Construing the Critical Imagination: Comments and Necessary Diversions

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The following article offers a critique of the "critical imagination" thesis espoused by Murray and Ozanne in a recent article published in the Journal of Consumer Research. Also provided is a commentary on the proposed utilization of the Frankfurt Circle version of critical theory as a groundwork for consumer research. The possibility of emancipatory action stemming from critical consumer research is broadly discussed. Diversions on these themes are offered as potential areas for theory building and for the formulation of alternative conceptions of critical consumer research.

A recent article by Murray and Ozanne (1991) attempted to establish an interesting link between the Frankfurt Circle1 version of critical theory and consumer research. However, this very ambitious project is problematic on two counts. We suggest first and foremost that Murray and Ozanne have represented and used critical theory in a number of ways that are inconsistent with that of the Frankfurt Circle. The arguments in Murray and Ozanne's article differ significantly from the critical theory of the Frankfurt Circle writers that they invoke—Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 132)—and also from other versions of critical social science (e.g., Benhabib 1986; Fay 1987), in that the requisite radical impulse is unduly minimized. As such, Murray and Ozanne's "critical imagination" thesis could yield as an unintended consequence the co-optation of critical theory in the service of those societal groups (e.g., the proponents of unbridled capitalist processes, or those engaged in the promotion of exclusionary politics and sectional interests) that are conceivably the ones we are trying to be emancipated from in the first place. Second, even if Murray and Ozanne had written in the spirit of the original conceptualizations, the aporias inherent with the work of the Frankfurt Circle also directly apply to their version.

Although the article positions itself as one concerned with emancipatory interests, there is very little substantive insight into the conceptual domain of emancipation, or the corresponding notion of enlightenment. We will argue that Murray and Ozanne never adequately define emancipation from an operational perspective, and because of this, the reader is never quite sure from whom or from what we are supposed to be emancipated. We will show that there are conceivably several major sources of oppression and domination that are characteristic of contemporary Western societies. Murray and Ozanne have not identified and discussed these sources in any detail nor have they analyzed the associated ideological manipulations inherent with power and domination. Some discussion of oppression must be established before emancipatory interests become evident and relevant. In a related vein, one would have to question the very decision to situate an emancipatory perspective within the Frankfurt Circle given the extreme pessimism exemplified in this group's later works.

What follows is our interpretation and evaluation of Murray and Ozanne's article. We use the original works of the Frankfurt Circle writers in an effort to delineate the differences between critical theory and the critical imagination thesis. In addition, we will highlight what we consider to be problem areas in both the Frankfurt writers' works and Murray and Ozanne's article. Observations will be offered on the options that consumer researchers could embrace in their attempts to incorporate more progressive and radical methods into their agendas.

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1We chose to follow Helmut Dubiel ([1978] 1985) when using the label Frankfurt Circle in an attempt to avoid the debate on whether there really was a school in any sense of the term.
A “DEFANGED” CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory is a neo-Marxian critique of both capitalist societal arrangements and positivist science. To the uninitiated reader, Murray and Ozanne’s version of critical theory, which is devoid of the concepts of ideology and domination, comes dangerously close to “sanitizing” writings that are otherwise very radical and should be unacceptable for traditional theorizations of marketing and consumer research. Max Horkheimer, who coined the phrase critical theory, established a seminal distinction between a traditional or scientific theory and a critical theory. That is, scientific theories and critical theories are said to differ along three important dimensions:

1. Aims or goals, and the way agents can use them. While scientific theories aim at the successful manipulation of the external world (instrumental use), critical theories aim at emancipation and enlightenment. Agents must be made aware of hidden coercion, and their awareness then frees them from that coercion and puts them in a position to determine where their true interests lie.

2. Logical or cognitive structure. While scientific theories are “objectifying” (i.e., the theory itself is not part of the object domain that it describes), critical theories are “self-reflective” (i.e., critical theories are always a part of the object-domain that they describe).

3. Confirmation. Scientific theories require empirical confirmation through observation and experiment. Critical theories are cognitively acceptable only if they survive a more complex process of evaluation, of which a demonstration of being “reflectively acceptable” is key.2

The conflict revealed in Horkheimer’s ([1937] 1972) differentiation of critical theory from traditional theory is between those who support the capitalist mode of production and its various ideological underpinnings and those who are subversive to it. However, based on who they suggest could potentially use critical theory, the positions of Murray and Ozanne may sustain social groups sympathetic to capitalism. Furthermore, their article could be used by academic, corporate, and governmental elites and apologists to reproduce the status quo and stifle radical change. Any version of a critical social theory should be wholly inconsistent with the notion of a capitalist commodity structure and its continual drive toward efficiency and the amoral profit motive.

Murray and Ozanne have not explored in detail the Frankfurt Circle’s strong and scathing critique of capitalism (see, e.g., Horkheimer 1947; Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1986;Marcuse 1964). As a result, the methodological material of their critical imagination thesis is questionable. For example, in Murray and Ozanne’s research process, the initial stage is the “identification of a concrete problem.” What exactly constitutes a problem, however, will be dramatically different if researchers are working within the constraints imposed by capitalism as opposed to those who are subversive to these same confines. Subsequent steps of the research process are, of course, directly affected by problem identification, and this renders Murray and Ozanne’s methodology one that perpetuates capitalism under a different functionalist guise.

Murray and Ozanne are still assuming a strict positivist stance by consistently viewing the social world as some objective phenomenon. Evidence of this can be found in their assertions that everything can be appropriately identified by the critical researcher (e.g., “all relevant social groups,” or “all relevant social processes and structures”). This assumption is counter to the premises of the radical humanist paradigm with its nominalist stance. This problem could have been avoided if they had followed Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) original paradigmatic framework because critical theory is explicitly situated within radical humanism. The idea that traditional marketing and consumer research academicians could use critical theory may facilitate Marcuse’s (1964) notion of “repressive desublimation” if there is not first a genuine paradigmatic transition from functionalism to radical humanism. If this desublimation occurs, the truly subversive intent and content of critical theory would be quelled under a semblance of “enlightened” action. Murray and Ozanne do not specifically advocate any type of conceptual, theoretical, or paradigmatic transformation.

Key to Murray and Ozanne’s critical imagination thesis is the belief that emancipatory action can be advanced through the application of a critical theoretical perspective. However, because of the subtle forms of functionalism found in their article, Murray and Ozanne’s conceptualization of emancipation is lacking in both meaning and in the potential for practical use. Drawing from Luke’s Marxian interpretation, Murray and Ozanne define emancipation as “the elimination of impediments to human freedom. Marx ties emancipation directly to the idea of self-determination” (1991, p. 142). Several operational questions come to mind when evaluating this definition. The following are particularly important: (1) From what perspective does one define freedom? (2) What constitutes impediments and from where do they originate? and (3) What is self-determination and how is it best facilitated? These are questions that, if properly addressed, will foster not only a better understanding of emancipation, but also of critical theory in general. A readership, radically ori-

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2Refer to Geus (1981) for an extended discussion on the three dimensions of divergence between critical and scientific theories.
Conceptualizing Freedom and Emancipation

Emancipation should be directed in part toward removing the myriad of unnecessary constraints specifically and artificially imposed by the processes of capital and positivism. This would allow nonelite peoples to develop the capacity for autonomous action. In conceptualizing freedom, one should differentiate between a negative variety (which the definition used by Murray and Ozzanne seems to imply) and the positive alternative. Applying a liberal reading from Fromm (1941) 1969), there is a crucial difference between “freedom from” (negative freedom) and “freedom to” (positive freedom). McGowan (1991) suggests that if freedom is conceptualized from the negative perspective and “defined as the absence of all limitations, then freedom can never be realized, and the political theorist will be hard pressed to legitimate any social limits on such freedom” (p. 38). Instead, Fay (1987) offers us a conception of positive freedom by directly associating freedom with collective autonomy. The goal of critical social science, therefore, is to “help people not only to be transparent to themselves but also to cease being mere objects in the world, passive victims dominated by forces external to them. It seeks to provide at least part of the means whereby these people can be subjects, active beings who author the direction of their lives” (Fay 1987, p. 75).

Emancipation, therefore, refers in part to the elimination of repressive social constructions that impede reflective thought and collective action. Additionally, one must always consider Marcuse’s ([1955] 1966) crucial distinction between “basic repression” and “surplus repression.” The former is necessary for the perpetuation or advancement of civilization, and the latter are those additional controls imposed on the general populace by society’s elites in order to reproduce their privileged position. Alvesson and Willmott (1992) rightly address the idea of surplus repression when they define emancipation as “the process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions, in particular those that place socially unnecessary restrictions upon the development and articulation of human consciousness” (p. 432). Murray and Ozzanne’s decision not to differentiate between positive and negative freedom, and basic and surplus repression, has obscured what could have otherwise been a much richer initial formulation of crucial emancipatory criteria.

Capitalist Impediments to Human Freedom: On Work and Consumption

Without some theoretical direction (which would include a conceptualization of oppression), the impediments to human freedom will be so varied, given the multitude of diverse interests, that working toward the alleviation of such impediments would be virtually impossible. Although they espouse a critical theoretical position, Murray and Ozzanne do not use the ammunition provided by this approach in the discussion of what form these impediments would take. They have made the mistake that Ryan (1982) appropriately warns us of, in that “very often political criticism deals tactically with capitalist ideology and social policy without disturbing their conceptual infrastructure” (p. 117). Alvesson and Willmott (1992) argue that socially unnecessary restrictions take many forms including repressive assumptions, traditions, ideologies, identity formations, and power relations. Following critical theory, then, we submit that what constitutes an impediment to positive human freedom can be identified within the capitalist value system and its impact on both the work and the consumption realms.

The presumption within most Marxian versions of critical theory is that alienation and commodity fetishism have roots in the capitalist labor process, and this relationship is something that Murray and Ozzanne do not discuss. This omission runs counter to their alleged adherence to a dialectical perspective and a relational social context explained by the idea of totality. The following excerpt from Marcus ([1941] 1983) is particularly helpful: “The product of labor, the commodity, seems to determine the nature and end of human activity. In other words, the materials that could produce life come to rule over its content and goal, and the consciousness of man is completely made victim to the relationships of material production” (p. 273). Marcus is interpreting Marx’s conceptualization of alienated labor found in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (Marx 1977a). For Marx, alienation under capitalist conditions exhibits itself between the individual and his or her productive activity, the product itself, other individuals, and the human species. Workers have no control over what they produce, how, or what happens to the product afterwards. Workers subjected to the wage form must work to live rather than to realize their full human potential through work.

Erich Fromm (1935) specifically addresses the phenomenon of alienated consumption by describing what he sees as the character of modern consuming activities: “The act of consumption should be a concrete human act, in which our senses, bodily needs, our aesthetic taste—that is to say, in which we as concrete, sensing, feeling, judging human beings—are involved; the act of consumption should be a meaningful, human productive experience. In our culture, there is little of that. Consuming is essentially the satisfaction of artificially stimulated fantasies, a phantasmic performance alienated from our concrete, real selves (p. 122). Fromm believes that in capitalist society consumption is no longer a means to an end (e.g., the satisfaction of a real
need), but an end in itself. For Fromm, consumption is situated within a broad societal context which includes alienation from work and from the social forces (e.g., the political sphere) that unilaterally determine human existence. Fromm's *artificially stimulated phantasies* are conceptually similar to Marcuse's (1964) false needs, Ofie's (1984) structurally imposed needs, and Firat's (1987) consumption patterns. There is the element of manipulation in all of these formulations. These arguments are important because those adhering to a Marxist-type critique all clearly argue that capitalism faces the severe problem of overproduction if people do not consume beyond their basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing (Leiss, Kline, and Hally 1990).

Benton (1987) has formally drawn the link between work and consumption for marketers: "In brief, the argument is that much of contemporary consumption is a form of compensation for the lack of meaningful work. Consequently, the origins of our culture of consumption, as well as of contemporary patterns of consumer behavior, cannot be understood apart from an understanding of the progressive degradation of work during the twentieth century" (p. 236). Marx (1973) provides us with a key feature of the capitalist mode of production: consumption and production are concomitants of one another. Marketing practices, in large part, satisfy the capitalist need for mass consumption that is required to absorb the vast outputs achieved by mass production. Emancipation, therefore, has to be conceptualized within both the production and consumption spheres because the laborer and consumer are one and the same. In other words, the capitalist arrangements of work and consumption provide us with several potential points of resistance for emancipatory action. The relationships of work and consumption are crucial for the consumer researcher to grasp in the construction of a critical theoretical interpretation.

Murray and Ozanne suggest that "critical theory provides a new approach that investigates those aspects of consumer behavior that constrain some social groups or that generate conflict." (p. 130). Societal conflict, however, has been avoided because the advocates of capital have been able to successfully block the realization of the inherent contradictions of the capitalist mode of production and consumption (e.g., the continual propagation of social production coupled with private appropriation, or capitalism's perpetual and successful confrontation with the problem of overproduction and/or underconsumption). This conflict avoidance is what Marcuse (1964) is referring to when he suggests that advanced industrial society has been able to achieve the "integration of opposites" (e.g., the collusion of business and labor). No conception of "the struggle of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat as the motive force of the development of capitalist society" (Schäff 1960, p. 244) can be found in Murray and Ozanne's formulations.

Conflict and contradiction for a critical theorist are systemic to societal processes (see Burrell and Morgan 1979), and not something that is randomly generated or determined, as Murray and Ozanne seem to suggest. The following passage is particularly telling when they suggest that a company can use critical theory as a defense: "Perhaps they can demonstrate that no contradiction exists, that the contradiction was not produced by their actions, or that the contradiction is not coercive. If the contradiction existed before the company began its marketing strategy, for instance, this specific corporation should probably not be held accountable." (p. 140). Are we to believe, then, that because a current-day corporation did not actually begin the capitalist process of exploiting the working class (through social production and private appropriation) that they are somehow justified in continuing such behavior? Or, because a particular company did not construct the notion of the profit motive, and is only subjected to it, organizational decision makers have no responsibility in transforming their marketing strategy from one that facilitates and disguises highly asymmetrical exchanges with consumers? The examples chosen by Murray and Ozanne (i.e., Hirschman's [1991] so-called "dark side" of consumer behavior: drug addiction, credit card abuse, excessive gambling, and prostitution) provide no critique of capitalism and are framed such that the consumer is held to be wholly at fault, or somehow irresponsible.

The Marxist notions of alienation and commodity fetishism, which could account for such behaviors, are characteristic of advanced capitalist societies. The dominance of the commodity form and the perverse importance of exchange value reproduce the notion that anything and everything can be bought and sold. The body is no different, as in the case of prostitution or pornography. Murray and Ozanne never discuss the ways in which marketing and advertising (as inherently biased processes) perpetuate the emphasis on exchange value which the original Frankfurt writers thought was one of the main evils under capitalist conditions. By substituting exchange value for use value, thereby imposing a fetishistic posture, the capitalist production and consumption apparatus destroys any notion of a free and genuine commodity exchange that stresses the intrinsic value of use.

*It is interesting that Hirschman, after writing about "people as products" (1987) would not include this subject matter as part of her "dark side" of consumer behavior. The commodity form has indeed invaded even emotional interactions if a significant number of Americans really perceive dating and romance as mere economic transactions and marketing exchanges. Situating this cross form of behavior within an analysis of instrumental reason and rationality would, of course, be in the spirit of critical theory.

Murray and Ozanne suggest that a company could be held liable if it could be shown that "consumers were induced to purchase goods and services that they would not normally purchase" (p. 140). Assuming that one could truly determine whether a particular consumer was unduly influenced to purchase, and given the aforementioned work of Fromm, Marcuse, Offe, and Firat, would not most American consumer goods manufacturers be responsible for the perpetuation of unnecessary consumption activities in the effort to combat overproduction and/or underconsumption? Although Murray and Ozanne briefly mention reification, it is never demonstrated how this mystification (i.e., how the relationship among human subjects is replaced by a contrived and artificial relationship among commodities) blocks the critical consciousness of individuals subjected to the capitalist mode of production (in both the labor process and consumption sphere). The commodity as a mysterious thing is a central focus of a radical critique of capitalist society in general, and for the Marxian and Lukácsian conceptions of reification specifically.³

The examples that Murray and Ozanne use (i.e., safety of minivans, TenderCare diapers, Starkist) represent opportunities for extended discussions on ethical decision making of organizations, on conceptions of social responsibility, and on the impact(s) on the behavior of consumers. However, how do these examples facilitate the Marxian notion of emancipation that Murray and Ozanne advance? Indeed, capital's demand for the commodity form and the associated ideological requirements are still not subject to scrutiny under their presentation. Capitalism is always open to the types of "locating" forwarded in the critical imagination thesis because they are easy for the system to absorb and defuse. All of Murray and Ozanne's examples fall outside the realm of critical theory and its Marxian underpinnings. As a result, the critical imagination thesis runs the very real risk of resulting in a parodic exercise in critical theory.

In many crucial ways some of the original formulations of the Frankfurt Circle (e.g., those of Fromm and Marcuse) still hold for contemporary critical theorists. The most important formulation is the position of Horkheimer (1972), who argues that it is "the task of the critical theoretician to reduce the tension between his own insight and oppressed humanity in whose service he thinks" (p. 221). It is apparent, however, that Murray and Ozanne are not speaking for the most oppressed groups in society. As discussed previously, their perspective draws attention away from a critique of the capitalist modes of production and consumption. As an ultimate result of this nonradical orientation, dominant or elite class interests are reproduced. The idea that one can talk about critical theory and competitive advantage literally in the same sentence (p. 141) is somewhat surprising. The notion that a company may be able to use critical theory in a defense of its marketing strategy is a position that should be reconsidered. The original Frankfurt Circle members would have been dismayed that their work, which was painstakingly subversive, was being put to the use of protecting the capitalist economic and ideological structure.

Ideology and the Deflection of Self-Determination

Because of a recalcitrance on the part of nonelite societal members, the advocates of capitalism have been compelled to engage in many forms of ideological indoctrination. Therefore, the concept of ideology in the pejorative sense (i.e., false consciousness)³ and ideology critique (Ildiologiekritik) have become central to critical theory and are absent in Murray and Ozanne's presentation. As a result, the crucial relationships between ideology, power, and domination remain obscured. Without some specific conception of domination or repression any discussion of emancipation becomes meaningless. In addition, the alleviation of ideological mystifications will, in part, be a first step in facilitating nonelite people's struggle toward self-determination.

Writing from a critical theoretical perspective, Geuss (1981) suggests that the term ideology "is used in a pejorative sense to criticise a form of consciousness because it incorporates beliefs which are false, or because it functions in a reprehensible way, or because it has a tainted origin. I will call these three kinds of criticism: criticism along the epistemic, the functional, and the genetic dimensions respectively" (p. 21). Eagleton (1991)³ has suggested further that perhaps the most widely accepted definition of ideology comes from the

³Incorporating the ideas from Capital (Volume I) (Marx 1977b) and History and Class Consciousness (Lukács 1971) would help traditional marketers and consumer researchers in this regard as well as assisting them in discovering crucial links between Marx and Lukács and the Frankfurt Circle.

³Within late capitalist interpretations, some adherents of critical social theory have replaced the notion of false consciousness with alternative conceptualizations of this phenomenon. Habermas (1981) and Alveson (1991) advocates the use of consciousness as a more accurate descriptive device.

³Eagleton (1991, pp. 1–2) provides us with no less than 16 definitions of ideology currently in use. Those that may be helpful for our purposes in consumer research include (a) the process of production of meanings, signs, and values in social life; (b) false ideas that help to legitimate a dominant political power; (c) systematically distorted communication; (d) that which offers a position for a subject; (e) the conjecture of discourse and power; (f) the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality; (g) semiotic closure. By deploying these selected conceptualizations we can, for example, assess the ideological content of communications messages (e.g., by recognizing that advertising is an inherently biased process) that emanate from corporate or political organizations.
work of Thompson. Thompson (1984) contends that “to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination” (p. 182). For Thompson, domination exists when the relations of power are “systematically asymmetrical”: “Relations of power are systematically asymmetrical when particular agents or groups of agents are institutionally endowed with power in a way which excludes, and to some significant degree remains inaccessible to, other agents or groups of agents, irrespective of the basis upon which such exclusion is carried out” (p. 181). Currently, advocates of most socialist and leftist agendas (e.g., the New Social Movements), which represent some form of a post-Marxian position, suggest that the divisions based on class, gender, race, and nation-state are the most important asymmetries in our societies. We would argue that inequalities based on ethnicity and sexual orientation are also in need of close examination. These divisions become crucial because the inequality that is present allows a (re)formulation of subject-positions from a radical stance. It is argued that the people that constitute these various subject-positions, in turn, should be susceptible to revolutionary or emancipatory activity. In other words, people that represent a particular class (e.g., proletariat) are not the only addressees of a critical social theory in contemporary times. Murray and Ozanne do not identify for which subject-position they are constructing their critical theory. The suggestion that “the output of critical theory may be useful to academic, public, and private interests” (p. 130) merely reproduces a system of domination that seems to be already in a very strong and insurmountable position.

Although we could point to several ideologies that operate to reproduce capitalist relations, and hence domination (e.g., the “need” for the division and subdivision of labor processes, or the adherence by nonelite peoples to the notion of democracy), the ideological effects of Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1986) culture industry become highly relevant for critical researchers specifically analyzing the underpinnings of the consumption sphere. Murray and Ozanne do not discuss the important contribution of Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1986) Dialectic of Enlightenment—in particular, their section on mass deception. The effects of the culture industry cut deep into the psyche of the American consumer. A consciousness, proletarian or otherwise, is stifled in part because of the culture industry, or to use Krautauerian terminology, the distraction factories (Krautauer 1989). “The deception is not that the culture industry supplies amusement but that it ruins the fun by allowing business considerations to involve it in the ideological clichés of a culture in the process of self-liquidation. Ethics and taste cut short unrestrained amusement as naïve— naïveté is thought to be as bad as intellectualism—and even restrict technical possibilities. The culture industry is corrupt; not because it is a sinful Babylon but because it is a cathedral dedicated to elevated pleasure” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1986, pp. 142–143). Horkheimer and Adorno are referring specifically to phenomena such as art, film, and music, and not consumer products per se. Their proposed link between the culture industry and advertising, however, is quite revealing: “Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically. In both cases the same thing can be seen in innumerable places, and the mechanical repetition of the same culture product has come to be the same as that of the propaganda slogan. In both cases the insistent demand for effectiveness makes technology into psychotechnology, into a procedure for manipulating men. In both cases the standards are striking yet familiar, the easy yet catchy, the skillful yet simple; the object is to overpower the customer, who is conceived as absent-minded or resistant” (p. 163).

We suggest that for consumer researchers the conception of the culture industry should be expanded to include consumer products as well as the strictly cultural forms identified by the Frankfurt Circle. Consumer products are amenable to such an analysis primarily because they exhibit the commodity form, and secondarily because they have the potential of becoming some of the only cultural artifacts that will exist in American society (e.g., the television or the automobile). Huysen (1986) expresses best the relationship between traditional cultural phenomena and consumer commodities: “Just as art works become commodities and are enjoyed as such, the commodity itself in consumer society has become image, representation, spectacle. Use value has been replaced by packaging and advertising. The commodification of art ends up in the aestheticization of the commodity” (p. 21). The boundaries between what the Frankfurt critical theorists considered cultural phenomena in the 1940s and today’s consumer products have become blurred, which has led to such a degree that it may no longer be useful to draw distinctions, at least in late modern America. It is all alienated leisure (Habermas 1973) controlled by industrial organization and capitalist interests.

CRITICAL THEORY ALONE AND THE LOSS OF POLITICAL RELEVANCE

As evident in their later writings, the Frankfurt Circle version of critical theory is inconsistent with any practical notion of liberation or emancipation because of its paralytic posture toward the commodity structure that seems to be dominant in most realms of human endeavor under capitalism. Murray and Ozanne do not address the major premises set forth in the discussions of Horkheimer’s (1947, [1967] 1974) instrumental reason, Marcuse’s (1964) one-dimensionality, or Adorno’s ([1966] 1973) administered world. For better or worse, these depressing societal interpretations go to the heart.
of postwar critical theory and must be explicitly recognized and confronted because of the potential for applicability in contemporary contexts. If one engages in even a cursory review of these seminal discussions, it becomes glaringly apparent that it would be extremely difficult to conceptualize emancipation from these reductive, yet deeply pessimistic, pages of the Frankfurt theorists.

Hence, Adorno’s ([1951] 1974) assertion that critical theory is a melancholy science. The Frankfurt Circle version of a critical theory is inherently sad, because even if some notion of emancipation is achieved (which is doubtful), large numbers of people previous to this have needlessly suffered from the horrors of existence under capitalism. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse ultimately realized that there was no identifiable agent of historical/social change or transformation. The modern subject seemed to have died, been radically re-centered, or been a cruel fiction all along. Benthahb (1981) suggests that contemporary critical theorists find themselves today in the same situation that the earlier Frankfurt Circle writers faced. Murray and Ozanne would have been better able to contend with this lack of a subject/addressee of critical theory had they incorporated the changes in the writings of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse.

Murray and Ozanne do not discuss the important stages of development of the Frankfurt Circle’s work. Dubiel (1985) identifies these periods as follows: (1) materialism, 1930–1937, (2) critical theory, 1937–1944, and (3) critique of instrumental reason, 1940–1945. This is significant because Murray and Ozanne seem to be caught in the middle stage, which Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse dismissed back in the 1940s. Marcuse’s (1964) One-dimensional Man, for example, was written in the spirit of the critique of instrumental reason. Murray and Ozanne (p. 134) discuss two value judgments of a critical theory of society drawn from Marcuse (p. x): (1) human life is worth living and (2) human life can be improved. Although Marcuse discussed these judgments of a social theory, virtually the rest of One-dimensional Man is an exposé of the tyranny and triumph of social domination and control. If a few pages later, in fact, Marcuse asserts that “society seems to be capable of containing social change,” or that there

“is no ground on which theory and practice, thought and action meet” (p. xii). In these short passages Marcuse is revealing the power of the integration of opposites and the absence of a collective or revolutionary subject. Given these contentions, the possibility of praxis is unlikely. If one were invited to use Marcuse, we argue that One-dimensional Man would be the last reference to use. If anything, his Essay on Liberation (1969) and/or Counterrevolution and Revolt (1972) at least provide us with some notion of opposition to the forces of the status quo (Rose 1990). In summary, the original Frankfurt writers divorced their theory from political action long ago.10

The Aporias of Critical Theory

The internal problems of critical theory, which have been discussed time and again (see, e.g., Benthahb 1981, 1986; Piccone 1976, 1977, 1978), is something that is not evident in Murray and Ozanne’s presentation. This situation may have transpired because of their use of generally sympathetic, and hence unreflective, secondary sources (e.g., Held 1980; Jay 1973; McCarthy 1978; Tar 1977) 1985. The conceptualizations of the Frankfurt Circle are far from flawless. The critical theorist engaging in ideology critique, for example, runs the risk of merely acting as a disruptive force in people’s lives. This is what Fay (1987) is referring to when he talks of the Wild Duck Syndrome (after Ibsen’s play), and essentially, who believes that “seeks to improve human life” (p. 136). Who determines this? Do critical theorists know better than the rest of us what our true and genuine needs and capacities are? Taking this a step further from the improbable to the implausible, are we to assume that the consumer researcher is in some unique position to conceptualize for the rest of us what human life should be like? The processes of reification and domination block the critical consciousness of everyone including consumer researchers.

10We would agree with Rose (1990) when he argues that One-dimensional Man may not have been pessimistic enough given the state of affairs 25 years after its original publication. Rose even suggests that the “Weakness of One-dimensional Man’s analysis cannot be refuted by a recitation of the many resistances that followed the publication of Marcuse’s work” (pp. 63–64). Benthahb (1981), on the other hand, argues that critical theory, in order to remain a viable possibility, must revise the one-dimensionality thesis. She contends that with the centrality of one-dimensionality “critical theory no longer moves within the horizon of prospective future transformation, but must retreat into the retrospective stance of past hope and remembrance” (p. 48).

9The post-Marxist literature may be of some value in the (re)construction of contemporary political action and discourse. Laclau (1990) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985), for example, offer substantial insights into the process of hegemony and the accompanying resistance.
CONSTRUING THE CRITICAL IMAGINATION

As discussed previously, the first-generation Frankfurt theorists, in their later work, formulated a critique of instrumental reason to denounce what they believed was a system of total domination. How can these individuals, however, stand outside this system in order to critique it? They would be subjected to the same alienation and manipulation if the system were that absorbing. Benhabib (1981) poignantly expands on this aporia of critical theory in the following passage: “If the plight of the Enlightenment and of cultural rationalization only reveals the culmination of an identity logic, constitutive of reason, then the theory of the dialectic of the enlightenment, which is carried out with the tools of this very same reason, perpetrates the very structure of domination it condemns” (p. 44). Murray and Oznane’s efforts that advocate a reliance on Jürgen Habermas’s (a second-generation Frankfurt theorist) communicative action, which they view as a way around this substantial dilemma (p. 141), are challenged by Kroger and Cook (1988): “As the leading exponent in social theory of the traumatized German mind, Habermas wrote a trauma-theory: a social theorisation which took shelter in the rationalist citadel of the ‘freely communicating self,’ in the ‘ideal speech situation’ of rationalized ethics, in the world as a parsed sentence, because it could not bear to stare directly into the dark abyss of enlightenment’s dialectic” (p. 255). Because of Habermas’s pragmatic reaction to Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, Kroger and Cook argue that he is unable to grasp “the entwining of reason and irrationalism,” the notion of “self-destruction and self-preservation as the twin reflexes of the bourgeois mind,” and “the deep relationship between technology and fascism” (p. 255). Kroger and Cook’s scathing and colorful characterizations aside, one would have to be equally extremist if advocating that the ideal speech situation is even remotely attainable in a capitalist consumption arrangement. The requisite validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness are simply not operationalizable in a setting of one-way communication or in communication where physical gaps (time and space) exist (e.g., the “interaction” between marketing organizations and consuming publics). We believe, therefore, that Dialectic of Enlightenment is more descriptive of late bourgeois society, and hence more theoretically useful than Habermas’s ([1981] 1984, 1987) theses on communicative action.

Based on who Murray and Oznane propose should use critical theory (i.e., those representing corporate and governmental interests), their article seems to transform critical theory into just another form of capitalist ideology, dogmatism, or mode of domination. The idea of the critical theorist as a liberator, metaphorically or otherwise, is a dated concept desperately in need of revision. In addition, it also seems highly improbable that the American consumer will be able to assume the role of revolutionary subject in any sense of the term. These, however, are problems not only in Murray and Oznane’s thesis, but also for critical theory in general. Fay’s (1987) Critical Social Science (which is distanced from the Frankfurt Circle) may offer us a way around these dilemmas.

In his discussions of critical theory, which include the realization of the latent potential for oppression, Fay has suggested that “the thrust of critical social science is provided by the unhappiness of its audience,” and “the existence of feelings of unhappiness on the part of its audience is one of the most important ways a critical theory protects itself from degenerating into a form of domination itself” (p. 81). Fay advocates that the primary values of a critical social science are rational self-clarity (the value of enlightenment) and collective autonomy (the value of emancipation). Happiness— that is, “a mental state in which people are pleased with their lives as a whole” (p. 80), and, “an intellectual feeling which involves emotional and cognitive elements” (p. 81)—is a value derivative from clarity and autonomy. A conception of rational self-clarity, or the realization of the true nature of one’s existence, is something that is missing in Murray and Oznane’s version of a critical theory. This has happened, in part, because of their neglect of ideology critique as discussed above. Without a formulation of self-clarity, and its opposite (i.e., false consciousness, consciousness restriction), any action toward emancipation would be deterred. The use of Fay’s rational self-clarity and collective autonomy, for example, is one way to operationalize self-determination. Assuming a radical humanist position, Fay suggests that we should stimulate the audience to liberate itself and thereby transform society. Although potentially helpful to consumers in their decision making, disseminating information about products and purchases (e.g., Mr. Coffee) hardly qualifies as an endeavor of critical theory and in no way will enhance the prospects for enlightenment or liberation. No matter what examples Murray and Oznane offer, the capitalist market system is still intact, with the commodity form stronger than ever.

Before closing, we want to evaluate the following assertion made by Murray and Oznane: “If critical theory were more widely used by consumer researchers, outsiders would not have to critique our field (p. 139).” Critical theory, however, is only one conceptual position that offers the possibility for reflective and progressive moments for our discipline(s). In fact, the arguments in our article were constructed, in part, to discern the applicability and contemporary use of critical theory. But because consumer research is admittedly an inter-

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For example, a recent issue of the Journal of Consumer Research (March 1993), includes articles that use feminism as a method of critique (Krotki and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1995; and Stern 1993). These analyses are important and differ in significant ways from the Frankfurt Circle version of critical social theory.
disciplinary endeavor, we should continually welcome critique from other nontraditional theoretical perspectives. Characterizations such as “outsiders” and “our field” become extremely tenuous, and could lead to an unintentional and undesirable exclusionary posture. We are certain that Murray and Ozanne would agree that no academic group has discursive privilege when it comes to something as complex as consumption phenomena. Consider, for example, that entire issues of *Theory, Culture, and Society* (1983, Vol. 1, No. 3) and *Sociology* (1990, Vol. 24, No. 1) have been dedicated to consumption-related issues. We believe that traditional consumer researchers should be working with people like Stuart Ewen, Mike Featherstone, and William Leiss, and not quarreling over conceptual domains, which, in effect, erects artificial boundaries to social scientific work. Leiss, for example, is probably a member of the “free-floating critical intelligentsia” that Murray and Ozanne admire. All academicians, including those “outside” consumer research, have an enormous amount of theoretical work to offer, and it would be counterproductive to advocate that critique must only come from “within.” Critique is in perpetual theoretical and conceptual flux because it is itself a dialectical process.

**AFTERWORD**

As we view radical theorizing from a 1990s perspective, the Frankfurt Circle version of critical theory seems troubled when standing alone as a theoretical “tool.” Critical theory is too locked into the projects of modernity and the Enlightenment and, consequently, the ultimate failures thereof. However, when critical theory is coupled with New French Thought and the writings of the post-Marxist discourse there may be renewed hope. We agree with Kellner (1989) when he suggests that critical theory must recognize the importance of the postmodernists’ vision of the primacy of consumption and consequently “must now deepen and expand its critiques of the consumer society to demonstrate the failures and limitations of contemporary capitalism” (p. 158).12 A strong case in point is Baudrillard’s (1981) analysis of the value of the sign. Here, traditional political economy is somewhat displaced by Baudrillard’s (1983) hyperreality of simulations, which consists of commodity signs, images divorced from content or substance, and media spectacles. Under a postmodern interpretation, the fetishism of the sign has replaced the Marxian notion of the fetishism of commodities.

There is at other times, however, a perceived conceptual overlap between Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, and those espousing postmodern or post-structuralist orientations. Levin (1991), for example, contends that the Marxian concept of reification, which is central to the Frankfurt Circle, is very similar to Baudrillard’s notion of simulation. At a much more definitive level, Agger (1991) advocates a synthesis of critical theory, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. Agger contends that while critical theory is a much-needed critique of positivist science and advanced capitalist culture, “post-structuralism completes the Frankfurt critique of science by showing that we can read all sorts of nondiscursive texts as rhetoric” (p. 120), and that the postmodernism of Foucault “offers valuable insights to students of social control” (p. 123).

We firmly believe that contemporary critical theorists, as well as those strictly engaged in consumer research, should grapple with such postmodern/post-Marxist phenomena as Kroeker and Cook’s (1987) *meïscscape*, Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) renewed emphasis on hegemonic processes, Foucault’s (1979) *panoptic mechanisms*, Derrida’s (1981a, 1981b) *deconstructive moments*, and Baudrillard’s (1983) *hyperreality*. It is our contention that Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* may be critical theory’s conceptual nexus to postmodernism. This linkage could be viewed as part of the evolution to postmodernism, or as postmodernism’s point of departure. The distinctions, or spectacles (Debord [1967] 1977), have become even larger, more prolific, and ultimately all-consuming in a postmodern version of consumer culture (e.g., MTV, hyperreal sporting events, and wholly imagistic political campaigns). It is essential that consumer researchers first be well acquainted with the basic premises of critical theory before a theoretical integration can be successfully attempted or, if it is warranted, a transition to a postmodern interpretation can be made.

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12For a marketing interpretation of postmodernism please refer to Venkatesh (1989) and Firat (1991a, 1991b). Based on these papers and many others (e.g., Jameson 1984), it seems that the primacy of consumption over production is characteristic of postmodern society. This, of course, could situate consumer behaviorists as major arbiters of critical discourse. By failing to recognize the possibility that the Frankfurt Circle may indeed be one of the theoretical precursors of postmodernism, we risk thwarting our academic efforts in this regard.


