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Culture Industry as the manipulation of intentions to act

A totality-oriented interpretation of the circle supposition of Horkheimer and Adorno

Abstract

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Introduction

In their "Dialectic of Enlightenment", Horkheimer and Adorno characterize the culture-industrial society as one where a "circle of manipulation and reactive needs" is in action, "in which the uniformity of the system becomes denser and denser (cf. Horkheimer/Adorno 2006, Author's translation). This contribution wants to elaborate on the specifics of the manipulations and needs that are suggested here in a very general, abstract way. It is possible to interpret the circle supposition in much more concrete, applicable ways, but I find it most plausible when interpreted in an abstract way.

If the term "system" is interpreted as "society", the circle can be interpreted as describing a measure of reinforcing the integrity of society in a very broad sense, while minimizing the possibilities of disintegration at the same time. Society basically gets more and more integrated by the circle. This implies the production of the material requirements of reinforcement on the one hand, on the other hand, and in accordance with the concept of methodological individualism, it also implies the reinforcement of the ideological requirements, which has to happen on the individual level. Ideological requirements consist of an affirmative stance towards society's structure as well as the positive or indifferent value of reinforcement and the negative value of disintegration. To put it simple, socialization of the already socialized consists of messages of why things are okay the way they are, and why societal change is to be avoided.

The "needs" in the circle supposition support these ideological requirements insofar they are identified as needs associated with the status quo of society. As a result, the manipulation's¹ task in the circle is to install and support this association. However, the success of the circle does not lie in the successful reinforcement of the ideological requirements, but rather in ideology resulting in action reproducing the aforementioned material requirements; in people not just thinking about reproducing and reinforcing society, but actually acting to do so and keeping from acting in a way that undermines the reproduction and reinforcement. Thus, the reproduction of ideology, of needs, desires, attitudes, is not the telos of the process described in the circle supposition. The reproduction of individual intentions to act that lead to action rather is the telos. The reproduction of ideology is only useful insofar it is the best way of reproducing intentions to act and actions.

These arguments apply to any form of society that falls under the circle supposition, meaning any form of society that regards reinforcement of its material requirements as vital, and sees a need to try to convince members of society to act accordingly.

Intentions to act as mental states

¹ The term "manipulation" here is used in the broadest sense, meaning "the result of a successful action in order to change something".

² Otherwise, random wanted outcomes would be just as fine as non-random ones. Without making a complete,₂

Intentions to act, according to Wagner (cf. Wagner 2012), are mental states that function as bridges between dispositions and actions. While dispositions include motives, attitudes, expectations that may be situated in non-conscious parts of the mind, intentions to act consist of conscious assessments of those dispositions. This does not mean that, in consciously assessing, dispositions become conscious, but rather that the assessment itself is a conscious act. Only therefore it makes sense to define actions as meaningful.

As intentions to act are the results of conscious assessments, they are dependent on the measures of assessment used. Going back to the argument about the vitality of manipulating intentions to act in a certain direction, successful manipulation consists not only of the manipulation of the outcome (the action)², but also of the manipulation of the interplay between dispositions and assessments in a way that results in the wanted intentions to act.

The interplay between dispositions and assessments, through the eyes of societies engaging in what the circle supposition describes, is interpreted in a teleological way. From the viewpoint of classical critical theory following the ideas of Adorno, the scientific distinction between dispositions and assessments has to be handled with caution, because assessments may very well be structured around non-conscious parts of dispositions. This is ultimately an empirical question: What do people consider when they make such assessments? While Horkheimer and Adorno (cf. 2006) obviously advocate using subjective as well as objective rationality (see also: Horkheimer, 2007), part of being rational about assessments is to acknowledge the existence and effectiveness of the irrational. This implies that the critical way of assessing accepts assessment as never being absolutely rational.

On the other hand, this does not imply that they have to be absolutely irrational.

Manipulation of rationality

The manipulation of intentions to act has to consider which methods of assessments it addresses. If, for instance, it addresses assessments that rely heavily on non-conscious parts of dispositions, manipulation through reason seems to be a rather unsuccessful strategy. If, on the other hand, assessments are regarded as rational, conscious acts, manipulation aims towards concepts of rationality, thus towards formal logic and semantic structures of language and its practical use. Christine Resch interprets the concept of "Culture Industry" in this way: knowledge is structured according to the principles of commodities and administration (cf. Resch 2012).

As the telos of manipulation consists partly of the ideological reinforcement for the aforementioned reasons, the aim of manipulating concepts of rationality is more meaningful in general, as it addresses the means of assessments at the same time as the ideological reinforcement itself.³ Non-conscious parts may very well be incorporated into ideology that addresses conscious parts, e.g. obedience to authority, misogyny, racism, narcissism or social Darwinism and would be an interesting topic for research. However, manipulation of the conscience seems to be much more applicable, and, at the same time, applied in the real world.

² Otherwise, random wanted outcomes would be just as fine as non-random ones. Without making a complete argument here, reliance on random wanted outcomes, no matter how good the odds are, cannot be a meaningful societal strategy, as it basically ignores the ideological legitimization of material reinforcement, thereby rendering socialization meaningless.

³ While it is possible to imagine a society where ideological reinforcement is achieved by mainly addressing the non-conscious, there seem to be some practical restrictions to the success of such an endeavor. Even non-conscious ideology becomes apparent in everyday experiences in the lived-in world.

Concepts of rationality are an interesting target for manipulation – we all have and act according to concepts of rationality, while we rarely have an awareness of our concepts of rationality. More important, we usually lack ideas of alternatives within the realm of rationality. The challenges students face when trying to understand Horkheimer's distinction between subjective or instrumental reason on the one hand, objective reason on the other (cf. Horkheimer 2007), illustrates the issue. While the different aims of both concepts of rationality are not too hard to understand, the difference in *methods* of rationality they imply are really hard to understand. Horkheimer's explanation refers to the dominance of instrumental reason, which is reflected in students' experiences: They want to apply objective reason with the tools of subjective reason. We lack the ability to observe rationality from a meta-level; our language seems not to be made for that. The best we can do is to note those issues and to try to identify and reflect changes in rationality in perspective to the aims of manipulations.

The lack of awareness of our concepts of rationality – and the lack of awareness of their fundamental contingency – make them a primary target for manipulation. While any given concept of rationality complicates manipulation that is in opposition to the implications of that concept of rationality, we are generally more unaware of the manipulation of rationality itself, for the lack of a meta-level for observation, relative to which we could identify changes in rationality. The ship, to use a metaphor, may move, but there is no landmass relative to which we could measure it's movement.

This is not to say that the manipulation of concepts of rationality is easy to be achieved. When Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the dialectic of enlightenment consists of such a manipulation that shifted "power" from objective to subjective reason, they point towards the necessity of a very concrete application of subjective reason, namely the principle of exchange (cf. Horkheimer/Adorno 2006). Adorno even acknowledges the superiority of societies structured around said principle when it comes to the very core of culture, and thus, of society, the defense against nature. Thus, the superiority of subjective reason, when it comes to survival, proved to be the ultimate argument to change the dominant societal concept of rationality. Still, it took hundreds of years from the beginning of capitalism to the establishment of culture industry as a form of society. In consequence, the notion of "manipulation" in the circle supposition, if interpreted in a strong way, cannot reasonably be understood as an immediate manipulation of a concept of rationality as part of a method of assessment of intentions to act; at least, not if we suppose that the individual's concept of rationality is a result of societal processes.⁴ A fetishised subjective reason may be called a pathology of society, but certainly not one that applies specifically to contemporary society. And while subjective reason produces it's well-known negative consequences if fetishized, much like oxygen, a certain amount of subjective reason is very healthy (cf. Horkheimer 2007).

Disintegration and Reinforcement

The idea of a stable concept of rationality, however, has to be put under scrutiny. Even if one accepts the argument that, in the principle of exchange, subjective reason presents itself as the form of rationality best fit for defense against nature, that does not imply that the application of subjective reason to life always leads to consistent results. In the tradition of Marx and Freud, many scholars have pointed out the contradictoriness of modern societies structured around the principle of

⁴ If, on the other hand, concepts of rationality are not generally learnt through the societal process, but through individual reflection, such concepts could be manipulated in a more immediate way. But that seems to be an unrealistic assumption.

exchange. The contradictions between poverty and abundance and between individual needs and societal circumstance are the most obvious examples.

One possible consequence of encountering societal contradictions is the impression of the limits of subjective reason, or, for that matter, any total concept of rationality. If society regards the dominant concept of rationality as mandatory, this presents a problem, as it opens the possibility of disintegration of the ideological requirements for societal reproduction on the micro-level, and henceforth possibly on the macro-level as well. This is true especially for capitalist societies as long as the principle of exchange is seen as the best way to defend against nature, and as long as defense against nature is seen as the primary aim of society, a viewpoint shared by many classics of social theory from Hobbes to Marx to Adorno. It is not a counterargument that this viewpoint does not adequately represent the meaning of society in everyday societal practice. As long as this primary aim of society is generally achieved, different aims may come into focus, e.g. welfare, fairness or, for that matter, defense against other societies or cultures. However, these are only meaningful as long as the primary aim is achieved.

While Horkheimer and Adorno have shown the pathologies of societies structured around subjective reason, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* they also point out a general argument against any concept of rationality being the dominant one in society: Using rationality does not imply using it based on rational motives (cf. Horkheimer/Adorno 2006). Quite contrary, rationality may be a tool used in completely non-rational ways or for completely non-rational, even non-conscious means.⁵ The lack of awareness of the true reasons for using rationality in itself is a source for contradictions between the conscious and non-conscious self. Through methodological individualism, this applies to the macro-level as well. So, as much as it seems that there are good reasons for one concept of rationality being dominant in a form of society, its limitations are there from the very beginning. The relevant difference between societies from a circle-supposition-perspective, in that sense, is not, what kind of rationality they choose as the dominant one, but rather, how they react to the possibly disintegrating effects of rationality's limitations becoming visible.

Conflict management in a society that does not try to limit disintegration seems to be almost impossible, as it had to negotiate on the aforementioned meta-level, whose actual existence in language practice is barely thinkable. No matter what model of conflict management was applied, no matter if it is a more authoritarian or deliberative one, people most likely would not be able to understand its communicative acts, therefore rendering it mostly pointless. Thus, the idea of a society not counter measuring these disintegrating effects while still being able to function as a society, seems to be a very far stretch.

On the other hand, there are plenty of examples of societies who do counter measure them. Some may not try to counter measure every single instance of a disintegrating effect, but at least most try to keep these effects under control. As it is not very likely to succeed controlling them by discussing the positive aspects of the dominant concept of rationality (i.e. *why* it is good) – this would, once again, require a broad understanding of the meta-level – the reasonable way is to reinforce the effectiveness of the dominant concept of rationality (i.e. *that* it is good). From a scientific standpoint, this basically is nonsense – the quality of something is not measured in comparison to something

⁵ A good example would be the deliberate use of rationality in an emotional argument, where the conscious reason for doing so may be the wish to solve the argument on a rational base, while the non-conscious reason may very well lie in the non-conscious need to hide emotions.

else, but solely by itself. It is, as if the claim "this stone is heavy" was made without any concept of "heaviness", a concept that could only be derived by comparing the weight of different things. If, for arguments sake, the particular stone was the only known entity that had the attribute "weight", the attribute itself would be useless, just another name for what is already called "stone". This argument can be transferred to dominant concepts of rationality: To claim that one form is better than the other makes sense only insofar different concepts of rationality are known (and are comparable). Contemporary forms of society seem to be structured around one dominant concept of rationality. In consequence, reinforcement does not have to depict the dominant form as being good; presenting it as the only available option renders "goodness" irrelevant and renders any doubts pointless: It is, what it is. The dominant concept of rationality not only is presented as dominant, but as total, as lacking alternatives. Totality reduces what "affirmative stance" towards the rational structure of society implies: Affirmation becomes Positivism, becomes accepting "what it is". There are still valid reasons to choose "goodness" over "totality", they will be discussed later on.

However, this examination evokes an important empirical question: If societies undertake measures of reinforcement that try to depict the dominant concept of rationality as being "good"⁶ – what is the point? What is, for instance, the point of reinforcing the notion that the principle of exchange, and, in broader terms, subjective reason, is good, if, at the same time, there is no alternative? If there is nothing to compare, "good" is meaningless. If "good" is used in reinforcement, is that a sign of a society doubting the totality of the dominant concept of rationality, or even indirect acknowledgement of competition? Or is it just another sign of the contradictoriness of society that it favours the totality of one concept of rationality, but at times indirectly acknowledges that totality of one concept of rationality is an illusion?

For the sake of completeness, there seems to be at least one other way to handle the disintegration. Adorno and Horkheimer compare subjective and objective reason, finding that both have their advantages and disadvantages, and both are best used to keep one another in check. Interestingly, the advantages of both get lost when they are fetishised, when one gets dominant for reasons beyond reason. However, what Adorno and Horkheimer describe here, can have two very different meanings: For one, if interpreted in line with Horkheimers writings (cf. Horkheimer 2007), this could be interpreted as suggesting a system of balanced power between different concepts of rationality. Here, it's not about "either, or", but rather about "both at the same time". However, Horkheimer and Adorno do not claim that any society ever was able to have such a balanced power, moreso, relative balance seems to only exist in times of transition from one being the dominant form to the other being dominant (cf. Horkheimer/Adorno 2006). On the other hand, if interpreted in line with Adornos writings, especially on Negative Dialectics, synthesis in the form of a balanced system is not possible, it rather is a "neither, nor"-situation, applying to both the choice between subjective and objective reason as well as to the question whether there is a right choice.

The question of totality, however, can be expanded to models like the one in the Horkheimer-interpretation, because there is no reason to view rationality as a dualistic instead of a pluralistic thing. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the inherent reason for more than one concept of rationality comes from the need for critique. Any system of concepts of rationality trying to immunize against critique would be total in that sense.

⁶ Other comparing attributes work as well.

To sum this part up: If disintegration is seen as something dangerous (which is the case in most societies), it can be counter measured by reinforcing the dominant form(s) of rationality. Reinforcement may either be achieved by depicting a limited number of concepts of rationality (in reality: one) as total, as the only one(s) existing, or by stressing out the qualities that make a limited number of concepts of rationality (in reality: one) superior/better than the others. Both present different forms of manipulation as noted in the circle supposition. However, as they only present instances of reinforcement of ideas that already exist, they may better be called "weak manipulations" in contrast to the strong ones mentioned before, which are about changing the concept of rationality perceived as the dominant, or even total one.

"Good", "total" and their influence on intentions to act

Since manipulation is just one aspect of the circle, what consequences do these examinations have for the other aspects, namely for reactive needs? The "reactive" part can be divided into two interpretational aspects. One is: Dominant or total concepts of rationality force a set structure of thinking onto people. That includes the perception of one's own needs as well as the needs of others. If the perception of needs is based on the concept of rationality used to perceive or identify them, the needs are, in fact, reactive to the concept of rationality.

The other interpretational aspect of "reactive" is more obvious in the German word originally used in the circle supposition: "rückwirkend". It seems to imply that the needs have an effect on the manipulation itself, that, to be precise, the reactive needs manipulate manipulation. Since Horkheimer and Adorno claim that the circle results in a system becoming denser and denser, this manipulation of manipulation may best be interpreted as a refinement of manipulation, rather than a change of the aims or methods of manipulation. Manipulation, to put it simple, is not effective enough. On the macro-level, the "density" of the system may be a measure of the effectiveness of manipulation, where "density" seems to best be interpreted as either the "degree" of totality or the general perception of the "degree" of "goodness" of the dominant concept of rationality. The reactive need, thus, can be interpreted as the need to eliminate doubt about the totality or goodness. Doubt is the expression of awareness of the reason for societal contradictoriness being connected to the dominant concept of rationality. If it results in cognitive dissonance, it is, as we know from psychology, generally avoided. The need for avoidance of said experiences is reactive insofar it challenges society to be "denser", to not "have" contradictions⁷, or at least to reaffirm that, even if they are unavoidable, they prove no challenge to the dominant concept of rationality.

Doubt, in this case, is a very strong motive for the formulation of intentions to act, and, in consequence, actions. People want their thinking of society (i.e. their concept of rationality) and society itself to be as much in concordance as possible; one could refer to this as the need for the absence of doubt. This may lead to a variety of actions, ranging from trying to manipulate thinking to comply with society, which results in societal mimesis as a non-rational form of cognition, all the way to trying to manipulate society to be in concordance with thinking, which on its own may mean a variety of things, everything in between changing society and designing society. Even on these levels, the circle supposition does not imply culture industry. There are plenty of ways to confront doubt in different, maybe better ways.

⁷ Following the arguments made here, being contradictory is not actually a property of society, but rather of the interplay between a form of rationality and society.

However, the need for the absence of doubt, as a form of negative affirmation, is not the only motive for the formulation of intentions to act that result in the refinement of manipulation and the reinforcement of the dominant concept of rationality, though it probably is one of the strongest. There are also indifferent and positive forms of affirmation resulting out of manipulations that supply bases for intentions to act. Indifferent affirmation occurs when one concept of rationality is considered total. Having anything but an indifferent attitude towards a total concept of rationality is pointless. It may still be called "affirmative" insofar it results in actions reinforcing that concept of rationality, even if without any intent to do so. One may call it "performative affirmation". There is hardly any need for reinforcement here, thus, "reactive needs" become obsolete when the perception of totality is achieved. One acts according to the total concept of rationality, but with indifference.

The third form of affirmation is positive affirmation. This occurs when the dominant concept of rationality is being perceived as "good", which seems to suggest it not being total⁸. In this case, one may suppose that "reactive needs" that ask for a refinement of manipulation lead to a more active involvement in said refinement because of the positive value of the dominant concept of rationality. To put it simple, positive affirmation likely has a positive influence on intentions to act, and, more importantly, on actions. While indifferent affirmation resulting out of perceived totality has its upsides, positive affirmation probably is the form society prefers people to have, because, depending on what reasons for the "goodness" of a concept of rationality are being regarded, it is less susceptible to disintegration. "Something is good" – according to this argument – is less susceptible to disintegration than "something is total", because "goodness" can handle a certain amount of contradictoriness, while "totality" cannot.

No matter how abstract a concept of rationality is, arguing for it being good does not necessarily have to take place on that abstract level (the same goes for any other stance towards a concept of rationality). It can be directed to a less abstract concept exclusively included or strongly associated with the dominant concept of rationality, it can also mean arguing in favour of certain concrete, everyday instances of the application of the dominant concept of rationality (or, in the case of totality, for its lack of alternatives).

Conclusion: Action theory and the circle supposition

A commonly used and commonly criticized interpretation of the circle supposition is that it implies a very vulgar stimulus-response-model. This contribution tried to show that the circle supposition, if instead interpreted with concepts of rationality in mind, may indeed be more reasonable. To use an analogy, the presented form of manipulation is not concerned with manipulating the players, but rather the rules of the game they play; rules which are not easily reflected upon by the players because the required meta-level-thinking is hard to perform. Playing Game X means applying the rules, otherwise it would not be Game X. The rules addressed by the manipulation are concepts of rationality, which are key in the process of assessing dispositions in order to formulate intentions to act. Vulgar stimulus-response-interpretations ignore assessment processes completely, instead focusing on the manipulations of the intentions themselves. While there may be a case to be made for that, it narrows down the applicability of the circle supposition to societies who view their

⁸ Of course, one could make a case for it being regarded as both at the same time. This possibility bears the aforementioned logical issues, but who is to say that people realize that?

members in a naturalistic way – as people whose dispositions are more important for intentions to act than the assessments. Cultural Studies have rightfully questioned these kinds of interpretations.

Yet, the interpretation this contribution proposes implies the interpretation of the word "system" in the circle supposition as "society". Stimulus-Response-Interpretations usually focus on specific parts of society, like media or media businesses, where that kind of interpretation may fit the viewpoint of the "manipulators" themselves, or at least where concrete instances of manipulations and those trying to manipulate are to be identified. Raupach/Rau/Gusko (2012) have shown this to be true in the specific case of media management scholars who study marketing and have made a case for this in product-oriented marketing in general (Raupach/Rau/Gusko, 2011). Raupach (2013; 2011) also has applied comparable interpretations separately to the Web 2.0 and to newspaper-style journalism and also sketched out a proposition of a framework on how to apply the circle supposition in a concrete way (Raupach 2013). However, as fruitful as these interpretations are, they become less plausible when manipulations and manipulators become less identifiable; the circle supposition then runs the risk of becoming an unscientific conspiracy theory. This contribution thus tried to put forth an interpretation that does not need specific, individual manipulators and roots the intentions of the abstract types of manipulation not in individual motives, but rather in broad societal motives at the very base of social theory. More importantly, it showed that culture industry as one form of society with subjective reason being dominant (or total) is just one form of society that fits the circle supposition.

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