

Conference Paper

Cultural Imperialism: A Concept and a Phenomenon

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Abstract

The article explores the concept and the phenomenon of ‘cultural imperialism’. The author follows the ideas by E. A. Vishlenkova, J. Galtung, H. Munkler, S. P. Mains, E. Said, H. Schiller, D. Yong, P. Golding, and P. Harris to present a multifaceted description of this phenomenon. By highlighting the typical features and definitions of this concept, the author elucidated its core meaning.

Keywords: cultural imperialism, cultural dominance, cultural expansion, etymology, transnational production, globalization

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1. Introduction

The theme of cultural imperialism is highly relevant in the contemporary world, where, according to many historians and political scientists, we see the turn from liberal to an imperial ideology. This turn is made more interesting by the fact that, throughout the XXth century, classical empires (such as Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, British empire, etc.) ceased to exist. In the early XXIst century, the researchers increasingly often highlight the emergence of the new empires.

Classical and new empires differ in their modes of domination over dependent territories – that is, they differ in the types of their imperialism. Here we are using the concept of ‘imperialism’ in its most broad definition based on its etymological meaning. ‘Imperialism’ (*imperium*) in Latin means higher power, higher military power and a territory controlled by its power. Therefore, the word ‘imperialism’ may be used to describe various forms in which one country dominates over the other.

The new empires build their politics based on the different types of power (‘soft power’) – therefore, imperialism itself changes, emerging and developing as a cultural imperialism, among other forms. It is important to stress that modern imperialism is defined not by the borders of empires, but by the relationships between the countries that compete for domination on a global scale (the so-called external imperialism), or

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within a country (the so-called internal imperialism) that develops imperial relation of domination between its capital and the provinces ('center-periphery' relations).

2. Issues in Contemporary Research in Cultural Imperialism

Among all types of contemporary imperialism identified by H.Münkler, we focus on cultural imperialism. In its most broad sense, it is a domination and power held by one country over another through culture. Let us focus on this in more detail, not only to describe this phenomenon but also to define the concept of 'cultural imperialism'.

The notion of cultural imperialism was introduced in 1970s. This term was conceptually defined in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) [9] by Edward Said, who outlined a theoretical approach which he then used to analyze imperialism and its cultural manifestations. Said described cultural imperialism as two intertwined processes: cultural domination and cultural expansion of one country into the culture and cultural development of another country.

He defined 'cultural imperialism' as a multifarious cultural oppression used by a dominant culture to suppress and subjugate all manifestations of an oppressed culture: from high culture to folk traditions, from personal to social phenomena, from value systems to consumer preferences, from symbols and rituals to its pop-cultural imitations. It is a culture as a whole that creates imperial feelings and thoughts and engenders an imperial imagination.

This notion of cultural imperialism introduced by Said was taken up and developed by many authors who identified many-faceted ways in which cultural imperialism manifests itself in diverse social areas. For example, according to H.Münkler, "an inevitable drive to be the winner manifests itself today <...> in scientific area <...> and show business. Nobel prizes, university ratings, Olympian medal ranks and Oscars become, each time, a test of an imperial *soft power*." [2, p. 68] Said's ideas have been developed by J.Galtung [4], P.Golding and P.Harris [5], Dal Yong Jean [3], S.P.Mains [8], H.Münkler [2], H.Schiller [10] and others. They identify and explore several modes of cultural imperialism correlating with the main sub-systems of contemporary culture: communication imperialism, investment imperialism, visual imperialism (including issues of imperial culture [7] and myths of the empire [6]), scientific imperialism, etc.

According to H.Münkler, imperial domination in general is based on the dominance in four most important spheres of international relations: political, economic, military and

cultural. Based on this structure, H.Münkler identifies three types of modern imperialism: investment (economic) imperialism, network (political) imperialism and cultural imperialism. Thus, both for Said and for subsequent researchers, 'classical' (military, political and economic) imperialism and cultural imperialism are the integral parts of imperialism as such. However, in contemporary research cultural imperialism is also shown to be an internally differentiated and heterogeneous phenomenon.

For example, J.Galtung identifies scientific imperialism as a sub-type of cultural imperialism. In scientific imperialism, there is a very clear division of labor between the teachers and the students: it is not a division of labor as such (something that can be found in any situation of knowledge transmission), but rather the positioning of the teachers and the students within the socio-cultural geographic space. The Center always provides the teachers, as well as the criteria determining a 'good' teacher. The Periphery, on the other hand, always provides the students [4, p. 94]. The process of education creates an exemplary realization of imperialist tastes.

In the process of cultural communication, Periphery reflects back to the Center an embodiment of cultural model developed in the Center – regardless of whether this Center is internal or external. This process is required to strengthen the Center's position as a dominating Center, allowing it to continue developing a cultural model and its transmission and, therefore, creating a lingering demand for the latest innovations.

J.Galtung identifies a version of a vertical division of labor in science. An example of this division can be seen in the work of the research teams from the Center who study the Peripheral lands in order to gather raw data in form of the deposits, carbon copies, biological samples, archaeological finds, academic relations, behavioral models, etc. These raw materials are sent to the central universities for processing and analysis and for theoretical interpretation. After this, the finished product (whether a journal or a book) is sent back to be consumed at the Periphery, where the demand for such products has been already established through the demonstrational effect, experience of education in the Center and the low-level participation in the gathering of raw data [4, p. 96]. According to Galtung, this is a structure of transnational scientific production and domination. If the exact research practices are required to provide the Center with the information that may be efficiently used to support imperialist structure politically or militarily, then the cultural imperialism becomes even more pronounced. This is accompanied by the 'brain drain', when 'raw' brains (students) and 'raw' bodies (menial laborers) migrate from the Periphery to the Center and become 'processed' (taught), with an obvious advantage to the Center. This makes the picture of scientific imperialism complete, concludes J.Galtung.

Another definition of cultural imperialism was proposed by S.P.Mains: "Cultural imperialism is a process of disproportionate influence over social practices and ideologies by one sociopolitical group over a politically weaker and (frequently) less-wealthy group." [8, p. 322]. For Mains, cultural imperialism plays an important role in the production of imaginary geographies that develop various interpretations of a place and of local/global identity [8, p. 333]. Mains identifies cultural imperialism in the workings of geographical societies, publications of geographical atlases and maps, popular geographical journals and tourist guides, organization of geographical expeditions and tourist routes, and the organization of various related research.

E.A.Vishlenkova provides a typical example of the process used to create an 'imaginary geography'. She describes an emergence of an encyclopedically structured body of knowledge about Russia in the XVIIIth century, complete with ethnographic descriptions of its peoples, geographical atlases with maps and panoramic pictures of various towns. The author notes that through these atlases Russian state began to be perceived as a single, unified, integrated space. Such atlases were created based on a number of expeditions that included both chroniclers and surveyors. E.Vishenkova notes an interesting detail: during the expeditions, the artists created very accurate drawings of landscapes and landmarks of various towns and cities. These drawings were devoid of any embellishments or distortions. Thanks to these drawings, all country residents could see 'Russian Empire and Russian land' [1, p. 50]. According to the author, despite the need for accuracy, these drawings could include not only an existing cultural landscape, but also images of the future buildings. As a result, such images combined past, present and future narratives. Using again the ideas of H.Münkler, we can say that such communications facilitate control exercised by the center over the periphery. The theories of E.Said and S.P.Mains are similar in their approach to textual representations and the use of narratives, which both of these authors interpret as the key components in development and cultural reproduction of imperial identities and practices.

Another group of theories is represented by the works of J.Galtung, Y.J.Day and others on the telecommunication manifestations of cultural imperialism, when an empire compels its subjects to accept its conditions for cultural communications, provides them with communicative tools, determines the character of media and produces/invests into the broadcasted content.

3. The Role of USA in Global Cultural Domination

Talking about modern cultural imperialism, many researchers assume global American cultural dominance (G.Filimonov, N. Tsvetkova, H.Münkler, D.Schiller) and call the USA a 'new empire' or a 'new type of empire'. It is the global spread of the US culture that shows us the relevance of cultural-philosophical approach to the empires and imperialism. American policy of global mass culture demonstrates that a dominant country has to be a leader in all areas, including art, education, science, technology, sport, etc. As we can see, American popular culture has spread almost everywhere thanks to Hollywood, large publishing houses, TV channels, as well as technical progress (Apple computers and Microsoft software), popular clothes brands, media-resources, the US national sports teams winning various competitions, a large amount of major scientific breakthroughs made in North American universities, etc. All of this make the USA one of the globally dominant nations – this is what many researchers imply when they call the USA a hegemonic power, or an empire.

4. Preliminary Conclusions

Summarizing the various theoretical interpretations of 'cultural imperialism', we can conclude that the conceptual core of this term can be described as follows: *cultural imperialism is a subjugation of a cultural system both in its entirety and in its components (such as 'geography', 'state cultural policy', 'visual epistemology', 'communication') to an imperial power, as well as the global transmission of this power.*

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