

Active and Nomadic Subjective: Connotation of John Fiske's "the Popular"

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Abstract: As a representative figure of the late period of Birmingham School's Cultural Studies, John Fiske has opened up a new perspective of cultural studies in the context of the America's consumer culture as well as he continues the custom of Birmingham school's cultural politics. He advocates regarding culture as a vital field of power and fight, in which the popular is not an atomized and stupid individual fooled by the institution but an active consumer who combats the cultural industry with energy and creativity. He considers the popular as an active and nomadic "lower race". Therefore, understanding the connotation of the mass is the key to understand the popular culture.

Keywords: The popular; John Fiske; Active and Nomadic Subjective; Cultural Studies; Cultural Politics.

INTRODUCTION

Birmingham Cultural Study has been a prominent one in contemporary academy as well as a very active field. The tradition opened by Birmingham School is passing the torch, making a large number of scholars famous at home and abroad. John Fiske in this study is one of the best among them. He has once worked and taught in the UN, Australia and US and also engaged in the Contemporary Cultural Studies Center at University of Birmingham. Complicated studying and working experience offers novel perspective for his cultural study. As a deeply rooted fan in popular culture, he praises highly the consumer culture of disadvantaged group in current society. On the whole, he follows the thinking of combining the culture with society and politics advocated by Birmingham School's early representatives including Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, EP Thompson and Stuart Hall, and he puts out a kind of "Cultural Politics" to regard the culture as a vital field of power and fight, in which the popular is not an atomized and stupid individual fooled by the institution but an active consumer who fights the cultural industry with energy and creativity. Thus, understanding the connotation of the popular correctly is vital to understand the Fiske's popular culture.

THE THEORY AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CONSTRUCTING JOHN FISKE'S "THE POPULAR"

John Fiske's construction of his "popular culture" has its own theory and social context. The former manifests that he inherits the tradition of Birmingham studies as a descendant of the Birmingham school. Being influenced by this tradition, he assumes himself

as an "organic intellectuals" and a "highly political awareness man", who struggles to speak on the stance of the popular holding his conscience as an intellectual. While the latter manifests that as a researcher and practitioner of the popular culture, by considering the situation, he chooses America which perfectly represents the prosperity of the popular culture as his theory's generated context, interfacing many classical theories with this context and finally creating a maverick thought of the popular culture.

John Fiske and the Convention of "Cultural Politics" of Birmingham Cultural Studies

Birmingham School's cultural studies, which were not a subject at the very beginning, but rooted in politics of "the New Left" in England, never conceal their clear political stance. "Hall even considers the establishment of The Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies as a shelter in university system for the politics of the New Left to resurface and pass on to a new generation" [1]. Deeply influenced by Marxism and the New Left, Birmingham School's cultural studies have been following the tradition of politicized culture. To be more specific, they "are born out of a endeavor to understand social change" [2], manifesting knowledge level, aiming at "creating miracles with concept, to concept, by concept" [2], and the final purpose is to stimulate or inhibit social change in some areas.

Consequently, for popular culture, Birmingham School's cultural studies pay attention to humanistic concern for the popular from the start, breaking the shackle between the two contradictory sides of the elite and the ordinary, focusing on the daily life and aesthetic

interest of the popular, emphasizing on the unique position and function of popular culture in social life and “embracing all kinds of cultural products with the civilianized thought, focusing on the context of making cultural products and strongly defending popular culture” [3].

While Fiske was pursuing his degree at University of Cambridge, the Birmingham School was at its zenith. After graduation, he worked for The Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the leadership of Hall, being imperceptibly influenced by the tradition of British cultural studies. Additionally, he never forgot his own academic mission, which was to unceasingly follow the tradition of politicized culture of Birmingham School. Like other cultural researchers, they believed that knowledge production was a kind of political practice. The knowledge they had painstakingly produced was neither neutral nor objective, instead, it was concerned with the position of speaking or the stance taken by the speaker, indicating the intention and the benefited party of the utterance. Furthermore, Fiske chanted for the popular, and paid positive attention to vulnerable group. He also focused on the representation problems of those who were in the edge position of class, gender, race, and spoke for them. He was engaged in taking on interstate, transnational or even inter-continental cultural practices. As Denis McQuail puts it, “John Fiske is one of the most eloquent, convincing person in struggling defense of the popular culture” [4].

John Fiske and American Consumption Cultural Context

Fiske’s theories were mainly involved in the phenomenon of the consumer culture in the 1980s. In the period of time, consumption obtained the unprecedented prominence, which was no longer the subservient production to the economic activities and penetrated into all fields and all levels of society after being closely connected with political cultural factors. The popular was once the labor subject in traditional society, and then played a major role in the diversified social activities in consumer society. Their consumption behavior was not a pure economic behavior any more, but a dynamic activity of the combination of social behavior and cultural behavior. How to understand the nature of the consumer society had aroused the attention of many scholars, who were highly enthusiastic about consumption process, consumption lifestyle, consumption pattern and consumption behavior, and who also changed the traditional study habits of combining only consumption with production into advocating finding out the meaning of consumption behavior by exploring the combination the consumption with the whole structure of society. From a political perspective, to analyze the relationship between the popular and the society, in a fashionable way, is to

analyze how the popular gets the right from their consumption behavior and from the power group.

The power struggle is vital for Fiske. It can at least revitalize the cultural field, where pessimistic atmosphere has long been prevailing, and it provides a dose of prescription for the left theory, which could not always win the support of the popular in pathological situation because of ignoring the public pleasure. After the Second World War, Britain, the United States, France and other victorious nations gain unprecedented prosperity, and the vanquished nations like Germany, Italy, and Japan also rise rapidly. All these seem to reveal the vitality of capitalism. The capitalist countries take a lot of measures to adjust what Marx said ‘the inherent contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat’. Most of the capitalist countries relieve the contradictions by adopting and constantly perfecting the welfare system to protect people’s basic life, by taking stock, by letting workers take part in the management of the enterprise, by taking the union system. At the political level, these measures cause a new change in the structure of social class. The stability of social structure in traditional research is broken. The homogeneity of class consciousness is blurred, and the political contradiction is also eased. However, these do not mean all the problems have been solved in capitalist system. On the contrary, a series of new problems come out, like the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, serious unemployment, racial problems, diversified morality, free thoughts and so on. All the social contradictions are shifting from the macro political level to micro political level of everyday life. State institutions are constantly using the interference power, but this kind of integration capability can only appear in implementing control strategically, based on the macroscopic level, and the ‘clever’ popular is playing ‘guerrilla tactics’ flexibly to give the controlled field sneak attacks. In view of this, Fiske takes these into the category of the popular culture study, and considers it is feasible to make progress. The activities in micro level for the popular are “under the proper social condition and capable of expanding their social and cultural space, and are redistributing the power in micro level according to their preferences” [5]. Besides, Fiske firmly believes that, in the “hegemony debacle, ideological weakness in resisting behavior, social control by lawlessness” [5] moments, the popular culture would show its progressive potential. So his theories also aim at reminding The Left of understanding the pleasure of the popular, focusing on the importance of public pleasure, linking theories and political platforms with people’s daily life, treating people’s action form the perspective of public to win public support instead of staring at the operation of the power group.

FISKE'S STANCE ON DEFINING "THE POPULAR"

According to the above statement, Fiske's definition of the popular manifests his stance against the elite cultural studies and reveals his sincere concern on the disadvantaged group.

First of all, he stands on the populist stance to define the popular. Fiske's stance of defining the popular is consistent with his attitude to treat the culture. He does not think that culture has superior or inferior, so he questions the elite stance of defining the popular and even doubts the existence of the elite. He asserts that elite is hypothesized one and the outcome of the popular is merely because the elite frequently used the popular as its opposition stance. He uses the claim of treating masses as an alienation and one-dimensional gathering and the sentence of "they live without knowing it in a state of being fooled" [5] to account for the indifference the popular showed to the relation between them and the institution enslaved them. He doesn't believe that the popular is "cultural idiot" and nor does he think that "they are without discrimination, passive and hopeless and a group fully controlled by the industrial giant in culture and politics" [6] Cultural industry only offers materials or cultural goods, but the popular does not accept them passively, whereas they take an perfunctory attitude to these goods and overthrow the hegemonic code endowed by the cultural industry on the cultural text and produce meaning and sensation for themselves.

Second, Fiske defines "the popular" on the position of against atomic and homogeneity. He assumes that the post capitalist society we live is composed of a large number of different social groups and subcultures, in this interweaving net-like social relation, the different distribution of power complicated the concept of "the popular". It has already been outdated and wrong doing to stubbornly see the society and the popular as the same [6]. He assumes that, in a consumption society, there is contradictory existing between producers and consumers and the consumers are engaging in activities to maintain this disparity, but the contradictory between them is not a contradiction between us and the enemy and its fight is not steep and militant. So, it is inappropriate to the division of the class and facing the racial and ethnic issues, purely class theory is doomed to be out of the battlefield. Fiske argues that, the popular in the consumption society is not manipulated by the cultural industry, but in consumption they are using the tactics to attack on the capitalism. They are enjoying life according to different lifestyles, purchasing by their own style, consuming in their own way. The diversification of the mainstream thought makes the different kinds of homogenization strategy of bourgeois impossible to defend effectively. So, to the ample social diversity, the traditional ideology has no way to tolerate.

Third, Fiske specially stressed to define the popular in the confrontation. Fiske believes that the popular of the consumer society all the time involved in activities of opposing and agreeing in a variety of power structure. "Confrontation" and "disparity" is the most prominent feature of the recognition of the public, if there is no power difference, there is no social differences. So, he points out, as Holzer said, one way to define the popular is from its opposition to the "power group". He said that they are more decisive than similarity and class identity, because the liquidity, the characteristics of the popular in the complex society, is generated in the various sharing of confrontation [5]. Fiske borrows the "guerrilla tactics" as a metaphor to describe the popular resistance to the Domination System. Guerrilla tactics is a tactics used by the weak. When facing the formidable enemy, they do not take a frontal attack but seize the enemy's weaknesses, taking the raid or blitz way to let the enemy hard to guard against so as to effectively fight against the enemy. The popular will not directly confront the domination system, but take a flexible resistance continuously in the internal system. The popular of guerrilla warfare is constantly challenged by the system, forcing it to be changed. The guerrilla warfare of the popular is constantly challenged the system, forcing it to be changed. When the system is being eroded or weakened under the constant attack of the daily tactics, it is possible to change the structure of the system itself. This also demonstrates the micro political function of the popular resistance.

THE CONNOTATION OF "THE POPULAR" IN FISKE'S THEORY

From what has been discussed above, we can figure out Fiske's general standpoint of the popular. The standpoint is a basis of the theory construction of popular culture, its connotation embodies in the following aspects:

First and foremost, "The Popular" is not an entity that can be recognized as a sociological category based on experiential knowledge but a sort of changeable bond established on allegiance and subordination, which is characterized by mobility. This definition throws light upon the essence of "the popular", thus distinguishing it from the various elements of sociology, including class, gender, age and race, which belong to the category of social structure or social group. These elements and their constituents are noted for their enduring and stable interconnections and constant membership, so they can be treated as the subjects for experiential studies. Furthermore, within class structures, the members more often than not share fixed class consciousness and goals. However, "the popular" is neither a colony exclusive of any individualization nor a biological unit; instead, it is a sort of complicated relationship that involves multiple

interests. Such a relationship is more of a bond of allegiance and subordination resulting from social practices than of a structural organization. Fiske once used an example to illustrate the relationship, in which some young Australian Aborigines were watching western film and cheering for the scene where American Indians sacking motorcades and houses, killing white men and kidnapping white women. On the other hand, they acknowledge Arnold, a role in the TV series called *Different Strokes* who is a black boy that has grown up in a white family. Fiske deems that black people, American Indians and Australian Aborigines share some common characteristics that is different than that of the white people, therefore, which has contributed to the formation of their tradition of allegiance and subordination. The most typical feature of the bond is uncertainty and temporality. People tend to alter the bond of allegiance and subordination in accordance with their self-interests when they are placed in different scenes or contexts. He also indicates that this sort of bond may correspond to class relations but necessarily equal to them. Likewise, it may also be associated with political institutions but not necessarily determined by them. Nevertheless, “the popular” connected by a bond of allegiance and subordination is not an illusion, instead, it can be identified through perceivable collectivity, which refers to the same background or temporal experience shared by “the popular” when they are in the same subordinated positions in a certain place at a certain time.

The “active” feature is the second connotation of Fiske’s concept of the popular. The so-called active person is free to do things literally. In Fiske’s view, the different level of the popular flow among various social categories as the active subject rather than the subservient subject. They are wandering around in the network of the social structure and constantly adjusting their social loyal subordinate relationship according to their needs to cope with the problems encountered in their daily life. The adjustment of the relationship is conducted in the structure of power relations, where confrontation and differences are more decisive than identification. Liquidity is progressing in sharing confrontation. In confrontation against power group, the diversity of different axis show that the importance of difference in different periods. As the active popular, they could make choices in their discrete resistant behavior according to their circumstance or strategic considerations. Fiske indicates by example that when we value the axis of age most, we tend to resist that of gender, class or race which may be more important at other times. As a result, the bond of allegiance and subordination is formed. This means the popular decide who to agree with and who to object. They make active choices in practice in accordance with the specific time and context. In daily life, the initiative of the popular is mainly manifested in the consumption practices of their creativity. Facing the products provided by the cultural

industry, on the one hand, they are quite picky and execute their power actively instead of accepting everything. On the other hand, for the chosen products, they take a “can-use” way to treat it on the basis of the thrill of evading social discipline power caused by social experience. These active individuals have the characteristics of flexibility, creativity and quick action. They use changeable tactics to avoid or attack the system which is too heavy, lack of imagination, over-organized and established by the dominant to start or expand their space.

The third connotation of the popular concept is the ‘lower class’ identity. “The popular is formed by the loyal subordinate relationship of the ruled” [5], and is formed in response to dominant power. As the counterpart, the existence of power group is a necessary condition for the existence of the popular; the popular concept has been redefining in the dialectical relationship with the dominant class. The popular is “relatively powerless social group, and the inquired group typically regarded as the consumer” [6]. However, the dominant power cannot control all the meaning of public construction, and cannot completely manipulate the loyal subordinate relationship formed by the popular. The popular has its autonomy because of the history of long-term marginalization and indomitable struggle in oppression. They form their own cultural forms (such as spoken text), and have their own interests (like in the cultural economy), so they could make differences in both ideology and material. But the autonomy is limited; they could relatively not totally get rid of the shackle of system. The confrontation of the popular could only reflect in the micro field, and creating and contending meaning from the cultural level in the inside system. It is progressive not radical, tactical rather than strategic social action, a micro level rather than macro level of political behavior.

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CONCLUSION

Fiske’s popular culture theory inherits Birmingham cultural studies and mingles with American consumption cultural context, thus bringing out the activeness of “the popular” in terms of consuming products. This theory not only acts to refute the elite culture but also contributes to modifying the research of the popular culture carried out by the Frankfurt School, which generally helps to add some optimistic aura to the field of cultural studies.

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