

CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM

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Introduction

According to Marx, the capitalist mode of production has the following three basic elements, apart from others, namely, 1) separation of the producers from the means of production and transforming them into wage labourers, 2) the transformation of the means of production into private property/monopoly, and 3) the logic of relentless pursuit of profit to private property accumulation. This profit-driven structure of capitalism is expansionist in terms of geography as well as range of activities. Hence, its inherent expansionist nature helped for the creation of colonies outside its territories in modern period, to sustain its profit-mongering and private capital accumulative ventures. Lenin called this process of globalist expansion, colonisation and enslavement of people all over the world as imperialism (VA, VP 2011: 12).

In the classical Marxist understanding, culture is understood as the superstructure of the existing socio-economic structure and condition. Hence, the expansion of capitalism from European territories to non-European locations through the imperialist ventures affected the cultural aspects of the people of the colonised countries, though such capitalist expansion is primarily economical in its venture. Though Marx understood how the socio-economic base affects the superstructural cultural elements dialectically, he did not elaborate much on the issue of the dialectics between culture and imperialism/capitalism and how imperialism sustains itself through operating on cultural categories. This dialectics between socio-economic base and the superstructure is not a one-sided dialectics.

The fourth footnote of chapter XV of Capital (Vol. 1), says, "Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them" (KM 2014 (Vol. I): 352). While commenting on it, David Harvey explains the Marxist dialectics that Marx was not in favour of technological determinism or economical determinism, but he posits the way how one aspect helps in revealing or disclosing the possibility of the other aspect dialectically and historically. All these six identifiable elements, namely, technology, relation to nature, process/mode of production, production/reproduction of daily life, social relations and

mental conceptions, constitute the totality; they internalise the aspect of the other element through mutual interactions among them. These six elements hang together with their internal dynamics, their intense inter-relations and with contingencies limited by their interplay. Hence there is no mechanical relationship among them as they are socio-historically conditioned. “No one moment prevails over others, even as there exists within each moment the possibility of autonomous development (nature independently mutates, evolves, as do ideas, social relations, forms of daily life, etc.). All these elements co-evolve and are subject to perpetual renewal and transformation as dynamic moments within the totality. But it is not a Hegelian totality in which each moment tightly internalizes all the others. It is more like an ecological totality, what Lefebvre refers to as an “ensemble” or Deleuze as an “assemblage”, of moments co-evolving in an open, dialectical manner” (DH 2010: 196).

This understanding illumines further what Marx said about the base-superstructure model in his earlier work, *i.e.*, in his *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that the relation between the base and superstructure is not a mechanical or causal one, but it is impregnated with the dialectics modelled on co-evolution. As a corollary, the relation between the economic base and cultural categories co-evolve dialectically, mutually affecting each other with their own internal dynamics, still limited by the contingencies of the socio-economical milieu.

With the emergence of cultural studies, understood as the borderless academic discipline (LG 2012; 13, 14), this understanding gained significance. The post-Marxists began to realise the ‘quasi-autonomous’ functions of the aspects of culture within a particular socio-economic milieu. For example, we find that all through the British imperial presence in India, not more than 5000 Britishers were present in the Indian soil at any given point of time. The question is, then, how could British rule the native populace which account for more than 30 crore with a meagre 5000 British workforce. Of course, we have certain explanations, based on economic and military criteria, that by bringing in the lot of masses within the hegemonic loop of imperialism, it was possible for the British colonialism to survive in India for almost 200 years without much resistance.

By using the phrase, ‘quasi-autonomous’, I do not intend to say that culture has its own autonomous function in spite of the socio-economic conditions. The popular understanding of culture as the aesthetic and esoteric sphere holds such an autonomous position for the cultural aspects, as detached from the historical-contextual, economical, political and social spheres of life. Culture, conceived in the aesthetical sense, becomes ‘protective enclosure’ ‘antiseptically quarantined from its worldly affiliations’, according to Said. On the other hand, how cultural aspects are rigidified and are used/manipulated to protect, maintain and subserve/reify the imperial interests is what I mean

loosely by the phrase, 'quasi-autonomous' here. Culture as the realm of contestation, block other narratives to form a singular and monolithic narrative to reify the imperialist discourses. With this basic understanding, I would like to venture into analyse the relation between imperialism and culture using the theoretical tools offered by Gramsci, Frankfurt School Marxists and Edward Said.

Culture Industry

Horkheimer and Adorno would argue that the fascist imperial attitude springs from the totalitarian epistemological understanding of the dialectics of enlightenment. Writing their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, during the period of Nazi surge in German politics, they understood the relation between culture and totalitarianism, though they do not use the word 'imperialism' very specifically. According to them, the technological advancements used by the 'culture industry' in the modern period provide the technological rationale for the rationale of domination, as "the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest" (MH & TWA 1998: 121).

As the socio-economic domination, the public administration and technological capabilities converge, the culture industry intentionally integrates the masses from above, on the lines of dominant nationalism and national culture, which in turn sub-serves the imperial or fascist forces. The capitalist profit motives are turned into naked, monolithic cultural forms. The voices of resistance and dissent are suppressed to reify the imperial and fascist discursive practices. Hence, Adorno says, "the total effect of culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment". The false identity of society and individual as monolithic, the integration of people as having singular identity through culture industry and the abolition of dissent, create a fertile breeding ground for fascist imperialism in its totalitarian outlook. "The stereotyped appropriation of everything, even the inchoate, for the purposes of mechanical reproduction surpasses the rigor and general currency of any "real type"', says Adorno (MH & TWA 1998: 127).

How does the culture industry create the individuals as horde of one collectivity? Horkheimer and Adorno cite the example of the organisation of 'Hitler Youth' to show how it became successful in the creation of repressive equality. "The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual; for individuality makes a mockery of the kind of society which would turn all individuals into one collectivity... Under the levelling domination of abstraction (which makes everything in nature repeatable), and of industry (for which abstraction ordains repetition), the freedom themselves finally came to form that "herd"' (MH & TWA 1998: 13). This type of totalising tendency is viewed as the universal truth. The deviation from such universality – a majoritarian

construction – is viewed as illegitimate and the truth itself becomes a regulative and dominative principle, rather than as a principle of enlightening the various moments of reality and the differences. “The universality of ideas as developed by discursive logic, domination in the conceptual sphere, is raised up on the basis of actual domination... The individuality that learned order and subordination in the subjection of the world, soon wholly equated truth with the regulative thought without whose fixed distinctions universal truth cannot exist” (MH & TWA 1998: 14).

Consequently, the idea of justice is also redefined within this system of thought. The guarantee of liberation is perceived through the rejection of any thought which deviates from the totalitarian understanding of reality. Such a totalitarian thinking and the subjugation of individual under this totalising tendency, gives rise to majoritarianism. The differences, the unknown, the minority and the deviations are perceived to be untruth and the ‘other’ which needs to be suppressed; the majority dialectically redefines itself by defining the ‘other’. “Thinking objectifies itself to become an automatic, self-activating process; an impersonation of the machine that it produces itself so that ultimately the machine can replace it. Enlightenment has put aside the classic requirement of thinking about thought... it turns thought into a thing, an instrument – which is its own term for it” (MH & TWA 1998: 25).

Continuing this argument in the realm of culture, Adorno says, “Culture, in the true sense, did not accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honouring them. In so far as culture becomes wholly assimilated to and integrated in those petrified relations, human beings are once more debased” (TWA 2012: 100). Such petrified cultural aspects are taken up by the capitalist forces with their profit interests, which in turn rigidify the cultural categories into cultural imperialism. “The power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness... The concoctions of the culture industry are neither guides for a blissful life, nor a new art of moral responsibility, but rather exhortations to toe the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests. The consensus which it propagates strengthens blind, opaque authority” (TWA 2012: 104 – 5). Such an imperialist authority operates through culture with the capitalist profit motives. Hence, in the philosophical discussions of Horkheimer and Adorno, we find a relation among capitalism, culture and imperialism. In the case of colonialism too such a relation would be most visible. As noted earlier, colonialism or imperialism, whether it be European or native, cannot operate effectively unless it regulates its capitalist interests through cultural categories also. When culture becomes an aspect of the culture industry, it serves imperial interests, as it is induced by profit-driven capitalism, which may develop into fascism too.

Culture and Imperialism

By the 1930s, colonies and ex-colonies covered 84.6 percent of the land surface of the globe (AL 2005: 3). How did such a massive imperialist venture become possible? Such an imperialist venture was rationalising its capitalist interests through cultural categories. Religion, an aspect of it, was a motor-nerve for such a venture. While elaborating the civilising mission of Christianity, Rev. Barde says, if the goods of this world “remained divided up indefinitely, as they would be without colonization, they would answer neither the purposes of God nor the just demands of the human collectivity?” Continuing in the same breath, Rev. Muller declares, “Humanity must not, cannot allow the incompetence, negligence, and laziness of the uncivilised peoples to leave idle indefinitely the wealth which God confided to them, charging them to make it serve the good of all” (AC 2010: 39). In such statements of European missionaries we find the justification and rationalisation of imperial interests through religious and cultural means. The imperialism and its capture of foreign territories were justified by Europeans, saying that the colonised have no technological capabilities to transform the nature and natural resources for humanised purposes. Of course, the European colonialism had the technological superiority over the colonised masses. However, the technological superiority itself became the rationale for the exploitation of people and resources by the imperial interests, through culturally defining the colonised as the weak and incompetent who is need of a saviour.

In his book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said makes a point as to how Orientalism helped for the imaginative construction of the culturally weak Orient, though it had its glorious past in the ancient times, only to further its imperial interests on the physically weak Orient. Drawing a parallel from Marx’s explication of Bourgeois’ representation of the proletariat in his book, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that “They (the proletariat) cannot represent themselves; they must be represented (by the bourgeois)”, Said tries to explain the representational character of Orientalism. The problem of representation is not politically naïve exercise, but to have the control over the perceived Other. Having a clue from Marx’s statement, Said says, “The Orient was almost a European invention” He further says, “the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate, both of which had a privileged communal significance for the journalist and French readers... Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as

its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucrats and colonial styles” (EWS 1978: 1). Though Orientalism is an academic and intellectual discipline, where the sketches of the Orient are drawn, it connotes the ‘high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth century and early twentieth-century European colonialism’. Said says that “one ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which were the truth about them to be told... Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient” (EWS 1978: 6).

Using the Gramscian notion of hegemony, he explains further how Orientalism is an offshoot of power relations between the West and the East. Gramsci makes a distinction between the civil and political society. The civil society, according to him, consists of voluntary affiliations like school, family and unions, while political society consists of army, police and central bureaucracy which use the methods of direct domination and coercion. Culture operates within the civil society. In any civil society which is not totalitarian, certain cultural forms predominate over the other forms through the consent, not through domination of the predominant group over the other. This is identified by Gramsci as hegemony. According to Said, Orientalism has got its durability and strength through the cultural hegemony of the West, obtaining its validity through the consent of the masses by repeating, teaching and authorising the representations. As a cultural hegemonic discourse, “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (EWS 1978: 7).

Though such a European imperial venture started with the study of the Orient and its culture, as a textual and contemplative venture, it later helped for the spatial geographical appropriation and extension of imperialism. For, the empire is not merely an object of economical ambition of the West, but it is a historical and political and sociological and cultural fact that necessitated the conquest of the East by the West. Though Orientalism claims itself to be scientific, deciphering the culture of the Orient, it could not detach itself from the ‘imperial worldliness’ of the authors, scholars, missionaries, travellers, linguists and administrators. Extending his argument, Said would argue that as the Orient was weaker than the West, “every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric... Human societies,

at least the more advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with “other” cultures” (EWS 1978: 204).

Here, culture becomes the realm of contestation; and this contestation reflects the imperial interests. “The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course: but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative... The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (EWS 1994: xii – xiii). This observation cannot be limited to European imperialism alone, as Said was aware of the hegemonic potentials of the dominant culture over the subaltern cultures.

Conclusion

Culture and majoritarianism as well as culture and imperialism have very intimate connection in every socio-historical milieu. Though imperial interests are primarily economical in nature, the imperial strategy is fought in cultural realm also. Said and postcolonialists offer a different solution to the problem of cultural contestation and the way how one cultural discourse emerges as dominant submerging other discourses. However, whether the imperialist connections with the cultural categories could be solved within the realm of culture itself is to be tested yet. When the culture becomes a space for contestation, it often leads to identity politics even if we understand identity politics itself as part of a democratic struggle. But how such democratic spaces could be got rid of imperial interests, without directly addressing the imperialism itself, is a bigger question which needs further studies from the Marxian position.

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