

Marxist theory on Culture

Anywhere and everywhere you travel around the world, you would feel a sense of different kind of cultures compared to your own. Culture can be defined as all the knowledge and values shared by a society and their way of life. There are many factors in which culture include, for example, different types of food, language, the dominant value of society, religious beliefs, etc. In British society, the majority would follow the same way of life, for example, the dominant language (English), dominant religion (Christianity), going to pubs, Shakespeare, etc. Karl Marx who was a sociologist over a century ago, he had a belief that, culture is that the most powerful members of a society, are those who live in the ruling class. These members set up the culture of a society in order to promote the interests of the ruling class and capitalism. A functionalist sociologist called Emile Durkheim argued against the theory of Marx. However, not only Durkheim but Postmodernism argues against Marxist theory on culture.

Karl Marx believed that culture focuses on the economic organisation of modern societies, the fact that societies like the UK are capitalist's societies characterized by class inequality in wealth, income and power. Social class refers to the amount of economic power, i.e. wealth. He saw capitalist societies as characterized by class inequality and conflict. He stated that there are two groups, one group called the Bourgeoisie (known as the ruling class - owned and control means of production) and the other group are the Proletariats (known as the working class – labour used in order to make an even greater wealth). The ruling class transmit their ideas via the superstructure, i.e. media, to ensure the status quo is maintained. However, there are evidence to support the idea of religion, ethnicity and nationalism may be as important as causes of inequality. Therefore, this theory can be shown to be overemphasising social class as the main source of conflict in modern societies. Marxist also suggested that people are passive towards the ruling class. However, in modern society people are no longer passive as we see strikes and protest against pay, working condition, etc. There are also people that remain passive due to the benefit capitalism bring for them such as living standards and materialism. Mass culture is produced for and marketed to the mass of production. This is seen as 'dumbed down', trivial, bland and superficial. Examples of this include, Hollywood films, reality TV shows, newspapers, etc. Mass culture can also be referred to the cultural taste of the working class. The beliefs of the Frankfurt School are that a mainstream mass culture was emerging in which the majority consumed similar kinds of cultural products and lifestyles. So as a results of this there has been a break down of traditional cultures and little individuality. Consumerism and cultural messages are encouraged by the mass media, people watch TV and the advertisement of goods makes them consume them when they are not an urgent requirement and so creates false needs. The mass media also transmits limited and bias views. Marcuse argues that this may lead to create a one dimensional thought, this is were people would not be able to imagine another way of thinking or alternatives to the status quo. It can also be stated that this type of mass media can be 'dumbed down' and simplified in order to make it easier for people to understand it, so this enables to appeal to a mass audience. Mass culture is said to be benefiting capitalism as it encourages consumerism and materialism so people go out and buy products at false needs. The industry would benefit from this as they are making money. Marxist would support

the views stated above of mass culture as the ruling class benefit in every way and consumerism helps the ruling class make money. Another point can be that work force needs to be passive, not go on strikes and work hard, so the status quo is maintained.

Although, Popular culture is similar to mass culture as they both support the concept of cultural forms enjoyed by many people, it criticises the idea that the majority are passive. This is commercially produced and examples include films, TV, programmes, magazines, etc. The Frankfurt school view mass culture to be making people passive and accepting capitalism. Whereas, popular cultures goes against the views of the Frankfurt school as it encourages people to be active, for example, punks (rebellion), so popular culture is seen to be challenging the status quo. An example of activeness from people around globe can be of the protests of the Palestine and Israel war where millions upon millions around the globe protested towards the freedom of Palestine.

Furthermore, a functionalist sociologist Emile Durkheim believed that society and culture was more important than the individual. He stated this as society exists before the individual in born into it and unchanged when the individual dies. In 1893 Durkheim noted that modern industrial societies are characterized by social order rather than chaos or anarchy. The behaviour of an individual is usually patterned and predictable. He argued that societies members are united by a value consensus (share the same cultural values and goal). So Durkheim is going against the Marxist conflict theory (this is the main relationship between the two social classes as they have different interests) and has stated his own Consensus theory. However, this belief of Durkheim has been criticised for exaggerating cultural consensus and hence social order. Interpretivist sociologists are critical of his theory as he sees people less important than society and culture. There is little acknowledgement that people play an active role in shaping culture.

Moreover, Postmodernism argues that in the past twenty to thirty years there have been many social changes. There are three main changes that have occurred and these are culture, identity and globalisation. Culture has changed tremendously as society has got much wealthier just has cultural industries. As we now are a media saturated culture all we care about is image and consumerism. Postmodernism culture is about mixing and matching contradictory styles like mixing music from different eras. In the past twenty to thirty years identity has changed and image and style has become more important than form and content. Our identities are as a result of mainstream popular culture which celebrates diversity and consumerism. For example, the older generation think more about their family and background class, whereas the new generation think more about what clothes they are wearing and being in the right places. Globalisation has changed vastly in the past thirty forty years. Global culture is challenging nationalism as a source of identity, through electronic communication, e-mail, telephone, etc. transitional companies include Sony, McDonalds, Nike, etc. Global Marketing includes cinema, music, computer games which all contribute towards consumption. So as a result, postmodernism criticises the Marxist view on culture and it states that people are starting to become more and more active.

In Conclusion, the theory of Karl Marx is that people in society are passive and are controlled by the ruling class. The ruling class use the superstructure to send certain messages and ideas and ensure that the status quo is maintained. However, many sociologist have argued against this, a sociologist called Emile Durkheim argued that

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people in society are become more active, this can be supported by strikes being held for higher pay or better working conditions or protests against certain countries such as Israel. However, there are still those who are passive as it benefits capitalism brings such as living standards and materialism. Durkheim argues his consensus theory against Marx's conflict theory. Postmodernism also argue that people now have become more active. This is because people now can work part-time, choose their own hours or work from home. So postmodernism state that society has changed vastly overall such as work, identity, culture, globalisation and knowledge. Overall, the Marxist theory of culture can be challenged against by functionalist such as Durkheim and Postmodernists.