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Total domination as a result of the fragmentation of thought: Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno

The total domination because of the fragmentation of thoughts: Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno

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Summary

The aim of this article is to establish a connection between Hannah Arendt's thinking on the characterization of totalitarian systems in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the reflections made by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on the condition of unreflection or inability to think.

The hypothesis is presented that the three authors agree that the inability to think leaves individuals susceptible to the total domination advocated by totalitarian regimes.

Keywords: Arendt; Adorno; Totalitarianism.

Abstract

The aim of this article is to establish a connection between Hannah Arendt's thought on the characterization of totalitarian systems in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the reflection made by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer regarding the condition of unreflectiveness or inability to think. The hypothesis presented is that the three authors converge insofar as they understand that the inability to think makes individuals susceptible to the total domination advocated by totalitarian regimes.

Keywords: Arendt; Adornment; Totalitarianism.

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this work is to examine the relationship between the totalitarian system, theorized by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and the erosion of the ability to think, a theme

addressed by Arendt in other works, as well as by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in...

Dialectic of Enlightenment, in particular, in the chapter " *Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as...*"

Deception of the Masses.

The book **The Origins of Totalitarianism**, first published in 1951, expresses the Arendt's attempt to understand the totalitarian phenomenon as an unprecedented event that occurred in History. For the German author, totalitarian regimes, as manifested in Nazi Germany and Russia. Stalinist, they denote an irruption, a rupture in the historical flow that needs to be investigated more thoroughly. Caution is advised due to its unprecedented nature. In this endeavor of understanding, Arendt discusses a crucial point for sustaining this type of regime: the inability to think. Indeed, the Regimes of total domination seem to have relied on the idea that non-thinking individuals would be easily manipulated and, consequently, susceptible to domination.

A few years before the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Adorno and Horkheimer They co-authored *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Published in 1944, at the time of the event While totalitarianism was underway, the work will broadly address how myth and science can also...



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to be taken as *Enlightenment* and, therefore, as sources of social domination. Despite the variety of the topics presented in the work, our focus in this study will be the chapter that deals with industry, cultural, in which the authors pursue the intuition that the mass society of contemporary times, as revealed within the context of late capitalism and cultural production, become an easy target for manipulation and domination, which resonates with certain characteristics of totalitarianism thought by Arendt in the 1951 text.

As we know, the three authors lived during the same era, which will certainly help us to... to see similarities and, undoubtedly, differences between their approaches. We intend, therefore, to glimpse the perspectives of Arendt and of Adorno and Horkheimer concerning the totalitarian wager, to incapacitate individuals' ability to think, thereby manipulating them and making them susceptible to domination, a practice that also makes use of the figure of the "superfluous" human being, as considered by Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

2. The Totalitarian Regime and the Inability to Think

Before exploring the text of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and looking for its central aspects... Regarding regimes that facilitate total domination, it is worth making some observations about our author and her... work. Driven by the effort to understand the world, we must bear in mind that Arendt, when she writes her philosophy (or her political theory, as she preferred to say), shedding light on the events that are happening is not a search for causes, but rather a search for causes. What is happening is not a search for causes, but rather a search for causes. first (or last) or for transcendent reasons in relation to the phenomena; what we find in his writings are concerned with understanding the events happening around him.

Furthermore, we also point out that the book *Origins of Totalitarianism* is the first work which projects Arendt into the intellectual landscape of her time. Divided into three parts — antisemitism, Imperialism and Totalitarianism — *Origins* focuses on understanding the totalitarian phenomenon as an unprecedented event in history. The first two parts, *antisemitism* and *imperialism*, they present a more evident historiographical bias, closer to a historical analysis, while the third part, *totalitarianism*, reveals a more interpretative and comparative tone, as we see Arendt's intention was to formulate a theory for understanding the totalitarian phenomenon.

Added to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, one of Arendt's fundamental writings that tells us *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published in 1963, helps to reflect on the inability to think. In general, this is considered to be Arendt's second most famous work, in which she composes an account of a journalistic account of the judicial process that took place in 1961 in Israel, which tried Adolf Eichmann, a *Gestapo* official responsible for the logistics of transporting Jews to the camps. From this, he drew decisive conclusions about the element we will be focusing on in this [article/discussion].



work: thoughtlessness or the inability to think.

In order to advance the investigation of the totalitarian system, it makes sense to present,

First, a fundamental idea of Arendt's in her approach to understanding totalitarianism:

For her, it is an unprecedented event, entirely new in history, which she cannot understand.

through the ordinary categories of thought bequeathed by Western tradition. According to the

According to the author, the advent of the totalitarian system caused a rupture and, for that reason, we failed.

To examine it thoroughly, we must turn to the philosophical tradition and its classical concepts, which were eroded throughout Modernity and shattered by the eruption of totalitarianism. That is what it says.

Arendt in the preface to *Between Past and Future*:

“(...) in the course of the millennia that followed the founding of Rome and that were determined by Roman concepts, this gap [between past and future] was transposed by what, since Roman times, we have called tradition. It is no secret to no one is aware that this tradition has become increasingly frayed as time has passed. Modernity progressed. When, finally, the thread of tradition was broken, the gap between... The past and the future are no longer a precondition peculiar solely to activity. of thought and subordinate, as an experience, to the select few who made of thinking, their primary occupation (...)” (ARENDR, 1979, p. 40).

Despite Arendt's observation that our categories of thought are inherited from

Traditions are not suitable for investigating the system of total domination, given their character of

In this novelty, the author, according to Bach, "does not refrain from formulating an ethical and effective judgment about the totalitarianism" (BACH, 2006, p. 35). Arendtian intuition indicates that, given the immeasurable occurrence totalitarian, our thought patterns (passed down, over time, by tradition)

Philosophical approaches may not capture the entire essence of the phenomenon, but this condition does not exempt us. Nor does it preclude us from analyzing totalitarianism and its characteristics.

Taking, from now on, the text of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, more specifically the beginning of its third part, with the aim of understanding the link between total domination and the

In the fragmentation of thought, we see that Arendt begins her journey of understanding by talking about the

Mass society, an indispensable component for the formation of a totalitarian system. According to

According to the author, the large number of people that make up the masses sustains the regime and, in addition

This, however, does not jeopardize the terrible totalitarian practices of depopulation (the act of expelling and eliminating people). As an example, Arendt notes that countries like India and China, known...

Because of their large populations, they are prone to the establishment of totalitarian regimes, since, in these

In those regions, "there is an almost inexhaustible human resource to fuel the machine of power and destruction."

of men which is total domination (...)” (ARENDR, 1989, p. 438).



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In addition to the numerical aspect, which is important for the formation of a firm supporting soil for
In a totalitarian regime, the masses still exhibit the aspect of superfluity (as understood by Arendt).
as a novelty in Europe and a corollary of increased unemployment and population growth.
(of the last century). In this sense, in Arendt's view, the individuals who form the mass are
considered by the rulers as *superfluous individuals*, that is, without human dignity,
dispensable, substitutes, murderable. Taking advantage of this condition attributed to people, governments
Totalitarians are able to manipulate the masses as they wish, without any moral scruples or
calculations of moral consequence. Thus, for Arendt, "only where there are large masses
It is superfluous things that can be sacrificed without disastrous depopulation results that become...
"The totalitarian government is viable (...)" (ARENDR, 1989, p. 438).

Another characteristic of the masses pointed out by Arendt (and which strongly contributes to the
The inability to think) is due to the fact that this large contingent of people does not express an interest.
authentic politician. In reality, the masses are co-opted by totalitarian rulers, they are
manipulated to act and think in a certain way and, for that reason, do not operate with a
genuine political interest in determined and achievable social change (ARENDR, 1989). For the
Politically, in theory, ordinary people externalize a political indifference, a bias towards neutrality.
which certainly facilitates their manipulation by the totalitarian government. Arendt notes that the very
Members of totalitarian parties reveal themselves to be depoliticized individuals and, therefore, engaged in...
in the excessive practices of totalitarianism, given its indifference towards public space and to
political consequences of their actions.

Following Arendt's line of thought, the masses form a social body marked by
depoliticization, due to the absence of political reflection and indifference regarding the direction of decision-making.
decisions are made by rulers. Totalitarian regimes, as Arendt explains, derive a great deal of power from these decisions.
This situation gives an advantage to individuals who swell within the mass, by displaying their
Social apathy; they don't bother to argue or counter-argue on political matters. Their
The behavior then tends towards violence, towards the impossibility of dialogue, towards obedience.
blind — "to death instead of persuasion," as Arendt says. At this point, it emerges, at the political level,
One aspect of the disintegration of thought that supports total domination: individuals, in some way.
To that extent, they conform, in an unreflective and careless manner, to the compass that guides the government's actions.
totalitarian. It is worth noting, however, that this formation of the masses does not happen in a way...
entirely passive, since manipulative propaganda exists and, certainly, active adherence.
of individuals.

Arendt, in her attempt to unravel the origin of mass society, argues that the
The class system typical of feudal societies, characterized by their estate division, entered into
collapse with the rise of the bourgeoisie, which did not represent a specific class (ARENDR,



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1989). This new bourgeois social stratum began to group together atomized individuals (disconnected, (dispersed) and lacking real political interest, insofar as they did not demonstrate cohesion among themselves nor the a group feeling of a class. In this new scenario, these people, who were dispersed throughout the fabric... Socially, they tended toward indifference and hostility towards political life. In Arendt's words,

"The competitive consumer society created by the bourgeoisie has generated apathy, and even... even hostility, in relation to public life, not only between social classes. exploited and excluded from active participation in the country's government, but above all, among their own class" (ARENDR, 1989, p. 441).

As a consequence of this tendency towards hostility towards politics, the masses acquire an air of of inconstancy and impermanence, in addition to not seeing himself as responsible for conducting business. The nation's politicians (ARENDR, 1989). The sum of the absence of political interest and unconsciousness. A lack of political accountability often results in fragmented individuals who end up being more... They are easily enticed and manipulated, to the point of becoming an *anti-political force*, because they do not fight. for real political interests — as the people themselves would do — but they seal the "will" of an organization lacking cohesion and interest in social changes that would be based on interest. public.

Up to this point, we have seen that mass society acts as an indispensable component in... The functioning of the totalitarian system. As we have seen, the mass, composed of individuals atomized, it does not take responsibility for public space — an abdication of responsibility takes place. Political thought and participation. However, alongside the *collective component* of the masses (which provides fertile ground for support, superfluity, and a lack of genuine political interest), it becomes It is also necessary to consider the *individual component*: that which, in the totalitarian system, was capable to convince the individual to stop thinking for themselves and to practice inhumane actions as if they were banal, common. To carry out this consideration regarding the individual component, we will visit Some lines from the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published in 1963.

Arendt, after attending the trial of *Gestapo* officer Adolf Eichmann and writing the The article, written for the American newspaper *The New Yorker*, drew interesting conclusions regarding... The behavior and thinking of this individual who was faithfully embedded in the machine of The destruction of people that was the Nazi totalitarian regime. What greatly impacted the author was the The normality with which Eichmann expressed himself: he was not a perverse, irascible individual or with mental disorders; in fact, he appeared to be an absolutely ordinary man. In this sense, Arendt He asserts that "Eichmann's problem was precisely that many were like him, and many were not." Neither perverted nor sadistic, but they were and still are terribly and frighteningly normal" (ARENDR, (1999, p. 299). This apparent normality suggested by Arendt allows us to assume that the individual



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Massified audiences don't need anything extraordinary, nothing absurd, to be co-opted, manipulated, and, with That is, to act in the most malevolent and cruel ways within the system of total domination.

Despite its apparent triviality, Eichmann based his defense on a Argument of mandatory order — the officer claimed that he performed his actions because he was simply following government orders; he explained that he “wasn't a monster,” but “victim of a fallacy” (ARENDR, 1999, p. 269). Furthermore, Eichmann even shifted his blame. even when using jargon and ready-made phrases, such as "my honor is my loyalty" (*ibidem*, p. 121) or “my only language is officialese” (*ibid.*, p. 61). In light of these statements, Arendt goes on to to conclude that, essentially, Eichmann had abdicated his capacity for thought and decided to follow the Orders were given passively. According to the author, the *Gestapo* officer did not take orders . autonomous decision-making, but the outsourcing or delegation of thought, which was shattered by the impetus of belonging and loyalty to the Nazi regime.

With the help of Eichmann's example, we realize that the breakdown of the capacity to Thinking caused his individuality (his identity) to be completely dominated by the system. In this regard, Arendt explains that totalitarianism was the only regime capable of reaching the point of... “to make [individuals] completely lose their individual claims and ambitions” and of “To erase an individual's identity forever, and not just for a fleeting, heroic gesture.” “collective” (ARENDR, 1989, p. 442). Observing this erasure of the subject and its capacity In a deliberative manner, Arendt weaves the thread of her argument by understanding that this lack of thinking, this lack of reflection, This could imply, in political terms, the possibility of ordinary, common people (like Eichmann) to be dominated and, as a result, to practice evil without moral conflict. For this reason, Arendt concludes, that “the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps its bureaucratic nature, is to transform men into employees and mere cogs in a machine, thus dehumanizing them” (ARENDR, 1999, p. 312).

Through the analysis of parts of the text of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, we clearly perceive, is the fragmentation of thought, for Arendt, which leads to... total domination of the individual, who loses their critical and agency capacity for the benefit of the system. which dominated him. In fact, Arendt's analysis teaches us that not thinking plays a decisive role in The manipulation of the individual through the totalitarian system, which will often use propaganda to achieve this end. It is, finally, in this context of unreflectiveness that we recall the controversial notion... Arendt's proposal of *the banality of evil*, which can be interpreted here as another result or The consequence of not thinking. Indeed, when individuals reach the extreme point of not thinking... when they feel more responsible for their actions, we have a visible instance of this banality, in to the extent that evil was committed as if it did not constitute a reprehensible ethical category.



3. The Dialectic of Enlightenment and Unreflection

After scrutinizing, in Arendt, certain aspects of totalitarianism and its commitment to Given the inability of individuals to think in order to achieve total domination, our attention turns to... Now, from the perspective of two authors who also experienced totalitarian horror, what led them to... like Arendt, who went into exile in another country in the face of persecution of Jews. Adorno and Horkheimer, Members of the so-called *Frankfurt School* also set out to theorize about society, In other words, it "allowed" the occurrence of a second World War and the nightmare of the regimes. Totalitarians: Mass society situated in the context of late 20th-century capitalism.

In one of their major works, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, from 1944, the two authors They attempt to explain how myth and science can be taken as Enlightenment and as sources of social manipulation. Basically, the authors want to show us that the process of rationalization Experience in the West must be viewed dialectically: the Enlightenment — understood, in modern times, as the human being's escape from the tutelage of external authorities (superstition, magical thinking, mythical thought, *etc.*) — aims, on the one hand, to understand the natural world through rationality; But in this impulse, he falls back into myth, into mythology, into that which he wanted to escape. In an attempt to to understand the world and pacify humanity's despair for intelligibility, the Enlightenment (in the sense of (broad) ends up over-rationalizing reality and falling, once again, into the shackles of mythology. From this perspective, Freitas says that "the Enlightenment always tried to free humanity from subjugation." servile and fearful in the face of nature (...), but this process submerged men more and more in another servitude, which the myth itself already imposed (...)" (FREITAS, 1999, p. 52).

Broadly speaking, Adorno and Horkheimer aim to demonstrate that the human act of Rationalizing reality, whether through mythology or modern science, can lead to... repeatedly, in social processes that, in some way, exert social constraint. (FREITAS, 1999). This repetitive relapse of rationalization into new forms of social coercion. According to the authors, this stems from an unavoidable prerogative of the Enlightenment: the knowledge that... An enlightened mentality aspires to achieve what is tinged with the ink of dominating nature and, therefore, consequently, the domination of people through that same nature which was, in theory, dominated.

From this perspective, relying on Adorno and Horkheimer's intuition that the Clarification is tainted by the domination of nature and humankind; we emphasize that this impulse... The tension of domination intensifies when we look more closely at the mass societies typical of The capitalist context of the 20th century. The phenomenon of manipulation through mentality. Enlightenment (which always falls back on myth and social oppression) becomes more evident in these societies. massified, given that the social body, due to its atomization (understood here as the absence of ties) and common goals), is more likely to adhere to commands, propaganda, consumerism, and



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promises of science, promises of salvation, *etc.*

Behind this more vigorous propensity of mass society to fall back on explanations mythological and alienating, it operates a social process of manipulation that Adorno called *Semi-formation (Halbbildung)*. Discussed by the German author in a 1959 essay, the concept of Semi-education helps us understand the Enlightenment and the culture industry (which we will see later) as sources of domination. As Maar teaches, semi-formation would be "a particular social form of the subjectivity socially imposed by a particular mode of production on all levels of life" (MAAR, 2003, p. 462). Semi-formation would then constitute a mode of formation of subjects in a type of mass society that, instead of forming individuals for a full subjectivity confers upon them a kind of "half-education" (*Halbbildung*), insofar as which shapes them with a view to their integration, in all areas of life, into social norms in capitalist modes of production.

It is worth noting that, in the social process of semi-formation, it is not a matter of leaving people without training. On the contrary, there is training, but it is socially determined and directed. Like training it is present; the subject is able to be himself, but only to the extent that he reproduces his semi-formation. Maar reiterates this point, warning that "the semi-formed subject takes himself as a subject." of the world that merely reproduces" (MAAR, 2003, p. 465), and the objective of these subjects is "to be subjects of the reproduction of a world in which their condition is that of subjugated subjects" (MAAR, 2003, p. 465), that is, individuals who, despite being educated, submit to social dictates. capitalist systems focused on production and consumption.

Aware that the social fabric is entangled in the process of semi-formation of subjects, We can safely move on to the chapter on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that we mentioned. Above: *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. In this part of the book, Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the culture industry and its characteristics, as well as other topics related themes, such as culture in general and mass culture, aesthetic barbarism, and the integration of the entirety of life within the capitalist system. However, taking into account the objective and brevity of this In this work, we will focus on the culture industry and, in particular, two of its characteristics that come into play. in line with Arendt's proposal regarding total domination as a consequence of fragmentation of the ability to think.

When Adorno and Horkheimer use the expression "cultural industry," they mean... reference to the mode of cultural production typical of late 20th-century capitalism. According to the Frankfurt School authors argue that the culture industry, through its cultural products and its... Encouraging consumerism, involving individuals in a self-perpetuating web of manipulation. This mode of production has the capacity to manufacture culture for the *masses*, that is, for anyone. person, without any consideration of a specific identity or elements



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individualizing factors, which are inexorably carried by the people in the strict sense — this

Yes, it articulates interconnected symbolic values that translate into an identity.

Knowing, then, that the culture industry has the capacity to produce mass culture goods.

For anyone, we can pursue their first characteristic, which aligns with the

The incapacitation of thought, as addressed by Arendt, is the *usurpation of schematism*. In the model

In the epistemological framework proposed by Kant, schematism reveals itself as a mental process that operates...

mediation between the particularities of experience and the universals of understanding. Through

In schematism, the subject subsumes the particular into a universal category through the action of...

thought. However, in Adorno and Horkheimer's view, when the individual finds himself immersed

In the culture industry, this cognitive process is taken away from you, since cultural productions

They arrive already prepared or pre-digested for easy consumption, so as not to require cognitive effort.

In fact, in this environment, the individual's ability to create information is usurped by the industry, which

weakens your ability to think. That is why Adorno and Horkheimer argue that "the function that the

Kantian schematism still attributed to the subject, namely, referring beforehand to sensible multiplicity.

"Regarding fundamental concepts, the subject is taken over by industry" (ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, 1985,

(p. 103). To illustrate this usurpation, the authors give examples in the fields of music and film, in

the details of the production are replaced by a general scheme of perception, which makes extensive use

of easy-to-memorize intervals, totally predictable clichés, and jokes with catchphrases.

calculated.

With the hijacking of schematics, the industry's clear intention to save money becomes apparent.

viewers of the intellectual effort required to appreciate a piece of content. This prior interpretation

The content and indiscriminate use of "facilitators" fosters a dangerous connection between *pleasure and...*

and *not the requirement of intellectual effort*, which corrupts the mass public into not thinking. They claim,

Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that "pleasure ends up freezing into boredom, since..."

To remain a pleasure, it should no longer require effort and therefore needs to move.

strictly on the worn tracks of habitual associations" (ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, 1985, p.

113). Indeed, the authors' aim is to denounce the other side of entertainment, namely, that of

to rob the subject of their reflective and critical process. In this way, the atmosphere of semi-formation and

The usurpation of intellectual effort makes it clear how the mechanisms of capitalist society work.

They transcend the economic sphere and infiltrate all aspects of individuals' lives, forming a

total manipulation network.

Indeed, this total network is precisely the second characteristic of the culture industry that

We want to emphasize this. As mentioned above, the Enlightenment aspires to be a process of

A rationalization of reality that permeates *all* of it, leaving no room for the mystical, for the

inexplicable, for the unfathomable. From this perspective, Freitas points out that



"The Enlightenment is totalitarian because, for its own realization, it needs to be... to achieve in every imaginable field of knowledge: nothing can remain. mystery, no enigma, nothing obscure, not even the desire to reveal what it is. this mystery, for it must be eradicated, not shown and evidenced by any means, such as narratives, images, *etc.*" (FREITAS, 1999, p. 2).

This totalizing character of the Enlightenment and, consequently, also of the culture industry, It generates a kind of social homogeneity, which is also advocated by totalitarian regimes. In Adorno and Horkheimer's view, this standardization of experiences and commodities can be thought of as... as a result of a "circle of manipulation and retroactive need" that provides a link of interdependence between supply and demand (ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, 1985). In this statement, Although the authors emphasize the economic aspect, it should be noted that this cycle of manipulation... It operates in all sectors of individuals' lives, permeating the social body as a whole. In this line of reasoning, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that "that which explains [the [standardization of goods and living] is the cycle of manipulation and retroactive necessity, in which unit of the system becomes increasingly cohesive" (ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, 1985, p. 100).

This pursuit of unity and homogeneity is visible in totalitarian systems, which preach a nationalist unification, which is not achieved primarily through common ties between its members, but through differentiation or exclusion of "the others," that is, of the regime's opponents. There are, Therefore, there is a strong affinity between the demands of the totalitarian regime and the mechanisms. manipulators of the Enlightenment and the culture industry. In these mass environments, the social bloc It therefore faces two totalizing processes: the usurpation of schematism and homogenization. social, which undermines, to a significant degree, the critical and reflective capacity of individuals within it, causing one to observe, to some extent, domination in all areas of life.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the reflections presented, we were able to perceive that, for Arendt, society... The masses function as a foundation for totalitarian regimes. The individuals who make up The great mass become victims of manipulation, since they are dispersed and do not express themselves. genuine interest in politics, even to the point of being hostile towards public space and political maneuvering. of decisions. Accompanying the supportive and selfless aspect of the masses, the element appears. of *superfluity*, which, within the totalitarian system, transforms these people into replaceable parts. of the regime, since its individuality does not play a relevant role in the task of domination. Furthermore From this, the individual side of the components of the mass comes to the fore: the people who were, in general,



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Those who were co-opted had their personal identities, as well as their moral and agency capacity, stripped away. in favor of belonging and loyalty to the totalitarian movement. In Adorno and Horkheimer, in turn, We see a similar and certainly complementary line of reasoning. For the Frankfurt School authors, Mass society is also emphasized as a favorable environment for domination, but this time having by the operating agent of the cultural industry and its effective mechanisms for manipulating people and, in Ultimately, to hijack its process of schematizing reality through rationality, which converges to the result, analogous to that reached by Arendt, that thought was shattered and, by virtue of As a result, domination gained ground.

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