

The Damage of Culture on Society: A Critical Interdisciplinary Analysis

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Abstract-- Culture underpins human civilization as a shared system of values, beliefs, norms, symbols, and practices that hold communities together and provide individuals with their identity. Nevertheless, culture is not necessarily harmless and frozen. This paper conducts a critical analysis in the context of how cultural systems cause quantifiable harm to individuals and communities, both historically and in modern society. Eight main ways in which culture can harm society are outlined through an interdisciplinary approach that relies on sociology, anthropology, psychology, political theory, and cultural studies. It consists of normalizing violence and harmful behaviour, strengthening structural inequality, suppressing individual identity, opposing scientific and social development, tribalism and intergroup struggle, the destructive consumer culture, the loss of social trust, and cultural imperialism. The epistemological issues of defining cultural damage while using a neutral position are also discussed in this paper, with the focus on the power dynamics inherent in cross-cultural criticism. It ends with a suggestion on how to respond positively and constructively to the problem of cultural reflexivity.

Keywords: consumer culture, cultural damage, cultural hegemony, cultural reflexivity, imperialism, inequality, societal harm, tribalism

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a struggle for survival, a process of constant self-correction.

— Amilcar Cabral, 1970

Culture, which is described as the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects, and behaviours held by members of a society (Macionis, 2012), is usually hailed as the biggest accomplishment of humanity. Culture enables human beings to be more than biological, to make meaning, to build institutions, and to pass on accrued wisdom between generations. Cultural products are art, language, religion, law, science and morality. Without culture, there would be no civilization. However, culture is a means of oppression and of grievance as well. The very forces that make culture so strong—specifically its ability to normalize behaviour by making social constructs seem like natural laws— can be used to perpetuate injustice, repress identities, and uphold power structures (Galtung, 1990; Bourdieu, 1984). This paper starts with the assumption that culture is not monolithic and static, but contested, stratified, and changing.

The production and reproduction of culture involves different social actors, including the elites, the media institutions, the religious organizations and the nation-states, which are usually structured in terms of interest and hierarchies. Therefore, cultural damage is not often accidental; it is a systematic phenomenon which is determined by the relations of power.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Gramscian Cultural Hegemony

According to Gramsci (1971), the idea of cultural hegemony states that the dominant social groups in society do not exercise power mainly through coercion but by producing cultural consent. The subordinate groups internalize the elite worldviews as common sense and thus fall into their subjugation. This framework uncovers how cultural harm tends to be invisible by way of assumptions which are widespread regarding gender roles, meritocracy, and nationalism.

2.2 Bourdieusian Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1984), shows how culture can serve as the means of capital that is distributed unevenly across classes. Having the right cultural tastes and credentials opens the gate to power and opportunity, and others are systematically excluded. What seems to be a simple aesthetic taste turns out to be a process of reproduction of the classes and symbolic violence.

2.3 Postcolonial Theory

Fanon (1961), Said (1978), and Bhabha (1994) are just some of the postcolonial scholars who have shed light on the process of establishing colonial and neo-colonial domination. Through the destruction of native cultures, the introduction of alien values, and internalized psychological damage. In a globalized world, such cultural hierarchies continue through economic and media imperialism.

III. NORMALIZATION OF DANGEROUS BEHAVIOUR

The normalization of behaviour due to the influence of culture may make harmful practices seem natural or unavoidable. The normalization of media violence causes the desensitization of audiences and encourages imitation.



The social learning theory by Bandura (1963), determined that people especially children, imitate violent actions they see in the media. Violence is romanticized in movies, games, and music, and in such a situation, harm is fun, and killers are reimagined as heroes. On the same note, those cultures where alcohol is a symbol of sociability or masculinity pose a crisis to public health. The World Health Organization (2022), estimates that the number of deaths associated with harmful alcohol use is about three million each year, which remains a crisis due to cultural norms and industry marketing. Misogyny, which is expressed in pornography, lad culture, and patriarchal religious standards, is another way of culture justifying harm. These standards are associated with gendered violence, discrimination in the workplace, and psychological trauma (Meyer, 2003).

IV. STRENGTHENING STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Material inequalities of class, race, caste, and gender are coded and justified through cultural systems. The South Asian caste system, which is the product of religious tradition, institutionalizes social stratification that does not give the Dalit communities a sense of dignity and mobility (Ambedkar, 1936; Guru, 2009). Although the law has been changed, caste violence continues to be witnessed, attesting to perceived cultural superiority. In the West, the issue of racial inequality is still present even after the legal segregation. Systemic racism is perpetuated by implicit bias, which is the cultural transmission of race and criminality or inferiority. According to Greenwald et al. (1998), cultural socialization is used to learn unconscious biases and not inherent prejudice. Gender hierarchies are also entrenched in the cultural aspect when societies appear to base the worth of women on their domesticity or obedience, which creates dependency in the economy and limitations on their social involvement.

4.1 Gendered Expectations and the “Double Burden” in South Asia

Although modern education has influenced the perception of women in terms of their professional potential greatly, it has been less successful in breaking the belief system of moral and social duty that is attached to the housewife factor. Indian culture tends to impose a double burden (Hochschild and Machung, 2012), according to which even working women are supposed to do the household chores as their first priority. This is not considered as a negotiable task but is, in fact, a feminine task. Socialization can start as early as in childhood with the idea of Paraya Dhan, a cultural cliché that defines a daughter as a temporary entity.

This is what results in the state of ontological displacement; that is, a woman is conditioned to think that her current residence is temporary, but her future marital residence is the one she is expected to fit in and not belong (Bourdieu, 1984). The bride is also prone to be a victim of so-called enforced resilience - the state of being culturally compelled to repress any true emotional manifestations, such as fatigue, sorrow, or anger in order to project the image of the perfect daughter-in-law. This performance involves getting up earlier than others, being ever available to the guests, and smiling despite exhaustion. According to Chowdhry (1994), such norms successfully erode the right to autonomy upon marriage and instead introduce a performative identity that is aimed at fulfilling the collective gaze of the marriage unit. The deprivation of a right to say no or even to have a space of one's own is not just an individual struggle but a systematic cultural process aimed at ensuring the survival of traditional patriarchal hierarchies at the cost of personal agency.

V. STIFLING OF INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY

There are established roles and identities that cultural norms create. When imposed forcefully, they have psychological and social negative effects. According to the theory of minority stress (Meyer, 2003), LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) people living in hostile cultures are under the constant pressure of stress and high levels of depression and suicide, not because of the personal pathology but because of the stigma.

This mental pressure is usually based on the cultural construct of heteronormativity that favours some identities and marginalizes others as deviant. Herek (2004), defines cultural stigma as enacted stigma, which is a direct experience of discriminating against someone, and felt stigma, where one internalizes the prejudice that is held in society as a way of self-devaluation. This internalization leads to a chronic condition of hyper-vigilance in that the marginalized people have to navigate the environments that fail to affirm their identities at all times. The harm is therefore not a singular psychological experience but a structural carryover of a culture that employs the deployment of rigid identity roles to secure social order at the cost of individual well-being.

VI. RESISTANCE TO PROGRESS

The traditionalism of cultures, in past and present, has frequently impeded the development of science and society by giving more importance to the idea of preserving tradition than to the accumulation of empirical knowledge.



This has manifested itself in the past through the persecution of Galileo on the grounds of his support of heliocentrism and the exclusion of women as a category of people in the public sphere of science. In the modern world, this resistance can best be explained by the concept of the so-called cultural lag - the period of maladjustment which occurs when non-material culture (values and beliefs) is unable to keep pace with the fast-changing material culture (technology and science) (Ogburn, 1922). In fact, even with the development of medical science and the increment in capabilities in genetic engineering and reproductive technologies, culture and religious traditionalism can become an obstacle to their application (Nanda, 2003). On a larger social scale, this is reinforced by structural hidden curriculum in institutions that are biased towards traditionalist dogmas as opposed to progressive research, thus creating a fear of challenging cultural dogmas among individuals. Consequently, culture can become a drag on human evolution by setting up an environment where social change is perceived as a source of disharmony in society and not social progress.

VII. INTERGROUP CONFLICT AND TRIBALISM

Culture brings unity and separation. The identities of groups, ethnic, national, and religious can be used to bring together within the group and demonize the outsiders. Cultural dehumanization campaigns are the most common phenomena before genocide, which depict the other as a survival threat (Stanton, 1998). Smaller-scale prejudice and violence are perpetuated by ethnocentrism. Sectarian warfare, national populism and xenophobia are all sources of power based on cultural constructions of difference as a threat. Such types of tribalism ruin the trust, collaboration, and stability (Lubbers et al., 2025).

Such othering is fully imbued with Social Identity Theory, because people, according to this theory, base much of their self-esteem on their group memberships and thus are predisposed to an inherent in-group bias and out-group discrimination (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This prejudice is frequently politicized in cultures where identity is linked to extreme ethnic or religious labels, which establish symbolic lines of who is part of the group and who threatens the group's cohesiveness. The United Nations (2023), reports that hate speech and dehumanizing rhetoric, which are often camouflaged behind the maintenance of cultural heritage, have grown by almost 40 percent in the online realm across the world, as a precursor to actual violence and institutional exclusion.

Culture as a demarcation tool and not a bridge-building tool results in a zero-sum mentality where the success of one group is seen as the direct destruction of another, and the social glue needed to hold the world together is destroyed.

VIII. MATERIALISM AND THE CULTURE OF CONSUMERS

The contemporary culture of consumerism identifies itself with consumption and commodifies identity and desires. It has been found out that focusing on extrinsic needs like wealth and status results in lower psychological wellbeing as compared to focusing on intrinsic needs like community and personal wellbeing (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). These extrinsic values are reinforced by advertising and social media, and this creates a sense of chronic dissatisfaction and anxiety. Consumerism leads to un-sustainable mining and garbage, which worsens the climate crisis on the planet. Ecological destruction as a form of structural violence has become normalized by the ideology of growth in capitalistic culture, as Galtung (1990) notes.

The cultures of honour only worsen this damage by controlling behaviour using shame and reputation. Those who do not conform to norms as per the mandated rules and regulations are either ostracized or even lynched as in the case of those who seek education, or those who refuse to join the military or those who change their religion. The psychological impact of such conformity is enormous, and it compromises creativity and diversity.

IX. LOSS OF SOCIAL TRUST

The pillar of democracy and stability of the economy is social trust, which is the belief that other people will act with integrity. According to Putnam (2000), social capital is high in societies where civic participation and performance of institutions are stronger. But this trust is destroyed by cultures of corruption or excessive individualism. Once bribery and nepotism get normalized, citizens become prone to exploitation and no longer willing to cooperate, which perpetuates corruption cycles. Equally, hyper-individualist cultures that celebrate self-reliance undermine solidarity in times of crisis, as reflected in the inconsistent national reactions to COVID-19 (Huynh, 2020).

Such a loss of social trust places people into a social trap, where they understand that it is in the interest of the group as a whole to cooperate, but due to cultural signals of corruption, they have no choice but to act in their own interests lest they become exploited by others. This disintegration is often said to be a deterioration of so-called generalized trust, the trust of a member of society to adhere to common moral norms randomly (Fukuyama, 1995).



A culture that promotes nepotism transforms social capital into bonding capital (exclusive, sometimes tribal or familial networks) as opposed to bridging capital (inclusive networks), limiting economic mobility and undermining the rule of law. According to research by Rothstein (2011), this cultural cycle of distrust is self-perpetuating once it has been established; citizens will be less likely to pay taxes or comply with the public health requirements, and starve these institutions of the resources they need to operate effectively. As a result, the hyper-individualism or systematic bribery culture is not only detrimental to the moral character of an individual, but literally destroys the social glue within a working democracy and a good economy.

X. CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

Cultural imperialism is the domination of one culture by populism using political, economic, or media influence. Colonialism eradicated native languages, religions and identities- a phenomenon that critics refer to as cultural genocide (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015).

The trauma is carried on to the next generation through the psychological and socioeconomic damage and alienation. In the contemporary world, this destruction is perpetuated by global media homogenization and commercial Americanization, which destroys linguistic and cultural diversity. According to UNESCO (2021), the number of languages that are under threat as a result of the pressure of assimilation is approximately 40% of the total languages in the world.

XI. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM: WHO DEFINES “CULTURAL DAMAGE”?

The term damage is epistemologically controversial because so many judgments are based on the cultural position of the critic. The Western liberal models focus on the rights and autonomy of the individual, whereas other cultures promote collective duty or spiritual unity. Critique is therefore a threat of ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism (Benhabib, 2002). The way to go around this is to use the model of interactive universalism developed by Benhabib (2002), whereby universal norms are constructed in equal cross-cultural dialogue in a way that does not involve dominance. This reflexive methodology is not subjective and neither is it moral imperialism.

It is this dilemma that is at the centre of the argument between radical moral relativism, the view that no culture has the authority to judge the other, and moral universalism, which aims at a universal measure of human dignity.

By recognizing harm in some other culture, critics run a risk of becoming orientalist, a phrase that Edward Said (1978), employed to refer to the patronizing attitudes of the West toward the Other. But not criticizing at all may result in a kind of the dependency effect, as systemic abuses are overlooked in the name of cultural respect. The concept of interactive universalism by Benhabib (2002), deals with this by changing the emphasis on imposing norms to a negotiating process with norms using the concept of discourse ethics. This method presupposes the fact that cultures are not closed bubbles, but are internally porous and able to self-critique. Through a world conversation with equal representation by all, societies can determine the damage to culture based on common human frailties and not a single dominant worldview.

XII. CULTURAL REFLEXIVITY AS A CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSE

When culture has a detrimental effect, then the solution is not to deny culture but to develop cultural reflexivity, the ability to analyse and criticize cultural assumptions and cultural institutions (Galtung, 1990). Cultural reflexivity is formed in a similar manner to what sociologists describe as the sociological imagination- the capacity to perceive the connection between individual problems and the broader social problem (Mills, 1959). It involves going beyond the single-loop learning in which a society merely makes corrections in its current culture, to the two-loop learning in which the values and norms per se are questioned and redefined (Argyris, 1976). The educational systems that emphasizes critical inquiry will enable the citizens to undermine the processes of normalization described above and transform culture into a pliable instrument of human prosperity. In addition, the responsiveness of the institutions makes sure that this intellectual critique is not merely theoretical but leads to practical changes in the legislation and society. The ability to conduct cross-cultural dialogue and the readiness to abandon destructive traditions in favour of the development of new moral values are the characteristic features of a healthy civilization, as it is manifested in the example of the so-called cultural reform movements, such as the suffrage of women and the destigmatization of mental illness.

XIII. CONCLUSION

Culture is a giant paradox: it is both the creator of the social meaning and the weapon of systemic demolition. In this study, eight different processes of cultural harm have been established, including the normalization of violence and stifling of individual identity, the erosion of social trust, and the burden of cultural imperialism.

But these conceptual frames are most poignantly articulated in the “two sets of standards” of gendered expectations. The South Asian experience demonstrates the socialization of culture does not merely indicate roles, but imposes a “two-fold burden” requiring professional excellence and that requires the submissiveness of the wife at home. This forms a state of ontological displacement whereby a woman is habituated to live at the collective gaze instead of personal agency. Finally, the goal is that the reflexive society will move beyond being passive consumers of tradition to becoming active and conscious producers of tradition. To avoid the trap of moral relativism, what Benhabib (2002) and Habermas (1990), offer is their concept of the so-called interactive universalism and communicative action, making sure that the pluralistic dialogue is adopted instead of rigid hierarchies of the patriarchal system. Cultural reflexivity has ceased to be a scholarly luxury; it is the pre-requisite of social justice and sustainability. The only method to reveal the destructive traditions and create a global culture, where human dignity is prioritized over the continuation of destructive dogmas, is to build a keen sociological imagination.

XIV. DECLARATIONS

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