

Ideologies and Popular Culture

Introductory Notes

Among the central questions I am raising in this class is where do ideologies of oppression (racism, patriarchy, ethnicism, classism, etc.) come from. We know that ideologies of oppression endure and acquire a life of their own because they perform a specific function in society. But who creates these ideologies and how do these ideologies attain the status of universality in a society--a universality that even extends to the victims of these ideologies. The short answer is: those who create and disseminate popular culture.

Now, in an ideal world, skin color would not be among the demarcating criterion of popular culture--for, from a biological perspective, there is only one race of people in this world: the *human* race. Sadly, however, the truth is that we do not live in an ideal world. Whether one likes it or not, popular culture, like all other aspects of society (economics, politics, etc.), is not immune from the factor of skin color as a significant determinant. But acknowledging this fact does not preclude one from advocating and striving toward the ideal: a popular culture untainted by such morally and abhorrently corrupt norms and values as those that undergird racial prejudice (as well as, of course, such other forms of prejudice as those based on gender, religion, nationality, age, disability, etc.).

The term 'popular culture' has traditionally carried with it an implicit acknowledgment of a hierarchical polarity in society: the masses versus the elite or the ruling classes--with the latter considered as custodians of 'elite' or 'high' culture. Consequently, an often unstated assumption among those concerned with popular culture is that it is inferior to elite culture. Whether judged from the perspective of cognitive demands or decent and civilized human values this is probably true--much of popular culture is soporific, banal, mediocre, and quite often abhorrent to say the least: witness, for example, commercial prime time television, or consider the film menu on the marquee at the local multiscreen movie theater.

However, are the masses to blame entirely for this situation? Of course not. They must bear some blame as non-discriminating consumers of popular culture, to be sure, but a larger share of the blame must be laid at the doors of the very people who consider themselves as persons of high culture: the wealthy who own/control the transnational multimedia conglomerates that today have monopoly ownership and control of all the principal outlets for popular culture (movies, books, magazines, radio, television, etc.)

To put the matter differently: the people who help fund the so called 'public' television (PBS)--which in relative terms may be considered 'high culture' television--are also the same people who produce and market trashy films for the masses that glorify the basest of human instincts, ranging from greed to dishonesty and from violence to sexual perversion. The constituent elements of popular culture are like other mass consumer commodities, they are only popular in the sense of *consumption*, not in the sense of *production*.

In other words, the capitalist marketplace offers merely an illusion of democracy by suggesting that it is the consumer who decides the 'menu' of popular culture; for in reality it is determined by those who own and control, via the *transnational multimedia conglomerates* (TMMCs), the means of production and distribution (film studios, publishing houses, cinema theaters, etc.), namely the wealthy (the capitalist class).¹

Therefore, so long as what appears on the 'menu' is not within the control of the masses, the notion of consumer 'choice' that is celebrated with such religious zeal by advocates and defenders of the capitalist marketplace is nothing more than a big lie.

The link between popular culture and the TMMCs does not rest merely on the matter of production, there is another form of linkage too: the dominant ideology, which in North America is the capitalist democratic ideology (and the function of which is to either prevent the development of, or erase, *political consciousness* (this term is defined in the next chapter). But to

¹ A word about the origins and nature of the TMMC. The ascendance of Ronald Reagan to the U.S. presidency in 1980 was not only of a symbolic significance to Hollywood in that here was a one time B-grade movie actor who had made it to the top, but it was also of substantive significance in that he would help usher in a new form of oligopolistic film company in Hollywood, the subsidiary of the *transnational multimedia monopoly conglomerate* (TMMC). The Reaganites came with a philosophy that believed in the idea of minimum government control of, or interference with, private enterprises (the only exception would be in those circumstances where the interests of private business were considered to be in grave danger from activities of either consumers or labor). To them any government regulations that interfered with the strict business of making profits were anathema; it did not matter that many of these regulations had evolved in order to protect the interests of consumers and the working class (in areas ranging from clean air and water through to worker safety on to the financial stability of savings and loan banks) from the more extreme of the depredatory tendencies of big business. Consequently, they launched a frenzy of deregulation, giving big business a free hand in a variety of areas including the area of oligopolistic control--the Reaganites were not only loathe to prosecute any antitrust violations, but through deregulation actually encouraged the development of numerous mergers and acquisitions, and thereby giving rise (on a scale not known before) to the huge transnational multimedia monopoly conglomerates (TMMCs) of the type represented by Gulf + Western, Time-Warner and Sony. Among the central features of these TMMCs was their incorporation of unrelated business activities within a single corporate entity. Consider the example of Gulf + Western: this TMMC owns over 100 companies, involved in such diverse activities as cigar making, race horses, rocket engineering, oil drilling, nuclear power plants, pantihose and lingerie manufacture, sugar production, steel mills, sports teams, etc., etc. And one of the companies it also owns is Paramount Pictures.

One of the consequences of the arrival of the TMMC in Hollywood on a major scale in the 1980s, was the production of what is sometimes referred to as 'event movies.' Two recent examples of event movies are *Batman* (1989), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *The Titanic* (1998). They are called event movies because the release of the films become media and business events in themselves; they even become part of the daily evening news broadcast on radio and television.

In addition to the millions spent on production *and* marketing of the actual films, event movies are accompanied by the production and marketing of ancillary merchandise ranging from T-shirts and toys through to books and school supplies on to shoes and cereals; that is almost anything on which the film logo or title can be printed. Another important characteristic of event movies is that they are produced for the widest segment of the population possible, more so than in the case of ordinary Hollywood releases, with the result that incredible amounts of resources and talent is expended in the making of a film that in terms of actual substance is, to the intelligent mind, nauseatingly bland. Event movies are designed to exploit the gullibility of the *ignorantsia* to the fullest.

what end? In order to assist with the maintenance of the status quo by facilitating the repression, or rechanneling or even refusal to acknowledge the disintegrating tendencies inherent in capitalist systems arising from such iniquitous power-dependent polarities as the rich versus the poor, males versus females, the able-bodied versus the disabled, the young versus the old, whites versus blacks, etc., etc.). Popular culture serves as a vehicle for the socialization of the dominant ideology, with the aim of rendering it so pervasive within the psyche of the masses that it achieves the inviolable status of so called 'common sense.'

Therefore, the ultimate task of the TMMCs is to harness the artistic creativity of the human mind in the service of this ideology; even if on the surface it may appear that the goal of such creativity is simply art and/or entertainment. This process remains usually opaque to all artists involved with mass or elite cultures because of their participation in the capitalist marketplace as either direct, or indirect, employees of the TMMCs.

Note two further points: One, the foregoing should not imply that there is a conspiracy at work among the TMMCs; conspiracy there is, but it is one that is systemic in which the chief conspirator is 'profit.' Two, it is necessary to stress emphatically that in ascribing the function of ideological socialization to popular culture the suggestion is not that the masses imbibe the ideology by *passively* exposing themselves to the different dimensions of popular culture. Rather, the suggestion here is that the masses are actively available for socialization by virtue of prior mental 'conditioning' that renders them willing to expose themselves to popular culture and which in turn creates receptivity to the ideological messages being transmitted by popular culture.

The 'conditioning' itself is a product of the experience of living and working in a particular type of society--in this case a capitalist democratic society--and the often unsuccessful attempts to deal with its many contradictions. Examples of these contradictions include: poverty amidst plenty, massive unemployment in the context of rising corporate profits, the right to vote in the context of deepening powerlessness in the face of the ever expanding pervasive corporate domination of society at all levels, the primacy of corporate needs over the needs of people, the abuse and destruction of environmental systems critical to all life forms in the name of economic progress, large budgetary deficits (with their attendant negative consequences for the quality of life) in a context of continuous massive funding for the military machine, etc., etc.

In other words, to give a specific example of this dialectical relationship between popular culture and the nature of the material relations of production of capitalist democratic societies, the willingness of the working class to purchase newspapers (such as the many TMMC owned and controlled mass tabloids found in large cities of Europe and North America) that are so anti-working class in ideological orientation as to *blatantly* slant and even distort news in the service of this ideology, is a function of the failure by the working class to come to grips with the contradictions of its daily existence--thereby rendering it vulnerable to ideological manipulation. And this ideological manipulation, in turn, blinds it to the true source of the contradictions of its existence.

One observation that can be made in parenthesis here is that what the foregoing also suggests is that those who seek a better society, free of the type of contradictions just mentioned, can not place all their hopes in the transformation of popular culture. Things are simply much more complex than that. There is, therefore, no denying this fact: that given the dialectical relations between the material relations of production (as manifest in the workplace) on one hand, and

popular culture on the other, alluded to above, the struggle for a better society rests on the necessity of taking the struggle into both realms; anything else is to engage in wishful thinking.

Those artists who do not wish to be recruited in the service of the dominant ideology must pay a price for their independence: the marginalization of their work--coupled usually with personal poverty. Therefore, even in a democracy, the artist is never really free to remain true to his/her art as long as he/she must have his/her art placed for evaluation before a capitalist marketplace--especially one that is controlled by the representatives of the wealthy, the TMMCs. Any artist who dares to produce serious art, one that questions the status quo in the name of a better society, must grapple with the real problems of putting bread on the table and overcoming physical barriers that prevent his/her work from reaching his/her potential audience among the masses placed by those who have monopoly ownership and/or control of the film studios, radio stations, galleries, publishing houses and so on.

Based on the foregoing it may appear that the suggestion here is that those who wish to influence popular culture through their artistic creativity in the direction of entertainment (via books, films, music, radio, etc.) that does not create, sustain and glorify ways of thinking and behaving that are banal, idiotic, soporific, and even morally and intellectually corrupt are doomed to permanent failure. This, however, is not true. Not all within the populace are unwitting puppets of the TMMCs. Moreover, the very concepts of freedom that the owners of the TMMCs are want to laud at every opportunity to legitimate their monopoly of wealth and power, are also available to the populace to legitimate development of their own independent forms of popular culture untainted by the dominant ideology. Plus, under certain conditions, it is possible for such forms to achieve a sufficient level of popularity as to permanently alter the status quo in a positive direction: toward the creation of a truly *civilized society*. *However, what the foregoing does suggest is that given the political and economic power of the owners of the TMMCs, the necessary political and economic space that can permit development of such alternate forms of popular culture is extremely narrow.*

Copyright © by elegantbrain.com. All rights reserved.

This document, either in whole or in part, may NOT be copied, reproduced, republished, uploaded, posted, transmitted, or distributed in any way, except that you may download one copy of it on any single computer for your personal, non-commercial home use only, provided you keep intact this copyright notice.
