Cultural capitalism

Cultural capitalism is the application of capitalist theory in cultural affairs. It is defined as the production of symbols, knowledge, and information as the guiding principle of wealth creation. It is distinguished from industrial capitalism in the sense that it focuses on cultural attractions and activities as the primary motivating factors underpinning consumption. Slavoj Žižek (2009) refers to cultural capitalism as the sale of attitudes or lifestyles. It is “global capitalism with a human face.” Žižek gives as examples how Nike “sells” the culture of physical achievement with its slogan “Just Do It” and how Starbucks convinces its customers that they are actually doing something good by drinking fair trade coffee: “You are buying something bigger than yourself. You are buying into coffee ethics…. It’s good coffee karma.” Consumers would therefore feel that could buy their own redemption – they become not just consumers, but also environmentalists, social activists, philanthropists, etc. Žižek, however, warns that by participating in this system, consumers are actually “prolonging the disease … rather than curing it.” He promotes changing the structure rather than this sort of charitable act: “The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty would be impossible and the altruistic virtues have really prevented the carrying out of this aim.” Jeremy Rifkin (2001) likewise explains cultural capitalism as “the commodification of human culture itself.” Commerce has now become the primary institution, and culture, coopted and commercialized, is derivative. The key players in this new type of capitalism are transnational media companies that exploit cultural resources and re-package them as cultural commodities – “short-lived commercial entertainments, paid amusements, and purchased spectacles” (Rifkin 2000).

Yoshio Sugimoto (2010) discusses how cultural capitalism affects the social formation and the work-style of the Japanese. He notes that because of cultural capitalism, consumers begin to look for products that suit their personal preferences. The differentiation of consumer motivations therefore reflect the changes in class formation in the sense that social divisions derive not so much from the unequal distribution of industrial goods as from that of cultural goods. Cultural capitalism also affects the work-styles of the Japanese as cultural workers have come to predominate the workforce as much as industrial workers. However, unlike industrial workers, cultural workers are not bound in a particular physical place of work. They do not belong to labor organizations, are fragmented, and self-centered (individualistic). Cultural capitalism therefore offers little or no job security, and the casualization of labor increases the precariousness of those in the quaternary sector (information and communication, finance and insurance, education and learning, healthcare and welfare, etc.).

Related concepts:

Cultural capital

Cultural capital is the ideas and knowledge that people draw upon as they participate in social life. Everything from rules of etiquette to being able to speak and write effectively can be considered cultural capital.

Cultural deprivation theory

The cultural deprivation theory implies that the middle/upper class are better off in all areas when compared to the working class and this is especially seen in education and schools. Proponents of this theory argue that working class culture (regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or other factors) inherently differs from that of people in the upper/middle class. This difference in culture means that while upper and middle-class children can easily acquire cultural capital by observing their parents, working-class children cannot, and this deprivation is self-perpetuating. The theory claims that the middle class gains cultural capital as the result of primary socialization, while the working class does not. Cultural capital helps the middle class succeed society because their norms and values facilitate educational achievement and subsequent employability. Working class members of society that lack cultural capital do not pass it on to their children, reproducing the class system.

References:


