Week 9: 6 November

**Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony**

Reading: Dick Hebdige, ‘From Culture to Hegemony’ (Coursepack)
John Hartley, ‘Hegemony’, ‘Subculture’

N.B. This week’s lecture will focus on both the Frankfurt School and the ‘culture industry’ and Gramsci and hegemony, regardless of what is indicated by the syllabus. This because of our unanticipated review of the Hall ‘Two Paradigms’ article.

[The Culture Industry] proclaims you shall conform, without instruction as to what: conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence. (Adorno)

In the products of the culture industry human beings get into trouble only so that they can be rescued unharmed, usually by representatives of a benevolent collective; and then in empty harmony, they are reconciled with the general whose demands they had experienced at the outset as irreconcilable with their interests. (Adorno)

The sign becomes the arena of class struggle. (Volosinov)

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life. (Hebdige)

My practicality consists in this, in the knowledge that if you beat your head against the wall it is your head which breaks and not the wall—that is my strength, my only strength. (Gramsci)

**Key Themes and Concepts**
1) Frankfurt School and the Culture Industry
2) Gramsci and Hegemony
3) Counter-hegemony and Subculture
1) Frankfurt School and the Culture Industry

What is The Frankfurt School?

- group of German intellectuals who broadly analyzed the nature and consequences of capitalism on cultural, political, and social levels
- this was in the context of the rise of Fascism and decline of revolutionary movements
- they were Jews who fled Nazi Germany and were surprised at some of the similarities they saw in the US
- viewed mass media as central to the success of capitalist regimes (as it did under Fascism)
- the culture industry analyzed or its key normative role in socialization

Remember that in Marxist analysis, the ruling elite not only own the ‘mode of production’ but also control the production of society’s dominant ideas and values.

They emphasized the role of mass media (what they called the ‘culture industry’)

- they came from an environment of propaganda and the effective use of mass media by the Nazis
- in the US, they saw mass media playing a key role for capitalist society
- namely, to obscure, undermine, and contain oppositional or critical consciousness on behalf of the dominant capitalist class
- this left them deeply pessimistic—no immediate hope for revolution or radical change
Contextualizing the Frankfurt School and culture industry

The work of the Frankfurt School (including Adorno) is categorized under the umbrella term ‘Critical Theory’

These are some key characteristics of critical theory:

• no singular approach or methodology
• emphasizes the power of critique to help create awareness of structures of domination (political, social, economic and cultural) and the possibility of changing them
• regarded the culture of everyday life as always being political
• regarded fascism as a strategic response by capital to crisis (i.e. worker-led revolutions)
• capital targeted the working class for containment thru. the ‘culture industry’
• the effect of the culture industry on the consciousness of the working class is conformity
• the mass production of commodified culture soothed workers and made them ready to go to work the next day
• in turn, it left little space for productive political action and revolutionary movements

Historical context

• the Institute of Social Research (a.k.a. Frankfurt School) est. in 1923, just after the Russian Revolution (1917)
• the Spartacus League Uprising in Germany (1919) had the country teetering on the edge of revolution
• then the German Social Democratic Party purged itself of revolutionaries, just as the Nazi Party began its rise to power
• remember the Nazi’s began as ‘national socialists’
• suddenly, worker-led revolution, which had recently been regarded as immanent no longer seemed so ‘inevitable’
• Spain, Italy and Germany—all with very powerful political left wing—became fascist states
• they wondered what had happened to the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class?

The Frankfurt School were among the first to consider the role of mass media in sapping the working class of its revolutionary enemy (as well as facilitating the rise of fascism)

Adorno and Horkheimer (in The Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1947) used the term ‘culture industry’ instead of ‘mass media’
Culture Industry (a.k.a. Mass media)
• mass production techniques were being used in film and radio
• culture is produced like cars—‘assembly line’ (to maximize profits)
• culture becomes a commodity
• mass production techniques impacted both how culture was being produced and consumed
• culture produced is standardized and repetitive
• cultural consumption as undemanding and passive

“Culture Industry Reconsidered”

• taken from a 1963 lecture, about 25 years after the term ‘the culture industry’ was first used in his book The Dialectic of Enlightenment (co-authored with Max Horkheimer)
• it was translated into English in 1975

A) Characteristics of the Culture Industry
i) industrial production
• purposely do not use the term ‘mass culture’
• used to emphasize the industrial production of culture for the masses
• industrial forms of production and distribution
• that is, the production of cultural commodities tailored for consumption
• not a culture spontaneously (organically) arising from the masses of people

Industry=standardization of culture

ii) low/high art
• forces together ‘high’ and ‘low’ art
• thus Adorno continues in the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition
but Adorno (and the Frankfurt School) also radically diverge from that tradition

Adorno recognizes “the rebellious resistance inherent within [low art].”

such expressions of resistance are contained by the culture industry

iii) capitalist production (profit)

The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked into cultural forms.

thus the masses are regarded under the principle of their realization as value—i.e. as a profitable audience

B) Aesthetics (cultural form)

Adorno is in the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition thru. a shared concern to the aesthetics of culture

• aesthetics—the internal logic and organizational form of the object of art

KEY DIFFERENCE

1) Arnold/Leavis had a conservative aesthetic—culture reinforced the established order
2) Adorno has a progressive aesthetic—art unsettles the established order and facilitates radical social and economic transformation

Adorno is highly critical of the culture industry because of where it focused on the organizational form

In short, not on culture or art, but how to make it most profitable

i) Culture Industry

• focused on the external organization of production—distribution and mechanical reproduction
• i.e. the profitable commodification of culture

ii) Artists (and cultural critics)

• focused on the internal organization of the object itself
• i.e. the inner logic and form of the work of art itself

For Adorno, there are “laws of form demanded by aesthetic autonomy” which are either ignored or treated parasitically by the culture industry

Basic question: What happens to the aesthetic dimension of art/culture when it becomes first, and foremost a commodity in the culture industry?
C) Frankfurt School/critical theory vs. ‘culturalism’
Adorno is also differentiated from ‘culturalism’ in his aesthetic orientation
• *culturalism* took popular culture ‘seriously’ by focusing on it in the first place—it was rejected out of hand by the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition
• *Adorno (and the Frankfurt School/critical theory)* takes popular culture ‘seriously’ by more critically examining its aesthetic quality

Recall the focus of Hoggart and Williams on working class cultural activities themselves (i.e. bus trip to the ‘seaside’)

The culture industry thesis assumes a commodified relationship (i.e. culture as something you consume)

How does Adorno ‘take popular culture seriously’?
• by focusing on questions otherwise ‘repressed’ by the culture industry
• questions of quality
• questions of truth/untruth
• aesthetic levels

In short, critical analysis does not even begin until it gets past the surface level of popularity and uncritical reception

This critical analysis leads him to the next level of analysis—the negative effects on the culture industry on mass consciousness

D) ‘Consciousness’ produced by the culture industry
“The objectively binding order” of the culture industry is “the status quo”

i) uncritical consensus
• a general uncritical consensus under the rubric of advertising/consumption

ii) disregard for ‘the masses’
• the culture industry assumes a mass mentality
• furthermore, they treat the ‘mentality of the masses’ as if it were “given and unchanging”

iii) conformity not consciousness
• Adorno confers extraordinary power to the ‘ideology’ of the culture industry
• that is, he asserts that conformity has replaced consciousness
• the order that emerges is completely unreflexive
For example, Adorno writes that narratives of the culture industry are “exhortations to toes the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests.”

Like Gramsci, then, he assumes a correlation between the content of popular culture and dominant material interests.

Adorno’s bottom line: the content of the culture industry “strengthens blind, opaque authority.”

E) Stupefaction and ‘substitute gratification’
Adorno concludes that the overall effect of the culture industry is “the anti-enlightenment” and anti-democratic.

[The Culture Industry] impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves.

He considers this to be a basic precondition for democratic society.

Instead, the culture industry turns people into masses, then despises them while obstructing their potential for emancipation.

**Summary of Adorno and Frankfurt School**

1) Critical theory is important for reconceptualizing the relationship between culture and politics
   - previous Marxist analysis tended to limit the political to the *state* and *economy*
   - the Frankfurt School saw culture—in its everyday practices and concerns—as a site where ideology (the political) always operated.

2) But they were also criticized for their pessimistic perspective
   - does the culture industry really function in such a totalizing and unidirectional fashion?
   - does it play such a direct role of ‘thought control’ (unthinking conformity)?

3) Relatedly, do they have an adequate model of power?
   - does domination function so effectively?
   - what about the possibilities and practices of resistance?
2) Gramsci and Hegemony

We know from the Hall article (‘Two Paradigms’) that hegemony became perhaps the most important single concept for Cultural Studies thru. the late 70s and early 80s

It is favoured because it takes a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to the material and symbolic components of culture

Specifically, it does not posit a simple or mechanical determination of cultural and ideological expression (the symbolic) by the mode of production (the material)

Instead, while dominant meaning exists, it develops in complex and variegated struggles, and it always in process

Who is Antonio Gramsci?

- an Italian political and cultural theorist
- he was a peasant from Sardinia who went to university in Torino (home of FIAT) when workers were in a state of insurrection
- asked questions similar to Marx regarding the persistence of unequal social and economic relations
- theorized the rise of industrialization and Fascism
- jailed by Mussolini
- died there in 1937—but managed to write prodigiously (*The Prison Notebooks*)
Gramsci emphasized *agency* (the struggle inherent in hegemony) and rejected economic determinism (hence his focus on culture and ‘the struggle over meaning’)

**What is Hegemony?**
- from the Greek ‘egemon’ meaning ruler or leader (usually in regards to the state)
- in the 19th c. it was used in reference to one state’s dominance over another
- usage of the word hegemony changed in the 20th c. through the writings of Antonio Gramsci
- it refers to the ability of dominant classes to exercise social and cultural leadership

Capitalist society is reproduced not only thru. economic means (i.e. the mode of production) but thru. cultural means as well

Gramsci identifies hegemony as the key to understanding the cultural side
- what is unique is his focus not on the force of dominant power (i.e. coercion) but on *consent*
- Consent is attained by the ongoing construction of a symbolic ‘force field’ that establishes the ‘common sense’ of an age
  - denotes the exercise of power in the form of social, *cultural*, and intellectual leadership or direction
  - more about power in the form of persuasion, inducement, and incitement
  - thus culture (and media) are key to gaining hegemony

For hegemony to function, the particular is presented as being universal

That is, everyday culture functions in a way that renders particular class interests (organized into a dominant ‘hegemonic’ bloc) into an apparently natural, inevitable, eternal, and hence unarguable general interest.

Hegemony functions on a general cultural level but is also inscribed into institutions
- school, work, the law and the state all produce knowledge and meaning (establishing a logic of sense or the world around us, rendering it as *natural*)
- such institutions re typically captured by hegemonic blocs
The metaphor for hegemony is the *velvet glove for the iron fist*

**Summary of the key characteristics of hegemony**

- 1) dominant classes exercise social and cultural leadership in society
- 2) done in part thru. gaining consent form subordinate classes
- 3) dominant classes need to form temporary coalitions to attain such consent
- 4) key strategy therein is making particular interests (i.e. of capitalists) seem universal
- 5) functions on both the cultural and institutional level
- 6) functions best when it seems most natural
- 7) never fully set once and for all
- 8) complex arrangement of alliances or blocs, constantly formed and reformed

**3) Hebdige: Counter-hegemony and Subculture**

Hebdige's book *Subculture* made a significant impact on the study of youth culture

His basic thesis is that subcultures (formerly called ‘deviants’) like ‘punks’ appropriate the objects, spaces, and signs available to them within the larger systems around them and turn them against that very dominant order

These are called ‘counter-hegemonic’ cultural practices

Hebdige summarizes hegemony as the process thru which

- a provisional alliance (‘historical bloc’)
- can exert ‘total social authority’
- wherein subordinate groups
- submit to their social, cultural and intellectual leadership

Thru. this consent, the power of the dominant class appears legitimate and natural

But this normative power is always provisional, always in process—because it is always playing out amidst contested terrain and relations

He specifies a broad set of subcultural practices which actively contest hegemonic formations
Counter-hegemonic practices

- Hegemony is a valuable concept because it goes beyond the notion of ‘ruling ideas’ simply and easily enforced on everyone.
- Hegemony emphasizes struggle, denoting a dynamic, ongoing process, because it entails the constant negotiation and formation of blocs and alliances.
- Thus, it should come as no surprise that counter-hegemony, just like hegemony, always exists in multiple forms.
- In short, any oppositional practice can be counter hegemonic.