

6-15-2022

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Citation Details

Zavala, Maria. "Cultural Imperialism and Hegemony, Working Paper No. 59", Portland State University Economics Working Papers. 59. (15 June 2022) i + 17 pages.

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Cultural Imperialism and Hegemony

Working Paper No. 59

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A Contribution to the *Working Papers* of the
Department of Economics, Portland State University

Submitted for: EC460, “History of Economic Thought”

15 June 2022; i + 17 pages

Prepared for Professor John Hall.

Abstract: While the traditional colonial imperialism of France and Great Britain ended after World War Two, it can be argued that a new form of imperialism replaced it. What is known as “cultural imperialism” includes the art of inserting a covert idea into person's mind by use of popular culture. Herein, Antonio Gramsci’s ideas of cultural imperialism are contemplated. This paper explores the topic by focusing upon some of the effects that popular American music has had on Latin music and the changes in culturally acceptable trends that have followed. Then, American beauty standards and the Eurocentric beauty standards of Latin America will continue to inform this conversation. Lastly, it will consider the changes that familial structures undergo related to the hegemonic influences of American and the proclivities for cultural dominance. Also considered are disruptions to traditions that many first-generation Latin Americans face. The thrust of this paper is to analyze cultural imperialism as understood by Gramsci, and then to consider how to develop what he called “alternative cultures” that could remain independent of the hegemonic culture, in an effort to avoid erasing one's own culture.

JEL Classification Codes: A13, B1, F54

Key Words: Antonio Gramsci, Hegemony, Latinx Culture, Popular Culture

This inquiry seeks to establish that cultural imperialism should be considered as a form of hegemony. For purposes of this inquiry hegemony is defined as Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) understood it. In an effort to grasp the importance of Gramsci's contribution to social sciences, I have endeavored to collect information from a variety of sources. This includes Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, journal articles, podcasts, videos, and literary interpretations advanced by this Italian social-philosopher. According to Devin Bales (2019, 2), Gramsci thought that hegemony could be understood by the total power wielded by one group over another. In addition to economic or political power though, Gramsci also introduced the foundations of what we term "cultural hegemony." In his podcast "Philosophize This!" episode 131 Stephen West (2019) explains Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony as a passive idea that the individual believes are actually their own. Seeing as the creative arts and culture can be appropriated, special attention will be given in this inquiry to the role popular culture has on influencing subcultures as well as what is now categorized as "Latinx music," with an emphasis on the "reggaeton" music genre. The focus of this inquiry will also include an analysis of popular music and its diffusion into Latinx genres, as well as the trends and beauty standards that are created in the United States and how these tendencies manifest themselves in Latinx Culture. Familial structures and the changes that take place after the first generation is established in the United States will also be incorporated into this writing. The effort of this inquiry is to advance an

understanding of Gramsci's notions of cultural hegemony that can be applied to understand current cultural trends. Then the question is posed: What might be done to establish an alternative original culture, which Gramsci believed needed to be in place if we were to thwart the grip of the imperialist hegemon.

Popular Music and Hollywood

Gramsci (1971, 770) explains that cultural hegemony is always a covert idea. Persons agree to hold an idea without realizing the idea is not their own. The influence is invisible to the individual and shows up as forms of popular culture that can be traced back to those in power. In this sense, culture can be used against people as it sets the stage for their everyday lives and holds illusions as people's boundaries. Culture itself is simply a weaving of norms, customs, and laws that a society uses to hold itself together. West explains that the origins of this social fabric is what interested Gramsci. His aim was to separate the culture from the natural. He thought that if the public could believe that everything in their environment was natural, they would not think to question it. When the system works perfectly, one does not blame others for their economic situations, they believe what is told to them, that it is of their own doing. This "ignorance" is what Gramsci termed "common sense." He believed that common sense was used to establish the power of the ruling class over the ruled. Gramsci (1971, 769) questioned and challenged that the existence of one truth. In his challenge Gramsci thought of truth as a fluid concept that depended upon where one was

in time and space. He also invoked the term “folklore” because it needed to be in line with the philosophy that particular society as a whole believed. It is then believed that one's own suffering is understood as a mistake of individual choices, and the responsibility falls entirely on the individual and not on the society to which one belongs. West (2019) explains that Gramsci did not believe life should be easy, but rather, he questioned the degree of difficulty persons should naturally have to overcome. How much of their suffering is necessary and how much is consciously inflicted upon people by society? West (2019) describes cultural hegemony as an “Economic Stockholm Syndrome.” Since one is born into a particular system, we accept it even if it harms us and we avoid questioning its validity. Gramsci also believed that being raised within a particular system would lead to ignorance in understanding it. Even when one wanted to make the system better and more humane, still we are faced with working from within. According to Gramsci, people perpetuate the system even if they are only looking out for themselves. By perpetuating it, we increasingly legitimize its natural state.

When it comes to popular music in the United States, we can see the influence on Latino music. What is labeled as “Reggeaton” can be described as a Latin genre of music that merges Black Bronx hip hop, Latin salsa, Caribbean Reggae beats, and more. The signature beat found in all Reggeaton music is called the dembow. According to *RollingStone* (2019), Reggeaton originated from a song titled “Dem Bow” introduced by Jamaican singer Shabba Ranks in

1990. After that, the beat was picked up by Panamanian producers and later by Puerto Rican musicians. While Reggeaton can be characterized by its distinct variations depending upon the home culture of the artist: those from the Dominican Republic are characterized as more bold, Puerto Ricans have more dance grooves. Panamanians are noted as lively, and Columbians are all of this combined. What is interesting is that across these cultures the same beat is used.

Many of the original popular artists of the genre credit “Marguesinas”, housing projects in Puerto Rico as the birthplace of the sound we currently identify as Reggeaton. According to The Music Origins Project, “The Noise” was a local night club that hosted rappers like Daddy Yankee, Tego Calderon, Nicky Jam, and Wisin & Yandel. These performing artists would go on to be the biggest names in this music genre. In 2004 Daddy Yankee released his album titled “Barrio Fino.” The literal translation of this title is “Fine neighborhood.” However the intended interpretation is something along the lines of “the best hood” an ode to his neighborhood. Within this album was the song “Gasolina” which exploded into the US radio airways. Using data retrieved from Billboard, I can noted that this album sat on the Number One Top Latin Albums in 2005 and won album of the year for the category. The album later went on to win the Top Selling Latin Album of the decade. “Gasolina” itself peaked at number 32 on the US Hot 100 List in 2005. What was once an obscure genre popular in Latin Caribbean islands became a Latin powerhouse. But it did more than that. After 2005, Reggaeton was recognized

in countries such as Denmark, Greece and Italy, peaking at number two in all three countries. Which eventually led it to number eight in the “Eurochart Hot 100” (Billboard).

With all the successes achieved with the Reggaeton genre, it was still contained within the “urban Latin” trope. This gave it a Latin hip hop feel that most non-Latinos associated it with. As such, little attention was given to lyrics of the genre, which carried the level of vulgarity attributed to American rap music. In the early 2000s, rap music could be stated as misogynist. The same could be said for Reggaeton. The cool thing in those time were raunchy lyrics and sexually explicit content, usually at the expense of insulting women. Since this was deemed culturally acceptable in the U.S., the reggaeton rappers that emulated much of this scene, in clothing and bravado, felt at ease in the explicit contents they promoted with their lyrics. One song in particular sexualized an 11 year old girl, who according to the lyrics, was seducing by attempting to look older. The genre was almost entirely stripped of women and any part they did play in hit songs were recorded as ad libs, which were moans and vocal snippets used as background beats. All this went uncriticized until the rise of the “Me Too” movement back in 2017.

Granted, Reggaeton had begun to soften its approach by the time contributions of songs by female artists like Shakira and Jennifer Lopez came along; however the more aggressive side of the genre went completely unchecked. Up until 2018 there were no popular female artists that identified as

Reggaeton rappers. The exception was women that could “play with the boys”, one or two who could hold as much gusto and bravado as their male counterparts. In 2017 Natti Natasha came on the scene with Pina Records, the largest reggaeton production company. She was featured in songs with Daddy Yankee along with other top rappers. The importance of this distinction is that she kept her feminine approach. Her image was somewhere between the American Barbadoes pop star Rihanna, but with a more girly sugar pop image. Natti Natisha was singing hooks similar to RnB songs by Black American pop stars and rappers. In 2018 her debut album was released and peaked at number three in the Top Latin Albums category, as well achieving a somewhat lower position in the US rankings (Billboard). The significance of this feat was quickly commercialized and feminine pop Reggaeton singers flocked to Latin music award stages. What was more significant was the change in the lyrics of male rapper’s lyrics. There was no song in sight that spoke of harassing women or applying derogatory language. The lyrics changed to talk about consensual sex, drugs, guns and partying. A small step in the right direction at least. Currently in 2022, the only ranking Latino Reggaeton artists in the US Hot 100 List according to Billboard are Karol G, Becky G, and Anitta, both of whom are women singing Reggaeton music.

This restructuring of male accountability in Hollywood and the American pop industry, which was followed by Latin pop artists, is what Gramsci would have labeled as “cultural hegemony.” Latin music has always been a slight step

behind American music. However, the relationship is more complicated. The lion's share of the Reggaeton audience are Latino youth, whether from Latin America or from within the States. While many of us might enjoy Latin music, the pop stars we most admire are American. In order to remain relevant and have crossover appeal, Latin artists must, to some extent, emulate American culture. In addition to that, Latin America might have their own production companies, those firms that create the songs, but the recording, distribution and marketing is monopolized by the American entertainment industry. Most Latin artists are signed under Sony Music Latin, or Universal Music Group (Spotify). As such, the image and message must be in sync with the dictates and pressures associated with American culture.

This is not to say that the actual sound of Latin urban music is not influenced by American culture as well. The effects are simply less noticeable to most of us who have not attained a certain degree of knowledge regarding the commercial production of music. To begin, Reggaeton and other sub genres of the pop scene mimic the structure of American pop music. The most visible example is in the structure of the songs themselves. American pop music, according to Master Class (2021), uses the ABACB model. Where A is the verse, B is the chorus or hook and C is the bridge of the song (MasterClass). There can be variations to this structure, adding a pre- or post- chorus adds another dimension of repetition without being overwhelming, which is what Latin songs use given their repetitive beats and rap lyrics. Pre-chores in pop

music usually use chord progressions. One of the most common ones is the plagal cadence which originated in the 1800s from hymns in England (PlaygroundSessions). Given that Latin music emulates American music and much of that influence can be dated back to England. We can connect the influences on Latin music going back hundreds of years to English colonial influences.

Beauty Standards and Trends

Whenever one watches Latino soap operas there can be a few immediate observations. The leading actors are characteristically pale skinned while the maids are invariably native. This is unfortunately a realistic depiction of Latino culture and reality. From the inception of Mexico the beauty standard was European. While Mexico has long been its own independent country, aspects of the European colonial cultural influences continue to appear. Characteristically, members of Mexico's high income society are disproportionately white. This is not a coincidence. Aside from Europeans in Latin America having economic advantage from the start, light skinned women can marry above their socioeconomic status. Whiteness is a type of cultural currency. A white wife can be viewed as offering prestige to her husband. Light skinned children are prized. When a dark-skinned child is born, families can be disappointed. Being born a disappointment has lifelong consequences, one of which is internalized racism, which is for many Latinos a shameful part of their personal identity.

Eurocentric beauty standards are so ingrained that we do not even realize they are not personal preferences. The vast majority of Latin make-up products promise skin lightening qualities, this includes moisturizing lotions and color correcting concealers. Women make an effort to stay away from direct sunlight. Tanned skin is associated with farm work, one of the lowest forms of employment in Latino culture. Even though the majority of the population holds some shade of darker pigmentation, as a whole, it is believed that white is equal to beauty. As long as the person is light skinned, they are more beautiful than a tanned person, regardless of their facial features.

In his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, author Edward W. Said (1994, 8), notes that although America was from its inception an imperium, which sought to grow in strength and influence, the idea that America is an empire is rarely brought up. The focus seems to be placed on its altruism and uniqueness as freedom fighters, with little attention given to the imperial history of the country. Said continues with his thinking and notes that that imperialism is more than colonization. There needs to be a whole hearted belief that subjecting people is for their best interest, in order for average people from colonial powers to believe they are doing the right thing. Even more so, the oppressed must also believe this: hence cultural imperialism is needed. The success of such a mentality can be observed when one looks at the distinction between the population of colonizers and the natives in the colonized countries. According to Said (1994,10-11) a prerequisite for an empire to exist is one of two

mentalities. The oppressed need to believe that their oppression is for their own good, which views the colonist as a paternalistic entity, or secondly, that they have no other choice other than to serve their master, regardless of their misery. Said explains that although France and Britain gave up their political control over their colonies after World War Two, these two nations did not strip their imperial ideology from these places. Said (1994, 12) continues and stresses that by the end of the 19th century, the hegemonic power had transferred to cultural affairs. The control from political power and economic policies were recreated and reinvented in the arts in music and media, the education systems, and literary works.

Gramsci criticized Marxist thinkers because they were blindsided by capitalism's ability to absorb pushback. West (2019) writes that Marxist believed with such faith that capitalism would eventually destroy itself, that they did not realize or could not conceptualize capitalism's ability to hold a soft power, that is to be gently seductive as well as bluntly combative. According to an article in *Time Magazine* by Mahita Gajanan (2019), Victoria's Secret's parent company L Brand announced in 2019 that it would be canceling the annual fashion show. Victoria's Secret's Fashion Show, which had been televised every year since 1995, displayed bone thin women supermodels in lingerie and undergarments. It consisted of top American pop star performers and a star-studded audience. Gajanan (2019) explains that the brand refused to hire plus sized women and transgender women onto the show. Given that

cultural norms in American beauty standards had shifted in recent years, the brand was seen as outdated. The boycott that followed was felt all the way to the top. As a result, they rebranded with a limited spectrum of inclusive body types and they hired one transgender model. However, the brand was forgiven, the proof can be observed in the customer traffic seen in American shopping malls.

The idea for most people was that we succeed in forcing a company to change. However, many companies could care less regarding what they sell, so long as they sell and bring in a generous stream of revenues. Victoria's Secret was given the formula to success in the current cultural norms, all they did was resist a little, eventually taking the recipe and running with it. This perceived control can be seen as a form of cultural hegemony. The owning class does not care if consumers want something different. The goal is simply to create an unrealistic beauty standard even when it means that people remain trapped in a feeling of inferiority. Not long after body inclusivity took hold of popular culture, came the reign of the "slim thick" body. This character is an exaggerated curvy woman with small shoulders, large breasts, and a thin waist with an expansive bottom half. This new Betty Boop replaced the 90s all American, paper-thin beauty standard. The new ideal was just as unrealistic as the old, except that the public felt they had won the fight. As they settled into the beauty standard they perceived to have created, they put away their bats and

brought out their wallets again. This serves as an example in which cultural hegemony had won a silent war, without ever being crowned the victor.

Familial Structures

If those oppressed fail to notice they are oppressed, they won't know to revolt.

This was Gramsci's reasoning on why the grand communist revolt never happened. For Gramsci (West, 2019), in order to have social change, one must

attack from two fronts. The war of "position," which is the war in which

cultural hegemony must be won before one can step into the next battle. The

war of "maneuver" is the communist revolution that never came to fruition.

This would have been the step after the first. But the war of position is a

multifaceted structure. Gramsci's understanding is that it has three components.

There are the intellectuals, which can be further sectioned into two categories.

The ruling intellectuals are in academia. Many researchers, according to West

(2019) can be out of touch with everyday people because research requires one

to be removed from the real world for long periods of time. This was the case

for philosophers throughout history. Additionally, the accreditation of such

individuals comes from institutions that perpetuate the ruling class's power.

Since most of the knowledge of the society comes from such individuals, there

is a need for organic intellectuals. Gramsci believed that the role of such

intellectuals was to be critical and skeptical about society. They were charged

with finding alternative means for education. And finding a way to get citizens to engage in politics and change the philosophy of these citizens' self identity within their environment. The other two ways that the war of position needs to be challenged was with its educators and the philosophy of the society. All three of these, the intellectuals, educators, and philosophy constitute what can be called the “cultural norms.” For this war to be won, West (2019) explains, there needs to be an alternative culture to replace the one that was trying to be defeated and this needed to be done in all three areas simultaneously.

The problem that arises is that Latino culture operates in a backwards way. When generations become more educated and economically stable the customs tend to shift towards more American lifestyles. Diets are altered, sport preferences may change, manners of speaking adjust, hobbies and interests change. The aim is to assimilate: to erase one's culture in an effort to fit in and be accepted into American culture. First generations refuse to teach their children to speak Spanish, they are given European names, and they move out of predominantly BIPOC neighborhoods. With whitening comes the loss of ego and pride, the BIPOC bravado, the gaudy tastes, the rowdy color. We trade it for the classy subtle tastes, composed demeanor, and stale parties of the perceived higher white class. We look down on multigenerational homes and kick our children out as soon as they become 18. We see family support as less impressive than scratching one's own back and making it without help. We purposely lose our support systems to try to be individuals, stripped of our

support networks, and history. We ignore our ingrained value of “family first” obligations. We emulate the whites and are embarrassed by our own.

Gramsci would say this is cultural hegemony. Not noticing this is being done to us as Latinos, we lose our identity for the promise that if we try hard enough we will become American. But we will never be American, not fully. The color of our skin will always be golden brown. Our way of speaking will be incorrect, facial structures always a bit too long, our parents taste ghetto, cactus will always be breakfast to us, not ornaments. We will never be American, not fully. Organic intellectuals must come from these communities. They must be the individuals that tackled higher education and forced themselves to camouflage but not be erased. They must come back to the periphery and give back the knowledge while reminding us to stay with our identity. To see the promise for what it is, a lie. We have to see success and economic prosperity while remaining unadulteratedly Latino. Alternative cultures must be enacted. We have to have subcultures in place so we don't default to popular American lifestyles. Accepting that we cannot be wholly Mexican anymore but a type of “in-between.” We must create an identity of our own, not the common sense that a naive consciousness would accept, as Gramsci (1971,773) describes. An example of resistance to this dominant culture is the Chicano culture. It is the hybrid between Mexican children of immigrants and their upbringing in the United States. Their styles are bold and dramatic. Exaggerated eye makeup, dark lips, masculine clothing with large pieces of jewelry. And Spanglish is

spoken, a true ode to the hybrid identity. Distinction must be made between education and assimilation.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that cultural imperialism should be considered as a form of hegemony. By exploring the relationship between American popular music and its effects on the Reggaeton genre, one can visualize the dominant culture's influence on the other. The parameters are set and continually developed by American popular culture. This is in part due to the lack of autonomy Latin artists have against the American monopoly of distribution and marketing firms in the music industry. When examining American beauty standards and their ability to absorb criticism and a changing cultural climate, we see the real strength that cultural imperialism has. This informs our understanding of the challenges in combating Latin culture's acceptance of Eurocentric beauty standards, which serves to perpetuate internalized racism among Latinx individuals with darker pigmentation. This passive acceptance of American cultural imperialism affects the following generations as well. As Latinx people begin to become better educated and financially stable than their parents, they tend to lose their roots and become absorbed with trying to emulate a white lifestyle. As a result, even those unable to climb the social class ladder associate whiteness with progress. This perceived image of progress must be detached from real growth if Latino

culture is to survive the journey from one generation to the next in the United States.

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