

CLASS AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF SOCIAL DYNAMISM

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ABSTRACT

The author of this article makes an attempt to explore how culture emerged and became a tool of perpetuating or resisting exploitative social order. An attempt has been made to show how, like capital, culture is produced by the working class but the exploiting class appropriates it and turns it against the interests of the producer. It also tries to show that, as a dynamic component of class struggle, the dominance of the capitalist culture can be challenged, resisted, and at times replaced by the culture of the dominated class.

Key Words: Culture, production, labour, capital, appropriation, dominant, emergent

INTRODUCTION

The term Culture designates activities which humans perform in the production and exchange of labour, goods and values in a given socio-historical context. In this sense, it encompasses wide and varied domains of social activities, interactions and concepts. In this article, I have attempted to analyze the origin and development of culture from Marxist viewpoint which takes it as one of the components of superstructure which, in turn, is the outcome of the given socio-economic base. I have tried to show how a culture is formed, how it creates and activates social dynamism; how it gets transformed and serves the ends of the conflicting classes. I have discussed it as an active agency which serves the interests of the classes which have conflicting interests. In other words, as a component of superstructure it can be a tool either of perpetuating or disrupting the dominant order of the exploiting class. In order to explain the concept of culture as a tool of class struggle, I have cited examples from common and familiar zones.

DEFINITIONS

The New Oxford Dictionary of English (2000) defines culture as “the customs, arts, social institutions, and the achievements of a particular nation, people, or the social group” (447). Chris Jenks has thrown light on the concept of culture from various facets and perspectives. According to him scholars from different disciplines like Sociology and Anthropology

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account for the concept of culture as symbolic and ideational aspects of society, define and study from different perspectives. (8). He further stresses that being a collective category it generates a principle of unification among the members of larger communities. Sometimes, according to him, culture is equated to civilization (9). Raymond Williams, on the other hand, defines culture as a dynamic and unstable category which is always undergoing through the phases of changes like dominant, residual and emergent (40, 41). These definitions, though look various points to some common conclusions- culture is collective; it is symbolic and ideational and dynamic.

LABOUR CAPITAL AND CULTURE

What is the source and origin of culture in a society? As long as the humans were just a part of nature like any other animals, there was no culture in the sense of the term we use and understand today. The moment men began to challenge, transform and react to nature, culture began. Western scholars are unanimous in accepting the view that culture is equivalent to civilization which gets impetus from moving further away from natural constraints and conditions and forming artificial conditions. Marx opines:

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life. (*Selected Works* Vol. One 20)

By being involved in productive labour, according to Marx, men produce material life which is the source and origin of consciousness which separates them from other animals. In other words, we can say that Marx attributes the origin of culture to men's involvement in the productive labour. Here he talks about the society in its primitive stage where there was no class division. Hence the consciousness or the culture of that stage was collective, not individualistic as we have today. So there was common human culture, as opposed to the class culture of today.

The development of production created the needs and conditions for the emergence of division of labour which intensified and accelerated the production resulting in the division of the community into the conflicting classes: the exploited and the exploiting. Between the two, the former continued to be involved in the productive labour but is deprived of its fruit whereas the latter without being involved appropriated it. The same logic works in the production and appropriation of culture. By producing the means of living, as Marx has stipulated, the working class also produces culture. The rule of producing property (means of living) correlates the rule of producing culture. This means that the exploiting

class uses the property produced by the working class (ultimately, it is labour which converts natural objects into capital) to enslave them. The more accumulation of property in the hands of the exploiting class, the wider and more intensified enslavement of the producing class becomes. This leads us to the conclusion that the labouring class simultaneously produces culture which the parasite class appropriates and uses against the producer. Marx, in another context, maintains that one's social being determines his/her consciousness (503). We can equate consciousness with culture because consciousness is inseparably related with ideology which is largely backed by a given culture. Regarding the accumulation of capital Marx maintains:

Capital consists of raw materials, instruments of labour, and means of subsistence of all kinds, which are utilized in order to produce new raw materials, new instruments of labour and new means of subsistence. All these component parts of capital are creations of labour, *accumulated labour*. Accumulated labour which serves as a means of new production of capital (159).

Here Marx unequivocally states that labour is the only source of all components of capital. But the irony of the class society is that the producer does not own the capital which their labour has produced. He further highlights this kind of situation:

By maintaining and multiplying itself as an independent social *power*, that is, as the power *of a portion of society*, by means of its *exchange for direct, living labour power*. The existence of a class of which possesses nothing but its capacity to labour is a necessary prerequisite of capital.

It is the only domination of accumulated, past, materialised labour over direct, living labour that turns accumulated labour into capital (161).

What we can infer from what Marx has stressed is that capital originates from labour. The capital possessed by the capitalist is the accumulated labour, the labour that has accumulated over ages. Because the labour has accumulated over a long time and across various places, workers cannot see that the so called property owners have robbed them. The reality is veiled or mystified for them by social norms and values through ages. Social conventions, religions, festivals, popular beliefs, social institutions, educational systems, entertainment industry, most of literature, media and various types of organizations prevent them from getting into reality. One question can arise at this point. What has culture to do with the relationship between labour and capital? Here two points merit our attention: one is that it is the originating point of culture which all scholars agree. Another point is that the above mentioned agencies (convention, beliefs, and religions etc which are components of culture)

play the decisive role to maintain the dominance of capital over labour by hiding the scientific truth from the producer. This ultimately leads us to see the role of ideology in the formation of culture. In every class society, workers are detested and looked down upon and the parasite class is revered. In Hinduism, working class is categorized as the untouchable. This situation is paradoxical. This situation is, to use Marx's vocabulary 'the world standing on its head.'

FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS AND CULTURE

The concept of false consciousness was first propounded by Fredrick Engels, the close comrade in arms of Karl Marx. According to him false consciousness denotes the consciousness of the society which bears the interest of the dominant exploiting class and which deludes the exploited class, for example, as we have seen, the 'private' property owned by the bourgeoisie is produced by the working class. But the bourgeois society holds the belief that it legally belongs to it. Not surprisingly, working class also holds the same view because it is the prevalent dominant belief system. In this way, false consciousness deludes the producer of the property and works for the oppressors. This is so because the class which dominates economically also dominates ideologically. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* defines false consciousness as lack of clear awareness of the source and significance of one's beliefs and attitudes concerning society, religion, or values. It also defines it as dishonest form of self-deception (304). This means that until and unless one has scientific understanding of the reality, he/she is guided by false consciousness. Religion and conventional social practices and values, as components of culture and promoter of false consciousness, enhance the existing social order. We can see this kind of situation happening around us. Louis Althusser, the French Marxist, has outlined how certain social agencies and institutions like the church, educational system, law, family, media, literature and sports work for the consolidation of false consciousness. He calls these 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (96). State power uses physical force to maintain the status quo, where as these agencies work for the same mission more effectively because these mentally paralyze the mass.

Take, for example, religion. Every religion, without any exception, promises people salvation. It is promised in the imaginary heaven. But that is only after death. The exploiting class enjoys heaven now and here. Religion attributes the suffering of the working class not to the social system but to their sin. Due to the fear of sin and resulting punishment in hell, they are successfully kept away from rising in rebellion. Hinduism talks about the previous and next life in addition to this one. It teaches that the suffering of the working class is the result of

sin they committed in the previous life and the wealth of the rich people is the result of the previous good deeds. So if one wants to be happy in the next life, one has to offer everything to the priest or god. It never teaches the reality that the cause of suffering lies in the exploitative social system which can be changed through collective efforts. So we have seen how religious practices, as a part of culture, safeguard the heaven of plunder and loot of the mass. For the same reason Marx was hundred percent right when he designated religion as opiate for people.

The prevalent education system, like religious precepts, never questions the legitimacy of the feudal and bourgeois property relations. It is faithfully directed by false consciousness. It never inculcates scientific and skeptical attitude in the learners about the prevalent social practices and beliefs. It is not life oriented. It is too much theory based and certificate focused. A science teacher (let us not mention the students) holds the most backward and superstitious beliefs and acts accordingly. A professor of Economics, like a trained parrot, repeats the statement that poverty is the main problem of the country. It never occurs into his/her head that it is not poverty, but appropriated wealth that puts forth the problem in any class society because so long as there exists the handful of exploiting class, the large majority is bound to be 'poor.' In the race of the few to accumulate more and more social wealth and become rich, more and more are left behind in poverty. In fact the words 'poor' and 'rich' are misnomers because they do not represent the scientific truth about the property relations. They do not expose the system of exploitation but fix the false belief more firmly in the minds of people. They help to turn the picture of reality upside down. 'The exploiter' and 'the exploited' are the appropriate words because they reflect the reality more accurately. But the prevalent education system never encourages such attitude among students.

The media is a very powerful and more effective agency of culture formation in the present day world. Through its capacity for disinforming (sometimes informing no doubt), it has become an angel of capitalism. Obviously, it is owned, managed, controlled and manipulated by the corporate world. So it serves the interest of the investor despite the fact that the term 'independent' is prefixed to it. No genius is required to realize that the free functioning of media is a precondition for the existence of capitalism because it cannot survive without constant creating and expanding market. Today needs of consumers do not emerge, but they are created through market which, in turn, is created by the media. Politically speaking, constant flow of lies and false values and their credulous consumption is the base on which capitalism rests worldwide. In this age of advanced electronic media, as spectators, we forced to become passive and helpless consumers not only of commodities but also

of bourgeois lies and ideologies. Very few of us have realized that there is American imperialism behind the emergence and growth of Islamic fundamentalism all over the world. During the seventies and eighties (although it is doing this all the time) the CIA funded and trained the fundamentalists to fight the progressive forces in Indonesia, in Iraq, in Turkey, and in Afghanistan. Graham Fuller, the ex CIA chief in his recent book disclosed this fact. Many of us do not like to accept that the US is the godfather of Osama Bin Laden. In order to dominate the world the ruling class of the USA uses all sorts of reactionary methods and ideology. National sovereignty of the countries against had domination are violated on the regular basis; legitimate governments are overthrown using mercenaries and puppet regimes are put up; countries are being destroyed; millions of people are killed; unprotected cities with its hospitals, schools, ancient monuments are bombarded to dust. Still we are singing hymns to America as the messiah of democracy, peace and human rights. How have all these been possible in the age we love to call the twenty first century? The answer is around us. It is the effectiveness of the media. It is because the USA controls information and manipulates the media. The media carefully blocks the transmission of reality and disseminates lies. It hides the vice about imperialism and presents it in the form of beauty. We are credulous to believe in it and there is the USA with its all positive attributes. It is not meant that media is always a tool of lies. It only means that in the present context in which imperialists hold monopoly over media, it can serve only their interests. The only point to notice is how media has been used to serve the corporate class interest and mislead the mass culturally.

Electronic media like television and internet produce introduce and sell so called pop culture. Although the common mass is its consumer, it works against their interest because it homogenizes the diverse audiences who have no common interests and background in reality. It creates a virtual situation in which there does not seem to be any class difference among the consumers. As a son of a low paid worker who faces difficulties to feed the family and a girl from a multi billionaire family listens to the same music, wears the same dresses, adores the same Hollywood actor, watches same movie, and harbors the same fancies. Apparently, they share the same cultural provinces as if they belong to the same socio- economic ground. The irony is that the boy is deceived in that he is alienated from his situation. The media is, therefore, homogenizing the world culturally, without homogenizing it materially. So it serves to maintain the status quo. Thus, it is creating an illusionary and false sense of unity and equality which is very suicidal to the oppressed.

Culture industry, assisted by hi-tech electronic media, prepares the condition in which women are converted into commodity. The success

of today's cultural industry lies in pornography which is sex slavery in the real sense of the word. 'Beauty contests' held on various levels on regular basis work against the basic interest of women by preparing the ground for fetishisation and marketisation of women. Organizers of such contests interpret them as forum for women empowerment and exposing their hidden talent. They attempt to give the interpretation a feminist tint. But it only shows how ignorant they are about women's rights. Paradoxically, they are correct. They have empowered themselves financially by associating themselves with patriarchal neo-liberal project and exposed the hidden parts of women bodies for corporate patriarchal gaze.

The list is so long that it occupies volumes to be complete. What we have seen is how social conventions, practices, beliefs and objects, as components of a culture, work to consolidate and perpetuate the dominant order based on exploitation. These components obscure the reality and create a false sense of unity between the oppressors and the oppressed. At this point questions arise: is it that a society is always misled by false consciousness? Is it that the capitalist culture dominates forever? Or can it ever be altered?

DOMINANT VERSUS EMERGENT CULTURE

Marxism believes in changes, changes in the form of radical ruptures. Everything that comes into existence has to go. This is universal. Human society is no exception to this principle. At one point in history the society was not divided into classes and the culture was common to all. As the society split into slaves and masers, the master's culture became the culture of the whole society. Under feudalism feudal culture was common of the whole society. In the nineteenth century the bourgeoisie fought a decisive battle against feudalism in Europe and established the dominance of its culture as the form of universal culture. In the present day world we live under capitalism though it is not what it was in the 19th century. Despite upheavals and changes, what we find in common in these is- they were all the cultures of the exploiting classes though all members in the community followed it without realizing that they were class specific cultures.

Historically speaking, every form of exploiting class is always in danger. The dangers come from two fronts: one from the subversive conflicts within itself and the other is the threat from the resistance and rebellion of the oppressed. In both cases changes in the old relations are inevitable. Culture and cultural practices have to change because without adjustment to conform to the new conditions it will not survive. This form of change takes place within the status quo. Instead of destabilizing the dominance of capital, this form of change modifies and consolidates it. It is a kind of false change because it brings about change only in form, not in content. In fact it is no change because it serves the same class interest. For example, in a feudal society a feudal lord can have many wives who are like

sex slaves. Under capitalism women get 'freedom and equality.' But this is ostensibly true because in capitalism women are converted into the objects of selling and buying just like any objects available in the market. Who buys and who sells? The question needs no answer. In this way, the capitalist culture is more deceptively exploitative than the feudal culture.

Another form of change is qualitative and radical. It has the capacity to bring about change not only in form but also in content of the cultural values. It attempts to establish the dominance of labour over capital. It has something to do with the proletarian politics and economy. In this case the cultural change is radical. If we have to deal with the male female relationship upon this cultural framework, proletarian culture abolishes the role of property and leaves the both parties independent to choose their partners. Here one question merits our attention. Which precedes- the proletarian state or the proletarian culture? This is a complex question. This brief article is no place to deal with such a complex question. However, it is safe to say that they are complementary and go side by side. My main focus is that the dominant capitalist culture is bound to be challenged and replaced by the emergent proletarian culture. It is not that the new culture comes into dominance out of the blue. It exists in class struggle in the seminal form. In this connection Raymond Williams' remarks are relevant:

One kind of basis has been valuably described in the central body of Marxist theory; the formation of new class, the coming to consciousness of a new class, and within this, in actual process, the (often uneven) emergence of elements of a new cultural formation. Thus, the emergence of the working class as a class was immediately evident (for example in the nineteenth century England) in the cultural process. (124)

Williams very clearly states that the emergence of the new culture takes place along with the emergence of the working as a new force. The new cultural formation of/by the working class is possible only when they free themselves from the bondage of false consciousness and come to class consciousness. He thinks this kind of precondition was available in the nineteenth century England. So long as the working class keep themselves deluded by false consciousness, they cannot fulfill the historical mission of forming the class force, simultaneously, the forerunner of the new culture.

The dialectics of history tells us that any social formation is composed of two conflicting forces which work as the motive force. In this struggle, the emergent force is weak in the beginning in comparison to the dominant force. But the former contains the progressive elements. That is why it is bound to overwhelm the dominant force because the latter contains regressive and dying elements. However, this does not mean that social

changes are governed by the law of inevitability as in nature. Social forces are conscious actors. The conflict does not follow natural course. The success of the emergent force largely depends on the methods and strategies employed in its struggle against the dominant force.

Nevertheless, in history there occurs certain moments in which the exploiting class finds itself incapable of maintaining the old order. These are the moments of crisis. Such crisis takes place either due to the revolt of the oppressed or due to the split in the ruling circles. Sometimes one gives rise to the other. Historically speaking, the periods of the two world wars were the periods of conflict and crisis among the imperialist powers. Taking advantage of this, the revolutionary forces in the Eastern Europe, China and in many parts of the world succeeded in overthrowing the bourgeoisie and establishing the state power of the working class. This established the dominance of labour over capital, creating the precondition for new, emergent culture as Raymond Williams has indicated. In Nepal, during the period of People's war the dominance of the ruling class was not only threatened, but overthrown (to a greater extent) and the new culture founded on the dominance of the oppressed class, caste, gender, ethnicity and region germinated.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, culture emerged as men began to be involved in production. Productive labour is not only the source of wealth; it is also the source of culture. By being involved in production, the working class not only generates wealth, but they also generate culture. Just like the wealth they create turns against them and enslaves them. In the same way, they create the culture but it deludes them because the exploiting class appropriates it. In this sense cultural agencies like religion, education, media, festivals, entertainment and most of the literature function to perpetuate the exploitative system. Although the agencies of false consciousness attempt to maintain the status quo by deceiving the working mass, by creating an artificial sense of homogeneity, the dominant culture is constantly challenged by the resisting culture of the emergent class. The emergent culture of the proletariat is capable not only of challenging the old cultural regime; it is also capable of overthrowing it redeploing its own cultural regime. The history of social dialectics has testified this time and again.

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