

**The Ready-Made Subject in 'Meta' Modernity: Engaging Max Horkheimer and  
Theodor W. Adorno with a Digital Culture Industry**

BY

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## Chapter 1: The Individual, the Algorithm, and the State

*“Perfected technology reduces the tension between the culture product and everyday existence.”<sup>1</sup>*

With the barbaric image of the “infernos of suffering and degradation”<sup>2</sup> in the Nazi concentration camps in mind, early Frankfurt School critical theorists were united in their commitment to understanding the social, economic, and political conditions that gave rise to facism. Based originally in Germany, the Frankfurt School emerged out of the Institute for Social Research and included such thinkers as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse. When Hitler took power in 1933, the Institute first moved to Geneva, then later to New York City. At the time they were centrally occupied with the question of why socialism did not emerge, and why fascism did: “We were all convinced of the probability of a Nationalist Socialist victory, as well as of the fact that it could be met only through revolutionary actions. That it needed a world war we did not yet envisage at the time.”<sup>3</sup> For Horkheimer and Adorno, it was unclear why the working class did not vigorously resist fascist takeover, especially considering the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia just a few decades prior. In democratic societies as in non-democratic ones, they observed that the risk of fascism was growing far greater than the hope for socialism. Marx’s theoretical formulation of the relationship between the economic base and the ideological superstructure could not adequately explain the stubborn persistence of social domination in the form of Nazism, state capitalism, and the culture industry. To address the deficiencies in Marx’s framework, Horkheimer, Adorno and others developed a more thoroughgoing social critique that would come to be known as critical theory.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1944; repr., Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94.

<sup>2</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947; repr., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 114.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

In both Europe and the United States, early critical theorists saw that liberal democracy was failing to fulfil its promise of individual freedom. In *Dawn and Decline*, Horkheimer argues that while these societies are “called free and considered liberal,”<sup>4</sup> only “an absurdly small number”<sup>5</sup> of individuals can be called free in any genuine and emancipatory sense. Horkheimer and Adorno saw this decline of individual freedom as inextricably connected with the culture industry, a system of standardisation<sup>6</sup> that functions to conceal the “coercive nature of society alienated from itself.”<sup>7</sup> It renders individuals passive, apathetic, and satiated—devoid of personality and spontaneity. In democratic and non-democratic societies both, the culture industry concentrates and assimilates ideological power “under the banner of triumphant objectivity,”<sup>8</sup> a phenomenon understood by Horkheimer and Adorno as the “culture monopoly.”<sup>9</sup> They argued that the culture industry’s monopoly power is insidious because it can be manipulated by political and economic elites to oppress the masses when the levers of liberal democracy no longer serve them. The culture industry is ubiquitous and unavoidable, egged on by the robust market for entertainment and consumers’ identification with the “needs” it manufactures.<sup>10</sup> Adorno writes that the individual consumer is not the *subject* of the culture industry rather its “object of calculation [...] an appendage of the machinery.”<sup>11</sup>

The rise of the culture industry is closely connected to the decline of the individual, which Horkheimer describes in *The Eclipse of Reason*. For Horkheimer, the idea of ‘individuality’ contains within it an inherent antagonism between individuals and their socio-economic conditions: “Today, this antagonism is supplanted in the conscious

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<sup>4</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline*, trans. Michael Shaw (1926; repr., New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Anson G. Rabinbach, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *New German Critique* 6, no. 6 (1975), 12.

minds of individuals by the desire to adapt themselves to reality. This process is symptomatic of the present crisis of the individual.”<sup>12</sup> He worries that the individual in late modernity is submissive and uncritical, having forgotten how to employ the intellectual functions that would help him transcend his position in reality.<sup>13</sup> His social and economic conditions force upon him the idea that the only way to get along in this world is through imitation and conformity, thus “giving up his ultimate hope of self-realisation.”<sup>14</sup> He is an individual in name only. As the individual becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the social groups and organisations to which he belongs, he reproduces and glorifies the status quo.<sup>15</sup> On the basis of objective reason and the industrial discipline, technological advances, and enlightenment thinking that accompanies its development, the individual becomes a more predictable, malleable social atom. In the absence of his spontaneity and unbounded free thinking, the individual is more susceptible to the “hypnotic spell”<sup>16</sup> cast by authoritarian figures and their ideologies.

Horkheimer and Adorno closely examined how the various forms of mass media can be employed as socially, politically, and economically relevant instruments. In their time, “movies, radio, jazz, and magazines”<sup>17</sup> were the dominant mediums. Today, the tools of the culture industry are more accessible, affordable, and effective than ever at appealing to “the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed.”<sup>18</sup> They are not just objects of modernity but of ‘meta’ modernity, a term which will be used often in the following analysis to encapsulate both the lived realities of late modernity as well as our social, political and economic interactions that take place online, in the metaverse. The metaverse includes but is not limited to any online multi-user environment (e.g., social media, virtual reality, and augmented reality). It represents an

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<sup>12</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno and Rabinbach, 12.

“interconnected web of social, networked immersive environments in persistent multiuser platforms. It enables seamless embodied user communication in real-time and dynamic interactions with digital artefacts.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the metaverse encapsulates all distinctly *online* interactions between people, corporations, the state, and other actors. I have chosen to concentrate on algorithmic social media as a trend of ‘meta’ modernity since it presents a widely-understood and accessible frame of reference for the contemporary reader, who is likely already engaged with this kind of technology. As well, early critical theory’s focus on the family and childhood experiences of authoritarianism make algorithmic social media a particularly relevant object of inquiry. When this analysis refers to ‘meta’ modernity, it is meant to include the already-understood conditions of late modernity in addition to the added interactions taking place in the metaverse.

While Horkheimer and Adorno might not have anticipated the kinds of communications technologies we use today, it would be clear to any modern reader of critical theory that social media and the algorithms that support them are highly impactful, intimate devices of the culture industry. The primary aim of this thesis is to conceptualise the problem of algorithmic social media within the theoretical framework provided by Horkheimer and Adorno in their writings on the culture industry, the modern enlightenment aspiration, the family, and authoritarianism. Does the framework provide a coherent and plausible way to think about algorithmic social media, the individuals influenced by it, and the problems it poses? As argued in Section II of this chapter, the existing theoretical literature relies on weak assumptions of the individual as ready-made, ahistorical, and already susceptible to being influenced by the use of media. Employing early critical theory to the problem addresses these deficiencies. Far from being ready-made, the individual in the critical theory frame is a more thoroughly historicized subject. Critical theory is also beneficial to this analysis because of its more explicit emphasis on a Marxist-inflected social analysis of the relationship between the state, individuals in society, and the economy. I argue that this particular dimension of early

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<sup>19</sup> Stylianos Mystakidis, “Metaverse,” *Encyclopaedia* 2, no. 1 (February 10, 2022), 486.

critical theory represents more accurately the problem of algorithmic social media than existing political theories of the algorithm. Finally, critical theory incorporates a psychoanalytic approach that takes place first within the family. In answering the question of whether Horkheimer and Adorno provide a coherent and plausible framework for this case, this thesis contributes to the existing literature by engaging themes in early critical theory with the problem of algorithmic social media for the first time. It will find that early critical theory provides both a coherent and plausible way of thinking about algorithmic social media and its impacts.

### *Section I: Defining Algorithmic Social Media*

To some extent, all of the well-known social media platforms depend on machine-learning algorithms to predict user preferences. Social media algorithms make decisions about which content gets shown to the user, and in what order. Since increasing user engagement is central to increasing revenue and profits, it is in the best interest of social media platforms to push the most compelling and relevant content to the forefront. Facebook uses engagement-based ranking, an algorithmic system that rewards posts that generate the most engagement (i.e. views, likes, comments, and shares). It lends itself to prioritising content that creates extreme reactions, whether positive or negative. Instagram does something similar, providing a constantly-evolving curated ‘Explore’ page for each individual user. The platform is notorious for the harmful behaviour it can bring out in children and young people, namely body image issues, bullying and unrealistic beauty standards.<sup>20</sup>

Tik Tok’s algorithm is perhaps the most sophisticated, if not eerily omniscient. When users create a new account, the app plays a wide variety of popular videos and tests each user’s engagement with them. In less than two hours of viewing, the app has enough data to presume key information about users such as general age range, gender and sexuality, hobbies and interests, political views, mental health status, level of education,

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<sup>20</sup> Megan McCluskey, “How Addictive Social Media Algorithms Could Finally Face a Reckoning in 2022,” Time, January 4, 2022.

religious views, marital status, etc. The more time spent on the app, the better the algorithm becomes at predicting the content with which individual users will engage. Many users characterise the Tik Tok algorithm as predictive; “Tik Tok knew I had ADHD before I did,” said one user. “How does Tik Tok know I am bi?” asked another. Under the hashtag #fyptospecific, there are almost 54,000 videos that reference users’ seemingly predictive experience of the algorithm. In a more intimate way than Facebook and Instagram, Tik Tok identifies and reinforces social and political *identities* to generate hyper-specific content for consumers, mapping links between identities and identifying content that should accord with them. The app relies on the apparent sameness of human experiences and the appeal of social categories and identification. However, for many of Tik Tok’s 1 billion active users, the algorithm’s perceived ability to reveal subconscious aspects of the psyche is imbued with a mystical, almost divine quality. It is the app that knows you better than you know yourself, the private place to uncover your most unconscious curiosities and connect with strangers that share in the same. As a product of the culture industry, Tik Tok, and its many resulting copycat platforms, are incredibly effective at reproducing the values of society and its elites. Content is shared and reproduced on the basis of popularity and engagement, metrics that are understood and leveraged by powerful culture monopolies.<sup>21</sup> “Any trace of spontaneity”<sup>22</sup> in the digital culture industry has been hand-selected by professionals intent on selling some product, value, or socio-political movement.

### *Section II: Literature Review*

Algorithmic information sorting is a subject that interests many contemporary political theorists. In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) argues that in the age of neoliberalism, algorithms are more value-laden than they are perceived. Algorithmic decisions, while seemingly value neutral and objective, reinforce oppressive social relationships that already exist in society. Moreover, the people who decide how the algorithms work undeniably hold values themselves, “many of which openly promote

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<sup>21</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 95.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

racism, sexism, and false notions of meritocracy, which is well documented in studies of Silicon Valley and other tech corridors.”<sup>23</sup> Her argument is not merely empirical. Noble points out the deeper psycho-cultural problem of neoliberal audiences who easily trust the accuracy of the first few results of a search engine.<sup>24</sup> While the results of a search engine are the results of an algorithm prefigured by a value-holding person, Noble argues that the perception of algorithms and data as neutral is an oppressive yet pervasive myth that underlies neoliberal society. Algorithms, just like any other communication tool, are prone to manipulation by people who aim to achieve a specific output; a widespread societal trust in algorithmic data as objective and neutral is dangerous because it conceals harms and inequalities that exist in society.

Frank Pasquale (2015), referring specifically to the application of algorithms in the financial sector, argues that algorithms are intrinsically political; they are not only mechanisms of valuation but also systems of control that are out of reach for most people. Authority, Pasquale says, “is increasingly expressed algorithmically.”<sup>25</sup> Algorithmic processes are opaque, yet they have both direct and indirect influences in our lives. He references credit scoring, sentencing algorithms, and predictive policing as examples of algorithmic technologies that influence individuals’ social standing and therefore contribute to domination and inequality. In our ‘black box society’, Pasquale argues that social standing is built less on perceivable action and more on imperceivable algorithmic systems of evaluation. He cautions of the dangers of this shift, warning that “New York quants [and] California engineers”<sup>26</sup> ought not to be the adjudicators of individuals’ socio-economic standing.

Unlike Noble and Pasquale, Davide Panagia’s (2020) analysis is less normatively focused. Panagia takes a cybernetic (political philosophy of engineering) approach,

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<sup>23</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Frank Pasquale, *Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

arguing that normative critiques of algorithms are important yet limited, since they do not “emerge out of sustained engagements with the ontological possibilities of technical media,”<sup>27</sup> nor the modes of existence specific to the technology itself. He argues that it is important to understand algorithmic technology in an ontological sense because it reflects “new limits and thresholds of what it means to be human,”<sup>28</sup> raising new questions about agency, freedom, and responsibility. Panagia’s work motivates this analysis to be sensitive to the ‘meta’ aspect of ‘meta’ modernity, taking care to consider the human experience as both lived in the physical-material world as well as the digital-immaterial world. In keeping with the spirit of early critical theory, this approach attempts at theorising the problem with an eye *beyond* current human potentialities grounded in the material world. Panagia inspires an understanding of the situation that is not merely critical of the impacts of ‘meta’ modernity, but also cautiously optimistic about its potential to realise a more humane organisation of society.

Noble, Pasquale, and Panagia’s contributions are perhaps most relevant to this analysis, but they are not the only attempts to theorise the normative and ontological role of algorithmic information sorting in modern society. For example, Koopman (2021) articulates a political theory of data, mapping recent work across several academic disciplines. Using format theory, Koopman focuses on the algorithm but also the conceptual dimensions of other big data technologies. Sheehey (2019) and DuBrin and Gorham (2021) also provide significant contributions, the former focusing on the temporality of the algorithm, the latter on how the algorithm forces users to internalise society’s values. Common among the vast contributions to the study of algorithms in political theory is a sense that algorithms function passively in society, exerting their influence without the direct knowledge of its users. In critical theory terms, the literature articulates an understanding of algorithmic social media as an expression of the values of the culture industry and as a constant, profit-maximising evaluator of it.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Section III: In Defence of The Authoritarian Personality*

Any critical theory analysis that seeks to involve the personality analysis that originates in the family must deal with *The Authoritarian Personality*. Written shortly after World War II by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* represented a convergence in psychology, sociology, psychoanalytic and politics. The authors attempted to explain how individuals could be drawn into authoritarian movements such as Hitler's by examining how an individual could be susceptible to fascist propaganda. They surveyed individuals along four different scales: the antisemitism scale, the ethnocentrism scale, the political-economic conservatism scale, and the infamous f-scale. High-scoring individuals along each of these measures were said to be potentially fascistic individuals, or individuals with tendencies towards authoritarianism. *The Authoritarian Personality* has also been subject to substantial criticism since its publication. It has been criticised for over-psychologizing social and political problems, and confusing a personality disorder for a political struggle.<sup>29</sup> However, its collaborators blatantly rejected a simplistic psychologisation of authoritarianism, recognising it fully as part of a web of social forces. In the Remarks on *The Authoritarian Personality*, the collaborators argue:

It would be naive to base a prognosis of anti-semitism, this truly "social" disease, on the diagnosis of the individual patients. Even their personal attitude, not to mention the prospect of fascism itself, inasmuch as it may involve this attitude only to a minor extent, can be explained through their specific mentality. This fact makes it appropriate to approach the problem through a socio-psychological inquiry such as ours. It measures and qualitatively determines potential reactions which can be expected to occur should the situation change because of severe economic disorders or the growing social "respectability" of anti-semitism.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hyman, Herbert H., and Paul B. Sheatsley. 1954. "The Authoritarian Personality': A Methodological Critique." In Christie and Jahoda, *Studies in the Scope and Method*.

<sup>30</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Remarks on the Authoritarian Personality" (Universitätsbibliothek: Max Horkheimer Archive, 1948).

The collaborators therefore do not claim a psychology of anti-semitism, rather their work is an extrapolation of “anthropological trends of culture”<sup>31</sup> to explain resistance against fascism. While the approach is undeniably psychological, it is only so insofar as it is concerned with motivating factors behind the phenomenon they observe. *The Authoritarian Personality* uses concepts (e.g., the division of the mind into ego, super ego, and id, the oedipal drama, the pleasure principle, repression, projection, paranoia) from the Freudian school while resisting the application of specific psychoanalytic theories to reduce fascism to a series of psychological events. Freud’s understanding of the primal horde, for example, is used to understand the phenomenon, however the collaborators interpret it in a broader socio-economic context so as not to give too much credit to the anti-semitite’s emotional experience.<sup>32</sup> As argued by Adorno, to attribute anti-semitism and ethnocentrism to the individual’s “guilt and castration complex”<sup>33</sup> is to misdiagnose the problem entirely. A similar general approach will apply to the problem of the algorithm; while examining it with Freudian concepts in view is crucial to understanding algorithmic technology as psychologically satisfying and addictive, the problem ought not to be reduced to a behavioural issue impacting society more generally.

The work has had other criticisms. Martin (2001) argues that it is “the most deeply flawed work of prominence in political psychology,” pointing to it as “a cautionary example of bias arising from the choice of methodological assumptions.”<sup>34</sup> He accuses the collaborators of confirmation bias—of building a personality type based on a phenomenon they already knew existed in society. Participants that ranked highly on the F-scale were coded as one cohesive personality type, that is to say an authoritarian: “differences in degree are often turned into differences in kind.”<sup>35</sup> Given the scope of this analysis, Martin’s criticism will be acknowledged but not understood as meaningfully

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> John Levi Martin, “The Authoritarian Personality, 50 Years Later: What Questions Are There for Political Psychology?,” *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (March 2001), 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

relevant. It is not the psychological personality type that is important in this case, rather the psycho-socio-economic process from which it emerges. Moreover, while it may not hold up to the norms of scientific positivism since it relies on data critics have proved is unreliable and dubious, its other merits ought not to be dismissed if it is to be understood as a *social explanation* for authoritarianism. This analysis is not as concerned about authoritarian personality types as the argument that stands up against the faulty methodology criticism: that facism, at least at the individual level of personal experience, begins in the family.

Fascist authoritarianism was the irrational rationalisation of the absence of a rational authority. It was a reaction-formation all the way down: a political reaction to communist and socialist movements, but also a psychic reaction to the collapse of authority. And it was *this* argument about authority and its political effects that pushed Horkheimer and his associates into the family and toward the basic lessons of psychoanalysis.<sup>36</sup>

Marasco articulates the collaborators' assertion that authoritarianism is not merely psychological; it cannot be lessened by some kind of collective therapy. The fact that early critical theory treats the family as both the locus for biological and social reproduction and as the first site of the authoritarian relationship is significant to Marasco. She argues that Frenkel-Brunswik, the only woman collaborator on the project, is primarily responsible for the family-authoritarianism link: "Frenkel-Brunswik shows why critical theory needs Freud, why the psychoanalytic strand in critical theory is not bad psychology but good social science, and why a social science that opposes fascism starts at home."<sup>37</sup> This insight is crucial to conceptualising the problems of 'meta' modernity, especially as they relate to children and young people in their formative years. Horkheimer saw the family as one of the most important formative agencies, one that directs man's behaviour, intelligence, aptitude, ideas, judgements, and wishes through

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<sup>36</sup> Robyn Marasco, "There's a Fascist in the Family," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 4 (October 2018), 795.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 797.

“processes not consciously directed.”<sup>38</sup> If the family is also “an ideology losing its economic as well as its emotional basis,”<sup>39</sup> then collective entities are likely to dwarf the family’s influence. This shift leaves space for fascist ideas to permeate the social consciousness at increasingly younger ages through another process not consciously directed: the algorithm.

#### *Section IV: Mapping a Way Forward*

The aim of this chapter was to provide a rationale for the central question of the thesis: Does early critical theory provide a coherent and plausible way to think about algorithmic social media, the individuals influenced by it, and the social problems it poses? It addressed other theoretical approaches to the problem of algorithmic social media and outlined what stands to be gained by introducing critical theory—namely Horkheimer and Adorno’s treatment of the individual, culture, the family, and the state-society-economy—to this issue. In the next chapter, I will examine the idea of the culture industry more closely, especially as it relates to the modern enlightenment aspiration. The chapter will consider the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as Horkheimer’s chapter on the rise and decline of the individual in *Eclipse of Reason*. Chapter 3 will look at a particular type of individual that emerges in late modernity, namely the authoritarian personality. In Chapter 4, I will argue that Horkheimer’s inclusion of the family and private life provides a new and nuanced way of thinking about algorithmic social media and its influence on young people. Each chapter illuminates the nature of one aspect of our changing socio-political interactions in ‘meta’ modernity; it will first consider the individual, then the state, and finally the family. In the final chapter, I will argue that early critical theory not only provides a coherent and plausible way to think about algorithmic social media, but it is uniquely suited to address an important gap in our current way of conceptualising the problem. Rather than

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<sup>38</sup> Horkheimer, *Studies on Authority and the Family: Research Reports from the Institute for Social Research*. Lunenburg: Dietrich zu Klampen, 1987.

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<sup>39</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew O’Connell, 1975, 98.

assuming a submissive and ready-made subject, critical theory forces us to reach much farther back into human history, indeed to the very beginning of it, to uncover *how* it is that the individual became so ready-made. In doing so, this work aims to maintain the spirit of Horkheimer's critical hopefulness, assuming that society's deepest potentialities have not yet been realised, and that it is still possible for individuals to become worthy of their name.

## Chapter 2: The Failure of Reason and the Modern Enlightenment Aspiration

*“The oldest fear, that of losing one’s own name, is being fulfilled.”*<sup>40</sup>

Adorno joined the Institute shortly after it moved from Geneva to Columbia University in New York City. He quickly became an intellectual leader within the Institute, which led to his co-authorship with Horkheimer of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1947. The work revolves around the question of why “humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”<sup>41</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno lay out five seemingly disconnected chapters, each attempting to explain why the modern enlightenment aspiration has failed so miserably. They show that the terrors of the Holocaust were not “an aberration of modern history”<sup>42</sup> but instead were rooted in the fundamental features of Western civilisation, namely reason. The development of reason and the advance of human thought has led to its own self-destruction; its enduring aim of liberating humanity from fear and imposing on nature its mastery has resulted in tragedy.<sup>43</sup> The dialectic of man’s domination over his internal nature, external nature, and society, is what concerns Horkheimer and Adorno. Their analysis points to the myths from which enlightenment seeks to separate itself, elucidating how enlightenment has *become* a myth in the present. This central paradox unites the five chapters and serves as a useful starting point for understanding how Horkheimer and Adorno’s critical theory can be used as a useful and historically-informed framework through which we can understand ‘meta’ modernity, namely digital capitalism, algorithmic social media, and the creation of the coding elite. More importantly, by evaluating whether critical theory is a compatible lens for the impacts of ‘meta’ modernity, what stands to be gained is a better understanding of the *nature* of the challenges confronting individuals, their individuality, and the opportunities for genuine freedom. The chapter will first focus on the enlightenment aspiration and its connection to the failure of reason, then it will situate the individual within this broad historical context. It is necessary to explain human history as

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<sup>40</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Horkheimer and Adorno see it in order to better understand how the ‘story’ of enlightenment and reason *is* the ‘story’ of the individual. Moreover, this exposition is crucial to understanding the inherent entanglement of rationality and domination, which reaches a new height in ‘meta’ modernity.

*Section I: Enlightenment Defined*

First, ‘enlightenment’ as a historical concept must be distinguished from Horkheimer and Adorno’s understanding of the term. The *period* of enlightenment usually refers to the time between 1660 to 1800, from the foundation of the Royal Society to Kant. It includes such thinkers as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Smith, and Hume, among others.<sup>44</sup> Conceived broadly, the Enlightenment saw significant intellectual and scientific progress, and promoted the view that philosophy would improve human life. It undermined ancient ideas of the cosmos, celebrated reason, and understood freedom and knowledge as ultimate human goals. For Kant, ‘enlightenment’ is a process of development that is not limited to a historical period or place. It is the release of humankind from its immaturity—immaturity in this sense is defined as the “inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.”<sup>45</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno’s ‘enlightenment’ is different from what is understood within the context of the historical period and also from Kant’s understanding of the term. For them, ‘enlightenment’ has a much wider historical breadth, dating back to the burgeoning of Western culture. Enlightenment is emancipation, and emancipation has long been understood as the freedom from fear.<sup>46</sup> Since the earliest forms of civilisation, the individual, the Subject, has sought to increase its awareness and mastery of the outside world, the Object. The Subject has done so through “increasing distance from the

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<sup>44</sup> Y. Sherratt, “Adorno and Horkheimer’s Concept of ‘Enlightenment,’” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (October 2000), 522.

<sup>45</sup> Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question : What Is Enlightenment?*, trans. H B Nisbett (London: Penguin, 2009), 1784.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xii.

Object,<sup>47</sup> seeing the world increasingly as “for him.”<sup>48</sup> Contained within the concept of enlightenment is an inherent duality or “opposition”<sup>49</sup> between what the Object and what he aims to be.

Sherratt (2000) emphasises that Horkheimer and Adorno are distinct in their views about what constitutes the foundations of enlightenment, articulating the importance of the Subject’s relationship to the outside world, the Object.<sup>50</sup> The concept of enlightenment contains within it an internality, a normative standard which the Object aims to be and also believes itself to be. Thus, “the concept of enlightenment, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, captures that which enlightenment would *conceive itself to be*. Enlightenment believes that it *is* the attainment of a particular set of aims.”<sup>51</sup> Sherratt argues that Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of enlightenment is distinct because it captures a normative internal standard that allows us to “criticise enlightenment with reference to its own standards.”<sup>52</sup> By this criteria, instances of enlightenment can be found throughout the whole of human history, in any place a particular normative standard is promoted in some seemingly progress-oriented way. This later point can be evidenced by Horkheimer and Adorno definition of enlightenment in reference to its opposite. If enlightenment fails, then it is inherently bound to regress into its opposite, namely immaturity, social domination, fear, and barbarism.<sup>53</sup> These traits contradict enlightenment’s final aim: progress. Sherratt’s reading is not without issue, however I raise it here to clarify a particular point. For Horkheimer and Adorno, enlightenment aims towards some perceived good, aiming to position itself against its perceived opposite. The proposed dialectic necessitates that contained within the concept *is* its opposite, thus enlightenment is capable of its own self-destruction into barbarism. Enlightenment *per se* does not necessarily aim towards general human emancipation, which is exemplified by

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>50</sup> Y. Sherratt, 526.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 527.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 528.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

the fascist crisis in Europe in the 20th century; it merely aims towards the Subject's perceived understanding of progress or as freedom from fear. Horkheimer and Adorno's emphasis on both the progressive and regressive dimensions of enlightenment are important because it more accurately explains the social phenomenon not just in our time but throughout history. The very ideas and mechanisms that have freed humans from fear of the unknown, from the mythical to positivist eras, have also been accompanied by domination and exploitation.

The aim of the first essay of *Dialectic* is to establish that social domination is not necessarily part of enlightenment, however the two experiences have historically been closely connected. Horkheimer and Adorno begin by surveying how the individual, the Subject, came awakened to "power as the principle of all relationships."<sup>54</sup> The myths that founded human civilisation were themselves enlightenment; man conceives of himself as God, sovereign over his surroundings. He develops an understanding of the essence of objects, then develops a relationship to objects through myth and magic in a relationship of kinship. This relationship between man and things, between Subject and Object, is the prerequisite for man's understanding of the world as *for* him, establishing what Freud called the "unshakeable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world."<sup>55</sup> Nature becomes a unity, to be controlled and classified by man. Unlike other enlightenment thinkers, Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly consider this earliest period of Western civilization a period of enlightenment, where enlightenment is understood in terms of the progression of the Subject's awareness of the foreign Object. In early civilization, myth (or "false clarity,"<sup>56</sup> as they see it) was used to understand the nature of the Subject-Object relationship. Spirits, demons, and the supernatural were taken to be reflections of human beings frightened of the external world. Horkheimer and Adorno use Homer's *Odyssey* as an early example of this, focusing on the work's embodiment of "both the difference between and the unity of mythical nature and enlightened mastery of

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<sup>54</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvi.

<sup>55</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1912; repr., United States: Pantianos Classics, 2018), 104.

<sup>56</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*, xvii.

nature.”<sup>57</sup> Myth, understood in this sense, was an early attempt at piecing together objective meaning, order, and the hope for salvation.<sup>58</sup> It was an early enlightenment, a way of thinking that sought meaning and the progress of human thought and rationality in the same way as the later Enlightenment thinkers. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno saw myth and enlightenment as interconnected, to the extent that “the myths which fell victim to the Enlightenment were themselves its products.”<sup>59</sup> Enlightenment thinking sought to increase man’s power over the external world by understanding the essence and unity of things through science and mathematics. It constitutes a continuation of a central human tradition, the “endless process of enlightenment,”<sup>60</sup> that seeks to understand the place of the external world in relation to the individual.

Just like the early thought systems dominated by myth and magic, the later rationalistic systems, in promoting objective laws of nature and repetitive and meaningless cycles, sanction fate as the mechanism that brings about reality, “incessantly [reinstating] what always was.”<sup>61</sup> While myth could justify inequalities through unmediated magical or divine forces, Enlightenment thinking does so through meditation, bringing all things into organised relation with each other. Both ways of thinking demand a level of abstraction, of distance of the Subject from the Object; they are both driven by the desire to break free from fear through knowledge, organisation. They are both driven by a principle of immanence, by the same fatalism the Enlightenment seems to reject.<sup>62</sup> While discarding magic and myth as the source of human suffering, injustice, and imprisonment, Enlightenment thinking binds individuals to the “compulsion of nature.”<sup>63</sup> It serves as an explanation for the external world, one that justifies hierarchy and social compulsion. Just like myth, fact is seen as something “eternally immune to

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

intervention,”<sup>64</sup> and individuals morph to fit within the industrial systems founded on immutable fact and science.

Enlightenment in the bourgeois capitalist period gives rise to the division of labour, imposes on individuals a standardised blueprint for behaviour, and enforces the self-alienation of individuals. It is the very foundation of the crisis of the modern individual, whose conception of self is entirely encompassed by mass culture and the necessity of work. The problem of the individual is not that he falls short of the normative enlightenment standard, rather that the individual has *adapted* to it: “Adaptation to the power of progress furthers the progress of power, constantly renewing the degenerations which prove successful progress, not failed progress, to be its own antithesis.”<sup>65</sup> However, the human desire to break free from fear through knowledge does not necessitate domination. The bourgeois capitalist period has created the irrational social conditions for domination that undermine the enlightenment aspiration. It has forced individuals, especially the growing proletariat, to act in the interest of self-preservation, concealing the irrationalities of the socio-economic order and the emancipatory potential of individuals.<sup>66</sup> Bourgeois capitalism, while a product of the modern enlightenment aspiration, conceals the domination embedded within it.

### *Section II: The Individual, Reason and Enlightenment*

A look at ‘enlightenment’ and its contents was necessary to background the more relevant consideration of this chapter: the individual. Embedded within Horkheimer and Adorno’s concern about the individual is a concern about reason. In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer argues that both have been “present from the outset”<sup>67</sup> and are closely bound up in each other. Subjective reason, the approach that has been dominant since the modern period of Enlightenment, is concerned with calculating probabilities and thereby

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>67</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947; repr., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 3.

to coordinate the means to a given end.<sup>68</sup> Horkheimer does not outright denounce the Enlightenment shift to subjective reason in *Eclipse*, however he argues that the process has instrumentalized reason to the extent that the sole criterion of reason has become its operational value in society, adapted to the “spirit of commercial culture.”<sup>69</sup> By contrast, objective reason presupposes certain *a priori* principles that are inherent to the objective order of things, and attempts to reconcile them with human existence.<sup>70</sup> The ends that are determined in systems of objective reason are “reasonable for their own sake,”<sup>71</sup> and do not rely on any “subjective gain or advantage”<sup>72</sup> in the same way as subjective reason. Objective reason, the approach of the ancients, attempts to explain the contents of reason, the true nature of things, and how to live correctly.<sup>73</sup> In an era of industrial and technological progress, the ancient systems of objective reason have lost their intellectual roots.<sup>74</sup> The shift away from objective reason has dissolved ideas of dogmatism, mysticism and superstition,<sup>75</sup> but has also displaced many of the “great ideals of civilisation,”<sup>76</sup> namely equality, justice, and freedom. The displacement of these ideals by the instrumental logic of subjective reason offers one additional explanation for why society has descended into barbarism. It also brings into sharper focus Horkheimer’s normative commitment to a more humane organisation of society.

The shift towards subjective reason is closely connected to the ‘decline’ of the individual. In *Eclipse of Reason*, in particular in his chapter on the rise and decline of the individual, Horkheimer describes a continuous historical tension between the individual’s desire for self-preservation and self-reflection, and reason as “an instrument of the self.”<sup>77</sup> The tension exacerbates the early antagonism between the individual and the external

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

world over which he seeks to exert power and control in service of the “doctrine of progress.”<sup>78</sup> To map the rise and decline of the individual, Horkheimer follows the progression of ‘individuality’ through the ancients, Christianity, liberalism, and present times. Horkheimer begins in the ancient tradition, naming Socrates the “true herald of the abstract idea of individuality.”<sup>79</sup> Unlike Aristotle and Plato, Socrates saw the individual as existing not only in relation to the polis but in true self-authenticating relation to his own soul and psyche. Socrates (and the Hellenistic tradition too) saw the highest good as contained *within* the individual, in a kind of inner harmony that arises from self sufficiency.<sup>80</sup> From the ancient philosophical tradition Horkheimer draws out a problem: “individuality is impaired when each man decides to shift for himself. As the ordinary man withdraws from participation in political affairs, society tends to revert to the law or the jungle, which crushes all vestiges of individuality.”<sup>81</sup> The project of individual virtue is therefore condemned from its earliest inception. Christianity changed what was meant by ‘individual’ in an important way, promoting Christ as a “new ideal on which to pattern [...] life on earth.”<sup>82</sup> Under Christianity, the will to self-preservation is dampened with the promise of eternity, thus lessening the inner tension between self-preservation and reflection. Finally, liberalism forged another kind of individuality, one of primarily economic basis. It ties ‘individuality’ with ‘provision’ and social harmony with the pursuit of individual interests via unrestricted competition. The kind of individualism promoted in modernity is not truly ‘liberal’ in character, since under capitalism people are not born equal and the development of individual talents and behaviours is greatly limited. The freedom to pursue work that is enjoyable is only available to a few people, and love of individualism and freedom is only cultivated by a kind of “nationalist chauvinism.”<sup>83</sup> Horkheimer makes the argument again that “the present form of society, so-called individualism, is actually a society of standardization and mass culture.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>83</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline*, trans. Michael Shaw (1926; repr., New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 50.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

The exposition of Horkheimer's rise and decline of reason and the individual has been necessary to uncover the moral of the central 'story'. The map of human progress that Horkheimer lays out is, in essence, a history of human imitation; it reveals the "continuous assault of collective patterns"<sup>85</sup> that has been present since early civilisation. Horkheimer sees the modern man as a product of a long history of mimicry and conformity, reproducing old cultural values and becoming increasingly indistinguishable from others around him. The social units across the eras all revolved around hierarchy and thus social domination, whether mythical, religious, philosophical, or otherwise. While many of their objective claims have been disputed and discarded, the pattern of imitation endures. Under capitalism the problem is not merely philosophical or political, but socio-economic too: "integration is the price which individuals and groups have to pay to flourish under capitalism."<sup>86</sup> Modern society negates all aspects of individuality in pursuit of what Horkheimer calls the technocratic dream,<sup>87</sup> so that the needs of consumers and producers can be forecasted, satisfied, or negated "in accordance with the policies of economic and political leaders."<sup>88</sup> Power is now more concentrated, more organised, and more deeply embedded in the mechanisms and ideology of modern industrialism. Horkheimer is clear that the individual has not totally disappeared into modern society and maintains that "man is better than the world he lives in."<sup>89</sup> However, despite the promises of industrialisation and technological progress, Horkheimer anticipates that the "unbearable pressure"<sup>90</sup> upon the individual is likely to remain unchecked.

This lengthy exposition begs the question: Does Horkheimer denounce the modern individual under capitalism? Does he argue for a return to subjective reason and the pre-Enlightenment individual? Horkheimer's thinking that man is better than the

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<sup>85</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 95.

<sup>86</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Remarks on the Authoritarian Personality" (Universitätsbibliothek: Max Horkheimer Archive, 1948), 99.

<sup>87</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 109.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

world he lives in has its foundations in his chapter mapping the rise and decline of the individual. In it, Horkheimer is firm in his commitment that within the individual is a potential that has not yet been fully realised, in modern times nor in ancient times. Modern times have indeed brought progress, and some people (albeit an “absurdly small number”<sup>91</sup> of privileged elites) experience some small vestige of freedom and individuality. But even for the ruling elites, they have “little more autonomy than their subordinates; they are bound by the power they wield.”<sup>92</sup> The chapter, in general, charts the *advance* of the individual, who is now more firmly grounded in material reality than ever before. Historically speaking, the individual in modernity is a great achievement, and he carries within him the deep potentialities of the human spirit. Capitalism and the rapidly growing technocracy and rationalisation of human suffering that accompanies it, are at present what prevents these potentialities from being realised while simultaneously creating the potential for them to be realised.

Industrial discipline, technological progress, and scientific enlightenment, the very economic and cultural processes that are bringing about the obliteration of individuality, promise—though the augury is faint enough at present—to usher in a new era in which individuality may re-emerge as an element in a less ideological and more humane form of existence.<sup>93</sup>

While societal pressure and the fear of persecution often prevent “human resistance to irrationality—a resistance that is always the core of true individuality,”<sup>94</sup> individuals have more information and resources to resist this pressure than at any other point in history. However, this resistance does not arise from “the purely technical requirements of production,”<sup>95</sup> rather a rejection of the atomization of individuals under conditions of capitalism.<sup>96</sup> The promise of freedom, as spontaneity and genuine emancipation, is a richer and more complex experience than the modern era makes possible. The promise of

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<sup>91</sup> Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline*, 45.

<sup>92</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 111.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

modernity, that is the fulfilment of a millenia-long aspiration for freedom for the individual and a humane organisation of society, cannot be fulfilled under existing conditions, and thus capitalism holds itself back. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that the current technological paradigm represents the next iteration of the historical process Horkheimer describes. Digital capitalism and the ubiquity of algorithmic technology suggests that while individuality in ‘meta’ modernity is not inevitable, the individual now faces conditions that make resistance to irrationality increasingly more challenging. This notion will be the focus of the following section.

### *Section III: Enlightenment, Reason, and the Individual in ‘Meta’ Modernity*

The transformative social effects of algorithms are well documented in the sociological literature and will therefore not be exhausted here. The aim of this section is to propose that early critical theory provides a more thoroughly historicised understanding of the conditions of modernity, one that is more concerned with *how* they fit within the modern enlightenment aspiration than algorithmic technology *per se*. While previous contributions to a political theory of algorithms have written extensively about algorithms as apparatus of oppression and social domination, they make two important assumptions that are worthy of further scrutiny. First, they talk about the individual as an ahistorical subject, one that exists apart from the ideas, ideologies and traditions that preceded him. In their accounts, the individual is easily susceptible to big data and its algorithms; he is a blind and ready-made product of his time. Second, there is a sense that the current reality is in some way unprecedented and opaque. While the technologies themselves are surely both, the enlightenment aspiration, the continuous assault of collective patterns, and the pressure of the individual to imitate in the name of self-preservation are not new. Horkheimer and Adorno provide a framework that illuminates how this particular era of modernity, of ‘meta’ modernity, fits within a longer tradition of progress. Its ascendancy and ubiquity presents an even greater challenge to the individual in an increasingly automated and algorithmic society.

As explained previously, Horkheimer and Adorno believed that something

internal to reason explained its demise. Reason has always been strongly associated with man's desire to classify, control, and dominate the world around him. What Horkheimer calls the "disease of reason"<sup>97</sup> is reason's blindness to the "original disease,"<sup>98</sup> namely the deeply antagonistic relationship he shares with the external world. The modern enlightenment aspiration conceives of itself as victorious in this antagonism, having developed increasingly sophisticated modes of production and increasingly appealing tools of the culture industry. Championing the authority of incontrovertible fact and the ideology of efficiency in production and communications, the current society has done away with older systems of objective reason and lodged itself firmly in the realm of instrumental reason. Algorithms represent the latest iteration of enlightenment and the instrumentalisation of reason; they touch all aspects of the metamodern world, from dating to finance, sentencing to healthcare, transportation to elections. They are lauded as better than people, reinforcing the supremacy of reason as an authoritative instrument to dominate the external world. This technocratic dream is a far cry from Horkheimer's belief that man is better than the world he lives in.

Algorithmic society also presupposes a distinction between the owners of capital (in this case venture capitalists, tech employees paid in stock, company founders) and everyone else. It creates what Burrell and Fourcade (2021) call the coding elite, a group that has consolidated power through technical control over the means of production and extracting labour (in the form of data and analytics) from the "cybertariat."<sup>99</sup> Just as in Horkheimer and Adorno's time, in digital capitalism there are few production centres and a large number of widely dispersed consumption points that require organisation and control. While the magazine stand, movie theatre, market and community centre represented the consumption points of their time, in 'meta' modernity consumption points are, quite literally, in our hands. The smartphone, just like the technologies that preceded it, emerged from the claim that it was based on consumer need. Digital capitalism makes

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>99</sup> Jenna Burrell and Marion Fourcade, "The Society of Algorithms," *Annual Review of Sociology* 47, no. 1 (July 31, 2021), 213.

the culture industry more accessible, more appealing, and more essential for self-preservation than ever before. Patterns for human imitation are ubiquitous, not just from the political and economic elite but from the peer group in the form of algorithmic social media. It is coercive in nature, an indication of a “society alienated from itself.”<sup>100</sup> If individuality is defined in the same terms as Horkheimer and Adorno, that is in terms of genuine spontaneity and connection to the human potentialities within the individual, then we can say that the conditions for individuality are more challenging now in ‘meta’ modernity than in their time.

The volume of information available in the ‘meta’ modern era is historically unprecedented. Of course, this transformation in knowledge-sharing and communications technology represents a great achievement of the modern enlightenment aspiration. If reason is understood in the Institute’s terms as the process whereby man classifies, controls and affects his internal nature and the external world, then we can say that reason too has made historical advances in the ‘meta’ modern age. The limits of individual human potential in organising and shaping the antagonistic forces of nature are also more expansive and dimensional than in previous eras. The possibilities for advancing a better, more humane organisation of society have also greatly increased through knowledge-sharing and communications technologies. The ‘meta’ modern story is not unlike the history-long story of reason and progress in which the individual has always been caught up: it is at once promising and regressive.

Early Frankfurt School critical theory proves useful for understanding how the individual fits within the technological transformations taking place in ‘meta’ modernity. Conceptualising the individual in a larger, millenia-long story of progress and reason reveals deeper psycho-social tensions that are not new but *inherent* to the enlightenment process. The magnitude of the technological change is not especially relevant here, nor is the ubiquity of the technology. It is a more enduring framework that considers the individual’s relationship with the external world more generally, rather than any one

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<sup>100</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94.

socio-economic change in particular. Horkheimer and Adorno's theoretical framework is also compellingly applicable in the 'meta' modern context because it recognises enlightenment as part of a dialectic. The process of enlightenment *contains within it its opposite*, namely barbarism, naivety, and regression. The age of big tech, digital capitalism and algorithmic social media is neither infinite nor linear in its aspiration for a better world. The 'meta' modern era, while embodying the enlightenment aspiration for progress and the advance of reason, contains within it new potentials for alienation, repression, exploitation, domination, and conformity. These harmful potentialities (e.g., oppressive values being embedded in algorithms, fake news sharing, big tech) have already been well documented in the empirical literature and will not be elaborated upon here. What an early Frankfurt School critical theory approach adds to the empirical work is a renewed focus on the potential crisis of the *individual* that the 'meta' modern era presents.

### Chapter 3: Fascism in the Family

*“Childhood in a limited family becomes an habituation to an authority which in an obscure way unites a necessary social function with power over men.”*<sup>101</sup>

Early Frankfurt School critical theorists rejected the orthodox Marxian view that the brutal oppression that faced their time was a reflection of the underlying economic basis of the capitalist modes of production. While the theorists held onto the view that capitalism is an inherently oppressive system, Horkheimer and Adorno found that some social and cultural phenomena, which exist within the capitalist frame, were also responsible for the status quo and thus for maintaining oppression and human suffering. Important among such phenomena is, of course, the family. The family was an important subject of study in the early days of the Frankfurt School, in particular for Horkheimer. As director of the Institute, Horkheimer’s first project was a multidisciplinary study on authority and the family. The study sought to understand the family as a more thoroughly historicised and political institution, one that does not exist apart from the state but rather as bound together with it.<sup>102</sup> It builds upon Hegel and Engels’ established dialectic and then goes further, “conceiving of the psychological dimensions of authority and historical change.”<sup>103</sup> This research was published as *Studies on Authority and the Family: Research Reports from the Institute for Social Research* in 1936. The work is extensive, spanning across 850 pages and academic disciplines (e.g., sociology, psychology, politics), however this analysis will mainly consider Horkheimer’s introductory chapter. *Studies on Authority and the Family* formed the basis of the research that later informed *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). It would become a highly influential work in the social sciences, especially in the few years following its publication: “No volume published since the war in the field of social psychology has had a greater impact on the direction of the actual empirical work being carried on in universities today.”<sup>104</sup> *Studies on Authority and the Family* is also credited with influencing Leo Lowenthal and Norbert

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<sup>101</sup> Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 108.

<sup>102</sup> Marasco, 798.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 798.

<sup>104</sup> Glazer, Nathan, “New Light on The Authoritarian Personality: A Survey of Recent Research and Criticism.” *Commentary* 17 (1954), 289.

Guterman's *Prophets of Deceit* (1949). The book is a detailed analysis of the speeches of prominent American populist figures; it attempts to classify types of populist figures as either an agitator, a reformer, or a revolutionary. The authors believed that America showed early tendencies towards fascism in the early 1940s and warned that Americans might be susceptible to "means of anti-democratic mass manipulation."<sup>105</sup> These studies point to the Institute's early interest in the connection between the family and fascism. The aim of this chapter will be to better understand the key aspects of the theoretical framework laid out by this section of critical theory, especially insofar as the family is conceived as a means of socialisation that has contributed to conditions of regression. After identifying and discussing these key aspects in the first section and second sections, the third section will evaluate the framework's ability to explain our more 'meta' modern challenges, especially as they relate to children and young people and algorithmic social media.

### *Section I: The Family-Authority Link in Horkheimer*

Horkheimer was committed to the idea that the family represents more than the initial site of character formation for individuals. For Horkheimer, the family is a crucial aspect of social and political life, since individuals perceive reality "reflected in the mirror of the family circle."<sup>106</sup> It influences the susceptibility of individuals to authority, a dynamic on which the bourgeois order very much depends. While Horkheimer acknowledges the direct educational function of the family, he considers the more unconscious processes of the family as equally important. Horkheimer's story of the family is not merely about the role of the family in the larger social structure, rather it is about the influence of the family site on individuals' relation to such concepts as obedience, reason, authority, self-determination and spontaneity. It more deeply considers how the individual perceives themselves in relation to the society and state, and how early experiences of childhood permeate these relationships. It is important to note that

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<sup>105</sup> Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1949), xii.

<sup>106</sup> Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 98.

Horkheimer does not idealise the family, nor does he make any normative suggestions about improving the strength of the family unit: “Every effort to improve the whole beginning with the family, necessarily betrays, at least at present, a parochial and utopian outlook and simply distracts men from urgent historical tasks.”<sup>107</sup> The focus is on how the values and structures of the bourgeois order are reflected in the family unit, and how the family unit reflects back those values and structures into society, politics, and culture. The resulting family, the bourgeois family, becomes an “irreplaceable”<sup>108</sup> object of study for early critical theory.

Horkheimer considers the family as it has evolved throughout Western history. In *Authority and the Family*, he points back to the Reformation as a time in which the function of the family was quite explicit: to teach man to live under Protestant authority in society. The domestic rule of the father was unquestioned, since it reflected the law of the city and the optimal relationship between the church and the state.<sup>109</sup> Obedience was valued for its own sake, and the child’s self-will was to be broken as early as possible, “the free development of his drives and potentialities [...] to be replaced by an internalised compulsion towards the unconditional fulfilment of duty.”<sup>110</sup> The transition from the absolutist to the liberalist period brought with it a shift away from obedience as the subject of the family’s educational function and towards the application of reason.<sup>111</sup> While the *de facto* authority of the father remained intact, children of this period were to not only obey but respect the father’s strength and superiority. The father develops a moral claim to his dominance, naturally assuming control of the household and all matters of practical life. In addition to the “inalienable quality of [his] superior being,”<sup>112</sup> the father’s authority in the liberal period becomes further entrenched because he possesses the money. The family’s submission to the father is thus rationalised, replacing old absolutist dynamics of natural duty and obedience with new dynamics of “material

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

and psychic exploitation.”<sup>113</sup> As a result, the child develops an impulse of submission, a “tempo of compliance.”<sup>114</sup> The family is the initial site that trains the child for the bourgeois authority relationship; the perceived naturalness and permanence of paternal authority is what initially teaches them that the economic and social system is natural and permanent too. The father-child relationship is the beginning of the child’s “resentment against civilization itself.”<sup>115</sup>

Each human being experiences the domineering aspect of civilization from his birth. To the child, the father’s power seems overwhelming, supernatural in the literal sense of the word. The father’s command is reason exempt from nature, an inexorable spiritual force. The child suffers in submitting to this force.<sup>116</sup>

Through this relationship, the child learns that success in the family requires the adoption of the father’s values.<sup>117</sup> The child represses his urges and follows the father’s example, albeit somewhat blindly; the child only truly understands the displeasure and punishment associated with his resistance to the father’s authority. This displeasure is felt in other areas of the child’s life too, such as within peer groups, the school, and the community centre. Thus, the association between punishment and resistance is established very early in an individuals’ life, resulting in frustration and resentment with the external world.

As argued by Horkheimer in *Authority and the Family Today* (1949), the authority of the family under current conditions of monopoly capitalism have been almost entirely displaced.<sup>118</sup> The bourgeois family, the middle class “good family” that imitates and reproduces aristocratic ideals, no longer exists as it once did. Conditions of capitalism have worn thin the libidinal ties that exist *both* within and outside the family. The father is no longer revered as the irreplaceable head of household, the mother, a wage worker too, is no longer needed as the sole keeper of the home: “With the disappearance of [these

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>114</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 70.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>118</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” in *The Family: Its Function and Destiny* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 360.

essential factors], the respect of family members for the head of the house, their attachment to the family as a whole, and their loyalty to its symbols dwindled away.”<sup>119</sup> Mothers in particular are made worse off by this development, for they must now be caretakers but *also* adapt themselves as breadwinners “to forms of life moulded by and for men.”<sup>120</sup> The child’s perception of the parents changes in conditions of monopoly capitalism. Rather than being perceived as figures representing self-reliance, duty, and moral autonomy<sup>121</sup> (such was the case at the height of the bourgeois family), children perceive parents through the lens of modern industrialism: as dependent and weak wage earners. The family, in terms of its function and its ideology, is losing “its economic and its emotional basis.”<sup>122</sup> The authority of other aspects of modernity (i.e., the culture industry, the community centre, the peer group) becomes dominant instead.

It is important to emphasise the point that the conscious intentions of the family have little to do with this dynamic that begins in childhood. Whether the father is kind or cruel has little relevance for Horkheimer. As long as the basic structure of social life which relies on the family structure is maintained, the bourgeois family “will continue to exercise its indispensable function of producing specific, authority-oriented types of character.”<sup>123</sup> However, the family in bourgeois society can also function as a haven in a hostile reality; it is a place where the individual can live “not as a mere [economic] function but as a human being.”<sup>124</sup> Horkheimer attributes this humanising aspect of family life to maternal and sisterly love, which functions as a source of antiauthoritarianism in face of the “total dehumanisation in the world.”<sup>125</sup> Similarly, he says that the memory of the paradise of childhood can inspire images of a better world, one that exists without poverty or injustice.<sup>126</sup> The bourgeois family is therefore a combination of realities; it is not reducible to one type, the functions and structures of the

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>123</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 112.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

family are constantly changing.<sup>127</sup> However, from Horkheimer's story of the family we can discern "traits and tendencies of the bourgeois family which are inseparable from the foundation on which bourgeois society is built."<sup>128</sup> The family is one and the same with bourgeois society; they are bound together and enabled by the commanding and permanent authority present in both.<sup>129</sup>

### *Section II: The Family and the Authoritarian Personality*

In the introductory chapter of *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno et al., argue that "no politico-social trend imposes a graver threat to our traditional values and institutions than does fascism."<sup>130</sup> The work attempts to understand the potentially fascist individual and the specific characteristics that make him susceptible to fascist propaganda. As an "anthropological species,"<sup>131</sup> the potentially fascist individuals share many similar characteristics, while individuals at the opposite end of the spectrum are much more diverse.<sup>132</sup> The authors are careful to separate the approach taken in their study from the Nazi notion that "natural" or biological traits determine the totality of a person's personality and inclinations; they are committed to the "assumption of infinite human flexibility."<sup>133</sup> In the introductory chapter, they also say that the psychological structure of the individual is not the only object of their study, because they are also interested in the objective political and economic situation in which the potentially fascist individual lives.<sup>134</sup> Adorno et al. describe the interactions between the individual psyche, ideology, and the rest of society as a 'process', suggesting that each aspect is bound together in a causal way. The study's survey questions were coded using four distinct psychometric scales: the anti-semitism scale, the ethnocentrism scale, and the political

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>130</sup> Theodor W Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 1.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

and economical conservatism scale. The fourth scale, the infamous f-scale, targets a more specific personality profile disposed to authoritarianism and anti-democratic propaganda. It considers conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intraception, superstition and stereotypy, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, and concern about modern sexual practices.<sup>135</sup> In Freudian terms, the authoritarian personality is characterised by deep intrapsychic conflict. They tend to have a strict superego that controls a weak ego which is unable to content with the impulses of the id.<sup>136</sup> The resulting personality is insecure, cynical and generally disdainful towards other people and society more generally. Authoritarian personalities are not necessarily domineering or controlling personality types, rather they are more disposed to obey a clear authority figure. They may wish to be the authority figure themselves, resulting in further intrapsychic conflict. They are submissive to authority but also aggressive to those they perceive as ‘other’ or as weak. They see clear distinctions between the weak and the strong in society, and are hostile towards people who deviate from traditional moral prescriptions or societal conventions. As such, they tend to irrationally dislike members of minority groups, whether religious, ethnic, or otherwise. The world, to an authoritarian personality, is firm and unchangeable; it ought therefore to be organised by strict order, hierarchy, and conformity.

Adorno et al. also consider the family a major influence on an individuals’ personality, especially insofar as the child is influenced by their parents’ membership to economic, social, ethnic and religious groups. Marasco argues that at the centre of *The Authoritarian Personality* is a commitment to Horkheimer’s theory of the family, which establishes that the family, in an individuals’ life course, is the first site of the authoritarian relationship. It is an essential consideration for any discussion about fascism as both an ideological project and a set of social structures.<sup>137</sup> However, unlike in Horkheimer’s early writings, Adorno et al. place more importance on how parents parent. Differences in a child’s perceived treatment from their families are explicitly considered

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Marasco, 799.

in the study. According to the authors, the problem of authoritarian personalities does not only arise from the irrationalities inherent to the structure of the bourgeois family, but also from how the child is cared for *in* the bourgeois family. I would argue that this is not a particularly significant difference between *The Authoritarian Personality* and Horkheimer's early texts on the family. Both works share an understanding of the family as at once an ideology, an institution, and an economic unit under capitalism. Given that in early critical theory these socio-economic aspects are all considered highly interconnected and even unified, the conscious and unconscious *intentions* of the family would be considered part of this framework, not separate from it.

The relationship between harsh, discipline-oriented parenting and authoritarianism was proven in the study not to be directly causal. While the "feeling of victimisation by the parents"<sup>138</sup> tended to be more prevalent among high-scoring participants, Frankel-Brunswick noted that this feeling tended not to be "based on reality"<sup>139</sup> in the same way as low-scoring participants who identified feeling victimised by their parents. High-scoring participants tended to feel resentment because of their perceived victimisation *while also* glorifying the role of their parents. In fact, many high-scholaring participants tended to agree with the administration of their harsh punishment.

They identify themselves with the punisher and even seem to enjoy punishment. Not only do they appear to have had this attitude as children, but during their adult life the idea of punishment and the fear of it stays with them, often preventing them from transgressing a narrow path of seeming virtue.<sup>140</sup>

Authoritarian personalities also showed a need for complete approval by their parents. When this approval was not gained, high-scoring individuals would usually act out, sometimes leaving the home, engaging in truancy, or becoming delinquent.<sup>141</sup> These kinds of behaviours Frankel-Brunswick called acts of "capricious" rebellion, which are

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<sup>138</sup> Adorno et al., 347.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

distinguished from acts of “real” rebellion demonstrated usually by low-scoring participants in the face of disciplinarian parents.<sup>142</sup> Authoritarian personalities are therefore highly dependent on the support and attention received by their parents. Frankel-Brunswick argues that this dependence is exploitive and manipulative in nature: “It is [...] a need for the help of others in getting things; the persons from whom things can be gotten may equally well be parents, or the “leader,” or anyone else who seems capable of offering tangible support.”<sup>143</sup> Low-scoring participants, while still dependent on their parents for support and attention, lacked this more exploitive outlook. The family is also related to the individuals’ perception of others who do not conform to their vision of a conventional or traditional society. High-scoring subjects tended toward an ingroup orientation, which showed up in their views on family heredity and background. They would emphasise the “aristocratic superiority of the family”<sup>144</sup> and its nature as homogeneous and totalitarian. This view was not shared by low-scoring individuals who thought in terms of *individuals* within the family structure.<sup>145</sup> High-scoring individuals also tended to be especially preoccupied with the socio-economic status of their families, seeing their situation as either helping or hindering them in getting what they want from the world.<sup>146</sup>

In general, Frankel-Brunswick’s chapter on the family-authority link in *The Authoritarian Personality* makes the case that prejudice, resentment, and cynicism in individuals is strongly related to the family. The formation of attitudes, values, and political beliefs is also strongly influenced by the family structure, dynamics, and perceived treatment of individuals by their parents. As argued by Horkheimer in his early work, Frankel-Brunswick argues that the family influences a person’s sense of their own individuality in important ways. Without “an internalised and individualised”<sup>147</sup> approach to the child’s development, parents will tend to transmit mainly conventional rules and

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 357

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

customs to the child, “expressing itself in a stereotyped approach devoid of genuine affect in almost all areas of life.”<sup>148</sup> High-scoring participants were divorced from an understanding of people within the family as individuals, identifying a clear ingroup and outgroup from a very young age and maintaining that distinction throughout their adulthood. Authoritarian personalities are prone to stereotyping any perceived ‘other’ group, and they display a “comparative lack of imagination, of spontaneity, and of originality and by a certain constrictive character.”<sup>149</sup> They execute conventionally-prescribed roles in exchange for some perceived benefit and are rigidly bound to the established patterns laid out by mass culture and society. While they often feel resentment towards society, often resulting in underlying destructiveness towards established customs and authority, they also tend to over-conform.<sup>150</sup> Both responses are inherently hostile and potentially dangerous; they both represent over-reactions to families that value obedience, status, and conformity.

While social and economic conservatism is one part of the traits observed in the authoritarian personality, it is important to note here that authoritarian personalities are not the same as right-wing conservative personalities. Mid 20th-century research in the social sciences, prompted by *The Authoritarian Personality*, has debated this point. Shils (1954) wrote that left-wing authoritarians indeed exist, tending to conceal their exploitative and manipulative relationships with others under expressions of solidarity.<sup>151</sup> Costello (1999) also wrote that left-wing authoritarians exist, sharing with right-wing authoritarians the desire to punish non-conformity and resistance against the existing order.<sup>152</sup> Altemeyer (1983) did not believe in the existence of left-wing authoritarians at all.<sup>153</sup> The controversial nature of the left-wing authoritarianism debate speaks to the fact

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>151</sup> Edward Shils, “Authoritarianism: ‘Right’ and ‘Left,’” *Studies on the Scope and Method*, 1954.

<sup>152</sup> Thomas H. Costello et al., “Clarifying the Structure and Nature of Left-Wing Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, August 12, 2021.

<sup>153</sup> Bob Altemeyer, *Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (San Francisco; London: Jossey-Bass, 1988).

that authoritarianism, as described by Adorno et al., is not widely understood. Authoritarianism is not a political ideology nor an institution. It is also not merely a personality type. The context of the work within the Institute must be remembered, so should the question motivating Adorno et al.'s investigation into authoritarian personalities: How, given society's progress and 'enlightenment', could Hitler have risen to power and Europe descended into barbarism? They did not aim to diagnose the individuals that fell prey to fascist propaganda with a disease that would be solvable by a kind of collective therapy. They also did not aim to interpret the authoritarian personality as an individual-level problem or experience. Like the rest of the work of early critical theory examined in this paper, the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* were aware that no socio-psychological phenomenon can exist apart from all aspects of society, including the family, the economy, politics, and culture. The potentially fascist structure cannot be eliminated by psychological means, for it does not emerge solely from within the individual. The process and patterns of fascism are *imposed upon* the individual; fascist propaganda "works" on individuals upon whom fascism has been internalised first by the family, then elsewhere in society.

It is not disputed here that *The Authoritarian Personality* is a complicated and problematic empirical work. However, from this problematic empirical text emerges compelling theoretical commitments that form a central pillar of early critical theory and its general view of the modern individual. Like Horkheimer's early writings on the family, *The Authoritarian Personality* presupposes the unity of state, society, family, and the individual in the fascist problem.

### *Section III: Evaluating the Family-Authority Framework for 'Meta' Modernity*

From the previous analysis begs the question: What do authoritarian personalities, fascism, and the family structure have to do with the challenges of 'meta' modernity? In this section I argue that understanding the nature of the family-authority relationship is *particularly* relevant in an age of big tech, digital capitalism, and algorithmic social media. Contextually speaking, the social conditions of the era prior to the Holocaust

were not unlike the social conditions of ‘meta’ modernity. Before the Nazis took control of the Reichstag in 1933, the German economy was nearing collapse. The country was almost bankrupt from World War I reparations payments, factories were closing because they could not afford to pay their employees, the government had no money for benefits or social assistance, and inflation was spiralling out of control.<sup>154</sup> Nazism represented “a late phase in the development of capitalism, in which a declining political structure has to be replaced by something more robust if capitalism itself is to survive.”<sup>155</sup> It drew upon a widespread disillusionment with modernism and rationalism, calling upon some socialist ideas to appeal to the increasingly unemployed and impoverished middle class.<sup>156</sup>

The popularity of Hitler is impossible to explain without the existence of a strong degree of receptivity within Germany – and this could well be set in a wider European context. There was much in Hitler which was ludicrous: it was converted into a compelling form of radicalism because it worked upon the needs of the population at the time.<sup>157</sup>

Effective Nazi propaganda also made a significant impact. In addition to promising the restoration of earnings, Nazi propaganda was targeted at restoring privilege and standing to the middle class. They also promised to reaffirm traditional values, albeit through a program of racial purity.<sup>158</sup> The socio-economic climate in Germany at the time was prime for fascist takeover, especially by a charismatic and authoritative figure like Hitler.

In the years since 2008, the global economy has seen slow but consistent economic expansion. However, the positive effects of this expansion have not been felt by the growing working class. The ‘meta’ modern economy is seeing unprecedented growth in the billionaire class, Western deindustrialisation and corporate financialisation is increasing the number of working poor, and inflation is increasing at its highest rate

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<sup>154</sup> Otto Nathan, “The Nazi Economic System,” 1944.

<sup>155</sup> Stephen J Lee, *Hitler and Nazi Germany* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

since the early 1980s. The institution of liberal democracy continues to be challenged, from the rolling back of civil liberties in India to the attack on the U.S. capital to the war in Ukraine. The impacts of the climate crisis grow increasingly severe, threatening people's homes and livelihoods all over the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has now killed over 6 million people, and social polarisation and toxic tribalism pervades our political and social institutions. Not unlike the time in which Horkheimer and Adorno wrote, young people are growing increasingly fearful and disillusioned with the promise of our democratic institutions and neoliberal capitalism: "The hopes of mankind seem to be farther from fulfilment today than they were even in the groping epochs when they were first formulated by humanists."<sup>159</sup> The modern enlightenment aspiration is increasingly defeating itself, "nullifying the goal it is supposed to realise."<sup>160</sup>

Alongside rapid social, political and economic change has been a technological revolution. How we communicate, travel, research, receive healthcare, vote, date, and manage finances has changed, becoming increasingly algorithmic and subject to the authority and expertise of big tech. In the 'meta' modern era, algorithmic social media is one of the child's first exposures to a community beyond their own. Just as observed by Horkheimer in his time, the family as a site of paternal authority is becoming increasingly displaced, and collective digital entities are dwarfing the family's influence. The family now functions as the gatekeeper between the child and the outside world, weakening parents' subconscious and conscious reproduction of conventional norms and rules. Childrens' reality is not only "reflected in the mirror of the family circle"<sup>161</sup> but also in the smartphone and television, displacing the family's educational function further still. As such, the growing child in 'meta' modernity establishes a relationship with the outside world much earlier than in previous generations, cultivating interactions and experiences through a vast variety of digital content that reflects the material world. The family is no longer a haven in a cruel and unjust world. The principles of affectivity, love, and solidarity embedded within the family are becoming increasingly eroded, and social

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<sup>159</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, vii.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>161</sup> Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 98.

media is aiding in its erosion. Relationships both within and outside the family are becoming not just more predictable but also technologically mediated. These interactions are tracked, commodified, and used by major media conglomerates to predict other social interactions. While I, like Horkheimer, do not argue that rebuilding the family is the ‘solution’ to the breakdown of social ties, it is nevertheless an important object of study. Understanding how capitalist social relations permeate ties as intimate and personal as the family is crucial to understanding how the existing conditions are being reproduced at this base level.

Authority in the ‘meta’ modern era is not concentrated nor perceived in terms of an authority *figure*. In an age of big tech, digital capitalism, and algorithmic social media, authority is increasingly dispersed and opaque. The “tempo of compliance,”<sup>162</sup> is established through highly specialised algorithms determined by the coding elite. The bourgeois authority relationship is established in relation to a social media feed, where resentment against civilization is cultivated and fed. It’s important to note here that anger, disgust, and general outgroup animosity drives social media engagement.<sup>163</sup> Content driven by these extreme emotional reactions receive more views and reactions, driving profits and ad revenues for the major digital media conglomerates (e.g., Meta, Google). In a very direct way, the social media echo chamber exacerbates “resentment against civilization itself.”<sup>164</sup> Algorithmic social media, especially youth-targeted apps like Tik Tok, also define a societal pattern upon which children ought to model in a very obvious way. Content on these apps revolve around an idea, product, or story’s trendiness; virality is determined by a video’s mass appeal. The algorithm reproduces trends incredibly quickly, defining new and constantly-changing standards and ideals for culture, consumption, and politics. The nature of the problem is the same as in Horkheimer and Adorno’s time. While they had asked what makes a person susceptible to fascist propaganda, the appropriate question in the ‘meta’ modern era is what makes a person susceptible to big tech influence. Just like in *The Authoritarian Personality*,

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<sup>162</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 70.

<sup>163</sup> Steve Rathje, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden, “Out-Group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 26 (June 23, 2021).

<sup>164</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 77.

understanding how the new technological paradigm supports or undermines a view of the world as unchangeable is essential to understanding individuals' tendencies towards authority. Moreover, it is essential to understanding how the prevailing social order (i.e. the interconnected culture, family structure, state) reinforces or challenges oppressive and unjust institutions. Like the fascist crisis in Europe in the mid-20th century, the challenges presented by 'meta' modernity are not a problem of mass psychology. They are not even a problem of the social, political, and economic climate. The nature of the problem revolves around how the complex interweaving of social, political and economic factors *bind* the individual to a digital 'authority'.

## Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

*“The sole way of assisting nature is to unshackle its seeming opposite, independent thought.”<sup>165</sup>*

The prior analysis has sought to answer the central question: Does early Frankfurt School critical theory provide a coherent and plausible way to think about algorithmic social media, the individuals influenced by it, and the social problems it poses? Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for the question at hand, introducing how Horkheimer and Adorno’s early work might interact with the digital culture industry of the ‘meta’ modern era. It points to existing political theory literature on algorithmic information sorting and argues that the current theoretical work assumes a submissive, ahistorical, ready-made subject. In Chapter 2, I examine more closely the modern enlightenment aspiration in Horkheimer and Adorno, the failure of reason, and the rise and decline of the individual. I argue that this aspect of their early work is effective at contextualising the ‘meta’ modern crisis of the individual, which is wrapped up in a millennia-long process of progress and regression; the ‘story’ of enlightenment is truly the ‘story’ of the individual. In this chapter I also examine how the crisis of the individual is rooted in the impulse to imitate and conform, which reproduces old cultural values that do not necessarily serve the aim of a humane and emancipated society. Horkheimer and Adorno’s theoretical framework thus provides a more thoroughly historicised understanding of the conditions of ‘meta’ modernity, one that more genuinely focuses on the crisis of the individual inherent to its development. In Chapter 3, I first examine Horkheimer’s early work on the family, exploring how the family relationship, which is inseparable from the bourgeois society from which it emerges, sets off the individual’s resentment against civilization. The chapter then shifts focus to *The Authoritarian Personality*, which considers how the individual becomes susceptible to fascist propaganda and general authoritarianism. The work provides a relevant framework for understanding the first *site* where conventional norms and values are reproduced and imitated, and how big tech and algorithmic social media has permeated it in ‘meta’ modernity. Algorithmic social media breeds resentment

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<sup>165</sup>Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 89.

against civilization, reinforces outgroup hostility, and influences the complex social process that binds the individual to a digital ‘authority’.

By engaging some relevant aspects of Horkheimer and Adorno’s early work with today’s digital culture industry, this analysis has sought to show that early critical theory provides both a coherent and plausible way of thinking about algorithmic social media, the individuals influenced by it, and the problems it poses. It is *coherent* because, with respect to the themes of enlightenment and the family, early critical theory represents a logical, unified and consistent way of thinking about the challenges inherent to the individual in Western civilization. It can conceptualise the ‘meta’ modern era within a much longer historical process, shifting focus from the problems created by any one technological development to the nature of the individual’s receptivity to it. As a whole, the works selected conceive of the institutions of modern life (e.g., culture, politics, economy, the state, the family) as a highly interconnected social process that influences the bourgeois consciousness. The approach is *plausible* because it reasonably explains some aspects of the social phenomenon that has accompanied the ‘meta’ modern era, including the predictive quality of algorithmic social media, the limited ability of many people to expose irrationality and ‘fake news’ on the internet, social media-fuelled social and political polarisation, the further displacement of the family as a site of authority, and the breakdown in trust in democratic institutions and neoliberal capitalism. An early critical theory approach does not dismiss all of these phenomena as necessarily ‘bad’:

The shackling of man’s thoughts and actions by the forms of extremely developed industrialism, the decline of the individual under the impact of the all-embracing machinery of mass culture, create the prerequisites of the emancipation of reason. At all times, the good has shown traces of the oppression in which it originated, Thus the idea of the dignity of man is born from the experience of barbarian forms of domination.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 126.

The most sincere commitment of early critical theory is to serve as “mankind’s memory and conscience,”<sup>167</sup> and to work towards a more humane organisation of society. In an era of opaque authoritarianism, rapid technological change, and increasing socio-economic inequalities due to the climate crisis and economic globalisation, the main task of critical theory is pressing and salient. We no longer lack “the sufficient cultural and technological resources for forging an understanding between individuals, groups, and nations.”<sup>168</sup> Today like in Horkheimer’s time, the material conditions exist to avoid barbaric inhuman events like **the** Holocaust. Early critical theory sees the genuine emancipation of the individual as crucial to this aim.

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 132

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

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