

Marxism and Contemporary Cultural Studies

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I What This Paper is Not About

As an introduction, it must be highlighted what this paper is about. As the title implies, this essay deals with Marxism and contemporary cultural studies. But when one has to talk about something as theoretically vast as Marxism alongside a discipline as interdisciplinary or even anti-disciplinary as cultural studies, it is easier to highlight what the paper is not about than what it is about. Thus, this paper is not an overview or a summary of the various strands of the Left’s understanding of society and culture, or a review of a particular Marxist text. Nor is it a properly worked out position regarding the role of Marxism in contemporary cultural studies. All that can be said by way of an introduction is that this paper has something to do with Marxism and contemporary cultural studies in India, though what it does with these problematics of Marxism, contemporary cultural studies, and India cannot be declared in advance.

II “In Shouting Distance of Marxism”: Stuart Hall and the Position of Cultural Studies

When one thinks of cultural studies, it is impossible not to think of Stuart Hall. The directions that cultural studies as a discipline explored in the second half of the twentieth century would have been unimaginable without the contributions of the “Birmingham School,” which itself would be unimaginable without Stuart Hall. Hall was a pioneer of the field, and his works will continue to shape and re-shape it for years to come. I am talking about Hall because I will now be discussing an essay by him, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies” (1992), in which he talks about the “set of unstable formations” that is cultural studies.¹ In the essay, Hall casts a retrospective glance, covers a brief autobiographical history of working within the field, registers the theoretical legacies and ruptures, and opens up a

¹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 99.

whole range of problems regarding the future of such a theoretical and political project.

At the beginning, charting his own entry into cultural studies from the New Left and outlining his influences and Marxist concerns, Hall writes: “These important, central questions are what one meant by working within shouting distance of Marxism, working on Marxism, working against Marxism, working with it, working to try to develop Marxism.”² Why this struggle with Marxism, and what does it mean to be within “shouting distance of Marxism”? I am reminded of the hailing-in-the-street example used by Louis Althusser to demonstrate interpellation.³ While Hall discusses the ruptures in the field of cultural studies later in the essay, it is worth noting that Marxist philosophy itself was a rupture in the history of Western philosophy, as captured in the often quoted and misquoted thesis by Karl Marx: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”⁴ This commitment to material change is inscribed at the core of any Marxist project.

Interpretation and change, this seems to be the ultimate Marxist maxim. However, as numerous scholars have pointed out, when it comes to interpretations of culture, the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels leave much to be desired.⁵ At the same time, while they did focus more on the analyses of political economy than of culture, one can still find a certain framework of society, to understand the cultural formations it produces, within their works. In this regard, one of the most popular quotes from *The German Ideology* (1867) is also the most telling: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”⁶ Thus, for Marx and Engels, there is a correspondence between the mode of production and the prevailing ideas in culture and society:

Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking.⁷

This is consistent with the Marxist position that, first, it is not consciousness which determines our social conditions, but the social conditions that determine our consciousness, and, second, the base-superstructure framework of Marxism where the

² Ibid., 100.

³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 174.

⁴ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2005, n.p., web.

⁵ See Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, edited by Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979), 168–204. Mouffe begins her argument by stating that “the theory of ideology was for a long time one of the most neglected areas of the Marxist analysis of society” (168).

⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 21.

⁷ Ibid., 9.

nature of the economic base, understood as the real material force in the society, determines the nature of the super-structural elements. It is this deterministic aspect of the base-superstructure framework that cultural studies has had to wrestle with from its early days. How do we understand culture in a capitalist society? While different schools of thought ascribe varying degrees of deterministic power to both the economic base and the superstructure, it is the post-Marxist position that problematizes it in perhaps the most radical manner.

III The Challenge of Post-Marxism

For the post-Marxists, the viability of the Marxist base-superstructure model in understanding hegemony and the (ab)uses of culture in society has to be re-examined in the context of new theoretical and political developments occurring in the last fifty years. As new waves of social movements swept across Europe and America and groups mobilized against discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality and other identity markers, the Western Left found itself at a crossroads: To what extent does the economic base influence the superstructure? And to what extent can the superstructure help in maintaining – or changing – the existing mode of production? Political theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau explore this theoretical crisis:

What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital “r,” as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another, and upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective will that render pointless the moment of politics. The plural and multifarious character of contemporary social struggles has finally dissolved the last foundation for that political imaginary [...]. Thus, the very wealth and plurality of contemporary social struggles has given rise to a theoretical crisis.⁸

While the classical Marxist approach, following from the base-superstructure model, has privileged class as the determining factor in its critique of ideology and in exposing the hegemony of the ruling class, post-Marxism attempts to question this position, claiming that such a privileging ignores other forms of oppression that precede and exceed the capitalist mode of production. What is instead argued for is a more pluralistic approach to the socialist project; an attempt to envision a movement that incorporates the diverse sites of struggle that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century without privileging any of them as *the* main struggle. Class contradiction, from this vantage point, is seen as just one contradiction among many. The base-superstructure model is thus brought under rigorous re-examina-

⁸ Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,” in *Post-Marxism: A Reader*, edited by Stuart Sim (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 15.

tion, for the dethroning of class as the determining factor, in the last instance, means that the entire structure of society as envisioned by classical Marxists collapses.

For the post-Marxists, this collapse is actually productive. Laclau and Mouffe build on Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony, Michel Foucault's conceptions of power and discourse, and Jacques Derrida's notion of deferral, among other elements, to posit their vision of "radical and plural democracy."⁹ Their aim is to put Marxism in a dialogue with these theories, which do not necessarily follow dialectical materialism or determinism. However, as some classical Marxists have argued, such a formulation leaves a lot to the imagination when it comes to "real" political situations of building alliances, for social groups are constituted not just of difference(s), but also of contradictions and antagonisms. Additionally, such a project, which welcomes contingency of social movements and does not prioritize any one group over the other, can also be a source of great anxiety, for it also means that the notion of an "end of history" is dispensed with, since new groups will always be competing for hegemony and power. This too is in disagreement with the classical Marxist teleological framework.

IV

Real-Life Process: Marx, Hall, and Indian Politics

Returning to Marx: "We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises."¹⁰ Perhaps it is this strong (and repeatedly emphasized) materialist and empiricist bent that might get lost within a theoretical project that aims to bring together diverse and sometimes contradictory positions like postmodernism or poststructuralism in a conversation with the socialist project. This is not to take a dogmatic position. Instead, what can be more fruitful is to examine the rise of the "post-" positions with respect to their contemporary modes of economic production and the global division of labour and production, as well as consumption of not just material goods, but intellectual goods too: something akin to the kind of exploration of metropolitan academic trends undertaken by the Marxist thinker Aijaz Ahmad in his book *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* (1992).

Marx located the origins of "the phantoms formed in the human brain" in the real, material world of humans, and put the emphasis not just on interpreting but also on changing the world.¹¹ Within such a framework, any discourse must always have a political aim. This would be a good opportunity to return to Hall's essay, in

⁹ Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, "Radical Democracy: Alternative for a New Left," in *Post-Marxism: A Reader*, edited by Stuart Sim (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 25.

¹⁰ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

which he talks about the responsibility of intellectuals and “the conditions and problems of developing intellectual and theoretical work as a political practice.”¹² What would be the aim of such a political practice? Under classical Marxism, this would have been the socialist project, ultimately leading to communism. But as mentioned before, the second half of the twentieth century saw the expansion of the political sphere, in the sense that oppressed identities not necessarily based on class fought for rights and recognition, and these political movements obviously made interventions in the theoretical realm, reorganizing, in Hall’s words, “the field in quite concrete ways.”¹³ In India too one can observe the necessary interventions in cultural studies (and other projects) made by feminism, Dalit studies, queer studies, and disability studies, to name only a few, all inextricably linked to the world outside academia. These are ongoing debates in both academia and national politics, and the proponents of these fields are in a constant tussle with certain strands of Marxism.

In India, as a specific kind of fascism gains ground, syncretic cultures of the subcontinent shaped over hundreds of years are at great risk of homogenization, and marginalized identities are under grave threat of persecution. In December 2021, calls for the genocide of Muslims were made by Hindu religious groups with close affiliation to the ruling political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).¹⁴ Attacks on Christians have also increased. How has Indian popular culture – its institutions, its audience, its participants, and its celebrities – responded? With unsurprising silence. The discourse has shifted to the Right to such an extent that we have now turned into a culture that can easily accommodate open calls for genocide.

What is the role of cultural studies in such a cultural climate, and what is the role of Marxism in such a form of cultural studies? Are we to look at culture in a purely deterministic way, and if not, how much autonomy can be accorded to forms and practices of cultural expressions? It is true that there are apparatuses that work to maintain the status quo without coercion, and that much of the culture industry propagates ideas and values that reaffirm the status quo of our contemporary world order. It is also true that there are resistant subcultures outside the domain of the centres of cultural production, though always at risk of being appropriated by the culture industry (for example, rap music from the slums of Mumbai is always at risk of ending up in sneaker ads). How much potentiality for progress can be ascribed then to cultural formations in an economy that is ready to make profit by selling the very cultural expressions that criticize it? I am afraid I have no clear answer.

Another noteworthy point in Hall’s essay is his comment on cultural studies in the United States with regard to the materiality of intellectual production itself. He recalls the ease of professionalization and institutionalization of the project in US-

¹² Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “Hindutva Leaders at Haridwar Event Call for Muslim Genocide.” *The Wire*, 22 December 2021, web.

American academia, and the danger this poses.¹⁵ India too is at a critical moment (although different from the North American scenario that Hall picks up) when it comes to the status of academic discourse. The defunding of public institutions, the fee hikes, and the setting up of private higher education institutions mostly by corporate giants (as many of these institutions were established in the wake of implementation of reservation policies for backward castes in public universities to perhaps create a parallel space for upper-class, upper-caste students) are effectively going to kill any political impetus within the academic space. The socio-economic issues of student debt, limited job opportunities with humanities degrees, and other plights of the modern Indian student experience will result in the gradual exclusion of marginalized identities from universities, which have never been all that inclusive to begin with.¹⁶

This is bound to result in an academically vibrant, but politically dormant university space. One can see it happening already, especially in private institutions providing liberal arts education, where student unions are either absent or reduced to glorified event management teams. Additionally, it is no secret that the public universities, too, have been systematically hollowed out, with some top positions now being occupied by members and supporters of the ruling regime.¹⁷ On top of all this, in 2021, in the middle of a global pandemic, the pro-privatization government introduced (and hurriedly implemented) the new National Education Policy (NEP), which has been termed exclusionary and reactionary and has been resisted by teacher and student bodies across the country.¹⁸ These are material, real-world problems that affect any theoretical project. Cultural studies, as one of these projects, can be set up quite easily and receive heavy funding in such private or defunded public institutions, but will only be studied and practiced by those who can afford it. Such a cultural studies, as a space for supposed elites only, will hardly have any stakes in the real world.

In this respect, I feel that the “irresolvable but permanent tension” that Hall talks about might actually be facing severe onslaught from the current pro-privatization regime and the dominant culture of utilitarian education (education that is useful to create a cheap labour pool for global capital) which it endorses. In this context, working in a cultural studies that locates itself “within shouting distance of

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Hall’s essay was originally prepared as remarks for the international conference “Cultural Studies Now and in the Future” held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1990. The conference proceedings were then published in 1992 as the nearly 800-page volume *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler. The conference’s aim of promoting cultural studies in the US adds a crucial self-reflexive dimension to Hall’s piece in his critique of precisely the professionalization and institutionalization he was expected to endorse.

¹⁶ Abhishek Hari, “Casteism Is Rampant in Higher Education Institutions, but Is ‘Wilfully Neglected’: Study,” *The Wire*, 8 October 2021, web.

¹⁷ Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta, “On Twitter, New JNU VC Has Supported Genocide Calls, Attacked Students, Farmers.” *The Wire*, 7 February 2022, web.

¹⁸ Prabhat Patnaik, “NEP: India Takes a Great Leap Backwards,” *Newslick*, 8 August 2020, web.

Marxism,” or within shouting distance of any theory that is interested in praxis, might become increasingly difficult.

Hall pointed out the open-endedness of cultural studies: something I find particularly relevant for an Indian cultural studies project. In a country like India, such a project *must* be open-ended if it is really interested in negotiating the diversity and complexity that India has to offer. Yet, as Hall points out, it cannot be simply pluralist for its own sake; it has to consider what is at stake in the real world.

V Final Thoughts

To conclude, I began with Hall, returned to Marx, jumped to post-Marxism, returned to Marx, then to Hall again – all this traveling only in an attempt to understand what is happening here in India. I am not sure if I am better off now than when I began. Marxism and its “classical” positions, its totalizing and somewhat eschatological tendencies, do feel problematic when we study something as “ordinary” as culture, which resists any kind of homogenization and totalization and frequently ends up taking unexpected forms. Yet I believe that the materialist understanding of society and the political project of philosophy inscribed in the writings of Marx, though not to be imported universally in a dogmatic manner, still provide, in their repeated emphasis on human agency and activity, a productive base for cultural analysis. This is important especially in the Indian context, where the means of cultural production and consumption cannot be thought of without the lived realities shaped by categories of caste, religion, gender, etc. Even the supposedly democratizing effects of the internet on cultural production and consumption can be thought only in terms of pre-existing economic and cultural capital of the involved groups. It is here, in the repeated surfacing of the need for a materialist understanding of culture, that I feel one needs to be within shouting distance of Marxism, no matter in which direction one wishes to venture.