Media, Rising Consumer Culture and the Working Class

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“Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically. In both cases the same thing can be seen in innumerable places, and the mechanical repetition of the same culture product has come to be the same as that of the propaganda slogan. In both cases the standards are striking yet familiar, the easy yet catchy, the skilful yet simple; the objective is to overpower the customer, who is perceived as absent-minded or resistant” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/1998, p163).

With the globalization of the world economy, consumer culture has truly become an international culture (Lury 1996; Belk 1988; Ritzer 2004). Theorists are acknowledging that the culture of modern day consumption, which started in the west, has taken deep roots across the world (Belk 1996; Venkatesh 1994). It is being argued that consumption is shaping human behavior in today’s world of ‘free markets’ in an unprecedented manner (Bauman 1996).

Media is one of the most important institutions of modernity. As Appadurai (1996) observes, ‘mediascapes’ play a significant role in influencing the global reality in terms of cultural flows. With consumption increasingly defining the global reality, social scientists are acknowledging the role of media in spreading it (Appadurai 1996; Mankekar 1999). While recognizing this social phenomenon critical theorists have highlighted its control and domination by large corporations (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/1998; Ewen 1976).

Media influences local cultures by their complex repertoire of images, and narratives, which constitute a representation. The meanings attached to products and their subsequent consumption is symbolically constituted (Sahlins 1976). It

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1 According to Appadurai mediascapes “refers both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production
has been argued that symbolic constitution of goods for consumers is dialectically produced through the interplay between representations and discourses (Costa 1998). Representations involve elements like words used to describe products, the stories told about them, the images produced, the emotions associated with them, the way they are classified and the values that are placed on them (Hall 1997). These representations in turn constitute discourses, which are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice (Foucault 1969). Our work analyzes these contemporary media representations as we conduct a discursive analysis of its ‘non-commercial’ features. We contend that the media representations create a discourse about lifestyles and consumption of objects that affects the culture or specifically the consumer culture in a society. Media plays the role of naturalizing and legitimizing consumer culture through a discourse. The various elements of communication – sounds, words, notes, visuals, gestures, expressions - employed by media creates symbolic-representations of different modes of consumption, which in turn are internalized by consumers.

Foucault (1969) posits that representations and discourses are not devoid of power, politics and desire, but are rather inflected with these concerns. Several theorists analyzing the role of media and the discursive formations created around consumption agree with Foucault’s position on the issue. Horkheimer and Adorno (1946/1998) in their incisive analysis of the post-second world war capitalism linked the rise of consumer culture to the corporate control of media which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world” (Appadurai 1986, p 35).
of the media and the culture industry. Similarly, Gramsci (1990) has related the
hegemonic nature of the ‘culture industry’ of the civil society and control of
human consciousness. Chomsky (1989) extending this logic further argues that
consumers are like products, which are sold by the manipulating media to willing
buyers in global corporations. We also contend that culture industry creates a
powerful discourse around consumerism, which makes it difficult for people to
resist it. Media is a significant vehicle of legitimizing unjust production relations,
as people get caught up in fulfilling their never ending wants and needs.

In this paper, adopting a critical perspective, we examine the case of
India. In the last two decades, India has witnessed unprecedented changes in
consumer culture and ‘mediascapes.’ We base our analysis on an examination
of media images emanating from its print and electronic versions. This
understanding is further enriched with a case study of working class consumption
practices. Working class consumers form a vast majority of the population of the
country and their increasing economic vulnerability due to economic liberalization
makes them particularly relevant for this study. We contend that rising material
aspirations and consumer culture in India are influenced by media. People are
subjugated to the current structure of markets, in the name of ‘good’ and ‘free life’
by constantly creating new wants through a systematic exposure to the discourse
on consumption. We further observe that increase in emphasis on consumption
is not a harmless phenomenon as posited by some theorists (Venkatesh 1984;
Venakatesh and Swamy1984). We argue that dialectics of turmoil and tranquility
mark this development for the working class population On the one hand it is
forcing this subaltern groups to catch up with the ‘conspicuous consumption’ of the ‘leisure class’ as Veblen (1899/1953) conceptualized. This has resulted in domestication of unrest among the working class, as they withdraw from collective political struggles to narrower and tranquil forms of economism. We further observe that these attempts at emulation have also resulted in poorer sections of the society devoting their limited resources to aping a lifestyle well beyond their reach and further compromising with their quality of life. The second affect has been in a way opposite of that of the first one. The other pole of the dialectic is the increase in turmoil with the tearing of the traditional social fabric and support systems. This turmoil progressively manifests itself in crisis of identity and greater monetization of relationships.

In summary, through the media-corporation-consumption nexus, we not only reiterate the logic of global capitalism, which rests on incessant and seamless exploitation of human beings, but also present an explanation of why it has become difficult for the working class to resist it. In the sprit of a dialectical inquiry, however, we also assert that contradictions within the apparently tranquil system make it increasingly necessary for the subaltern groups to rebel against it.
References


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