

Dissenting the Dominant Narrative: An Analysis of the Occupy Movement in Light of Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies

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Abstract

Stuart Hall's theory of *cultural studies* proposes that mass media maintains the ideology of the dominant class in a society. Grounding its argument on Hall's cultural studies, the paper explores resistance of the Occupy Movement against the hegemonic and dominant discourse mainly operated by the controlled media. It is also explored how and to what extent the Occupy Movement is successful in achieving its main goals; occupying the mainstream discourse, blocking repression of the movement by protecting the write to speak, and by ending the corporate personhood.

Keywords: Occupy movement, cultural studies, Stuart Hall, Noam Chomsky, mainstream discourse, mass media dominant narrative.

(I)

“The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.” Karl Marx (*these words are inscribed on his grave*)

(II)

“We are the ones we have been waiting for.” June Jordan (Ruggiero, 2012, p. 17)

1. Introduction:

Whereas the two World Wars led to the conception of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the world since then entangled in the unprecedented battles between the haves and have-not. While the former have hatched oppression and tyranny, the latter have set exceptional records of sacrifices. Throughout the Cold War and still going on so-called War on Terror, the history of the last fifty years is the history of human rights; violated by ‘the haves’ and aspired by ‘the have-nots’. The 2010s began a major turning point in the aforementioned transnational battle of rights. This is the emergence of the Occupy movement, initially in New York in September

2011 as a public response to the class war in the United States, subsequently proliferating sporadically to hundreds of cities across the world. The movement has stirred the public conscience and has been a great success in putting “the inequalities of everyday life on the national agenda” and “influencing reporting, public reception and language” (Ruggiero, 2012, p 9-10). The movement has foregrounded the national conscience of the people of the United States to the level that according to the Pew study “about two-thirds of the U.S. population now believes there are ‘very strong or ‘strong ‘conflicts between the rich and poor_ an increase of 19 percentage points since 2009” (Ruggiero, 2012, p 9-10).

Cultural studies is a neo-Marxist critique of the hegemonic power of mass media. It explores the manipulating role of media by bringing to for its influences, persuasions, and interpretations. Hall believes that “mass media manufacture consent for dominant ideologies” (Griffin, 2012, p. 344-45). He expounds that the popular media marginalizes the powerless and the poor classes and conversely “maintains the dominance of those already in positions of power” (Griffin, 2012, p. 344-45).

2. Method

The methodology to be used in this writing helps conducting an analysis of the Occupy moment in light of Stuart Hall’s theory of Cultural studies. The resources the researchers use are books and journals on the topic in question supporting and explicating the argument of this paper that mass media maintains the ideology of the dominant class in a society, manufacturing their consents on the socio-political and economic concerns. We are going to discuss the Occupy moment in light of Stuart Hall’s cultural studies to explore how the moment has been resisting the hegemonic discourses operated by the controlled media all over the world.

3. Discussion

That media is an industry devising, designing and manufacturing people’s opinions and controlling the individual and collective consciousness all over the world is a fact that can hardly be overlooked. Media (to appropriate the often-quoted opening sentence of Nadeem Aslam’s *The Blind Man’s Garden* (2012) ‘is a third parent (p.5). Stuart Hall (1986) considers medias as “the machinery of representation in modern societies” and he believes that it is the politics of mass media that represents the world and ideas and it creates images that invents and further interpret discourses that steer the affairs of the in “certain definite ways” (p. 9) Since there are several conflicting aspects of the issues with their multiple facets, so shall be the “ways in which meaning about the world can be constructed” and “it matters profoundly what and who gets represented, what and who regularly and routinely gets left out; and how things, people, events, relationships are represented” (p. 9). Hall (1986) states that; “What we know of society depends on how things are represented to us and that knowledge in turn informs what we do and what policies we are prepared to accept” (p. 9).

Ideology is a driving force behind the politics of mass media and representation. Hall (1997) defines ideology as “the mental framework” propagated and proliferated through the languages and symbols, the concepts and notions, groups and classes, the imagery and patterns of thoughts, and “the representation which

different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (p. 29). Preoccupied with the working of ideologies on mass media, Hall (1977) further elaborates how effectively mass media operates a leading ideological institution. He goes still further and argues the working of ideology in securing capitalism he believes that it “provides the ‘cement’ in a social formation” (p.33).

Whereas Hall (1997) himself was a coloured Jamaican who immigrated to England as an adult and who found that “his physical appearance was often as important as his economic class in the way people reacted to him” (Griffin, 2012, p. 346), he extended Marxist’s concept of ‘economic determinism’ and expounded that economic, social, and political relationships were not merely based on money. It can be argued that Hall, like Sartre believed in systematic encountering of classes. Sartre pointed out to this systematic resistance in his preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that there exist in the world two opposing classes; On one side there are “five hundred million men” who have ‘the world’ and on the other hand there are “one thousand five hundred million natives” who have the use of it (p.7).

According to Edward Said (1994), in the domains of cultural studies and the history of ideas, ‘influence’ is an important heading that stands for several relationships; such as the relationship between the ‘West’ and the ‘Other’ or between the ‘imperializers’ and the ‘imperialized’ (p. 230-233). Extending further his famous argument of hegemony, Said (1997) in his latter work, *Covering Islam*, enumerates the relationship between knowledge and interpretation. He argues that “[a]ll knowledge that is about human society, and not about the natural world, is historical” and thereby it “rests upon judgment and interpretation” (p. 162). Interpretations, according to Said (1997), depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is in interpreting, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place” (p.162). In this sense, the coverage of any recessive culture by the dominant and hegemonic culture is a matter of interpretation and judgement.

Referring to the “preponderant difference or domination of one nation over another” (Griffin, 2012, p. 346), Hall specifically employs the Italian political theorist, Gramsci’s concept of *hegemony* in cultural sense “to describe the subtle sway of society’s *haves* over its *have-nots*”. He emphasizes that the broadcast and print media’s hegemonize the interpretation of reality and as a result the role of this ‘manufacturing industry’ “turns out to be *production of consent* rather than a *reflection of consensus* that already exists” Thus the masses “unwittingly accomplish” the desires of the dominant ideologies and they are “complicit in their own victimization” (p. 346).

Griffins (2012) further explains Hall’s idea of mass media hegemony that the mass media make and shape the consents of the readers and viewers and as a result “they share the same interests as those who hold the reins of power” (p. 346). This hegemonic influence of mass media “has been relatively successful, it’s played an important role in maintaining worker unrest at the level of moaning and groaning rather than escalating into revolutionary fervor” (p. 346).

Hall (1997) in his book *Representation* further extends the concept of the hegemonic influence of media by his solid argument of making meaning through discourse. He believed that "the primary function of discourse is to *make meaning*" (p. 2). He raises the question that "where do people get their meaning?" and then answers that people "learn what signs means through discourse-through communication and culture" (p. 2). Hall (1997) states that:

"culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings...To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world in ways that will be understood by each other" (p. 2).

Extending Hall's exposition on culture, it can be argued that the Occupy movement provided extensive channels of communication between its several general assemblies across the world, and it brought the working groups and supporters of the movement across the movement to challenge the mainstream discourse. The movement in January 2012 rejoiced its second phase by steering to its three monumental goals:

"1) occupy the mainstream and transition from the tents and into the hearts and the minds of the masses; 2) block the repression of the movement by protecting the right of the 99 percent's freedom of assembly and right to speak without being violently attacked; and 3) end corporate personhood" (Ruggiero, 2012, p. 69).

As discussed above, investigating the subversive role of the Occupy Movement in the light of Stuart Hall's theory of cultural studies, this paper explicates how the movement has penetrated deeply in every sphere of life. In the second phase, according to Chomsky (2012), the Occupy movement has transformed the whole focus of discussion on many important issues related to the history of U.S. Economy, the working class, banks, politics and money, plutonomy and the precariat, workers takeover, climate change and nuclear weapons (p. 23-38) such as people already knew about these issues but these issues were in the margins and after Occupy such issues "are now right up front" (p. 70).

It was through regular channels of communication that real issues of economy and growth which were marginalized by the dominant discourse were brought to the fore. It was due to the movement that a "big shift" was seen in the mainstream. Chomsky (2012) refers to the survey released by the Pew Foundation in January 2012 that; "for the first time ever, concern over income inequality was way at the top" (p. 70-71). Chomsky (2012) further expounds that the poll did not merely measure "income inequality" but it highlights the degree to which "public recognition, comprehension and understanding" of the issues of growth, economic equality, democracy, and freedom has gone up (p. 70-71).

Chomsky (2012) argues that the most remarkable aspect of Occupy movement is its being on the mainstream agenda "so that people who may have known of it from their own personal experience see that they are not alone, that this is all of us" (p. 70-71).

The Occupy Movement reached the masses with two major kinds of approaches; “Major protests, civil disobedience and arrests” are the key parts of its mobilising strategy. And “day to day activities of discussion, working groups and general assemblies are the deep structure, the ongoing forces adding mass and momentum to Occupy’s wave” (Ruggiero, 2012, p. 13). Since its very inception the movement has introduced innovative tactic by mobilising the masses in the street to occupy the public sphere. With this symbolic street power Occupy has effected cultural change and challenged the economic determinism.

The Occupy movement is the first massive global rebuttal to dominant narrative of capitalists. According to Chomsky the movement’s most monumental achievement is in “redefining ideas like growth”. Following the model of the dominant narrative, in the words of Chomsky (2012) is like “lemming walking over a cliff”. Chomsky provided us with “many options and opportunities that exist to change the system”. The formidable task of the Occupy people is to promote the counter narrative about “different way of living” that will be based on “maximizing values that are important for life” rather than on maximizing how much we can buy.

The hegemonic role of mass media, according to Hall, provides “the guiding myths that shape our perception of the world and serve as important instruments of social control” (Griffin, 2012, p. 349).

Since its appearance in Zuccotti Park, New York in September 2011, the Occupy movement has been a great success in giving the voice to the muted group. Some may argue the rapid popularity of the movement but there is no denying the fact that the movement had a very strong intellectual and philosophical footing. Several intellectuals including Howard Zinn have already laid a lot of groundwork for its cause and immense thinking on the central issues that are foregrounded by the by movement. Speaking to *Howard Zinn Memorial Lecture* on October 22, 2011, Chomsky (2012) praised Howard Zinn for his “inimitable” contribution to the preparatory phase of the movement. Chomsky believes that Howard Zinn has “literally changed the consciousness and also conscience of an entire generation” (p. 24).

Since 1970s there have been enormous changes in U.S. economy. Chomsky (2012) refers to them as a “process of de-industrialization and de-development” that means “manufacturing production continued overseas-very profitable, but no good for the work force” (p. 26). Similarly, Chomsky criticizes the development that took place around 1970s and he terms it as “a vicious cycle” that results into the accumulation of wealth in the hands of financial sector and this wealth does not benefit the economy, people and society (p. 28).

Further extending his argument, Chomsky (2012) states that the concentration and accumulation of wealth yield “concentration of political power” giving “rise to legislation, that increases and accelerates cycle” (p. 28) resulting into a kind of “corporate governance” which subsequently rise in the “cost of election” and both the political parties in U.S. are compelled to be driven into “the pockets of the corporate sector” (p. 28).

4. Conclusion

In closing, the Occupy movement is all about driving the common folk to raise questions on the hegemonic economies, hegemonic democracies, hegemonic societies, and every hegemonic institution. Occupy movement has developed a proper system of rejecting and refuting the ruling class and the capitalistic hegemonic agendas on historical, political, social, economic, environmental issues. The people involved in this movement “are not in for themselves” rather they are with it “for one another, for broader society and for future generations” (Chomsky, 2012 p. 74). It is a bond and a network of people at anywhere; streets, offices, schools, religious places, unions, factories. It is getting involved with people and trying to be collaborative rather than to be competitive. The movement has not only raised the conscience of people and created concerns about inequality, injustice, and manufacturing consents among a wider sphere of population but it also has crafted an entirely fresh narrative in the midst of dominant discourse of the powerful. The movement has redefined and reset meaning of growth, freedom, and democracy in the new world. The movement has questioned the influence of powerful on government and has created “cooperative communities” that in turn will ‘occupy’ the dominant narrative of the new imperialistic and capitalistic world.

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