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Marxist Influences on Cultural Studies

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Abstract

Cultural studies as a discursive field interrogating socio-political formations and interconnections allows organic alternative that struggles for better form of life. To investigate cultural forms in connection to their production and influence on society and history opens door for cultural Marxism as a trajectory of cultural studies. This paper is an attempt to map the influences of Marxism on cultural studies taking its cue from Gramsci and Althusser.

Keywords: Cultural studies, hegemony, ideology, power, civil society

Cultural studies are the study of contemporary culture from a variety of ways illustrating its establishments and functions and contributions to the cultural production. It involves manifold ways of analysis from a variety of disciplines integrated on the investigation on subjectivity in relation to culture and everyday life departing from positivism. Cultural studies also acknowledge and critique the immense differences and demarcations that is innate to any society. Cultural studies came into academia in the 1950s when a trajectory of literary studies was named after F. R. Leavis. The followers of Leavis broke the controlled canon to open up the social democracy that involved the nuances of culture and society into literary studies. Cultural studies were further developed by Hoggart and Williams who accentuated culture as intertwined with the way of life in an organized manner. However, it was Stuart Hall who established cultural studies in the way it is today with a mind to interrogate the variety of cultural forms and institutions cutting across disciplinary borders.

One of the central concerns of contemporary cultural studies is power. Cultural studies take its cue to the critique of power from Marxist theory. Marxist views on power and social formations have influenced radically as a direction to public discourses on cultural and social theories. Though the disintegration of USSR and Eastern European communist nations, the liberalization of Chinese and Vietnamese economies, the influence of radical Islam are often noted as the demise of Marxist ideals, Marxian propositions continue to impact the theoretical understanding of cultural privilege, oppression, social setting and social formations in contemporary culture. The emergence of cultural studies in the latter part of the 20th century influenced the variety of approaches to the study of society and culture. Marxian theorists like Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin Adorno, Althusser, Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton employed Marxian theory to investigate varied cultural forms and its interconnection to economy and history.

Marx had scarce remarks on culture referring to Eugene Sue, popular media and foreign press. However, the centrality of Marxism in cultural studies stay indefensible as the “terms of that return are predicated on prioritizing economic relations and economic determinations over cultural and political relations by positioning these latter in a mechanical and reflectionist role” (McRobbie, 1992, p. 719). The interconnection between cultural studies and Marxism was envisaged by Stuart Hall through “shouting distance” proximity. Marxism, the cultural studies embraces/willing to adopt is unhinged and a unilinear aim that could be appropriated to the study of culture. Marxism as a “critical materialist analysis” which embraces societal change as its point of interrogation embarks on the significance of economic and political state of affairs that relates to any culture. The accentuation of Marxism upon the material world and nothing more investigate and elucidate social formations as produced and production is socially manipulated. It also contests the divine intervention or the naturally transpired social formations. To regard Marxism as canonical or a dogmatic tool to intervene

the social and cultural arise out of the critical Marxist assumptions that view social formations as determined. The Marxian approach that highlights the study of the interconnection between culture, economics and politics within determinate historical context eventually originated from capitalism.

Capitalism is systemic and connote to the production through human labour where labour power is commodified and exchanged for value (other commodities). Capitalism, to stay alive, has to depend on “the value of the commodities which the labourer receives for labour power has to be less than the value of labour power itself, even though these commodities are produced by labour power” (Valentine, 2006, p. 55). The distinction between labour value and commodity value is a surplus that associates profit and extra capital advanced in the production of commodities. Built on disparity, capitalism is ethically warranted where opposite classes are obtained from their interconnection to production: a) bourgeoisie who experience the advantages b) the proletariat who experience deprivation. To place the two classes in opposition creates noteworthy political and economical dimensions that contribute to the understanding of culture in a society. Post-Marxists, though, do not directly emphasize on and delineate culture as a form of social life, they agree on the manifold ways of power relations that comprise culture that is politically and economically determined through oppositions, contestations and connections of authority. However culture assumes a nonfigurative theoretical value through these writers that is methodical and categorized social production of meaning and value. The self-configurative role of culture from politics and economy as part of capitalism carries the notion regarding the culture that is formed by politics and economy through culture. One may not be able to eliminate culture out of the economic and the political because culture is consequential and intersected notwithstanding in diverse ways.

I

Gramsci's consciousness of Fascism in Italy after World War is not essentially an economic awareness as it connected and extensively brought together working class and industrial capitalism and the institutions of society like church and the peasantry. The (fascist) nation that Gramsci fabricates is not a nation sovereign of economy as it is drenched in capitalism but the political impact that retained coercion and consent in the form of 'hegemony.' Hegemony is a political progress that ensues within the social formation where the variance is between “a small official level of limited liberal parliamentary democracy locked in disputes with the residues of pre-capitalism such as the aristocracy, the military and the church, and a larger but less specific 'people' generally uninvolved in and unrepresented by the former but linked 'organically' to the latter” (Valentine, 2006, p. 56-7). The failure of Fascism to cope with the expectations of people resulted into people versus power antipathy. Moreover leadership was visualized as subjective involving commonsense rather than being an external infliction of power. By encouraging power and authority of the imagination Fascism counterbalanced and relocated the political vigour of class struggle, the inconsistency between bourgeois and proletarian social classes as capitalist consequences.

The diverse social institutions that configure civil society is part of superstructure involving political institutions, religious organizations, the educational system, the media and the family. Gramsci observes that the state offers a conspicuous dynamics through which the civil society is tied with economy thus making civil society “the ensemble of organisms commonly called “private”” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). However the individual deeds and values standardize the cultural institutions though such a view of superstructure is opposed to Marxian affirmation that the institutions that convey a monolithic bourgeois ideology. Gramsci attributes certain responsibility to the individual to administer oneself without a process of self-administering allowing a challenge to the political society and becoming a regular maintenance, its organic balance. It is the individual who rules values that are normal and static assembling a transformative politics which could permeate productively. Gramscian view of civil society capsizes the base—superstructure interconnection where meanings and significance uphold the society. The various structures are not the alternative moment of history but it marks the subordinate one. Gramsci's notions on structures of the society are idealist because ideologies are legitimized in the present with potential of configuring fresh histories and partner in the fabrication of power.

Gramsci's influence on the study of culture envisages the manifold manners of responses and approaches his (unresolved) theoretical framework evokes. Stuart Hall (1993) observes that Gramsci's contribution articulates “immense amounts about the nature of culture itself, about the discipline of the conjunctural, about the importance of historical specificity, about the enormously productive

metaphor of hegemony, about the way in which one can think questions of class relations only by using the displaced notion of ensemble and blocs” (p.102). In fact, Gramsci seriously relocated various propositions of Marxism in cultural studies as its character has one of being radical and irrevocable. Culture, in Gramsci’s thought, is an apparatus of social and political authoritarianism where capitalists exercise power and control over the day to day life of the working people through various channels of state like police, prison and military. Scott Lash (2007) maintains that “what Gramsci gave to this [cultural studies] was the importance of consent and culture. If the fundamental Marxists saw power in terms of class versus class, then Gramsci gave to us a question of *class alliance*. The rise of cultural studies itself was based on the decline of the prominence of fundamental class-versus-class-politics (p. 68-9). However, many neo-Gramscian theorists propose culture as a sight for conflict between “the ‘resistance’ of subordinate groups in society and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interests of dominant groups in society” (Storey, 2006, p. 11).

Hegemony is exercised through an amalgamation of power and approval through an appropriation of ‘historical bloc.’ Consequently, “the normal exercise of hegemony on the classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always to ensure that force would appear to be based on the consent of the majority expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion—newspapers and associations” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 80). Ideology, in Gramsci, is a praxiological idea that is asserted as truth claims within social groups. Moreover, ideology is life oriented and mundane that is appropriated in everyday activities. Bennett describes popular culture as “structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by forms of opposition to this endeavour. As such, it consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which—in different particular types of popular culture—dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are ‘mixed’ in different permutations” (Bennett *et al*, 1986, p. xv). Popular culture is not the enforced culture or a culture that materializes out of the interstices to resist the culture of the dominant. Culture, here, is a topography of transposition between opposition and assimilation which is historical and synchronic.

II

Althusser’s contribution in establishing the notion of ideology is significant to cultural studies. Ideology was formulated to bring to fore the convoluted and conflicting interrelations which functions through the systems of social formations. Ideology is a system of experiences and depictions where people conceive their way of life: “By practice in general I shall mean any process of transformation of a determining given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means” (Althusser, 1971, p. 166). Ideology can be the depiction of the imaginary association of a human being to the reality. The way we live in reality and the depiction in discourses and texts are our thoughts are channelized through the superstructure which persuades that our lives are better than they really are. The interaction between the imaginary and the real holds significance in cultural studies interrogating as Althusser would, why is there a necessity to depict reality? Ideology, as it functions across social formations, persuades the thoughts of both proletariat and bourgeois. Ideology is a “closed system: there can be no ‘distance’ from its influence, no identification of the ‘real’ except by virtue of a scientific, analytical, Marxist discourse” (Lewis, 2008, p. 72). The imaginary is conspicuous as the limits of the borders are extended through a process of epistemological knowing and it is inflexible to construe the association of imaginary to reality as the waterway between the two is depicted.

Althusser concurs with Marx that social formation does not replicate the ambience of its production. The existent social relations of production that contributes to social formations are to be disseminated through material conditions of production. The system, thus, warrants a subjection to the dominant ideology and its practice. The key Marxist social concepts: the Law, the State and Ideology are cross-examined from the point of view of production and replication on the other contributing to the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) which involves the major institutions of the government and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) involves the religious, educational, family, legal and the political. While the RSA function through repression and the ISA through ideology and forms the key to Althusser’s articulation of the societal relation. According to Althusser (1971): “Each mass ejected *en route* is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfil in class society:

the role of the exploited (with a 'highly developed' 'professional,' 'ethical,' 'civic,' 'national'; and a political consciousness); the role of the agent of exploitation (ability to give the workers orders to speak to them: 'human relations'), of the agent of repression (ability to give orders and enforce obedience 'without discussion,' or ability to manipulate the demagoguery of a political leader's rhetoric), of the professional ideologist... (p. 155-6). Ideology is determinate and close to a dream but has a structure and functioning to make it non-historical reality. However, he also raises the question why human beings are in need of the imaginary transposition of their reality. Thus, ideology functions in a way to reinforce to its subjects among the masses through an imaginary.

Althusser's notion of ideology was devoid of history "demonstrating how an abstract and universal ideology was equally present in all forms of cultural life but of exploring the concrete forms and contents of different ideologies" (Sparks, 1996, p. 90). Althusser strengthens the concept of ideology to regard its emphatic presence as the medium of social formation devoid of economic repercussions. Therefore, the subjective determination of its own sovereignty "as the identity of anything depends on what it is not, no matter how much it may seek to preserve its pride by denying that to be the case...affirm the overdetermined character of identity of any social subject: this is to say, the presence of what a subject is not within it" (Valentine, 2006, p. 61). It unleashes the manner in which ideology is defined and allows new pluralistic approach to ideology in a way historicity is explicated through cultural specific functions of society. Therefore, forms of cultural life have to demonstrate in forms and contents of different ideologies. The educational institutions in the capitalist society substitute the role of church incriminating ideological re-enactment of labour power alongside the social interconnections of production. Ideology is an effectual means of perpetrating and sustaining class power than authority. Education conveys a ruling-class ideology that rationalizes capitalism. It re-enacts the approaches necessitated by class groups within the division of labour. Ideology represses the workers to the authority that is extended by the dominant. Moreover, "ideology masks the 'real' exploitative foundations of production by displacing the emphasis of thought from production to exchange" (Valentine, 2006, p.65). It accentuates on the individuals through splintering the echelons of society and brings together people to an imaginary unity as a submissive community of consumers. The social formations are a convoluted configuration that is sovereign. Althusserian state apparatus is essentially functionalist with regard to the requirement of the people that assumes a manager less system. Educational system is a meeting of conflicting ideologies and ideological contradictions rather than a location of effortless and harmonized imitation of capitalist ideology. Althusser's work does not encounter the epistemological issues that might be non-ideological and acultural.

Within cultural studies Marxism is seen as a predicament, though not in isolation but historically grounded within socio-political formations. The issues that Marxism deals with: power, class struggles, capital and value bring together critical evaluation and reflection on the discourses of culture than utilization of politics and ideology. Thus attempting to "connect together in a critical reflection different domains of life, politics and theory, theory and practice" (Hall, 1993, p. 265). Marxist cultural studies intended to determine the human subject who experiences the operations of the economy and ideology as a point of investigation beyond the minimal appropriation of Marxism. It also visualizes a new set of interrelations of base, superstructure, consciousness, being and power, the manifold methods in which social formations and their modes of production of culture and the consciousness of the ambience, the convoluted and reconciled connect between historical and the social of the world. Hall disapproves the political economy of culture paradigm as it leads to economic reductionism. Cultural studies emphasizes that culture must be examined within the social associations and system through which culture is produced and commodified. Consequently it allows the investigation of culture to be closely bound with the study of society, politics and economics.

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