the culture industry leads to a creation of false needs where the requirements society puts upon the individual need to be met.

False needs are therefore created in society through advertising and capitalism which basically satisfies them. This creates also a decrease in the importance of the individual's basic needs.

“We may distinguish both true and false needs. “False” are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. Their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability (his own and others) to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease. The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs” (Marcuse, 1991, 7).

Concluding from these points, one could say that the main idea is that people are well off so there is no space for critical alternatives. One could see that for Marcuse, capitalism was too successful as it not only cultivated these needs but it also satisfied them; and he criticizes it for it.

This analysis suggested the ways through which capitalism formed a culture industry that changed the needs of individuals. These needs changed from primal needs to false needs that the individual did not need but the culture industry forced them socially to meet certain requirements. The paper started by defining capitalism and listing the components of which led to the formation of a culture industry and the possibility to build upon these false needs. This was crucial in the formation of this paper as capitalism is the economic system in which these needs are created in. The use of the primary sources by Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer was required in order to understand their concepts and opinion behind the culture industry. Furthermore, the different aspects that aided capitalism in forming this culture industry were taken under consideration. On this point, one could mention advertising as and TV as two main examples that amplified these false needs. MTV and Hollywood were taken under consideration when trying to consider such examples.

In final consideration, the economic capitalist system creates a culture industry in which people are destined to face false needs that are not vital to their well-being, but are deemed to be vital by the creation of a society that bases success through material means. This analysis served to explain the society we live in and to create an understanding of how the needs people perceive nowadays are nothing but a cry of acceptance in a culture industry that has undermined the importance of the human being. In the future, this project could follow up by taking under consideration other economic systems and offer a comparison between them and capitalism. One could then see if it is really only capitalism that leads to such false needs. If capitalism were to be the only system leading to these needs, the comparison with other systems could provide a list and understanding of what aspects of the other economic systems could be adopted in a capital society in order to avoid and decrease these already existent false needs.

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