

## **Cultural Studies**

### **Introduction**

Our modern society is marked by the globalization phenomenon that is characterized by a rapid exchange of information, resources and people resulting to conflicts, modifications and amalgamation of diverse cultural ideologies. Glocalization is a cultural phenomenon that emphasizes and promotes the distinctiveness and uniqueness of local cultures as a competitive advantage in global integration.

Cultural diversity is a pressing issue in cosmopolitan societies such as America, which is currently constituted by different people of various races, ethnicity, origin, color, beliefs and even languages. Understanding culture is vital in addressing issues about social oppressions i.e. discrimination, international business expansion i.e. off shoring and outsourcing, and social and political development of humanity and civilization in general.

Culture has diverse meanings and roles to different people. While cultural studies before simply pertains to understanding its meaning and roles, today, it refers to studying how culture contributes, influence and shape society.

### **Theodoro Adorno**

Among the most important philosophers that placed emphasis to the importance and study of culture in society is Theodoro Adorno. His interest on culture is also reflected to

his fondness to his critiques on music. Born on September 11, 1903, is a member of the prominent Frankfurt School in Germany that developed and practiced the critical theory approach which has apparent influences from Karl Marx, Hegel and Kant.

The Critical theory approach assumes that society is a dialectical entity in which the ideology of every person is shaped with its mediation and interaction. Placing emphasis on the social learning theory, ideologies are immersed into individuals by the society. Thus, an empirical observation of people will only reflect the ideologies that society impresses upon the people. Instead, society should be studied holistically by an integrated approach in the areas of economics, psychology, history and philosophy. The critical approach is reflected in Adorno's Negative Dialectics in which he argued that concepts (i.e. people's insights) cannot identify its true object (i.e. society). Instead, a particular object (e.g. society) can be grasped or identified with universal concepts (i.e. the integration of the study disciplines enumerated).

Since Adorno's writings reflected the conflict theories of Marx, student activists during the 1960's were immediately inclined to adopt his works. Adorno explained later that his indifference to the activists' cause however is because his theory is incompatible with the political praxis.

Adorno's emphasis on cultural studies inevitably drove him to touch on Aesthetics, in which he introduced Materialist Aesthetics, a theory that highlights the importance of the object in art. In contrast to Kant's idealistic Aesthetics, he argued that both the piece of

art and its aesthetic value i.e. beauty are cognitive truths. His umbrage on popular culture or new media and technologies during his time led him to delineate between high and low culture. High culture is represented by classical music and literature while low culture is signified by the popular music i.e. jazz and dance music especially so because during that time popular culture is evolving to incorporate socio-political issues.

### **Max Horkheimer**

Another famed member of the Frankfurt School and a close colleague of Adorno, Max Horkheimer was a German philosopher and sociologist, who at first formulated positive utopianism and optimism in order to create the framework for his adherence to a socio-cultural revolution, which is the deterministic goal of Karl Marx. In collaboration with Adorno, however, he shifted from Orthodox Marxism in recognition of the autonomy of consciousness and culture from economics then shared the negative utopianism of Adorno. Accordingly, Horkheimer's desertion of the revolution and the Marxian utopia emanated from his understanding that the revolutionary in essence tends to become the oppressor. This idea is quite apparent in modern societies in which communist movements are considered as insurgencies that create terror to the civilian populace. Horkheimer recognized the strength and rigidity of the capitalistic system as it has developed its position where it perfectly penetrated the consciousness of the collective people and have controlled their personal nature in accordance with the requirements and necessity of capitalism. This reality has altered Horkheimer's pursuit for social revolution to a more sublime, realistic and effective means of change through education.

Horkheimer's later Critical Theory that emphasized on liberation through education however is highly metaphysical and utopian. It proposes the possibility of carrying out change by transcending from the material reality but attaining the essence of being human. This phenomenological framework creates a new setting for the realization of hope which will be the basis for the struggle against counter-education.

### **Adorno and Horkheimer on the Culture Industry**

Adorno and Horkheimer follows the conflict theory of Marx with respect to capitalism but veered from Karl Marx's prediction that capitalism will eventually collapse. They emphasized on the role of culture on how capitalism has become ingrained in society, which ultimately thwarted the revolutionary consciousness of the people. In Adorno's critique of the mass culture or popular culture, the culture industry, which created and disseminated goods through the mass media i.e. television, controlled and manipulated the people. (Adorno and Horkheimer) He blamed popular culture to be that principal cause why people become adamant to change. Basically, the opportune pleasures generated by the consumption of popular culture engender submissiveness and contentment of people in spite of their despondency or glum economic conditions. The mass production of goods is actually pseudo- individualization, in which the standardization of cultural goods also homogenizes the ideological perspectives and inclinations of the people. Parallel to that of Horkheimer, culture played a crucial role in reinforcing or fortifying capitalism by creating a consciousness among the people that is

meekly compliant to the very components and processes that operates and perpetuates the capitalistic system.

Moreover, the culture industry nurtured false needs which is addressed and satisfied through capitalism. Instead of the needs for freedom, intellectual progress and authentic happiness, people are preoccupied with materialistic wants. Adorno then developed a framework that explored the mechanisms that produce mass culture, which has a political nuance because of the state's role in the adoption and promotion of capitalism, which calls forth less government intervention on the dynamics of market forces i.e. demand and supply as well as strengthening of the private sector as the principal agent for progress. The production and consumption of mass culture is the root cause of society's moral degeneration and perpetuation of social inequalities because of the apathy it yields.

### **Stuart Hall on Cultural Studies**

A leading leftist activist in the 1960's, Stuart Hall was one of the major founders of cultural studies in England. This discipline transpired in reaction to the political affairs in Britain in the 1950s when the New Leftist movements discarded social revolution but established a new stance of "'politics of intellectual work'".

As a pioneer in cultural studies, he derived different notions of culture. Culture is the totality of all the insights and descriptions through which people create meaning and manifest their common experiences. The democratic and participative nature of culture

allows for its objective discussion. This is in reaction to the critical theory approach where empirical study of the experience of people simply reflected the object society.

Following the anthropological viewpoint, culture pertains to social practices and the analysis of the relations among components in life. Culture is intertwined in social operations of people and other elements of society as they interact with each other.

Under these two premises, Stuart Hall defined Cultural Studies as an applied theory," that includes the interrelation and integration of different critical theories such as post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, liberalism, in its different dimensions including social sciences, politics, economics among others. Different theories and integrations result to a variety and complexity of results which is reflective of the nature of culture nevertheless.

Thus, Hall proposed an encompassing definition of cultural studies that takes into account both structuralism and culturalism elements including the ramifications of the different approaches of different branches of knowledge e.g. political science, anthropology, psychology, economics, making cultural studies a comprehensive, complex, and dynamic discipline.

Equally important in Hall's definition is the practical application of cultural studies to socio-political and other contemporary issues making the discipline proactive in the development of new culture and society in general. In modern trends, the studies centered on mass media, economic forces of production and consumption and recently,

information technology i.e. Internet, in relationship to culture and society, because these are the dominant agents of culture today.

### **Parallelism of Adorno, Horkheimer and Stuart**

Under the nuance of the Marx's conflict Theory, Adorno, Horkheimer and Stuart adhere that popular culture played a central role in entrenching capitalism in society which ultimately perpetuates the status quo. Stuart emphasized the role of mass media i.e. television, on gaining and winning the willing support of the lower class to the ruling class. (Hall, Morley and Chen) They rejected the rigid Marxian ideology that focus on the economic aspect that determined social behavior. Instead, they adopted a culturalist Marxist stance in which they believed that social behavior, characterized by the conflict of classes, has cultural grounds, which is independent of economics. As Stuart pointed out, this culture is a result of dynamic processes and factors such as class, race, gender, psychological personalities, and cognitive abilities among many others.

Adorno and Horkheimer underscored the falsehood of pseudo-individualism, which emanates from the standardization of mass production of goods. (Cook) This is detrimental to the enlightenment of people because it destroys the critical inclinations and potentials of the people. Thus, the culture industry results to the apathy of people to change that status quo. Stuart on the other hand, highlighted that the hegemony or standardization arising from the commanding influence and domination of the ruling

class over the lower class is not enforced nor is it a plot or planned conspiracy by the elite. It is simply based on the widespread acceptance of dominant ideology.

In the perspective of logical philosophy, this tendency of the people is similar to the common logical fallacy called the Argumentum ad Populum (also known as appeal to numbers or to the majority). It is a fallacy because the validity or soundness of its line of reasoning and conclusion is based on the popular assent of the majority of multitude. The "Snob Appeal", which is a variation of such fallacy, follows the truth or validity of a conclusion based on what a select group or the elite believes e.g. showbiz personalities, who are apparently not authorities on the topic or matter that they declare. Political endorsements and advertisements of showbiz personalities are the most common examples of this fallacy. This fallacy is a special form of the argumentum ad populum, for it is also an attempt to sway the masses or to sway an audience. (Werkmeister) Because people are gullible, they tend to believe that what a popular actor or actress will declare about a certain product is true.

## **Conclusion**

The cultural studies that Stuart defines may be viewed as response to the call for the primacy of education that Horkheimer and Adorno accentuate in order to liberate people from their unconscious apathy and docility that was shaped by popular culture in society. Focusing on mass media, cultural studies shall be used to study how people can transcend from the myriad of messages and information that media bombards and imparts on the

people to develop critical awareness that could eventually lead to the rejection of the dominant ideology i.e. capitalism. Therefore, cultural studies theory is an approach to a critical and oppositional decoding of these messages or information. Hall believed that even if mass media plays a vital role in maintaining the status quo that ultimately served the interests of the ruling class, it can also be instrumental for critical ideological struggle and understanding which can be achieved through cultural studies.

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