

...cultural fast food with the Frankfurt School

Hey Karl, who were the Frankfurt School?

Not now Dave ... I'm texting my tutor my dissertation ... it's taken 157 texts so far and I've only done the introduction.

Oh go on ... you owe me. You drank my third loan last night.

Did I? Thought that was loose change. Okay... The early Frankfurt School were mostly a bunch of Germans who created and worked together in a kind of inter-disciplinary group that included sociologists, political economists, psychologists and more. You've probably heard some of the main names: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Leo Lowenthal, Max Horkheimer, among others, and then later on Herbert Marcuse.

So, what's the big deal with them?

Well, a curriculum often works in a kind of heroes and villains way, and for us the Frankfurt School are the bad guys. They're often a starting point for textbooks as a kind of line against which we can compare progress and see how far we've come, like a year zero.

Bad guys? What did they do?

Well, for one thing the Frankfurt School were The Smiths of cultural studies and Adorno was their Morrissey.

The who?

No, not The Who. The Smiths! 'Heaven knows I'm miserable now' and other such fun songs – you know? They're usually seen as pessimistic, all gloom and doom.

Well, that's how the Frankfurt School are seen. And they're often condemned for it. People say they thought audiences were doped up by mass culture, that it's like a

mental dummy keeping you docile and unthinking and people just take it in and are shaped by it. But that's a real caricature of a large amount of work that really aimed to tackle the huge issue of why Marx's prophecy of revolution hadn't come true. In working on this they made a lot of arguments, often in very complex language and it's not easy to unpick some of it.

But, and this is being very crude, in terms of culture they highlighted how culture was becoming an industry, that it was about selling as much as possible and that to do so it creates conditions that keep you buying.

They might have said that culture is now like fast food: instead being something that satisfies your needs, it gives you a little lift but leaves you hungry again pretty soon, and isn't very good for your health. It keeps you in a state of hunger so you come back for more. And the choices are limited because people tend to like what they know and because the industry needs to produce it en masse.

They said mass culture was 'like a multiple-choice questionnaire without a correct answer' – it doesn't matter what you buy so long as you keep buying. And so long as you keep buying you're keeping the whole thing chugging along nicely.

So were they a bunch of miseries?

Well you could say they certainly didn't paint mass culture as a bunch of laughs. But there are a load of misconceptions about them, such as the idea they never did empirical research, which is simply wrong, or that they hated all mass culture just because it wasn't high culture or that they were resigned to the terribleness of it all.

These ideas about them were particularly strong when cultural populism was rife.

What's cultural populism mean then?