

Reflections on the Politics of Culture :: Monthly Review

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Reflections on the Politics of Culture

Christian Parenti

Michael Parenti's two most recent books are *Blackshirts and Reds* and *America Beseiged*, both published by City Lights.

In the academic social sciences, students are taught to think of culture as representing the customs and mores of a society, including its language, art, laws, and religion. Such a definition has a nice neutral sound to it, but culture is anything but neutral. Much of what is thought to be our common culture is the selective transmission of class-dominated values. Antonio Gramsci understood this when he spoke of class hegemony, noting that the state is only the "outer ditch behind which there [stands] a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks," a network of cultural values and institutions not normally thought of as political.¹ What we call "our culture" is largely reflective of existing hegemonic arrangements within the social order, strongly favoring some interests over others.

A society built upon slave labor, for instance, swiftly develops a racist culture, replete with its own peculiar laws, science, and mythology, along with mechanisms of repression directed against both slaves and the critics of slavery. After slavery is abolished, racism continues to fortify the inequitable social relations—which is what Engels meant when he said that slavery leaves its "poisonous sting" long after it passes into history.

Culture, then, is not an abstract force that floats around in space and settles upon us—though given the seemingly subliminal ways it influences us, it can feel like a disembodied, ubiquitous entity. In fact, culture is mediated through a social structure. We get our culture from a network of social relations involving other people: primary groups such as family, peers, and other informal associations within the community or, as is increasingly the case, from more formally articulated and legally chartered institutions such as schools, media, churches, government agencies, corporations, and the military.

Linked by purchase and persuasion to dominant ruling-class interests, such social institutions are regularly misrepresented as politically neutral, especially by those who occupy command positions within them or are otherwise advantaged by them. What Gramsci said about the military might apply to most other institutions in capitalist society: their "so-called neutrality only means support for the reactionary side."²

When culture is treated as nothing more than an innocent accretion of solutions and practices, and each culture is seen as something inviolate, then all cultures are accepted at face value and cultural relativism is the suggested standard. So we hear that we should avoid ethnocentrism and respect other cultures. To be sure, after centuries in which indigenous cultures have been trampled underfoot by colonizers, we need to be acutely aware of the baneful effects of cultural imperialism and of the oppressive intolerance manifested toward diverse ethnic cultures within our own society.

But the struggle to preserve cultural diversity should not give carte blanche to anyone in any society to violate basic human rights. Many patriarchal cultures, for example, are replete with "sacrosanct customs" that, on closer examination, promote the worst kinds of gender victimization, including the mutilation of female children through clitorrectomy and infibulation, and the sale of young girls into sexual slavery. I once heard an official from Saudi Arabia demand that Westerners show respect for his

culture: he was addressing critics who denounced the Saudi practice of stoning women to death on charges of adultery. He failed to mention that there were people within his own culture—including, of course, the female victims—who were not enamored of such time-honored traditions.

For most of U.S. history, slaveholders and then segregationists insisted that we respect the South's "way of life." In Nazi Germany, anti-Semitism was an integral part of the ongoing political culture. Many evildoers might rally under the banner of cultural relativism. The truth is, as we struggle for human betterment, we must challenge the oppressive and destructive features of all cultures, including our own.

In academic circles, postmodernist theorists offer their own variety of cultural relativism. They reject the idea that human perceptions can transcend culture. For them, all kinds of knowledge are little more than social constructs. Evaluating any culture from a platform of fixed and final truths, they say, is a dangerous project that often contains the seeds of more extreme forms of domination. In response, I would argue that, even if there are no absolute truths, this does not mean all consciousness is hopelessly culture-bound. People from widely different societies and different periods in history can still recognize forms of class, ethnic, and gender oppression in various cultures across time and space. Though culture permeates all our perceptions, it is not the totality of human experience.

At the heart of postmodernism's cultural relativism is an old-fashioned anti-Marxism, an unswerving ideological acceptance of existing bourgeois domination. Some postmodernists depict themselves as occupying "positions of marginality," taking lonely and heroic stands against hoards of doctrinaire hardliners who supposedly overpopulate the nation's campuses. So the postmodernists are able to enjoy the appearance of independent critical thought without ever saying anything that might jeopardize their academic careers.

Taught to think of culture as an age-old accretion of practice and tradition, we mistakenly conclude that it is not easily modified. In fact, as social conditions and interests change, much (but certainly not all) of culture proves mutable. For almost four hundred years, the wealthy elites of Central America were devoutly Roman Catholic, a religious affiliation that was supposedly deeply ingrained in their culture. Then, in the late 1970s, after many Catholic clergy proved friendly to liberation theology, these same elites discarded their Catholicism and joined Protestant fundamentalist denominations that espoused a more comfortably reactionary line. Their four centuries of "deeply ingrained Catholic culture" were discarded within a few years once they deemed their class interests to be at stake.

Generally, whenever anyone offers culturalistic explanations for social phenomena, we should be skeptical. For one thing, culturalistic explanations of third-world social conditions tend to be patronizing and ethnocentric. I heard someone explain the poor performance of the Mexican army, in the storm rescue operations in Acapulco in October 1997, as emblematic of a lackadaisical Mexican way of handling things: It's in their culture, you see; everything is *mañana mañana* with those people. In fact, poor rescue responses have been repeatedly evidenced in the United States and numerous other countries. And more to the point, the Mexican army, financed and advised by the U.S. national security state, has performed brilliantly in Chiapas, doing the thing it was trained to do, which is not rescuing people but intimidating and killing them, waging low-intensity warfare, systematically occupying lands, burning crops, destroying villages, executing suspected guerrilla sympathizers, and tightening the noose around the Zapatista social base. To say the Mexican army performed poorly in rescue operations is to presume that the army is there to serve the people rather than to control them on behalf of those who own Mexico. Culturalistic explanations divorced of political-economic realities readily lend themselves to such obfuscation.

The Commodification of Culture

As the capitalist economy has grown in influence and power, much of our culture has been expropriated and commodified. Its use value increasingly takes second place to its exchange value. Nowadays we

create less of our culture and buy more of it, until it really is no longer *our* culture. We now have a special term for segments of culture that remain rooted in popular practice: we call it “folk culture,” which includes folk music, folk dance, folk medicine, and folk mythology. These are curious terms, when you think about it, since by definition all culture should be folk culture. That is, all culture arises from the social practices of us folks. But primary-group folk creation has become so limited as to be accorded a distinctive label.

A far greater part of our culture is now aptly designated as “mass culture,” “popular culture,” and even “media culture,” owned and operated mostly by giant corporations whose major concern is to accumulate wealth and make the world safe for their owners, the goal being exchange value rather than use value, social control rather than social creativity. Much of mass culture is organized to distract us from thinking too much about larger realities. The fluff and puffery of entertainment culture crowds out more urgent and nourishing things. By constantly appealing to the lowest common denominator, a sensationalist popular culture lowers the common denominator still further. Public tastes become still more attuned to cultural junk food, the big hype, the trashy, flashy, wildly violent, instantly stimulating, and desperately superficial offerings.

Such fare often has real ideological content. Even if supposedly apolitical in its intent, entertainment culture (which is really the entertainment *industry*) is political in its impact, propagating images and values that are often downright sexist, racist, consumerist, authoritarian, militaristic, and imperialist.³

With the ascendancy of mass culture we see a loss of people’s culture. From the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, a discernible working-class culture existed, with its union halls, songs, poetry, literature, theater, night schools, summer camps, and mutual assistance societies, many of which were organized by anarchists, socialists, and communists, and their various front groups. But not much of this culture could survive the twin blows of McCarthyism and television, both of which came upon us at about the same time.

The commodification of culture can be seen quite starkly in the decline of children’s culture. In my youth, I and my companions were out on the streets of New York playing games of childhood’s creation without adult supervision: ringalevio, kick-the-can, hide-and-seek, tag, Johnny-on-the-pony, stickball, stoopball, handball, and boxball. Today, one sees little evidence of children’s culture in most U.S. communities. The same seems to have happened in other countries. Martin Large notes that in England, in the parks and streets that once were “bubbling with children playing,” few youngsters are now to be seen participating in the old games. Where have they all gone? The television “has taken many of our children away” from their hobbies and street games.⁴

This process, whereby a profit-driven mass culture preempts people’s culture, is extending all over the world, as third-world critics of cultural imperialism repeatedly remind us.

Limited Accommodations

There are two myths I would like to put to rest: first, the notion that culture is to be treated as mutually exclusive of, and even competitive with, political economy. A friend of mine who edits a socialist journal once commented to me: “You emphasize economics. I deal more with culture.” I thought this an odd dichotomization since my work on the news media, the entertainment industry, social institutions, and political mythology has been deeply involved with both culture and economics. In fact, I doubt one can talk intelligently about culture if one does not at some point also introduce the dynamics of political economy. This is why, when I refer to the “politics of culture,” I mean something more than just the latest controversy regarding federal funding of the arts.

The other myth is that our social institutions are autonomous entities, not linked to each other. In fact, they are interlocked by corporate law, public and private funding, and overlapping corporate elites who serve on the governing boards of universities, colleges, private schools, museums, symphony

orchestras, the music industry, libraries, churches, newspapers, magazines, radio and TV networks, publishing houses, and charitable foundations.

New cultural formations arise from time to time, usually within a limited framework that does not challenge dominant class arrangements. So we have struggles around feminism, ethnic equality, gay rights, family values, and the like—all of which can involve important, life-and-death issues. And if pursued as purely lifestyle issues, they can win occasional exposure in the mainstream media. Generally, however, the higher circles instinctively resist any pressure toward social equalization, even in the realm of “identity politics.” Furthermore, they use lifestyle issues such as gay rights and abortion rights, among others, as convenient targets against which to misdirect otherwise legitimate mass grievances.

The victories won by “identity politics” usually are limited to changes in procedure and personnel, leaving institutional class interests largely intact. For instance, feminists have challenged patriarchal militarism, but the resulting concession is not an end to militarism but women in the armed forces.

Eventually we get female political leaders, but of what stripe? We get Lynn Cheney, Elizabeth Dole, Margaret Thatcher and—just when some of us were recovering from Jeane Kirkpatrick—Madeleine Albright. It is no accident that this type of woman is most likely to reach the top of the present politico-economic structure. While indifferent or even hostile to the feminist movement, conservative females reap some of its benefits.

Professions offer another example of the false autonomy of cultural practices. Whether composed of anthropologists, political scientists, physicists, doctors, lawyers, or librarians, professional associations emphasize their commitment to independent expertise, and deny that they are wedded to the dominant politico-economic social structure. In fact, many of their most important activities are directly regulated by corporate interests or take place in a social context that is less and less of their own making, as doctors and nurses are discovering in their dealings with HMOs.

Supply Creates Demand

We are taught that the “free market of ideas and images,” as it exists in mass culture today, is a response to popular tastes. Media culture gives the people what they want. Demand creates supply. This is a very democratic-sounding notion. But quite often it is the other way around: supply creates demand. Thus, the supply system to a library can be heavily prefigured by all sorts of things other than readers’ preferences. Discussions of censorship usually focus on limited controversies, as when some people agitate to have this or that “offensive” book removed from the shelves. Such incidents leave the impression that the library is struggling to maintain itself as a free and open system. Overlooked is the prestructured selectivity, the censorship that occurs even before anyone gets a chance to see what books are on the shelves, a censorship imposed by a book market dominated by six or seven conglomerates. There is a difference between *incidental* censorship and *systemic* censorship. Mainstream pundits sedulously avoid discussion of the latter.

Systemic repression exists in other areas of cultural endeavor. Consider the censorship controversies in regard to art. These focus on whether a particular painting or photograph, sporting some naughty thing like frontal nudity, should be publicly funded and shown to consenting adults. But there is a systemic suppression as well. The image we have of the artist as an independent purveyor of creative culture can be as misleading as the image we have of other professionals. What is referred to as the “art world” is not a thing apart from the art market; the latter has long been heavily influenced by a small number of moneyed persons like Huntington Hartford, John Paul Getty, Nelson Rockefeller, and Joseph Hirschorn, who have treated works of art not as part of our common treasure but, in true capitalist style, as objects of pecuniary investment and private acquisition. They have financed the museums and major galleries, art books, art magazines, art critics, university endowments, and various art schools and centers—reaping considerable tax write-offs in so doing.

As trustees, publishers, patrons, and speculators, they and their associates exercise influence over the means of artistic production and distribution, setting ideological limits to artistic expression. Artists who move beyond acceptable boundaries run the risk of not being shown. Art that contains radical political content is labeled “propaganda” by those who control the art market. Art and politics do not mix, we are told—which would be news to such greats as Goya, Degas, Picasso, and Rivera. While professing to keep art free of politics (“art for art’s sake”), the gatekeepers impose their own politically motivated definition of what is and is not art. The art they buy, show, and have reviewed is devoid of critical social content even when realistic in form. What is preferred is Abstract Expressionism and other forms of Nonobjective Art that are sufficiently ambiguous to stimulate a broad range of aesthetic interpretations, having an iconoclastic and experimental appearance while remaining politically safe.

The same is true of the distribution of films and their redistribution as videos. Some are mass-marketed while others quickly drop from sight. Capitalism will sell you the camera to make a movie and the computer to write a book. But then there is the problem of distribution. Will a film get mass exposure in a thousand theaters across the nation, or will the producer spend the next five years of his or her life toting it around to college campuses, union halls, and special one-day matinee showings at local art theaters (if that)?

So it is with publications. Books from one of the big publishing conglomerates are likely to get more prominent distribution and more library adoptions than books by Monthly Review Press, Verso, Pathfinder, or International Publishers. Libraries and bookstores (not to mention newsstands and drugstores) are more likely to stock *Time* and *Newsweek* than *Monthly Review*, *CovertAction Quarterly*, or other such publications. A small branch library will have no room or funds to acquire leftist titles but will procure seven copies of Colin Powell’s autobiography or some other media-hyped potboiler.

It is not just that supply is responding to demand. Where did the demand to read about Colin Powell come from? The media blitz that legitimized the Gulf War also catapulted its top military commander into the national limelight and made him an overnight superstar. It was supply *creating* demand.

Imperfect Socialization

One hopeful thought remains: socialization into the dominant culture does not operate with perfect effect. In the face of all monopolistic ideological manipulation, many people develop a skepticism or outright disaffection based on the sometimes evident disparity between social actuality and official ideology. There is a limit to how many lies people will swallow about the reality they are experiencing. If this were not so, if we were all perfectly socialized into the ongoing social order and thoroughly indoctrinated into the dominant culture, then I would not have been able to record these thoughts and you could not have understood them.

Years ago, William James observed how custom can operate as a sedative while novelty (including dissidence) is rejected as an irritant.⁵ Yet I would argue that after awhile sedatives can become suffocating and irritants can enliven. People sometimes hunger for the uncomfortable critical perspective that gives them a more meaningful explanation of things. By becoming aware of this, we have a better chance of moving against the tide. It is not a matter of becoming the faithful instrument of any particular persuasion but of resisting the misrepresentations of a thoroughly ideologized bourgeois culture. In class struggle, culture is a key battleground. The capitalist rulers know this—and so should we.

Notes

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 238.

2. Ibid, p. 212.
 3. See my *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), chapter 1 and passim.
 4. Martin Large, *Who's Bringing Them Up?* (Gloucester, England: M.H.C. Large, 1980), p. 35.
 5. William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in his *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner, 1948), p. 13.
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