

Frames, Paradigms and Power: Structure and Agency under the Context of Cultural Imperialism, Globalization and Hybridity

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Abstract

Globalization refers to the colonization of more and more areas of life with market forces in more and more place, it also names the global dissemination of capitalism. Cultural imperialism thesis holds that dominant societies impose their culture and ideologies to other subordinate societies in order to establish and perpetuate their power and control. Comparing to cultural imperialism, globalization and hybridity become more adequate for suggesting a less coherent, unified and directed process. People gain more agency under the idea of globalization and hybridity by the problem with power and inequality will always exist. While we are all part of a global society whose consequences no one can escape, we remain unequal participants and globalization remains an uneven process.

Keywords

Cultural Imperialism; Globalization; Hybridity; Structure and Agency.

1. Introduction

Critical theorists never care about the study of individuals, instead their goal is to gain knowledge of the entire social world. Most critical theories are concerned with the conflict of interests of different social groups within society and how communication perpetuates the domination of one group over another. They are interested in social relationships of power, social inequalities and focus their studies on structure. As Baran & Davis stated, what is real, what is knowable in the social world is the product of the interaction between structure and agency [1]. Structure can be social world's rules, norms, beliefs or more importantly, media. Agency is simply people's power to do things [2]. It's how human interact or behave in that world of structure and it's also our ability to respond or to change if possible. To critical theorists, reality is constantly being shaped or reshaped by the dialect between structure and agency. Agency is derived from structure and structure enables certain social groups the ability to do more than other social groups, their relations are inseparable.

Ideology is a way of seeing the world that makes the existing organization of social relation appear natural and inevitable [3]. It is a conception under critical theory because it pushes us to think about the structure and power relations of the whole society instead of certain individuals. The structure we are looking at would be the entire society, but the level of agency differs according to the theories of Marx, Gramsci and Althusser.

Under the structure of capitalism, mass public has no agency at all based on Marxism. Marx believed that economy determines every other idea that circulate in the society by creating social and economic power, shaping law and education and the idea people draw from when they create cultural artifacts. The relationship between economic base and cultural superstructure is a mechanical and economically deterministic one [4]. This economic determinism means that whoever has the most money and economical power also becomes the dominant groups in this society. Money guarantees their political power. People without economic power, like workers, become the subordinate group of the society. They are never

paid with what they are worth of work or else the bourgeoisies would not be able to generate profits. Subordinate groups accept their subordination naturally, not through force but through ideology. To Marx, ideology maintains social order but this culturally shared ideology is in fact false consciousness, an illusory idea about the way society works in capitalists' benefit. The dominant class promulgates systems of meaning to promote their own interest and works to generalize and universalize them [5] and subordinate classes mistakenly adopt the ideas as their own and the belief are taken as natural. During the formation of false consciousness, subservient groups have no agency at all. When the mass audience are enjoying television as a harmless entertainment, they never realize the medium lulls the mass audience into passive inaction and indeed instills bourgeoisie's aspiration and value [6]. Mass public acts as a passive receiver of dominant ideologies produced by capitalists while not having the ability to respond or to reject.

For Gramsci, ideology is hegemony. He admitted that economy is an important factor of power but rejected the idea of economic determinism. Hegemony involves negotiation and concession between different social groups with a high degree of consensus, and the process of negotiation reflects higher level of agency. Negotiation occurs constantly and there is a great potential for social change. Hegemony can sometimes be won by those who are not economically dominant and relatively powerless groups can get their voices heard and win consent for their ideas to become the dominant ideology in the society. This implies that culture and media are not just products of dominant class, nor are they free-floating. Instead there are constantly shifting of balance between competing interest social groups at different times [7]. This is no longer a passive interaction, instead it is possible for every social group to negotiate their idea and make themselves heard by the society. They now have more agency and more power to interact with the structure and the society.

Althusser sees ideology not as false but as a conceptual framework through which men interpret, make sense of, experience and live the material conditions in which they find themselves [8]. For him, ideology is not a static set of ideas imposed upon subordinates by the dominant classes like Marx said, but a dynamic process that can constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice [9]. Althusser rejects Marx's idea of base superstructure and economy determinism and proposed his own theory of overdetermination. Culture and power are not determined solely by economic relations but by different ideological state apparatuses. Those ISAs are social institutions such as family, education system, language, media, political systems etc. We are socially constructed and the ideology naturalized our sense of world, sense of identity and sense of our relationship to other people and to society in general. We internalize ideologies and thus are unconscious about the presence of their effects. Althusser believes that our unconscious is formed in ideology from outside our essential selves, the notion of an essential self disappears and is replaced by the social being who possess a produced sense of identity — a subjectivity [10]. Hailing is a constant construction of the subject and a constant reproduction of ideology in people. When we are communicating with people, what we usually do first is to hail them. To answer, they should recognize we are talking directly to them not someone else and this recognition derives from whom we think they are. Responding to hailing is a recognition of self-identity which is socially produced. People are subjects because our identities are given by the outside world, not what we choose intrinsically. During this process, human do not have full agency as subjects in this society because our identities are shaped under different ideological social apparatus and they are built by ideologies that the outside world perceive us to be. We don't have the agency to jump out of social ideologies and determine what we want ourselves to be perceived. However, we have certain level of agency to reject hailing. If we are not satisfied with how we are hailed or we reject the social position which we are being hailed at, we have our power to ignore hailing and ignore those ideologies people applied on us. But if we reject one ideology, we will always be categorized under another

and we can never jump out of the frame of ideology. Based on Althusser's theory, under the structure of society and ideologies, human as subjects do not have full agency to determine our identity but we certainly have the power to reject and neglect the ones we are not satisfied with. Globalization refers to the colonization of more and more areas of life with market forces in more and more place, it also names the global dissemination of capitalism, especially in more market-oriented forms [11]. Under this framework, the structure we are looking at is the global media industry and the agency means the ability for consumers to choose whatever content they want to consumer.

Cultural imperialism thesis holds that dominant societies impose their culture and ideologies to other subordinate societies in order to establish and perpetuate their power and control. It is a part of economic and political imperialism illustrated particularly between developed and undeveloped countries. It refers to the spread of cultural values, ideas and practices which reflect and reproduce the superiority of dominant culture [12]. The process of cultural imperialism causes a loss of cultural diversity, through the growth of global sameness, lots of countries start to lose their cultural autonomy. For Marx, there is no agency at all for consumers to choose the content they are consuming. The global communications industry is dominated by US-controlled corporations, huge media conglomerates are all owned by capitalists in America. As a result, all the exported media content represents the dominant ideologies in America, and according to Marx those ideologies are produced by capitalists for their own benefit as false consciousness. Consumers from subordinate countries have no agency towards the contents and ultimately will take those dominant ideologies as the ones they believe in. According to Marx, this globalized capitalism bring the dominant ideologies of American capitalism to the whole world, eliminates the most precious diversity and unifies the cultures and ideologies.

However, theorists of Gramscian reject this determinist account and argue that cultures are able to resist force of imperialism [13], a higher level of agency is involved. Governments have the capability to reject western produced media content, or consumers themselves can choose to reject the foreign culture within those media contents. It is possible for local consumers to neglect the inculcation of American ideologies because they are actively consuming local media contents with their own culture. Even if they do not reject, they have the power to reinterpret western ideologies into their own. Based on different culture background, different people may develop various interpretations toward the content they are consuming and further derive different understanding towards western ideologies. When there is a certain level of agency, culture mix and that leads to hybridity. Hybridity rejects authenticity as a value used to critique the global flow of culture. When certain media content is a mixture of cultures, the idea of being authentic no longer exists. Summarizing the idea of Gramscian, consumers gain a higher level of agency, they can choose to reject or reinterpret foreign culture. However, since first-world nations and corporations are owning and controlling television production and distribution, and shaping content and ideology to international audiences, it is inevitable for them to consume those contents and be influenced by those values. In this case, consumers still don't have full agency to freely consume media contents that they want.

Comparing to cultural imperialism, globalization and hybridity become more adequate for suggesting a less coherent, unified and directed process. People gain more agency under the idea of globalization and hybridity by the problem with power and inequality will always exist. While we are all part of a global society whose consequences no one can escape, we remain unequal participants and globalization remains an uneven process [14], it is still no yet possible for consumers to gain full agency within the market force.

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