



# Educational System as a Discourse of Power: Reading Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in Terms of Adorno's Theory of 'Halbbildung'

Masoumeh Bakhtiari, <sup>1</sup>

University Lecturer, Islamic Azad University, Karaj branch, Karaj, Iran

DOI

<https://www.doi.org/10.34785/J014.2019.407>

## Article Info

Received Date: 29 May 2019

Reviewed Date: 19 August 2019

Accepted Date: 23 September 2019

## Suggested Citation

Bakhtiari, M. "Educational System as a Discourse of Power: Reading Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in Terms of Adorno's Theory of 'Halbbildung.'" *Critical Literary Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2019, pp. 245-259.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mbakhtiari@kiau.ac.ir



## Abstract

Discourse has been one of the most challenging interdisciplinary terms during the past few decades which connects variety of fields of study such as politics, philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and literature. One of the approaches which is born out of mutual interaction between Linguistics and socio-political debates is critical discourse analysis (CDA), which studies the relation between language and power. Among the influential figures of this approach, one may refer to Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, and Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Theodore Adorno as one of the key members of this school challenges the basic assumptions of educational system in his writings particularly his essay “Theory of Halbbildung,” by which he meant “Half-education.” In his viewpoint, education is deemed as very forceful, one of the manifestations of power relation, which speaks in its own language to its audience or learners. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the failure of educational system to foster autonomous individuals in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in the light of Adorno's theory of half-education.

## Keywords

Education, Half Education, Autonomy, Conformity, Critical Discourse Analysis

## 1. Introduction

Discourse has been one of the key terms in the past few decades, which relates various multidisciplinary areas such as Linguistics, politics, sociology, philosophy, and literary arenas. In Linguistics, a renewed reliance upon the term is directed towards language in use, and not language as an abstract entity. Specifically speaking linguists believe that the whole process of verbal interaction constitutes a discourse and it is through this interaction one sees and thinks about the world. Bonded by ideology, culture, education, politics and some more influences it creates



a very complex system whose evaluation and analysis has drawn the attention of many experts. Emphasis on discourse as occurring within special cultural conditions and under particular instances derives from a number of investigators and areas of research, including the works of Michel Foucault with the institutional conditions and power structures that serve to make given statements. Foucault, a prominent authority in this field regards discourse as large groups of statements that are rule governed, and make a complete system.

All societies in his view have procedures whereby the production of discourses is controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed, whose main purpose of this control is to ward off powers. Foucault later argues that discourse is a medium through which power relations produce speaking subjects. In other words, a discourse is a social language created by particular conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience. Tyson believes that although many use discourse and ideology interchangeably the word discourse draws attention to the role of language as the vehicle of ideology (285). From a historical perspective, no discourse exists in isolation; none alone can explain the complexities of power for the spirit of each age is different from other ages. Instead, there is a dynamic and unstable interplay among discourses related to each other internally and externally. In addition, one of its main functions is to wield power for those in authority, and simultaneously creating opposition to that power. This power dominates itself in various discourses such as religion, science, and education since it is through these that a person's concept of self is constructed however ideologically and very unconsciously.

## 2. Literature Review of the Theory

As one of the subcategories of discourse, and a very challenging discussion in discourse quite connected to linguistics one may refer to critical discourse analysis or CDA. CDA is an approach to the study of language that closely examines the inter-relationship between language and power. Historically it has developed through various conceptions of Linguistics and some influences from post-structural theories as well as Marxists, examining the notion of language in socio-political contexts. In this approach, it is deemed that language which functions as communicative medium



between man and universe cannot be taken as neutral or realist. Instead, there is a strong web of hidden relations embedded in it, which should be critically analyzed to be dismantled. Concerning the same issue Van Dijk notes that in CDA it is viewed that science and specifically scholarly discourse, are inherently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interactions. Instead of denying or ignoring such a relation between scholarship and society, they believe that all such areas and particularly pedagogical and educational disciplines must be closely observed.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 271-80) summarize the main tenets of CDA as follows:

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. The link between text and society is mediated
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
8. Discourse is a form of social action (qtd. in Van Dijk)

There is a special attention to scholarly areas in CDA, one of whose manifestation is certainly education and educational system as a very dominant discourse of power, which inject its desired hegemony to students in various ways including books, teachers, courses, and the like. This issue, which is a considerably significant field of study in CDA, is particularly influenced by Marxist linguists and educationalists such as Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire whose theories will be briefly overviewed.

Antonio Gramsci, a leading Italian Marxist, an intellectual, a linguist, and a major theorist whose beliefs are published in his seminal work *Selections from a Prison Notebook* is mostly credited for being the first Marxist theorist to work with the problems of revolutionary change in twentieth century. He is also mostly discussed for his concept of hegemony. As Barry Burkes suggests Gramsci's significance for educational discourse lies in three areas: first, his exposition of the notion of hegemony, which provides the reader with a way of coming to understand the context in which there is possibility of transformations in education. Second, the role of



organic intellectuals and third the need not to dismiss traditional forms of education in favor of more commodified ones. Gramsci argues that “no government, regardless of how authoritarian it may be maintain itself through common modes such as policing, and armed force and it needs to be hegemonic. By hegemony, Breton writes,” the domination of a set of ruling beliefs and values through ‘consent’ rather than through ‘coercive power’ (88). It thus becomes much more comprehensive compared to the Althusserian term ideology, and that if coercive systems ruled directly, non-coercive ones such as churches, family, and schools ruled very unconsciously.

This depicts how schooling plays such an important part in Gramsci’s criticism. In this educational system, individuals are taught and grown up so that they can sustain the status quo. He believed that a learner must be an active one, not a passive and merely mechanical recipient. The learner must develop self-awareness, critical social awareness, to create counter –hegemonies towards a less homogenized, standardized, and massified society.

Another prominent figure, the Brazilian critical educator Paulo Freire, is deemed as one of the most influential educational thinkers of the late twentieth century. His most well-known work is *Pedagogy for the Oppressed* (1970). In this and other books, Freire defends a system of education that emphasizes learning as an act of culture and freedom. He is known for his concepts such as “Banking Education,” in which the passive learners have pre-selected knowledge deposited in their minds. Freire heavily endorses students’ ability to think critically about their education situation; this way of thinking allows them to recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social context in which they are embedded. Realizing ones consciousness is a needed first step of “praxis” which is defined as the power and mechanism to take action against oppression while stressing the prominence of liberating education (*Paulo Freire International Project*).

In his theory of knowledge Freire argues that knowing is a social process and that the relationship called “thinking” is not enclosed in a relationship thinking subject-knowable object because it extends to other thinking subjects (92). In his theory of learning Freire talks about the problem of viewing educational system like a bank where students come to receive the knowledge of how to live. Knowledge in his view



is not a commodity to be bought, but rather it must be constructed. Further, in his theory of transmission he says that teaching is a political process.

Apart from the above-mentioned critics, Critical theory is one of the major backbones of critical discourse analysis at the beginning of twentieth century. The term belongs to a group of Marxist philosophers who were known as The Frankfurt School. Van Dijk renders further information that some of the tenets of CDA can already be found in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School before the Second World War. Its current focus on language and discourse was initiated with the “critical linguistics” that emerged (mostly in the UK and Australia) at the end of the 1970s. CDA has also counterparts in “critical” developments in sociolinguistics, psychology, and the social sciences, some already dating back to the early 1970s.

### 3. Theoretical Framework: Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt school for Social Research, established in 1923, included a group of mostly German intellectuals who fled from Frankfurt to New York and Los Angeles when the Nazi rose to power in the 1930s. Many of them returned to Germany at the end of 1940s. The leading figures of the institute were Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. Most of the members of this group were post-Marxist interdisciplinary philosophers.

Theodore Adorno was born in Frankfurt in 1895. An important influence on Adorno’s intellectual development was his training in music, particularly because in the 1920s it enabled him to meet some prominent composers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg. Adorno then discovered his interest in philosophy, sociology, and aesthetics. At the University of Frankfurt in the 1920s, he was introduced to Walter Benjamin, who was also interested in sociological analyses of contemporary culture. In later years Adorno’s circle of associates widened to include Ernest Bloch, and Bertolt Brecht. During this time, Adorno began studying various materialist approaches to culture, falling under the influence of Marxian texts such as Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* (1918), and Lukacs’s *History and Class Consciousness* (1922).

Bloch’s Utopian notion of art influenced Adorno’s understanding of autonomous art and Lukacs’s conception of reification informed his theory of the “mass deception”



wrought by the modern culture industry. At the University of Frankfurt Adorno also met Max Horkheimer, a member of the now famous interdisciplinary Institute for Social Research, which was founded in 1924. In 1930, as the director of Institute, Horkheimer shifted his focus to cultural studies and so-called critical theory. In 1938 Adorno became a member of the institute and later succeeded Horkheimer as director in 1946. Some years later Adorno accepted Horkheimer's invitation and moved to New York, and, then, in 1941, to Los Angeles. There Adorno and Horkheimer collaborated on *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1947) as their major critique of modern culture.

Adorno is mostly debated for his theories such as "culture industry," Aestheticism, and media criticism. However, in fact he has some other seminal theories which are less discussed. One of these is his Theory of *Halbbildung* or half-education. Among most of Adorno's writings and thoughts, his theory of half education though very fundamental is rarely touched upon and has attracted little attention in comparison. As an experienced educator, Adorno was well aware of the dissatisfactory situation of education; in a series of radio interviews, he attempted to clarify and expand his notions concerning the problematic basis of education in the Capitalist era in the light of his Marxist critical theories. As Daniel Cho puts "his aim in these discussions was to promote the public maturity by bringing reified consciousness to self-awareness."

One of his most significant essays concerning education, its discursive quality, and critical thinking is called "Theory of *Halbbildung*" which is translated as both "pseudo-culture" and "half-education." To be more specific Adorno in his own essay makes the point clear that in German language the word *Bildung* has a much more comprehensive and basic signification which is that of education and not culture. Therefore, the term *Halbbildung* or half education that really seems more relevant to this discussion is utilized here. In his essay Adorno defines the term education, its unique features, and its crucial function in the general intellectualization of the culture of a society.

Afterwards, he elaborates on the condition under which education becomes half-education. First, Adorno regards education as a very powerful hegemony, and a very essential discourse of power. Christian Spatscheck argues that, according to Adorno education means a persisting area of conflict between an individual's autonomy and



their adaptation to the demands of society, therefore, it entails an ongoing dialectic process between individual's emancipation and the demands for submission to culture and society. The word *Bildung* is previously used by educational reformers such as Humbolt who regarded it as the highest point of personal development and perfection of personality. Humbolt's theory vividly echoes Adorno's view that as Christian Stifter explains Adorno conceived of education in terms of Kantian "Dare to know."

Kant believes that because of their drive to be free, humans need a certain polishing of their roughness once their instincts are subdued. Hence, the idea of education is to develop the natural qualities of humans, to assist them to be autonomous beings. Mere training is never sufficient, and although people must learn to think, such thinking must always take place within the constraints of discipline, culture, civility, and morality (Trevor Maddock). In a democratic context, Adorno means by "*Bildung*" the idea of transformative education operative in liberal thought. In this case, it is the idea of cultivation or development of individuals into completely self-determining persons, who are integrated, at home within, and in harmony with their society. In his essay Adorno writes, Education is inherently structured in antinomies. It presupposes autonomy and freedom, but until today it has referred to structures of an order which is pre given with respect to each individual, which is heteronomous in a certain sense, and therefore, untenable. Only within this order is the individual able to cultivate himself" ("*Halbbildung*" 26).

Similar to Kant Adorno believed that Education should not be the imparting of knowledge but as the production of a right consciousness ("*Halbbildung*" 31). It is precisely that for which there are not any real customs, it can only be earned by spontaneous effort and interest, it is not guaranteed by course alone, and even if it were of the general studies type. Linked to his theory of "Culture industry" in which human being is treated as a commodity; an object in exchange market, Adorno now turns to *Halbbildung* or half-education. He argues that half-education happens if education becomes ideology, when the interest of the dominant group in the society defines the aim of education while at the same time neglecting the true interests of the subject of education. Survival of the fittest becomes the remaining interest.



Concerning the same point, Mariana Papastephanou notes that under such circumstances “Education is unable to cultivate reflective and critical subjectivities. Instead of critique, it promotes appeasement-all the more when education succumbs to the culture industry or fails to encourage students critical stance to its imperatives.” As a very powerful force manipulating in different levels education- informal education, academic education, Adorno focuses on the crucial function of education in a social structure as socioeconomic contradictions and crises manifest themselves in educational thought.

Emphasis on education and its significance in the societal relations has not drawn the attention of philosophers, sociologists, and linguists alone, but novelists alike. The tradition of writing novels in the form of Bildungsroman is a very classical one which has been quite fashionable from eighteenth century onward. Interesting enough the type comes from the German word bildung which signifies formation or education. Bildungsroman portrays the character development of the hero from childhood to maturity.

#### 4. Discussion: *Catcher in the Rye* and Theory of ‘Halbbildung’

As a case in point, J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* willingly yields itself to the theoretical discussion of this paper. As one of the magnum opus of Modern American novels, it addresses several issues of contemporary American life. The author has a sharp critical eye on many facets of his society such as immorality, violence and brutality, religion, parental relations, educational system and the problem of growing up in such society.

Ohmanns argue that various critical interpretations on moral issues cause overlooking the relation of these issues to a broader social and economic context, which is that of late capitalist economic system. Sonja Beck explains that the novel expresses a deep sense of frustration with the status quo, something with which teenagers are no doubt familiar. Holden, the protagonist of the novel is fed up with private schools that exist for the sole purpose of “molding boys into splendid, clear thinking young men.” The reader finds Holden at the exposition of the novel having a flashback to his previous school from which he is “flunked out” recalling the traumatic last days of his wandering in streets. Throughout the whole novel one can encounter



characters who are the byproducts of authoritarian education. To characterize them Spatscheck explains that as the result of authoritarian education we have this kind of personality: Conventionalism, authoritarian, submissive, aggression, anti-intracception, superstition and stereotype, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, exaggerated concern over sex; features which are abundantly faced with in various characters. Holden is a non-conformist in the first step and he tries to escape being stereotyped or in Adorno's terms standardized and commodified. His being kicked out of different schools is a sign of being maladjusted to this dominant hegemony. His criticism of educational system can be obviously felt in his description of Pencey prep school:

Pencey Prep is this school that's in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. You probably heard of it. You've probably seen the ads. anyway. They advertise in about thousand magazines, always showing some hot shot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere near the place. And underneath the guy on the horse's picture, it always says: "Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men." Strictly for the birds. They don't do any damn more molding at Pencey than they do at any other school. And I don't know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking at all. Maybe two guys... (Catcher:1951,2)

Indeed listing the students of this school no one recalls any mythological champion such as Hercules, Achilles, or Hector, but violent, hypocritical, aggressive, and sexually obsessed boys like Ackley or Stradlater who are the byproducts of such massification.

Sick educational system is the symbol of a greater totality and sickness of technologically enslaved society. Thomas Andrea argues that according to Adorno, the spread of technology served the culture industry in U.S., just as it helped tighten the control of authoritarian governments in Europe. Standardization was a species of technical rationality in which culture was purged of all spontaneity and novelty. Intrinsic worth was calculated in advance for the sole purpose of achieving maximum profitability. This materialistic air is more felt when Holden describes his dorm at the beginning of Chapter Three:



Where I lived at Pency. I lived in the Ossenburger Memorial Wing of the new dorm... It was named after Ossenburger that went to Pency. He made a pot of dough in the undertaking business after he got out of Pency. What he did, he started these undertaking parlors all over country that you could get members of your family buried for about five bucks apiece... The first football game of the year, he came up to school in this big Cadillac... and told us we should always pray to. (Catcher:1951, 16)

For all this phoniness Holden is a rebel and as Pinkser points out Holden is the prototypical rebel, for beneath his prep school façade and conciliatory prep school manners lies the heart of an uncompromising pursuit. In short, Holden is a young man as divided as he is confused.

He finds himself in a totality of “spirit overcome by fetishism of commodities” (Adorno). School teachers even Mr. Spencer with all his historical care for Holden are unable to sympathize with him as they see him as a wanderer, a restless spirit, moving from this school to another in search of autonomous individual, liberal education, and teachers who can foster critical self-reflection in him. Amidst all this chaos Holden is in search of his true self and as he puts it in his own words: “Sometimes I act like I’m about thirteen. It’s really ironical, because I’m six foot two and a half and I have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head –the right side-is full of millions of gray hairs. I’ve had them since I was a kid. And yet I still act something like I was only about twelve” (Catcher 9). Of course, it is noteworthy that this sense of duality and dichotomy is not merely Holden’s. Pinsky notes that though materialistically prosperous, there was a sort of anxiety and restlessness in America during the 1950s.

As such *The Catcher*, Salinger’s mixture of bright talk and brittle manners, religious quest and nervous breakdown, captured not only the perennial confusion of adolescence, but also the spiritual discomforts of an entire age (6). It is true that there was an aura of prosperous America with music, dancing, hotels, bars, attractive women, and Cadillacs; however, there is not even one adult who can recognize the motivation behind Holden’s worry about the ducks in the lake in Central park. As representatives of educational system, even Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini cannot feel this worry, Holden’s worry about his sister, and about all other children in their encounter with adult world. Even more shocking is Mr. Antolini’s quotation from a



psychoanalyst named Wilhelm Stekel who believes that “The mark of immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one” (*Catcher* 188). The quotation that stands as the doctrine of a prosperous life is in sharp contrast to Adorno’s sentence when he writes, “In terms of history of ideas, all conformist society is nothing more than Darwinian natural history. It puts premium on the survival of the fittest” (25). It appears that Holden is not a *fittest* since he is not ‘one of us.’ He is no Stradlater with all his animal instincts, and muscular attraction, and no Ossenburger piling up money out of corpse. He is an autonomous individual with high capacity for critical self-reflection and not one following the herd. The final blow befalls upon him after Mr. Antolin’s long lecture about the significance of academic education “which gives you an idea what size mind you have. What it’ll fit and, maybe, what it won’t... (then) you’ll begin to know your true measurement and dress up your mind accordingly.” (*Catcher* 190).

## 5. Conclusion

Education is supposed to benefit free individual, an individual grounded in his own consciousness but developing within the society. It is a must-to-do appeal for any society who has Utopian future in mind. However, under hegemonic forces it has the task of a very powerful discourse to foster conformity. That is the main reason philosophers such as Adorno examine it to think of counter hegemonies, liberal educational systems that can teach and strengthen resistance rather than advocate conformity. Concerning the socio-cultural situation of the 1950s in America, the world of *Catcher* constructs Holden and continues to filter through him obsessions in sexuality, materialism, and respectability. At the same time, Holden offers himself up as sacrifice and savior, to an age that was often so phony, so smug, so self-satisfied, it would not have even recognized the charge of conformity we levy against it now. There is no emblem of true and successful educational system in this novel. Even Holden with all his claims for rejecting the present state of affairs if finally broken down neurotically, since he is not educated enough or strong enough to stand against all this phoniness. It was for all this that Adorno called the present condition of education as half education, and warned individuals to reconsider culture. Definitely he was worried about the next World War and the further dominance of instrumental reason.



One way to escape instrumental reason in which the individual is enslaved the economic powers and total submission is to have educated individuals. Those who dare to learn and teach alike since Adorno viewed teachers as intellectuals and not 'merely specialized technicians.' Education should not be based on all that Holden observes as intimations of phoniness, Pency alumnus who care more about self-aggrandizement, who cares for corpse more than the living human once he was. Adorno profoundly kept faith in the very reality that there must be a consideration of education, to highlight autonomy, to teach to fight conformity, to practice critical self-reflection with the students as the basis of classroom curriculum and to "worry about the ducks in the frozen lagoon" as Holden did.



## References

- Adorno, T. "The Theory of Pseudo-Culture (Halbbildung)." 1951, Online, at <http://vstudyplace.ccnmtl.columbia.edu> [Retrieved 4 March 2018]
- Andrae, T. "Adorno on Film and Mass Culture: The Culture Industry Reconsidered" *Contemporary Media*, No. 20, 2005, pp. 34-37.
- Beck, S. "Phony' Mythology: Conformity, Socialization, and *The Catcher in the Rye*" 2009. Online, at <http://angelingo.usc.edu/issue01/culture/beck.html> [Retrieved 19 June 2019]
- Breton, H. *Literary theory: the Basics*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2001.
- Burke, B. "Antonio Gramsci, Schooling, and Education." *Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, 2005, Online, at <http://infed.org/thinkers/Gramsci> on Education [Retrieved 30 January 2019]
- Cho, D. "Adorno on Education." *Historical Materialism*. Vol. 17, 2009, pp. 74-97.
- Freire, P. *Teachers as Cultural Workers*. Macedo D. (Trans.), Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.
- Maddock, T. "Autonomy and Conformity: Theodore Adorno's Analysis of the Liberal Theory of Education." *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 42, 1998, pp. 90-100.
- Ohmann, C and Ohmann, R. "Reviewers, critics, and *Catcher in the Rye*" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1976, pp. 15-37.
- Papastephanou, M. "Aesthetics, Education, the Critical Autonomous Self, and the Culture Industry." *Journal of Aesthetics Education*, No. 40, 2006, pp. 75-91.
- Pinsker, S. *The Catcher in the Rye: Innocence Under Pressure*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1993.
- Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Boston: Bantam Books, 1951.
- Spatscheck, C. "Adorno on Education" *The Encyclopedia of informal Education*. 2007, Online, at: <http://infed.org/thinkers/Adorno> on Education.htm [Retrieved 5 December 2018]



Stifter, C. "Theodore Adorno and Popular Culture." 2005, Online, at:  
<http://adulthoodeducation.at/en/literature/textarchiv/645> [Retrieved 21  
February 2019]

Tyson, L. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Van Dijk, T. "Critical Discourse Analysis." 2006, Online, at:  
<http://discourse.org/oldarticles> [Retrieved 11 November 2018]