

Re(senhas)

ISSN: 3085-6434

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71263/znxgzb42>

Culture and Capitalism

Manuel Bezerra Neto¹

In the introduction to *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson states that: "It is safer to understand the concept of postmodern as an attempt to think historically about the present in an age that has already forgotten how to think in this way." He then starts from the evident observation that the new globalized capitalist order, as a substitute for the previous stages of its imperialist domination, today marks its triumphant apotheosis in all spheres of social, economic, political and cultural life, which has the market and irrational consumerism as its

¹ Philosopher. Retired Professor of the Education Course at the Regional University of Cariri (URCA). E-mail: Manuel-bezerra@hotmail.com

exclusive reference, considering everything around it so as to no longer leave any place *outside the system* – neither Nature nor people's own collective unconscious, constantly massacred by media propaganda. In this scenario of an apparent hedonistic society *of leisure and pleasure* (di Masi), offered by the virtual reality of algorithms, men would have nothing else to do but take care of the things of the spirit; that is, to be artists, to live in a society emancipated from the pains of work. From this perspective, then, the problem of revolutionary transformations still remains a *historical necessity*; it remains a realization of practical and theoretical reason (Hegel). But according to the illusory prediction of Domenico di Masi, all human concerns would now revolve only around the subjectivity of existence; namely, man would turn only to the elevation and perfection of the spirit, so that such an activity should be a passage from savagery to civilization. Now, if we imagine life as a continuous succession of positive experiences, all modern inventions should converge to the same point of advancement and progress which, in Foucault's view (*History of Sexuality*), would mean nothing more than "factories of institutionalized order and control, thus creating conditions by which norms replace the unpredictable; it would be a system of production of control norms capable of fulfilling functions of adjustment and reproduction of the dominant order.

Consequently, in this stage of totalitarian domination of capital, culture ceases to be the authentic expression of the experiences of individuals – objective and subjective – in society and comes to be

Re(senhas)

understood only as the cultural logic of capitalist accumulation. Meanwhile, therefore, to speak of culture in the present circumstances inevitably implies to speak of society, since the term cannot be just a concept taken abstractly, but rather as the concrete result of human activities developed historically, in a praxic-ontological perspective in the face of the inexorable question of human needs and freedom, as well as the indispensable guarantee of the reproduction of the human race itself. Marx was right when he stated that "men, in order to survive, must first guarantee the material conditions of their existence, and then make history" (Marx. *The German Ideology*, 1979). Furthermore, when reflecting and analyzing culture not only as a concept, but as the totality of the conscious activities of men in society, it is in fact the set of these activities (artistic, philosophical or political) that develop as constitutive parts of the very ways of human life at a given stage of their existence; i. is, as an objective and subjective result, they must represent, in the end, the possible unity between the subject and the object; It is an ontocreative process, towards higher and more autonomous ways of being of the human being.

The process of objectification-subjectivation is the process by which man, before producing concrete objects, according to his vital or spiritual needs, needs to elaborate in his mind a project that will later be realized. It is, then, this act that differentiates us from the rest of organic nature, because it does not produce culture; this is not a spontaneous manifestation of Nature, but a historical act of human will

Re(senhas)

or need, hence culture is also a process of conditioning – objective or subjective – that seeks to organize, positively, or to disorganize a system of values or norms of conduct in society. Nevertheless, to believe that culture possesses, *per se*, an always affirmative character; a way of *spiritual elevation*, as the "good human conscience" proclaims, it is not to perceive or admit that in capitalist society, in addition to the ideological function of imposing its values as universal, thus making them norms of coexistence accepted by all, we must rather emphasize the political and economic character that induces people not only to imagine an apparent neutrality of cultural production in the face of the dominant social power of capitalism; as an appropriation as an instrument determined by the interests of the market; namely, only as an object of exchange.

From this conceptual perspective, culture – especially aesthetic culture – once appropriated as a commodity or object of exchange, ends up losing its character of autonomous creation and emancipatory promise, becoming just another object of social conditioning and generation of economic value for capitalist accumulation. To affirm the "virtuous" character of institutionalized culture in this way is to doubt or neglect its emancipatory character of critical denial of the established order, and not as a set of ideals that should confer a true humanized dimension to life. However, for bourgeois ideals, culture must be a sphere of social life entirely unrelated to the determinations of the market. This implies that, in the bourgeois conceptual view, the

Re(senhas)

affirmative character of culture indicates only the universalized subordination of the individual to the private demands of individual hedonistic desires for pleasure and happiness. For those people who can "buy" cultural goods, even if this is possible only in appearance, a subjective enjoyment whose function is to make a social life of uncertainty and suffering bearable, so that, as Gyorgy Lukács stated, "The culture of capitalism could only be a critique of the capitalist era" (1919 text – Hungary). This, then, is the affirmative character of bourgeois culture, which demands from its dominant social form the affirmation of humanist ideals that it itself objectively denies.

Consequently, to insist on the bourgeois idea of culture, understood only by its affirmative character, as an objectification of the humanist ideals of the individual, implies, in the same way, to obscure or deny its character of critical negativity of the values and social standards established by the dominant order. That is to say, the affirmative character of culture in the capitalist order needs to be counterposed by critical negativity, which, instead of signifying a mechanism for the abstract elevation of the spirit, according to the bourgeois canons, signifies the ontocreative affirmation of the true emancipation of man. Culture, as a set of activities that should favor the freedom of the individual, cannot, on the other hand, mean an instrument of conceptual evaluation and subordination to the determinations of the market. In this sense, we can think of culture, at present, only as a political effort aimed at maintaining the capitalist

Re(senhas)

social order, a struggle between installed chaos and class struggles and the imperative of reproducing market relations. In this conflict, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand culture as a specific product of human activities as an expression of the spiritual needs or desires for self-realization of individuals in society.

It is not easy, therefore, to think of culture in such a way that this is not in some way revealing a situation of crisis or systemic abnormality that ends up becoming a coercive norm in the face of the demands of the accumulation process of the consumer society. Moreover, all models of cultural production were rather concentrated on the freedom of their creator, they were organized around a spiritual correlate of values, categories, and philosophical principles whose conception was considered the task of a particular class of cultural creators who were autonomous and free in their creative work. Today, however, the market *and consumer* categories have caused a decisive change in the process of aesthetic creation, because it has also come to be considered an inherent part not only of the general processes of material production, but, above all, of the institutional mechanisms that coordinate and organize projects related to culture as a whole and, particularly, to the arts. In other words, the result and content of cultural works can only be affirmed and justified today through the determinations of the market and consumers eager for superficial and ephemeral novelties. In this way, then, culture is rather linked only to the demands of the order of accumulation and not a critical instrument

Re(senhas)

of denial of this order and its ideology. Bourgeois culture could not be anything other than affirmative praise, in view of its role of "ethical improvement" and aesthetic refinement.

By seeming to demonstrate that the field of culture is a space immune to the influxes of the market, in capitalism it has no other function to fulfill than to demonstrate that all human activities aim only at the realization of things as objects of exchange and not at the human being as their creator and true end of social being.

The Reverse of Culture

Up to now, we have taken the term culture in its traditional concept, as an activity of elevation of the spirit, or of affirmative culture, which, at bottom, is nothing more than the aesthetic form of capitalist society. From this concept, it would assume the responsibility of responding to the well-being and happiness of people in society. The fact, however, is that, in view of the characteristics of the real life of individuals, in this sphere, such a requirement will only be met on the plane of rationalized metaphysical abstractions. In a social way of life in which the proclaimed universal unity is a simple chimera and economic value is its basic foundation, demanding a minimum of well-being and happiness means only a privilege for *those blessed* with the possession of material riches. That is, the promise of satisfying the needs of all in the society of profit and accumulation is not recognizing that the vast majority has to submit to the hardships of wage labor that only

Re(senhas)

generates dividends for the owners of capital, and still has to be submissive to the economic determinations of reproduction of the commodity production system.

The eschatological promise of happiness, however, requires that those who sell their labor power always be disposed to oppression, humiliation, and the permanent state of want that objectively denies all possibility of pleasurable enjoyment and personal self-fulfillment. There is, then, only the possibility of reaching this unreal state if culture actually imposes itself as a universalized requirement; i. it is, as a concrete need to change the material relations of production, a new mode of production of values, which is not based on relations of domination and market expropriation of the worker's surplus labor. Now, while the bourgeois "good philosophy" makes its ideas feasible only on the plane of abstractions and individualistic desires, the culture that opposes it – the culture of negation, which does not only mean the culture of breaking customs, which in the end is only affirmed by the interference of the market – must be the one that does not refer only to the achievement of *a better world*. but of a world that results from a radical transformation of the material order dominated by market values. Thus, the beauty of this culture is only a subjective beauty: it must reach the outside only through the intervention of the spirit. By having assumed the demand for the realization of human freedom, this *culture of order* intends to unify on an abstract plane everything that refers to human actions, thus leading all this to the "formation of the pure

Re(senhas)

humanitarian character" immanent of freedom and reason. Now, this imaginable human achievement, however, must presuppose a possible community of values and desires, in the sense of achieving freedom, reason and the possibility of realizing all the potentialities intrinsic to the human being.

It is evident that this concept of culture, in the end, aims more to make expressive its discriminatory character of a class than its unifying and progressive character, enriching it and not replacing it with any object that can only acquire market value. In this case, it becomes only market value, a false improvement without, however, allowing the emancipation of its creator. This idea of culture, only as an identity expression of socially discriminated groups, implies, therefore, only a displacement and replacement of the working class by new means of production, making the new political-social relations an expression only of the obscene proclamation of bourgeois democracy that today boasts of producing ever greater numbers of structurally abstract and disposable individuals in the world of the production of values. even though this new configuration, determined only by the interests of capitalist accumulation, will only become accessible to the consciousness of the producing masses when it is "capable of breaking its mystical veil as a real process of material and spiritual production, and reveals itself as the product of men freely associated and under their planned and conscious control (...)", says Marx (Capital, vol. I).

Re(senhas)

From this perspective, the overcoming of this concept of culture will only be effective if its concrete bases – the material structures on which it is based, its character – are eliminated, because it presupposes human dignity, insofar as it is concerned with the objective conditions of life that allow this effective condition to be achieved. In these circumstances, nothing is gained by perpetuating an inert and decomposing social way of life, if it is not replaced by another structure that recognizes that the present has already exhausted its promises and has the future as a concern for human life.

In short, the overcoming of the "affirmative culture" in the material process of life is considered a threat and an offense to the very spiritual life of society. Even so, without considering that not only the production, but also the enjoyment of cultural goods, have long been valued only under the law of monetary value; Happiness and its delight are already calculated in terms of their immediate utility in the same terms as a wager in which there is the possibility of winning or losing. But it is usually lost when this idea is proper to utilitarianism, whose calculation is linked only to the principle of the law of the market. The Sunday happiness of leisure is nothing more than the demonstration of a competition of who squanders the most. This, however, means elevating the ideology of consumption and the market to the only form of social life that promises happiness but forgets the vital needs of individuals of flesh and nerve who suffer under the penalties of the obligations of commodity-producing labor. Thus, conceptions of this

Re(senhas)

nature are in direct opposition to what is essential, so that the conclusion of this critical analysis is on account of Fredric Jameson, when he states that...

(...) the criticism of consumption (...) merely on the problem of the market, and above all on the nature of socialism as an alternative system; and if the possibility of such a system (...) is not explicitly faced and theorized, the critique of commodity production inevitably tends to turn to the merely moral discussion (...) (Jameson. *Postmodernism: the cultural logic of late capitalism* – 1997).

Brejo Santo, September 2024.

REFERENCES:

EAGLETON, Terry. *As Ilusões do pós-modernismo*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1998.

FOUCAULT, M. “Aulas sobre a vontade de saber”. In: ALLIEZ, Éric; LAZZARATO. *Guerras e Capital*. São Paulo: Ubu: 2021.

HEGEL, G. F. W. *Enciclopédia das ciências filosóficas*, vol. II. São Paulo: Loyola, 1997.

JAMESON, Frédéric. *Pós-modernismo*. 1997. São Paulo: Ática, 1997.

MARX, K; ENGELS, F. *A ideologia alemã*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2007.

MARX, K; ENGELS, F. *O Capital*, vol. I. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1998.

Re(senhas)

