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Book Review: Culture, Ideology and Society

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Tarifa, Fatos. *Culture, Ideology and Society*. The Hague: Smiet, 2001. 81pp. (paper).

Fatos Tarifa's *Culture, Ideology and Society* was my companion on a recent trip to the Balkans. Having read and reviewed one of his other books, *The Quest for Legitimacy and the Withering Away of Utopia*, I thought *Culture, Ideology and Society* would not only offer a glimpse of how a social scientist turned enlightened diplomat examines the lenses through which sociologists, philosophers, and film makers look at the world, but also some insight into the categories and concepts that are useful in better understanding the Balkans. I believe the book was somewhat successful at doing both.

It is a collection of essays written during the period 1996–98 while the author was earning his second doctoral degree at the University of North Carolina. The first essay, "The Language Paradigm in Contemporary Social Theory: Marx, Habermas, and Bourdieu in Comparative Perspective" (1997), examines how the problem of language has been treated by three 19th and 20th century giants of social theory: Karl Marx, Jürgen Habermas, and Pierre Bourdieu. Tarifa lays out Marx's treatment of human consciousness (and ideology qua form of consciousness) and language as being indispensably and dialectically linked to each other, and nicely captures Marx's concern for the social being of both consciousness and language, as well as the importance of ideology and how ideology as language provides errors and illusions that distort the practical reality in which people live.

Tarifa's overview of Habermas focuses on the latter's move away from the historical evolution of material production to the evolution of "communicative rationality." Rather than viewing ideology as false consciousness, Habermas takes it to be distorted communication. What Tarifa finds so important with Habermas's work on language is that language is what allows people to communicate with one another and that can lead to the building of "social consensus." Unfortunately, ideology as a distorted form of communication makes consensus difficult, and yet Habermas's Hegelian vision of history amounts to a progression "towards a state of human freedom and emancipation" (23). Moreover, Tarifa takes Habermas's theory of language and communication to be one of truth and emancipation. The Enlightenment values of democracy, freedom, rationality, and individuality are of great importance and can be anchored in social institutions that promote forms of communicative action. It is this portion of Habermas's work that

provides hope for those living in the Balkans, since it is "through communicative action and rational discourse, [that] people can act cooperatively in a 'goal-directed manner' for reaching understanding, hence resolving, at least in principle, all significant differences" (23). This belief in the development of communication skills as the means by which people can narrow their political and cultural differences, however, seems to be overly optimistic, and is a point that Tarifa could have further exploited. Tarifa makes it clear that Habermas suggests

conceptions of truth and justice and genuine legitimacy of consensual agreements emerge only from conditions that correspond to an "ideal speech situation." In an "ideal speech situation" all parties have *equal* opportunities to engage in dialogue without undue *domination* by one party, without *restriction*, and without ideological *distortion*. An "ideal speech situation" is thus a prerequisite for an authentic democratic public sphere where citizens can determine social policy under conditions of uninhibited, noncoerced, nonmanipulated discourse.(25)

Given this to be the standard that must be met before a democratic public sphere is to be achieved, there is little reason to think that such a sphere will be formed any time soon in places like Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. To the degree that ethnic nationalism and the various nationalist political parties promote divisiveness between different ethnic groups, there is little reason for the mastering of communicative skills to become a panacea for what ails the Bosnians and the Kosovars alike.

As for Bourdieu, Tarifa notes that the Frenchman moves away from the one-dimensional emphasis on the material conditions of man to one that is multi-dimensional, including the positions that people occupy in different fields of social space, particularly that space of cultural production (thus, the concept of cultural capital). What is important for those who live in capitalist societies, or societies that are moving toward capitalism, is that certain historical changes have taken place during the 20th century such that the forms of power and resistance are no longer centered around economic domination and exploitation, but rather around cultural and psychological identities. Marxist discourse on class struggle and critique of political economy no longer represents the heart of power and change in contemporary capitalist society. Ruling classes do not dominate overtly or

through a conspiracy where the privileged willfully manipulate reality to suit their own interest, but they do so by being

the beneficiary of economic, social, and symbolic power which is embodied in economic and cultural capital, and which is imbricated throughout society's institutions and practices and reproduced by these very institutions and practices. (26–27)

Although Bourdieu's thesis is a plausible one, Tarifa's work would have benefitted from an enumeration of the sorts of historical changes leading to the reshuffling of sources of power and resistance, and how the 20th century is different from the 19th century in this regard. Nonetheless, Tarifa's discussion of Bourdieu's work is illuminating as a lens through which transition societies, like those of the Balkans, can be examined; and it offers one more concern about how such societies can foster domination in the 21st century.

The second essay "Marx est mort! Where Have All the 'New Philosophers' Gone?" (1997) is a fascinating look at a group that emerged from the same socio-political context in France and that shared a set of political beliefs and philosophical assumptions, particularly their rejection of Marxism as a "philosophy of domination." These new philosophers included André Glucksmann, Michel Guérin, Jean-Marie Benoist, and Bernard-Henri Lévy. Most well-known is Lévy, author of *Barbarism with a Human Face*, who made the controversial claim that the application of Marxism will always lead to the Gulag. Although the group's critique of Marxism made them famous, Tarifa is correct to say that these new philosophers cannot take credit for first rejecting Marxism, since others including Claude Lefort, Raymond Aron, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty had made such assessments long before. Although the new philosophers helped to alter the public conversation about Marxism, their notoriety and influence was short lived.

The third essay is entitled "On Culture and Ideology: Spelling Them with a Capital 'C' and 'I' or with a Small 'c' and 'i'?" Of all the essays, this essay, along with the next, most closely resembles a seminar paper. Tarifa examines two important but difficult concepts of the social sciences: culture and ideology. Unfortunately, the significance of how these words are spelled is somewhat lost in his cursory discussion of several key figures in philosophy and the social sciences. It would have been helpful had he drawn the distinction between the upper and lowercase spellings and then proceeded in instantiating these in the works of the theorists mentioned. Instead, Tarifa begins with a definition of culture as the creation and use of symbols and artifacts by humans, including paintings and novels, and one which constitutes a way of life of an entire society. This is followed by a discussion of how culture has been construed in a variety of ways: e.g., Marx and Engels thought of it as the ideal expression of the material conditions of a society. Others who followed the founders of Marxism, like the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács, the author of *History and Class*

Consciousness (1923), iterated the former's notions of class and revolution, whereas others, like Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903–69), focused on notions like culture industry and mass culture, while still others such as Paul Dimaggio, focus on high and popular cultures.

Tarifa's discussion of the concept of ideology is no less ethereal. He launches into a brief discussion of various theorists spelling "ideology" but never explains the distinction and how that arises within the works of these theorists. "Ideology" is as elusive as "culture." Tarifa begins with the standard reference to de Tracy as the originator of "*idéologie*" and moves to Marx and Engels, who spelled "ideology" with an uppercase "I" and who portrayed ideology as false consciousness or a distortion of reality. He then references Bennett Berger, in whose work ideology is found with a lowercase "i." Yet he never makes clear what the distinction between cases is and how it is played out, thus complicating further the issue with Berger's claim that culture can be transformed into ideology.

The fourth essay, "On Political Power and Legitimation: Marx *vis-à-vis* Weber," begins with Marx and ends with Max Weber. Marx understood power as an aspect of the economic relationship which determined, in a fundamental way, the shape of society and was applied by classes and groups, not individuals, with the most extreme forms of power differentiation found in capitalist societies. However, Tarifa finds Marx's base-superstructure model of the relationship between economic class power and state power to be simplistic, primarily because it assumes that changes in the economic base are always paralleled by changes in the political and ideological superstructures of the society. Tarifa rejects this but does not make clear why this is the case.

According to Tarifa, Weber's position on power is in opposition to Marx's view. Weber gave a detailed analysis of power, which for Weber was an aspect of how people relate to one another. As Tarifa makes clear, Weber drew distinctions between types of power based on the extent to which they were thought to be legitimate. Central to his political sociology was the concept of domination, a concept of great importance for anyone interested in assessing power within the former communist countries of Eastern Europe. As Tarifa reads Weber, domination is "obedience that is *willingly given*" (62). Commands must be given and obeyed for there to be domination. Obedience, however, involves some sort of moral support for those who are giving the commands, i.e., legitimate authority or "systematic title to rule" (62). As Tarifa points out, Weber did not complement his classification of forms of domination with a classification of "forms of political regimes on the basis of whether the predominant means of control were coercive, normative, or instrumental" (63). Furthermore, Tarifa notes a second problem with Weber's work:

[Weber] makes no distinction between what might be called normative compliance that springs from

voluntary commitment and that which is grounded in a long-term strategy for survival, both very important especially in understanding the problem of legitimacy in communist-ruled states. (63)

Of some importance to understanding Weber's theory of power are his three kinds of claims to legitimacy and domination: the traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational claims which Tarifa discusses. He believes that Weber was primarily interested in the issue of legitimation, rather than legitimacy: the former deals with the claims that dominant groups make about themselves; the latter "refers to the conditions in which such claims have in fact been accepted and endorsed by subordinate groups" (65). Tarifa believes the issue of legitimacy should have been addressed by Weber by enlarging his typology to include the category of illegitimate domination. Such a discussion is of importance to Tarifa given his interest in "processes of legitimation and legitimation crises of state socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe" (65).

The final essay of the collection, "Making Sociological Sense of *Lamerica*," is about the Italian film *Lamerica* and how Tarifa perceives it as "a distortion of reality and insulting for most Albanians" (69). This is an interesting essay, first because it is part of a collection of essays so influenced by the works of Marx, particularly his discussion of ideology as a distortion of reality. *Lamerica* takes place in 1991 following Albania's emancipation from Communist rule. Unlike the excitement and confusion that Albanians were facing at that time, *Lamerica's* portrayal is one of chaos and anarchy, a view unrepresentative of Albanian society at that time. Tarifa takes children to be an accurate mirror of any society, yet *Lamerica's* portrayal are anything but accurate. Rather than having depicted the children of Albania as normal children living in a stressful situation, *Lamerica* represented them

by a flock of gipsy kids begging and loitering everywhere, clinging to strangers in all their curiosity, laying fire upon an old absent minded man. Elsewhere, whenever children are shown, they are all depicted as malicious, pitiless street kids. (71)

Even the mass departure of Albanian refugees is poorly captured in the film, suggesting that those who fled were simply searching for the "good life" in the West.

Second, it is a film that deals with a rather important issue for the future of post-communist societies in Eastern Europe, including Albania. The 1990s saw large numbers of Albanians continuing to leave their country, leading Tarifa to conclude that mass emigration may have had a detrimental impact on the rebuilding of the country. The first wave of emigrants captured by *Lamerica* were factory workers, farmers, and the unemployed. What the film does not show is the second wave that took place when large numbers of university graduates and professionals left the country, creating a brain drain of massive proportions with adverse results. In Tarifa's own words:

The long term economic and social prosperity of Albania depends on knowledge available to it. For progress is based on knowledge, and knowledge is used by brains and increased by brains. Human brain power is therefore the key to the future. But the future never comes if you do not plan for it. (80)

Tarifa has put together a collection of essays dealing with the principal concerns of sociology: culture, ideology, and society. Those anticipating many direct links to the Balkans will be disappointed; however, the few links Tarifa explores are compelling.

Culture, Ideology and Society can be read as a testimony to the development of a scholar-statesman and how he traces the fusion of sociology and politics in a collection of writings. Perhaps Tarifa is showing the reader that an intellectual framework disconnected from immediate realities will be a failure just as a pragmatic politics divorced of theory will also fail. The reader who is somewhat well-versed in the history and jargon of sociology and philosophy, and who wants to construct a vision of the 21st century, will find Tarifa's book interesting reading.