

## Book Reviews

# Capitalizing on Culture: Critical Theory for Cultural Studies

By Shane Gunster

University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2004; Pages: 380; Price: \$35.95

ISBN 13: 9780802036933

### CONTENTS/OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

#### Introduction: Culture as Commodity

1. Mass culture and commodity form; revisiting the culture industry thesis
2. Capitalism, Mimesis Experience: Legacies of the Commodity Fetish
3. Dreams of Redemption? Adorno, Benjamin, and the dialectics of culture
4. From Mass to popular culture: from Frankfurt to Birmingham
5. Articulation and the commodity form: Rethinking contemporary cultural studies

#### Concluding Thoughts

James Hamilton of the University of Georgia finds Shane Gunster's *Capitalizing on Culture: Critical Theory for Cultural Studies* (CCCS) as a publication in line with Hall's 'return of the repressed in media studies' but with a difference and that is the repressed earlier was the 'concept of ideology' while here it is what the Frankfurt School has projected within the project of cultural studies. To start with, Gunster laments that the earlier proponents of the critical theory has not been properly appreciated. He notes that the series of authors in this line like Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin have not been understood in the right context; rather they have been ridiculed and misquoted by the earlier powerful critics for their vested interests. Hamilton thinks that even some other authors like Lowenthal, Marcuse and some others of the like have also not been well presented in their right sense of critical theory.

Gunster argues that the critical theory has been misunderstood as if it were a set of hard and fast rules whereas it is adaptable to the changing circumstances in so far as the conditions for emancipations are concerned though the earlier authors did not anticipate the characteristics of commercialization of social relationships in the coming ages. It is further argued that the critical theory needs to be revisited for working in the area of

cultural and media studies as now the interactions between the forces of domination and resistance, culture and economy, meaning and practice, and individual and society have so far been interpreted superficially as the organizing principles for work.

Hamilton note that some authors like Jay (1984) and Kellner (1989) also attempted to recover Critical Theory but Gunster may be distinguished as the one trying to overcome the shortcomings of the critical theory in the past as well as in the present times. The author intends to generalize the construction of Critical Theory benefiting from the past authors and then reformulate it to cope with the particular requirements of today. Here the author wants to capitalize on the emergence of cultural studies and its theoretical developments.

The author by referring to the earlier works, attempts to discover the aspects of Critical Theory not highlighted so far by each author rather than connecting and linking them with each other. The author then critically evaluates the attempt made by the CCCS to ignore Critical Theory by substituting 'mass culture' with 'popular culture'.

Hamilton notes that whatever the author has dealt with in reviving the Critical Theory in this book has also been undertaken by other authors, but CCCS appears to be more exhaustive. That is why the last two chapters dealing with reshaping the Theory, relating it with other works of today, and linking it with media, society and commercialization of today's social relationships, have been worth noting. Instead of explaining the Theory as a rigid concept, the author emphasizes the study of relative interaction between the cultural positions of today with the intent of Critical Theory. The commercialization of social relationships as embedded in the 'postmodern materialism' may be studied for its content in the light of Critical Theory to inquire into it as the apparatus, that is overwhelming on a regional scale of today's social formations.

Hamilton appreciates that the author is well aware of the contradiction between the form of experts opinion and the notion that Critical Theory is not based on hard and fast rules. He also wonders how the author approves Freudian and psychoanalytic concepts without any criticism which is against the tenets of Critical Theory . He expresses the deep dissatisfaction over how the author deals with explaining Adorno, theorizing the concept but ambiguously and without access. Still the author has made a good attempt at extending the works of Adorno and Benjamin. The book has successfully rediscovered and highlighted, the case of usefulness of Critical Theory in media and cultural studies today.

*Capitalizing on culture* focuses upon those theorists in the social sciences and humanities who were interested in establishing interconnections between culture and power with today's capitalism. The book keeps the readers engaged. Gunster is highly successful in offering the argument for grounding the subject of cultural studies in the classic work of Benjamin and Adorno. This book can become a beacon house in the

field and will open up new horizons with important debates about how media culture is ignoring the true realities by just focusing on smulcrus (hyper realities). This book also provides critical alternatives. Gunster, on one hand, reexamines Adorno and Benjamin's rival analysis of the "cultural industry", while on the other hand, he highlights and establishes the fact that Adorno and Benjamin's work has been totally neglected and misconstrued. He argues that Adorno and Benjamin's work has been used as a scapegoat and has been the subject of hostility among scholars of cultural studies.

Gunster successfully explores Critical Theory in the context of the cultural landscape which is engulfed by the Capital. Gunster places Benjamin's ideas on experience, capitalism and memory with Adorno's critical analysis of mass culture and modern aesthetics. This juxtaposition of two great brain's thoughts blends the two perspectives and offers a forum for investigating the comparative causes of the collapse of cultural studies. In this way, the capitalization of culture provides a reevaluation of Critical Theory that will remain the focus of the attention of the scholars studying the intersection of culture and capitalism.

Commodification has become a dominant and prevailing factor not only in the production but also in the promotion and consumption of most forms of mass culture. Many scholars in the world are at a fix to engage with culture either as commodity or Critical Theory. Credit goes to Gunster for correcting the oversight and providing alternative readings of Adorno and Benjamin's works. Gunster appears to be at the height of his creativity in generating a complex, non-reductive theory of human experience that focuses upon the golden opportunities on one hand and severe dangers on the other hand arising from the junction of culture and economics.

**Rana Zamin Abbas**

*Assistant Professor*

*Head Research Capacity Building (RCB) and*

*Editor Organization Theory Review (OTR)*

*School of Business and Economics*

*University of Management and Technology*

*C-ii, Johar Town, Lahore 54770, Pakistan*

*E-mail: zamin.abbas@umt.edu.pk*

*and*

**G Mujtaba**

*Deputy Director*

*Geological Survey of Pakistan*

*Near Expo Center, Johar Town,*

*Lahore 54770, Pakistan*

*E-mail: mujtabag@hotmail.com*