

Discuss giving examples, how culture shapes our understandings of the social world

Culture is concerned with aspects of the human society, which are learned rather than the aspects, which are inherited. These fundamentals are shared in members of a society and allow an understanding between individuals of a society. They locate shared context in which people in a society live out their lives. A society's culture consists of intangible aspects and tangible aspects. The intangible aspects being the beliefs, ideas and values and the tangible aspects being the objects technology or symbols, which correspond to that content. Culture is seen as epiphenomenon.

The mass culture is seen as an ideological system. Ideology is shared beliefs and ideas, which operate to rationalize the interests of groups. Ideologies can be found in all societies in which there are methodical and inbuilt inequalities among groups. The notion of ideology has a close correlation with that of power, since ideological systems assist to legitimise the degree of difference of power held by groups.<sup>1</sup> The word ideology was first used by a French writer called Destutt De Tracy. He said it meant a 'science of ideas'. The idea of media is very closely related to ideology. The rise of mass media manipulates our thinking.

Karl Marx was born in Prussia in 1818 and he received his formal education at the universities of Bonn and Berlin, where he discovered the work of Hegel, a philosopher whose ideas influenced Marx's own intellectual development. Marx's so-called 'materialist conception of history' holds that societies can be understood primarily by looking at the way that mankind organises production of the basic wants and necessities of life, and the social relations arising thereof - 'In order to meet its fundamental material needs, a society develops an economic base and social classes... How it does this conditions the whole social, political, legal, moral and intellectual life' (5, p137). It should be noted, however, that although this economic base provides the main foundation for the 'superstructure' of the wider social system, Marx does not deny the existence of causal factors which operate in the other direction, although these are held to be much less significant. Hence, the most powerful stimulus for social change comes into being when the forces of production develop to the extent that they become incompatible with and are hampered by the existing structure of society, ultimately leading to the eclipse of the latter and the emergence of a new social order. In Marx's view, European civilization had passed through several distinct epochs as defined by the nature of the forces and relations of production, beginning with 'primitive communal' societies and culminating with the current system of capitalism, characterized by the sale of labour power as a commodity. Marx argued that internal contradictions in this system would in turn precipitate its downfall, giving way to a new system which he termed socialism. The most powerful factor in this eventual downfall was held to be that those owning the means of production and distribution (the bourgeoisie) achieved their success and superior status through the economic exploitation of a large class of workers (the proletariat), who would eventually come to understand their subservient position within the system and take steps to destroy it.

Marx regarded ideology as 'a false consciousness'. It wasn't Marx who coined this term it was in fact Engels who coined the term 'false consciousness'. Marx sees religion as ideological, it teaches the unfortunate to be satisfied with their lot. The

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<sup>1</sup> Giddens A (2001) Sociology (Cambridge: Polity Press) Page 464

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social forecaster should expose the distortions of ideology so as to let the helpless to get an accurate viewpoint on their lives and take actions to develop their conditions of life. Thompson viewed De Tracy's and Marx's view as the 'critical conception of ideology'. Thompson argued that the critical conception is preferred because it links ideology with power. Marx's idea of recognizing ideology as a false consciousness. The main criticism against Marx's theory may be of Gramsci. He thought that false consciousness could said to be <sup>2</sup>'presented and expounded as an immediate expression of structure and must be contested as primitive infantilism'.

<sup>3</sup>Gramsci defines hegemony as a cultural and ideological means whereby the dominant in society, including basically but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous' content of secondary groups including the working class. Gramsci contrasts hegemony with coercion, therefore showing their mutual importance. He sees hegemony as one aspect of social control arising out of social conflict. Hegemony is accepted and works because it relies upon the granting of concessions to subordinate groups, which do not pose a threat to the overall framework of domination.

According to Gramsci the liberal, democratic societies of western capitalism are different in that they have relatively weaker states but stronger and more complex civil societies, which reinforce the hegemony of the dominant group.

Gramsci's hegemony is not a fixed and finite set of ideas, which have a constant function to perform. Clearly hegemony secures the dominance of the most powerful classes and groups in society and does so by even determining what is called common sense. None the less it emerges from social and class struggles which it in turn shapes and influences and its hold over subordinate groups can never be fully guaranteed.

The fears and anxieties expressed by critics of mass culture have been equally directed at a threat of Americanisation. The reason for this is that American popular culture is seen to embody all that is wrong with mass culture. Mass culture is thought to arise from the mass production and consumption of culture. Since it is the capitalist society most closely associated with these processes it is relatively easy to identify America as the home of mass culture. So much mass culture comes from America that if it is a threat then Americanisation is a threat aswell. For domestic critics of mass culture, Americanisation threatens not just aesthetic standards and cultural values but national culture aswell. Matthew Arnold in his book wrote 'in things of the mind and in culture and totality America instead of surpassing us all falls short'. Arnold's fears about Americanisation were part of his concern that democracy should not just give power to the masses but should entail a polity guided and directed by the state and a properly constituted culture. As such the latter should involve the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know on all the matters, which most concern us the best, which has been thought and said in the world. The equation that Arnold draws between Americanisation and mass democracy rather than Americanisation and mass culture. However many have suggested that democratisation and mass culture are not that easily distinguished from each other.

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<sup>2</sup> Gramsci cited in Smith and Hoare (1971)

<sup>3</sup> Strinati D, (2004) An introduction to theories of popular culture 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

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Leavis was a critic of mass society and mass culture and saw America as an embodiment of both of these dangers. He saw mass society as involving mass production and standardisation generating an almost irrepressible shift to a mass culture dominated by the mass media. This involved the hypnotic pleasures of a superficial culture and the exploitation of a ruthless and uneducated public, which consequently became indifferent to the standard of great Art. Americanisation was therefore the problem for Leavis because American society had the most developed mass culture and thus represented the future towards which other comparable societies such as Britain were heading. 'American conditions are the conditions of modern civilisation even if the drift has gone further on the other side of the Atlantic than on this'.

The criticisms that can be made of this particular understanding of Americanisation can be used to introduce a more general critique of mass culture theory. There are other ways of understanding ways of Americanisation in Britain. The debate over the nature and effects of Americanisation in Britain can be traced back to the nineteenth century. But it seems to have become more significant and more contentious after 1945. Hebdige fears about Americanisation in the post war period were linked to fears about the threat posed to traditional intellectual elites and their judgements about taste by the levelling down process. Ideas about America being more populist and democratic fed into concerns about increasing working class affluence and consumption which threatened the intellectual arbitration of taste and middle class consumption as forms of symbolic and positional power. These fears about Americanisation have not been confirmed to a backward looking and elitist conservatism.

The distinctions drawn by mass culture critics between mass and high culture are not as clear cut or as static as they claim. The boundaries drawn between popular culture and art or between mass high and folk culture are constantly being blurred and changed. They are not necessarily given or consistently objective and historically constant but are often indistinct and historically variable. Mass culture theory tends to condemn mass culture as a whole. F.R. Leavis for example is said to have dismissed cinema as a serious cultural form though MacDonald was prepared to count some examples of cinema such as Eisenstein's films as art.

A way in which culture shapes our understanding of the social world is through mass media. Through media people's thoughts are manipulated. This can be through TV, radio or any other form of media.

The most modern type of mass media to emerge is the cinema and radio. Popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. They raised fears about the commercialisation of culture and regimes for mass propaganda. The existence of highly efficient means of reaching large numbers of people within societies with centralised, totalitarian political systems was seen by many as another way along with coercion, of further establishing such systems and suppressing the democratic alternatives. Mass media such as radio and film transmitted the official ideology of the fascist state because they could be controlled centrally and broadcast to the population at large. The concept of mass society has formed one important perspective on the role of mass media and mass culture in modern capitalist societies. The claim of mass society theory refers to the disruptive consequences of

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industrialisation and urbanisation. The rise of large scale and mechanised industrial production, and the growth of massive populated cities are argued to have destabilised and then eroded the societies and values, which previously held people together. The theory argues that industrialisation and urbanisation serve to create what is called atomisation. This defines what is meant by a mass society. Mass society consists of atomised people who lack any meaningful or morally logical relationships with each other. These people are not conceived of purely and simply as isolated atoms, but the links between them are said to be purely contractual, distant and irregular rather than close and well integrated. Mass culture is thought to arise from the mass production and consumption of culture. Mass media was once thought to hold a mirror up to a wider social reality, and thereby reflect it. Society has become included within the mass media. It is no longer even a question of the media distorting reality since this implies there is a reality outside the surface simulations of the media which can be distorted and this is precisely what is at issue according to post modern theory.

The feminist theory has been in growing interest. It can be argued that there have been three strands of feminism. One being liberal feminism, which criticises the unequal and exploitative employment and representation of women in the media and culture. Cultural representation of women in the mass media it is argued support and perpetuate the prevailing sexual division of labour and orthodox conceptions of femininity and masculinity. The symbolic annihilation of women practiced by the mass media confirms that roles of wife, mother and housewife etc are the fate of women in a patriarchal society. Women are socialised into performing these roles by cultural representations, which attempt to make them appear to be the natural prerogative of women.

Thin recent years the view of women as passive consumers manipulated into desiring commodities and the luxuries of consumption by the culture industries has begun to be challenged by feminist theory and research. Within the context of the emergence of cultural populism it has been argued that this notion of passive consumers undervalues the active role they play, the way their appreciation and interpretation of cultural consumption may diverge from that intended by the culture industries and ignores how consumption cannot simply be understood as a process of subordination. Consumption is a vital issue for feminists since women have often been defined as the main group of consumers by advertisers and more generally by cultural theory. Consumption does not simply represent the power of hegemonic forces in the definition of woman's role as consumer but is a site of negotiated meanings of resistance and of appropriation as well as of subjection and exploitation.

Ideology can be seen as a critique because it can lead to false assumptions. An example of this may be men control power, higher earnings, and higher status. To justify these statements arguments are given out which are seen as lies such as women are weaker than men are less rational etc.

Overall I think that culture shapes our understandings of the social world in many ways. However all societies don't all have the same thoughts about the social world. Also having different religions may also influence a person's understandings of the social world. History of a society can have an impact of a persons understanding of the social world. For example football in the UK has always been

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seen as part of our culture whereas a country like Ethiopia may never seen football as important factor of their culture. The Media is part of our culture in the UK and the media manipulates our thoughts. Another factor may be clothes. In the UK it is traditional clothes may be seen as a pair of jeans and a top whereas in Bangladesh their traditional clothing is saris. Culture plays a big role in our lives and helps us understand the social world in different ways according to our cultures and religions even. This is because we focus a lot on traditions passed on from generation to generation.

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