

Discussing How John Fiske Analyzes Left-Wing Crisis

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Abstract: John Fiske's exposition about Populism is an important basis to understand Popular Culture. He has analyzed the reasons of causing left-wing crisis and some problems in it, advocating changing attitudes towards the popular and respecting and identifying the popular and their daily life culture for the left. By these, the left can win supports from the public and find out the confrontation function of Popular Culture to realize the micro political function, which is necessary for realization of macro politics.

Keywords: Left-Wing; Crisis; The Popular; John Fiske; Populism

Introduction

John Fiske is one of the most typical representatives of the late British culture. He has a great number of researches on popular culture including many books and more than one hundred papers such as *Reading Television* in 1978, *Introduction to Communication Studies* in 1982, *Television Culture* in 1987, *Myth of OZ: Reading Australian Popular Culture* in 1988, *Power Plays, Power Works* in 1993, *Key Concepts in Communication and Culture Studies* in 1994 and *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* in 1994. These books and collections of papers about Popular Culture have been regarded as the pioneer in the field of Popular Culture, and he has been the one who is so significant that researchers in this field could not avoid. However, the studies of his culture thoughts are in a great amount besides his books and papers. So the best way to understand his ideas about Popular Culture is to make sure his purpose of creating Popular Culture and the problems that he is urgent to solve. The author of this paper thinks that John Fiske still follows traditions of Birmingham School's culture politics as he is one of the late descendants of Birmingham school, but he tries to find out the potential of Popular Culture's micro politics in a certain social context by thinking about the social crisis of the left and broadening views to American consumer culture. So this paper aims at analyzing the complex of micro politics of Popular Culture based on the systematically backtracking of the left's opinions in order to contribute to the accurate understanding of Popular Culture.

1. The Credibility Gap Encountered by the left

Fiske has abandoned the radical revolutionary strategy of macro politics and has changed into preserving a tactic of micro politics. The reason is that macro politics which is focusing on culture industry and plan are hopeless, so it must return to the daily politics and to the personal politics in order to cheer for those who make full display of initiatives in consumption activities just as McGuigan has put forward. Fiske has made such kind of choice with the purpose the same as Stuart Hall, that is to say, he tries to find out a way for the left bounded in the lost and the pessimistic situation.

1.1 *The Crisis Brought to the Left by European and America Political Changes*

In 1970s, a series of new changes in European and American politics make the left into a new confusion. In Britain, the most typical example is the winning of Conservative Party in 1979, thus making Thatcher be the Prime Minister for 11 years. Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher came to power with a series of bold resolution. However, what makes the left confused is their supports to some initiatives like reducing the welfare spending and cracking down the power of labor union, which obviously has damaged interests of common people. The same thing happens in America. The entire 80s became the conservative "Reagan Era". Reagan also cut down social welfare as one of his major political policies, but he still won high support rates.

1.2 Reasons for Credibility Gap Encountered by the Left

Where is the cause of the result? Fiske analyses the different attitude towards Populism from the left and the opponents of the left. On the one hand, some of the left don't trust Populism. Fiske pointed out that some of the left would think about Adolf Hitler, the fascist dictator in the early 20th century, and Mussolini who came to the throne by Populism, which deepen the credibility gap of Populism for the left. For example, the left focused excessively on bureaucracy and were not willing to contact with "the alliance" and were with serious paternalism. Even the Labour Party came to throne, it seldom encouraged the active participation in public organizations. Centralization of state power brings the people's daily life into strict jurisdiction such as education and residence decoration, not coordinated with the popular public will. However, Fiske believed that "at least in the west, the most successful Populist Movement has been accompanied by the right" [1]. Although the Left have reasons to distrust Populism, he thinks that the left should not misunderstand or even abandon Populism as Populism can't be attributed to any certain faction from its nature.

On the contrary, Thatcherism has successfully put the Populism to use and established a "authoritarian populism". On the one hand, it introduces successfully the Gramsci hegemony theory inserting vitality to the government. The hegemony theory is characterized by establishing continuously new ethics and new moral order to win general recognition of the public. The hegemony theory has abandoned the old economic ideas, and has attached great importance to the ideology like concepts, beliefs and values of modern society. Its power is not in the enforceability but in the ability to get involved in some solidified situation in the process of negotiation. It is also in the active practice of hegemony, Thatcher has removed the idea supporting a long time after post-war like the welfare system into a new concept beyond exception to combine the public. Just so, the hegemony in practice has changed unconsciously the public's belief foundation and established a new type of social satisfaction by taking into account the public's identity.

Secondly, it has established successfully "authoritarian Populism" in the practice. This kind of Populism emphasizes typically on "the new secular virtue based on the legal order and family values" [2]. It defines capitalism as an inclusive system that can be effective for the middle class as well as for the general public, advocating winning supports upon wide acceptance. In this way, Mrs. Thatcher has freed the people from the bondage of bureaucratic system, giving the public the freedom of daily life, paying attention to the problems of the public, and standing on the spot of people. For example, they would complain about their discontent with the bureaucracy of the left, the labor

union, or the local government with the common people; they make people realize what is the true democracy and lead them see the non-democratic factors in the labor union and encourage them to revolt from it so that they can take the labor party's places away.

2. Problems in the theories of the left

Fiske points out, needless to say, the left are really concerned about the rights of the public or political interests, and believe deeply that the oppressions and the unfair treatments are not attributed to the public themselves but the system. So the left put forward a political program wishing to unite the public, lead the public and make efforts to create a fair and equal society together. However, the right wing have avoided the fact of unequal economy and make a political program from the ideological level to make sure the public would be against the political agenda of the left in terms of public interests. Their specific approach is to make the political program of the left be the means to promote the left themselves and abridge the rights of the people. At the same time, they synthesize people's desire to control interests of themselves into their own personal ideology for the right and they "build and spread the meaning of the right, which is close to Popular Culture "because he connect the public and individualism and freedom together, and connect the power group and the state control together." [3]. Fiske believes that the right successfully defined them as the observer of public interests and made the left be the opposite of the public. Therefore, Fiske thought that the left crisis was caused by defects in the theory, and he pointed out that the left-wing's theory has two problems.

The primary problem of the left theories is that they do not take people's desire controlling daily life into account, lacking the connection with people's daily life. As Fiske has said, the left theorists except a few of them completely ignore the core zone of daily life for the public so that they can't come up with any theory associated with the pleasure of the public. Although they claim to represent the interests of the public and they insist on the democratic rights of the people at the bottom, they can't win the supports because their hollow theories are not closely related to the daily life interests of the public. The public are concerned about their interests and pursue the pleasure of daily life. They don't need the requirement that people's responsibility and historical mission is to be silent and bear responsibility and blame until the victory of revolution has come to shine brilliantly to enjoy the happiness. People would not in favor of this Islamic style. Fiske believes that the left has another reason to be indifferent to the daily life of the public. He thinks that the left do not see the political potential contained in the daily life and do not see the progress contained in the confrontation. What's more, some Marxists should deny

the validity of the public as a category, and it is opposite to the fact that identity is easy to make clear by the “interests groups” not only depend on the class in the post industrial society.

Another problem is that the left are the speakers of the public while they depreciate the public because they regard the public as the victims of the capitalist system or the puppet under the capitalism. This is clearly in line with the Frankfurt School of “pessimistic elitism”. In the eyes of the elites of the Frankfurt school, the culture industry has dominated all aspects of consumers’ social life so that they have been submerged in various kinds of products manufactured by the cultural industry.

The power of culture industry carries all before it and is ever-victorious, which is efficacious forever to influence the public. Cultural industrial products dominate people’s life anytime and anywhere even to reach people’s entertainment, “Every cultural industry product is a sample on a big machine in economy. Everyone could not be separated from those products from the very beginning when he works and rests as long as he still breathes. No one would not see a movie and listen to the radio, so everyone is influenced by cultural industry products.” [4].

Moreover, in the view of the Frankfurt school, the purpose of every movement of cultural industry is only to reappear human in accordance with the needs of the society. What’s Interesting is that the Frankfurt school think that culture industry will also provide consumers with “pleasure”, however, this pleasure is sugar coated bullets to paralyze the public, which has essential difference with the pleasure produced by resisting or escaping system as Fiske said. The logic of the cultural industry is simple which tries to make everyone happy as much as possible. It produces products making consumers the most moved and create new needs as cultural industry produces product to consumers’ taste. The public continuously lose the ability to distinguish between true and false, good or bad to become a total culture fool under the industrial design and deceive. The public’s position as the subject has been also lost and become the object and appendage to the cultural industry.

3. The needed attitude towards Populism by the left wing in Fiske’s opinion

Fiske argues that the left wing should learn from the Thatcherism that the Populism is deficient in a general and core value. “Therefore, it’s necessary to understand and develop a kind of socialistic Populism for the left wing, which helps reconstruct the relationship between theories and programmes of left wing and people’s daily life” [5].

He also proposes that the most important task for the left wing after 1990s is to construct all kinds of

creative relation between the tactic of resistance to daily life and the action in strategic aspect. The Thatcherism, which has possessed the priority in daily life depending on the ethos constructed by hegemony, is a lesson for the left wing. If they hold on to the economic determinism and insist on that the capitalism’s extinction is in certain without uniting with the people from the aspect of ideology, all the ideals will be the Utopia after the last brick getting off.

However, that is not the end of the left wing for Fisk’s agreement on Hall’s proposal on the solution that construct a kind of socialistic populism to re-interpret the right wing’s pattern and reconstruct the connection between the grand political programme and people’s daily life in order to return to grassroots politic and progressive elements in daily-life politic. Progressively, they can seize back their ever-lost territory and create the conditions for social reformation. First of all above, they should change their attitude to the people from ignorance to respect their strength on progress.

He argues that the result of absolutizing political power, looking down upon the followers of popular culture, regarding them as the victims at the aspect of construction and ignoring their huge strength on resisting the system is losing their appeal and support, because they will never choose to ally the side which despises them and not admits their strength in kinds of social subordination.

Therefore, he concludes that it’s time for the left wing to abandon the traditional way of revealing and criticizing the darkness of the ruling class through utilizing the public as the sacrifice for the social system but think highly of their strength on progress. In this way, they can not only ally the public but also get rid of pessimistic atmosphere and retake the optimistic spirits which is the clever way to meet the situation of today’s society in Fiske’s opinion for the existence of differences and contradictory are manifest. The public, though subordinate to the power, are still energetic in resistance to the traditional conformation which is imposed by capitalism in case of the assimilation from the system in all kinds of ways. Meanwhile, they continuously carve out space for interest in the process of resistance which embraces progressive elements although controlling them is contemporary. Furthermore, the progressiveness reveals the public’s desire for controlling their daily life. The situation urges the left wing to explore an appropriate media or access to relate the concern on health, welfare and education to their desire for the freedom and control. Only in this way, the public can be owned.

Fiske also stresses that paying attention to the micro politics of popular culture is not to ignore its relationship with rational and macro politics. In contrary, this progressive politic can be a necessary

premise for triggering the rational movements of Populism, if not a necessary reason. Specifically speaking, although this micro politic cannot create the historical conditions for rational reform directly, it is able to contain a public perspective which can prompt the emergence of these conditions which can be used in rational reform. Therefore, although discrimination still exists between two reform patterns, they don't contradict. The most important thing is to find out the point where the discrimination is in order to seek the solution for the differences.

Majority of theorists who insist on the macro politics look down upon popular culture because their practice and flexible fighting tactics can be easily embraced and used by the system, resulting in benefiting on ruling class even putting off the reformation. However, the idea falls into a manifest trap that ignoring the progressive elements in public politic, which will lead to pessimism.

Fiske alerts theorists of some points. First of all, don't overstate the embracing ability of the system. On the other hand, the ability can be regard as a tactic to deal with the guerrilla strategy of the public. Embracing means gives up the territory and transmits the space. Secondly, don't despise the people and their progressiveness. Politic without the support from the public will be definitely defeated. As a result, only the politic paying much attention to people's daily life, and encouraging as well as guiding the progressive movement can own the necessary condition for the rational reformation. Last but not the least, he sincerely points out that "the radical theory which doesn't support the popular is doomed to be failed in politic as well as the practice which can not connect to historical crisis and rational movements during the period of political conflict will also be defeated" [6]. Deficient in kinds of conditions, holding on to micro politic is to build the base of prosperous macro politic.

Conclusion

All in all, as what Fiske said, the only solution for the left wing to get rid of the crisis is to turn their eyes from paying attention to the bloc power to the popular's resistance and conflicts to it and recognize the popular's strong desire for the operation of everyday life. Based on this, it is necessary to make a set of political program actively connected with people's daily life which can not only manifest the left wing's concern to social justice but also can show the popular's desire for happiness (especially material desire). It's extremely important for the left wing to explore a method to connect both.

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