

Cultural Imperialism in the Late 20th Century

By James Petras

Rebelión^[1]

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Introduction

U.S cultural imperialism has two major goals, one economic and the other political: to capture markets for its cultural commodities and to establish hegemony by shaping popular consciousness. The export of entertainment is one of the most important sources of capital accumulation and global profits displacing manufacturing exports. In the political sphere, cultural imperialism plays a major role in dissociating people from their cultural roots and traditions of solidarity, replacing them with media created needs which change with every publicity campaign. The political effect is to alienate people from traditional class and community bonds, atomizing and separating individuals from each other.

Cultural imperialism emphasizes the segmentation of the working class: stable workers are encouraged to dissociate themselves from temporary workers, who in turn separate themselves from the unemployed, who are further segmented among themselves within the 'underground economy'. Cultural imperialism encourages working people to think of themselves as part of a hierarchy emphasizing minute differences in life style, in race and gender, with those below them rather than the vast inequalities that separate them from those above.

The principal target of cultural imperialism is the political and economic exploitation of youth. Imperial entertainment and advertisement target young people who are most vulnerable to U.S. commercial propaganda. The message is simple and direct: 'modernity' is associated with consuming U.S. media products. Youth represent a major market for U.S. cultural export and they are most susceptible to the consumerist-individualist propaganda. The mass media manipulates adolescent rebelliousness by appropriating the language of the left and channeling discontent

into consumer extravagances. Cultural imperialism focuses on youth not only as a market but also for political reasons: to undercut a political threat in which personal rebellion could become political revolt against economic as well as cultural forms of control.

Over the past decade progressive movements confront a paradox: while the great majority of the people in the Third World experience deteriorating living standards, growing social and personal insecurity and decay in public services (while affluent minorities prosper as never before) the subjective response to these conditions has been sporadic revolts, sustained, but local activities and large scale protests of short duration. In a word, there is a profound gap between the growing inequalities and socio-economic conditions on the one hand and the weaknesses of revolutionary or radical subjective responses. The maturing 'objective conditions' in the Third World have not been accompanied by the growth of subjective forces capable of transforming the state or society. It is clear that there is no 'automatic- relationship between socio-economic regression and socio-political transformation. Cultural intervention (in the broadest sense including ideology, consciousness, social action) is the crucial link converting objective conditions into conscious political intervention. Paradoxically, imperial policy-makers seem to have understood the importance of cultural dimensions of political practice far better than their adversaries.

Cultural Domination and Global Exploitation

Imperialism cannot be understood merely as an economic-military system of control and exploitation. Cultural domination is an integral dimension to any sustained system of global exploitation.

In relation to the Third World, cultural imperialism can be defined as the systematic penetration and domination of the cultural life of the popular classes by the ruling class of the West in order to reorder the values, behavior, institutions and identity of the oppressed peoples to conform with the interests of the imperial classes. Cultural imperialism has taken both 'traditional' and modern forms. In past centuries, the Church, educational system, and public authorities played a major role in inculcating native peoples with ideas of submission and loyalty in the name of divine or absolutist principles. While these 'traditional' mechanisms of cultural imperialism still operate, new modern instrumentalities rooted in contemporary institutions have become increasingly central to imperial domination.

The mass media, publicity, advertisement and secular entertainers and intellectuals play a major role today. In the contemporary world, Hollywood, CNN and Disneyland are more influential than the Vatican, the Bible or the public relations rhetoric of

political figures. Cultural penetration is closely linked to politico-military domination and economic exploitation. U.S. military interventions in support of the genocidal regimes in Central America which protect its economic interests are accompanied by intense cultural penetration. U.S. financed evangelicals invade Indian villages to inculcate messages of submission among the peasant-Indian victims. International conferences are sponsored for domesticated intellectuals to discuss 'democracy and market'. Escapist television programs sow illusions from "another world". Cultural penetration is the extension of counter-insurgency warfare by non-military means.

New Features of Cultural Colonialism

Contemporary cultural colonialism [CCC] is distinct from past practices in several senses:

- (1) It is oriented toward capturing mass audiences, not just converting elites.
- (2) The mass media, particularly television, invade the household and function from the 'inside' and 'below' as well as from 'outside' and above.
- (3) CCC is global in scope and homogenizing in its impact: the pretense of universalism serves to mystify the symbols, goals and interests of the imperial power.
- (4) The mass media as instruments of cultural imperialism today are 'private' only in the formal sense: the absence of formal state ties provides a legitimate cover for the private media projecting imperial state interests as 'news' or 'entertainment'.
- (5) Under contemporary imperialism, political interests are projected through non-imperial subjects. -News reports' focus on the personal biographies of mercenary peasant-soldiers in Central America and smiling working class U.S. blacks in the Gulf War.
- (6) Because of the increasing gap between the promise of peace and prosperity under unregulated capital and the reality of increasing misery and violence, the mass media have narrowed even further the possibilities of alternative perspectives in their programs. Total cultural control is the counterpart of the total separation between the brutality of real-existing capitalism and the illusory promises of the free market.
- (7) To paralyze collective responses, cultural colonialism seeks to destroy national identities or empty them of substantive socio-economic content. To rupture the solidarity of communities, cultural imperialism promotes the cult of 'modernity' as conformity with external symbols. In the name of 'individuality', social bonds are

attacked and personalities are reshaped according to the dictates of media messages. While imperial arms disarticulate civil society, and banks pillage the economy, the imperial media provide individuals with escapist identities.

Cultural imperialism provides devastating demonological caricatures of revolutionary adversaries, while encouraging collective amnesia of the massive violence of pro-Western countries. The Western mass media never remind their audience of the murder by anti-communist pro-U.S. regimes of 100,000 Indians in Guatemala, 75,000 working people in El Salvador, 50,000 victims in Nicaragua. The mass media, cover up the great disasters resulting from the introduction of the market in Eastern Europe and the ex-U.S.S.R., leaving hundreds of millions impoverished.

Mass Media: Propaganda and Capital Accumulation

The mass media is one of the principal sources of wealth and power for U.S. capital as it extends its communication networks throughout the world. An increasing percentage of the richest North Americans derive their wealth from the mass media. Among the 400 wealthiest Americans the percentage deriving their wealth from the mass media increased from 9.5 percent in 1982 to 18 percent in 1989. Today almost one out of five of the richest North Americans derive their wealth from the mass media. Cultural capitalism has displaced manufacturing as a source of wealth and influence in the U.S.

The mass media have become an integral part of the U.S. system of global political and social control, as well as a major source of super profits. As the levels of exploitation, inequality and poverty increase in the Third World, Western controlled mass communications operate to convert a critical public into a passive mass. Western media celebrities and mass entertainment have become important ingredients in deflecting potential political unrest. The Reagan presidency highlighted the centrality of media manipulation through highly visible but politically reactionary entertainers, a phenomena which has spread to Latin American and Asia.

There is a direct relation between the increase in the number of television sets in Latin America, the decline of income and the decrease in mass struggle. In Latin America between 1980, and 1990, the number of television sets per inhabitant increased 40 percent,, while the real average income declined 40 percent, and a host of neo-liberal political candidates heavily dependent on television images won the presidency. The increasing penetration of the mass media among the poor, the growing investments and profits by U.S. corporations in the sale of cultural commodities and the saturation of mass audiences with messages that provide the poor with vicarious experiences of individual consumption and adventure defines the

current challenge of cultural colonialism.

U.S. media messages are alienating to Third World people in a double sense. They create illusions of 'international' and 'cross class' bonds. Through television images a false intimacy and an imaginary link is established between the successful subjects of the media and the impoverished spectators in the 'barrios'. These linkages provide a channel through which the discourse of individual solutions for private problems is propagated. The message is clear. The victims are blamed for their own poverty, success depends on individual efforts. Major TV satellites, U.S. and European mass media outlets in Latin America avoid any critique of the politico-economic origins and consequences of the new cultural imperialism that has temporarily disoriented and immobilized millions of impoverished Latin Americans. Imperialism and the Politics of Language Cultural imperialism has developed a dual strategy to counter the Left and establishing hegemony. On the one hand, it seeks to corrupt the political language of the left; on the other it acts to desensitize the general public to the atrocities committed by Western powers.

During the 1980's the western mass media systematically appropriated basic ideas of the left, emptied them of their original content and refilled them with a reactionary message. For example, the mass media described politicians intent in restoring capitalism and stimulating inequalities as "reformers" or "revolutionaries", while their opponents were labeled "conservatives". Cultural imperialism sought to promote ideological confusion and political disorientation by reversing the meaning of political language. Many progressive individuals became disoriented by this ideological manipulation. As a result, they were vulnerable to the claims of imperial ideologues who argue that the terms "Right" and "Left" lacked any meaning, that the distinctions have lost significance, that ideologies no longer have meaning. By corrupting the language of the Left and distorting the content of the Left and Right, cultural imperialists hope to undermine the political appeals and political practices of the anti-imperialist movements.

The second strategy of cultural imperialism was to de-sensitize the public; to make mass murder by the Western states routine, acceptable activities. Mass bombings in Iraq were presented in the form of video games. By trivializing crimes against humanity, the public is desensitized from its traditional belief that human suffering is wrong. By emphasizing the modernity of new techniques of warfare, the mass media glorify existing elite power - the techno-warfare of the West. Cultural imperialism today includes "news" reports in which the weapons of mass destruction are presented with human attributes while the victims in the Third World are faceless "aggressors-terrorists".

Global cultural manipulation is sustained by the corruption of the language of politics. In Eastern Europe, speculators and mafioso seizing land, enterprises and wealth are described as "reformers". Contrabandists are described as "innovating entrepreneurs". In the West the concentration of absolute power to hire and fire in the hands of management and the increased vulnerability and insecurity of labor is called "labor flexibility". In the Third World the selling of national public enterprise to giant multi-national monopolies is described as "breaking-up monopolies". "Reconversion" is the euphemism for reversion to 19th century condition of labor stripped of all social benefits. "Restructuring" is the return to specialization in raw materials or the transfer of income from production to speculation. "Deregulation" is the shift in power to regulate the economy from the national welfare state to the international banking, multi-national power elite. "Structural adjustments" in Latin America mean transferring resources to investors and lowering payments to labor. The concepts of the left (reform, agrarian reform, structural changes) were originally oriented toward redistributing income. These concepts have been coopted and turned into symbols for reconcentrating wealth, income and power into the hands of Western elites. And of course all the private cultural institutions of imperialism amplify and propagate this Orwellian disinformation. Contemporary cultural imperialism has debased the language of liberation, converting it into symbols of reaction.

Cultural Terrorism: The Tyranny of Liberalism

Just as western state terrorism attempts to destroy social movements, revolutionary governments and disarticulate civil society, economic terrorism as practiced by the IMF and private bank consortia, destroy local industries, erode public ownership and savages wage and salaried household. Cultural terrorism is responsible for the physical displacement of local cultural activities and artists. Cultural terrorism by preying on the psychological weaknesses and deep anxieties of vulnerable Third World peoples, particularly their sense of being "backward", "traditional" and oppressed, projects new images of "mobility" and "free expression", destroying old bonds to family and community, while fastening new chains of arbitrary authority linked to corporate power and commercial markets.

The attacks on traditional restraints and obligations is a mechanism by which the capitalist market and state becomes the ultimate center of exclusive power. Cultural imperialism in the name of "self expression" tyrannizes Third World people fearful of being labeled "traditional", seducing and manipulating them by the phony images of classless "modernity". Cultural imperialism questions all pre-existing relations that are obstacles to the one and only sacred modern deity: the market. Third World peoples are entertained, coerced, titillated to be modern', to submit to the demands of capitalist market to discard comfortable, traditional, loose fitting clothes for ill fitting

unsuitable tight blue jeans.

Cultural imperialism functions best through colonized intermediaries, cultural collaborators. The prototype imperial collaborators are the upwardly mobile Third World professionals who imitate the style of their patrons. These collaborators are servile to the West and arrogant to their people, prototypical authoritarian personalities. Backed by the banks and multinationals, they wield immense power through the state and local mass media. Imitative of the West, they are rigid in their conformity to the rules of unequal competition, opening their country and peoples to savage exploitation in the name of free trade. Among the prominent cultural collaborators are the institutional intellectuals who deny class domination and imperial class warfare behind the jargon of objective social science. They fetishize the market as the absolute arbiter of good and evil. Behind the rhetoric of 'regional cooperation', the conformist intellectuals attack working class and national institutions which constrain capital movements -- their supporters isolated and marginalized.

Today throughout the Third World, Western funded Third World intellectuals have embraced the ideology of concertation (class collaboration). The notion of interdependence has replaced imperialism. And the unregulated world market is presented as the only alternative for development. The irony is that today as never before the "market" has been least favorable to the Third World. Never have the U.S., Europe and Japan been so aggressive in exploiting the Third World. The cultural alienation of the institutional intellectuals from the global realities is a byproduct of the ascendancy of Western cultural imperialism. For those critical intellectuals who refuse to join the celebration of the market, who are outside of the official conference circuits, the challenge is to once again return to the class and anti-imperialist struggle.

North Americanization and the Myth of an International Culture

One of the great deceptions of our times is the notion of 'internationalization' of ideas, markets and movements. It has become fashionable to evoke terms like "globalization" or "internationalization" to justify attacks on any or all forms of solidarity, community, and/or social values. Under the guise of "internationalism", Europe and the U.S. have become dominant exporters of cultural forms most conducive to depoliticizing and trivializing everyday existence. The images of individual mobility, the "self-made person", the emphasis on "self-centered existence" (mass produced and distributed by the U.S. mass media industry) now have become major instruments in dominating the Third World.

Neo-liberalism continues to thrive not because it solves problems, but because it serves the interest of the wealthy and powerful and resonates among some sectors of the impoverished self-employed who crowd the streets of the Third World. The North Americanization of Third World cultures takes place with the blessing and support of the national ruling classes because it contributes to stabilize their rule. The new cultural norms -- the private over the public, the individual over social, the sensational and violent over everyday struggles and social realities -- all contribute to inculcating precisely the egocentric values that undermine collective action. The culture of images, of transitory experiences, of sexual conquest, works against reflection, commitment and shared feelings of affection and solidarity. The North Americanization of culture means focusing popular attention on celebrities, personalities and private gossip -- not on social depth, economic substance and the human condition. Cultural imperialism distracts from power relation and erodes collective forms of social action.

The media culture that glorifies the 'provisional' reflects the rootlessness of U.S. capitalism -- its power to hire and fire, to move capital without regard for communities. The myth of "freedom of mobility" reflects the incapacity of people to establish and consolidate community roots in the face of the shifting demands of capital. North American culture glorifies transient, impersonal relations as "freedom" when in fact these conditions reflect the anomie and bureaucratic subordination of a mass of individuals to the power of corporate capital. North Americanization involves a wholesale assault on traditions of solidarity in the name of modernity, attacks on class loyalties in the name of individualism, the debasement of democracy through massive media campaigns focusing on personalities.

The new cultural tyranny is rooted in the omnipresent repetitive singular discourse of the market, of a homogenized culture of consumption, of a debased electoral system. The new media tyranny stands alongside the hierarchical state and economic institutions that reach from the board rooms of the international banks to the villages in the Andes. The secret of the success of North American cultural penetration of the Third World is its capacity to fashion fantasies to escape from misery, that the very system of economic and military domination generates. The essential ingredients of the new cultural imperialism is the fusion of commercialism-sexuality-conservatism each presented as idealized expressions of private needs, of individual self-realization. To some Third World people immersed in everyday dead end jobs, struggles for everyday survival, in the midst of squalor and degradation, the fantasies of North American media, like the evangelist, portray "something better", a hope in a future better life -- or at least the vicarious pleasure of watching others enjoying it.

Impact of Cultural Imperialism

If we want to understand the absence of revolutionary transformation, despite the maturing of revolutionary conditions, we must reconsider the profound psychological impact of state violence, political terror and the deep penetration of cultural/ideological values propagated by the imperial countries and internalized by the oppressed peoples. The state violence of the 1970's and early 1980's created long term, large scale psychic damage -- fear of radical initiatives, distrust of collectivities, a sense of impotence before established authorities -- even as the same authorities are hated. Terror turned "people inward" toward private domains.

Subsequently, neo-liberal policies, a form of "economic terrorism", resulted in the closing of factories, the abolition of legal protection of labor, the growth of temporary work, the multiplication of low paid individual enterprises. These policies further fragmented working class and urban communities. In this context of fragmentation, distrust and privatization, the cultural message of imperialism found fertile fields to exploit vulnerable peoples' sensibilities, encouraging and deepening personal alienation, self-centered pursuits and individual competition over ever scarce resources.

Cultural imperialism and the values it promotes has played a major role in preventing exploited individuals from responding collectively to their deteriorating conditions. The symbols, images and ideologies that have spread to the Third World are major obstacles to the conversion of class exploitation and growing immiseration into class conscious bases for collective action. The great victory of imperialism is not only the material profits, but its conquest of the inner space of consciousness of the oppressed directly through the mass media and indirectly through the capture (or surrender) of its intellectual and political class. Insofar as a revival of mass revolutionary politics is possible, it must begin with open warfare not only with the conditions of exploitation but with culture that subjects its victims.

Limits of Cultural Imperialism

Against the pressures of cultural colonialism is the reality principle: the personal experience of misery and exploitation imposed by Western multinational banks, the police/military repression enforced by U.S. supplied arms. Everyday realities which the escapist media can never change. Within the consciousness of the Third World peoples there is a constant struggle between the demon of individual escape (cultivated by the mass media) and the intuitive knowledge that collective action and responsibility is the only practical response. In times of ascending social mobilizations, the virtue of solidarity takes precedence; in times of defeat and decline, the demons of individual rapacity are given license.

There are absolute limits in the capacity of cultural imperialism to distract and mystify people beyond which popular rejection sets in. The TV "table of plenty" contrasts with the experience of the empty kitchen; the amorous escapades of media personalities crash against a houseful of crawling, crying hungry children. In the street confrontations, Coca Cola becomes a Molotov cocktail. The promise of affluence becomes an affront to those who are perpetually denied. Prolonged impoverishment and widespread decay erode the glamour and appeal of the fantasies of the mass media. The false promises of cultural imperialism become the objects of bitter jokes relegated to another time and place.

The appeals of cultural imperialism are limited by the enduring ties of collectivities -- local and regional -- which have their own values and practices. Where class, racial, gender and ethnic bonds endure and practices of collective action are strong, the influence of the mass media are limited or rejected.

To the extent that preexisting cultures and traditions exist, they form a "closed circle" which integrates social and cultural practices that look inward and downward, not upward and outward. In many communities there is a clear rejection of the "modernist" developmental- individualist discourse associated with the supremacy of the market. The historical roots for sustained solidarity and anti-imperial movements are found in cohesive ethnic and occupational communities; mining towns, fishing and forestry villages, industrial concentrations in urban centers. Where work, community and class converge with collective cultural traditions and practices, cultural imperialism retreats. The effectiveness of cultural imperialism does not depend merely on its technical skills of manipulation, but on the capacity for the state to brutalize and atomize the populace, to deprive it of its hopes and collective faith in egalitarian societies.

Cultural liberation involves not merely "empowering" individuals or classes, but is dependent on the development of a socio-political force capable of confronting the state terror that precedes cultural conquest. Cultural autonomy depends on social power and social power is perceived by the ruling classes as a threat to economic and state power. Just as cultural struggle is rooted in values of autonomy, community and solidarity which are necessary to create the consciousness for social transformations, political and military power is necessary to sustain the cultural bases for class and national identities. Most important, the Left must recreate a faith and vision of a new society built around spiritual as well as material values: values of beauty and not only work. Solidarity linked to generosity and dignity. Where modes of production are subordinated to efforts to strengthen and deepen longstanding personal bonds and friendship.

Socialism must recognize the longings to be alone to be intimate as well as to be social and collective. Above all, the new vision must inspire people because it resonates with their desire not only to be free from domination but free to create a meaningful personal life informed by affective non-instrumental relations that transcend everyday work even as it inspires people to continue to struggle. Cultural imperialism thrives as much on novelty, transitory relations and personal manipulation, but never on a vision of authentic, intimate ties based on personal honesty, gender equality and social solidarity. Personal images mask mass state killings, just as technocratic rhetoric rationalize weapons of mass destruction ('intelligent bombs'). Cultural imperialism in the era of 'democracy' must falsify reality in the imperial country to justify aggression -- by converting victims into aggressors and aggressors into victims.

More Information on Empire?^[2]

More General Analysis on Empire^[3]

Links

1. <http://www.rebellion.org/>
2. <https://www.globalpolicy.org/empire/index.htm>
3. <https://www.globalpolicy.org/empire/analysis/index.htm>

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