

“O eyes”: Social and Cultural analysis of American society through *The Oprah Winfrey Show*¹

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Resumo

O objetivo do presente artigo é a análise de aspectos da vida social e cultural norte-americana através de questões mostradas no *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, um popular e influente programa televisivo produzido e exibido no país. Para tanto, selecionamos algumas características do programa em questão, que se destacaram como sendo importantes para o entendimento das contradições presentes na cultura capitalista, e as analisamos. Pudemos constatar que os temas apresentados no programa refletem não apenas as contradições presentes na sociedade norte-americana, mas também as existentes na base econômica dessa sociedade; e que o programa, não apenas em seus temas, mas também em seu formato, representa um significativo retrato da sociedade em questão.

Palavras-chave: *Estudos de cultura, Estados Unidos, ideologia*

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence,
but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”

Karl Marx

0. Introduction

In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* it is stated that the relations of production constitute the real foundation of society and that on that

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economic structure of society rise superstructures to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

In that way, it has been a great part of this semester Cultural Studies course to uncover deeper meanings about society through the products of one of those superstructures, Culture. It is, therefore, the aim of this piece, to analyze social and cultural aspects of American society through matters that are shown in *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, a very popular and influent television program.

In order to do that, we have selected a few characteristics that highlighted when watching the programs as meaningful in the understanding of the contradictions of the Capitalist culture.

1. Oprah and the *American dream* ideology

In a show entitled "*The Big Idea That Made Millions*", Oprah Winfrey presents to her viewers several ordinary people who became millionaires and lived the American dream: a housewife who invented a recipe that won a million dollar contest; a couple that created a fashion empire "with little more than a knitting machine"; the man who created a famous clothing label and sold a portion of it for over 100 million dollars and another who invented a now very popular ice cream bar are some of the attractions of this episode.

However ordinary these people may have one day been, they are not as rare on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, for even though this episode was dedicated to them, there are many other episodes in which people that represent the same ideology are featured. From Jimmy Choo, the man who created the famous brand of shoes "Jimmy Choos", to the model who managed to get a contract with "Dolce & Gabbana" despite being overweight, many stories portrayed in the show have one thing in common: they all demonstrate the possibility of action that, alone, one person possesses. It is the *self-made man* ideology. And interestingly enough, Oprah herself is an example of a self-made woman. Born and raised in a farm, the ordinary black girl turned into one of the richest woman in the world.

However, it is known that this is not very likely to happen, on the contrary of what stories like hers lead people into believing. Therefore, Oprah's show is a powerful mechanism of spreading false consciousness, and thus, works in favor of the values that are

regarded in the maintenance of the current social status. Let's not forget Culture plays a very important role in the spreading of "common values".

Contradicting itself (or not) in a show which theme was "*What Class Are You? Inside America's Taboo Topic*", Oprah's Show uses common sense, presenting how hard it is to change one's social class, and that it is more likely that a person will fall in the social scale rather than rise. However, arguing with a specialist on the matter, she firmly disagrees with him, by saying that it is not about luck, it is about hard work, and that anybody who works hard to achieve something, someday will – demonstrating her strong belief in a common American ideology. A profusion of applause comes from the audience when she says that, a distinct sign that they also believe in it.

According to the specialist guest on the show, it is very likely that the current division of goods will always remain the same, since it is the children of the most privileged portion of society who have access to good education and opportunities, the social status is maintained accordingly. Do Oprah and her audience know they are applauding that too?

The "American dream" ideology is very strong, and even though Oprah's show let people didactically know that the top one percent of Americans own roughly 40 percent of the country's wealth, and that this top one percent possesses more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined, the same show still is able to lead people into believing that they can become millionaires as well. According to the guest of the show, "If people don't feel that they have a fair chance of getting ahead...a lot of people feel excluded. That's not good for society. That doesn't keep America together." In that way, the show plays an important role in maintaining the system as it is; by giving its audience the hopes of becoming a "self-made man" it counteracts indignation in way that conservative values are reaffirmed.

About that matter, Michael Moore will claim in his book "*Dude, where's my country?*" that the system is manipulated in order to support few people, and that it is so well manipulated that it can actually convince honest working people to believe in a promise that keeps them going because maybe, maybe, it can happen to them. In this sense, Moore argues that this promise is what guarantees the system an army filled with people ready to fight for the rights of the most privileged classes (such as lowering the amount of taxes that millionaires pay), even though their own children have to go to decaying schools, or even die defending the oil of this same class in war overseas.

To summarize, it is possible to say that the kinds of ideologies that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* spread are important to the maintenance of the current economic system, since, if people believe they may become rich they probably will not be against the privileges the higher classes have, and will never rebel. In this case, one is able to see clearly how the show is affirming the values of the capitalist mode of production, which is something that coincides with Marcuse's definition of the function of culture.

This cultural product, namely the show, is screening that anyone can be rich, and by doing that is not only helping the maintenance of the system, but it is also hiding something underneath the appearances: the system is unfair because it is based on a contradiction basis, that is, the ones who contribute to the mode of production do not have access to it. Therefore, the show hides the real determination by describing only the appearance; it is a cultural product that spreads ideology.

After understanding that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* can be seen as an apparatus used in favor of the system in order to maintain a certain social organization, or as Oprah's guest says, "to keep America together", it is impossible not to relate it to the function of literature in the late 19th century. According to Cevasco, "parte preponderante de sua afliência [literature] se deve ao sucesso com que desempenha sua função de treinamento social no sentido exigido para a manutenção de uma determinada ordem." (Cevasco, 2003:27)

In that way, it raises the question of the kinds of ideological demands of our time, which Oprah's program is fulfilling. It is obviously not an easy thing to establish, for historical, political, economical and cultural relations must be considered, however we may say that it has something to do with the decaying popularity of literature, what occurred due to the rising of new popular and technological devices (such as the television) in the late phase of the capitalist mode of production.

1.1 "Shut up and sing": a not written lemma in the Declaration of Independence

In one of Oprah's programs there is an interview with the band The Dixie Chicks, talking about the repression that they suffered in America, thanks to a comment made by one of them, criticizing Bush's war in Iraq. With this episode we can clearly see the failure of one of the most quoted slogans present in the Declaration of Independence: Liberty,

what implies free speech. "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty and equal pursuit of Happiness." The Bill of Rights also guarantees freedom of speech to all free man.⁵

First of all, it is interesting to observe the increasing number of cultural productions in which such document is recovered and used as a key to solve a difficult situation. In the recent movie *The Pursuit of Happiness*, the main character Chris Gardner (Will Smith) spends a lot of energy trying to correct the wrong spelling of the word 'happiness' written on a wall. Actually, he was immersed in a time of trouble without any hope of finding a solution. Happiness was really far from his poor reality, when he, based on the Pursuit of Happiness defended in the Declaration of Independence, decided to accept a challenge: to be a trainee in a prestigious stock brokerage firm with no payment for six months. He ends the program with a job and a promising future. Gardner on pursuing the American dream soon became a millionaire. At the end of the movie we read: "based on real facts".

The connections presented in the movie show the link between the happiness of every American citizen with the Declaration of Independence. Thus, it is naturalized and well accepted that every American law or document is written for the benefit of people. Such idea is already part of Americans argumentation and it allows them to overcome hard conditions.

As a matter of fact, the Declaration of Independence works as a mantra to be repeated again and again. It reinforces the concept of America as being the New Land and it is also what makes the Dixie Chicks believe that they were injured and betrayed by the people who are not really concerned on politics and on the real meaning of the word democracy. Instead of saying that democracy is a cover that hides oppression, they (the band, especially the leader) deeply believe that the common sense has been kidnapped by a unilateral discourse – George W. Bush's discourse defending war.

1.2 Old sources of the *American dream*

It is impossible to say that the USA did not start its history without a great demand for hope. As a matter of fact, the Declaration of Independence is not only a document to

⁵ "ARTICLE I: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

declare the freedom of all states of America, but mainly to reinforce the triumph of a system in which the government works in defense of the accumulation of capital. Time does not belong to God anymore, but to speculation. According to the protestant ideology, to make profits on weekends is not a sin but a sign of hard work and integrity. The complete institutionalization of the leisure time took and takes space in many cultural expressions; such procedure makes diversion become an ideological implement that naturalizes certain values.

It is commonly accepted that, when a theory appears, the phenomenon it describes is coming to its end. Maybe, when a theory becomes a document, it is a sign that the process that motivated that theory already ended. When we read "all men are created equal", we can assume that we are dealing with an old statement which comes from ideals evolved in Europe during the French Revolution. Such ideals are recovered and recreated in a country legitimated by the unquestionable plans of God – America.

After all, what is the link between the polemic involving a pop band and the American dream clearly presented in the Declaration of Independence? Firstly, we have a band that performs many shows and claims to be a non-political group, that is, a group not involved in political issues. Its primordial function is to promote alienation, to make people forget that they work the entire week to pay for their "free" weekends. Nevertheless, in reality, every action is political and it is impossible to escape from that. The Dixie Chicks realized that only after the fast repercussion of their vocalist's words criticizing the war, words which exposed, in another country, the failure and falseness of the American dream – to overspread democratic ideals – what provoked the anger of many American citizens.

However, if in 2003 the group Dixie Chicks was condemned to ostracism, today they have recovered all their power in the musical industry. Their recent album "Taking the Long Way" is filled with critical lyrics, which can be understood as a reinforcement of the idea presented by Naomi Klein: "we were too busy analyzing the pictures being projected on the wall to notice that the wall itself had been sold" (Klein, 2001:124). In other words, the Cultural Industry gives us the idea that some projections are really authentic, that some of its products are really original, when in fact its support is already sold. Thus, when being strongly criticized by the American population; having their CDs and photographs burned in public; and even receiving death threatenings, The Dixie Chicks were, in fact, in very luck. Since there is no such a thing as "bad publicity", their

marketers wisely decided to use the episode in their favor and make more money by selling *The Chicks* within the identity of a "political band".

According to Frach Rich, a guest at the show, "the whole point of democracy is taking decisions based on reality". When reality is falling into pieces, everything becomes a blur, including the role of what is considered a real citizen. No one can see the real enemy. Many American citizens destroyed Dixie Chicks' CDs without realizing that the whole Cultural Industry is already part of the hidden lemma presented in the Declaration of Independence: Shut up and sing! America says. Shut up and sing! American citizens repeat in a huge choir.

2. "O Philanthropy": appearance X determination

Oprah is the money provider for many charity institutions; she even has a company with a trademark specially created to designate her philanthropic adventures, "Oprah's Angel Network". This is interesting because it shows that this characteristic of her is as much of a product as many other palpable things that she sells, such as "O, The Oprah Magazine" and "The Oprah Winfrey Show Bistro Mug". What occurs is that, similarly to what Naomi Klein claims in "Patriarchy Gets Funky" happened to the demands for better media representation of minorities, this "identity" was accommodated by marketers, and of course it is very lucrative. Hence, it may appear to the great public as if Oprah is a kind-hearted person who wants to change the world, but the real determination behind it is that this characteristic of hers actually makes her more profitable in the market.

To better illustrate this, it is possible to mention the example of a program entitled "Oprah and Bono paint the town 'Red' ", in which the singer Bono Vox (also famous by his involvement in charity) presents his new operation to raise funds for the fight against HIV in Africa, the Red campaign. When buying products from prestigious brands participant in the campaign, part of the money goes to the aid of African women and children contaminated. With that in mind, Oprah and Bono go shopping through posh participant stores, and the resultant scenes are bizarre: after buying no less than ten "iPod nano" at the Apple store, Oprah announces that she had contributed by paying the HIV treatment with pediatric drugs for a child for two months. When purchasing other ten "Motorazr V3m" cell phones at the Motorola store, she announces that this action will

provide someone with a year's worth of anti-retroviral drugs. The scene is repeated in other stores such as GAP, Armani and Converse.

In this case, not only can we clearly identify the big corporations's aims as being covered by an image of philanthropy, but also "the abstraction of self and reality in consumer society" (Willis, 1997:112). Here Willis's words fit well: "The reduction of being to consumption coincides with the abstraction of shopping as well. (...) If shopping equals mere existence, then the purchase of brand names is the individual's means of designating a specific identity." (Willis, 1997:112)

However, more can be said about the episode. There is an evident contradiction in what is happening in the show, which seems to pass unnoticed to the audience, that is the fact that whereas an American woman can purchase ten cell phones at a time, an African is not even able to buy medication for herself and her child. This makes clear that there must be a powerful mechanism that prevents American people from noticing this preposterous social difference. This mechanism is Culture, which produces ideological constructions that cover the effects of the production relations.

In that case, the fact that Africa is a poor continent because of the years of exploitation that it suffered during the colonial time is hidden – and therefore it is also concealed that historically America's luxurious life style definitely has something to do with Africa's misery

The exploitation gained new fur with globalization, but it is clear in the case of the Red campaign that big companies have completely taken advantage of the HIV situation in Africa to make more money still. In order to do that, they counted on the American consumer society, in which "you are what you have", and even more concerning than that, people are not capable to see the real determination behind the appearance.

3. Conclusion

"Oprah.com is your leading source for information about love, life, self, relationships, food, health" – the headline flickers in the Internet page. Not a second and another headline comes to mind: "Oprah Winfrey tops Forbes' list of the 20 richest women in entertainment". Without a doubt, Oprah Winfrey is America's most successful TV

presenter: popular, rich and admired. Her show, as we tried to expose, is as diverse as her website headline states: *Why they beat the Odds* "Homeless, hungry and abused... an NFL star reveals his past. Then, a man that nobody thought would end up where he is today. And a mom lost the loves of her life in a fiery plane crash, but she defines resilience. Extraordinary people who prove that anything is possible!" Her personal history – from the humble beginnings in Mississippi to being one of the most powerful women in the world – explains her thoroughly American-self-made-man discourse – Marx statement that definite forms of social consciousness correspondent to the superstructure strike again: one can understand how she became who she is today. Oprah's magazine ad flashes by the screen: "This month: Be authentic! Listen to your body, love yourself the way you are, and more. Plus, get the lowdown on anti-aging." The ever-present contradictions don't seem to affect her at all and her audience, ready to believe, follows the lead. Applauses! Next story. "He was nearly killed on assignment in Iraq. Now, hear their incredible love story. Plus, Bob's road to recovery!" "Teeth bleaching, Botox, Brazilian waxes and the truth about cellulite! Dr. Oz has all the answers for the skin you're in!" "Are You Ready To Change Your Life? Get started with Bob Greene's Best Life diet. Plus, recipes and more." "This Is The Year To Get Richer! Find out how to start your own Money Group or find one in your area. Stop making excuses and start saving!" It is from the post-modern muddle of information that American maxims arise. Shut up and sing! Buy "Red"! Anything is possible if you work hard enough!

As it is, the actual, present format of the shows, similar to above, supports the fundamental alienation mechanism *The Oprah Winfrey Show* seems to rouse in her viewers. Through the jumbling of completely different themes together, ultimately, all subjects are given the same value. The leveling of the themes guarantees that they all – be it Freedom of Speech or America's Best Pizza – are equally profitable (in terms of attracting viewers), and eventually equally forgotten. That, of course, after firstly being neutralized by ideology – something is always found to bond the themes together, obviously never the economic base of society.

As this highly effective alienation mechanism is, of course, a general trait of the capitalist system, and, as it was previously attested in this paper, the themes presented in the show – and the implications of the way they are presented – by revealing some contradictions of American society are, actually, reflecting the existing contradictions of

the Economic foundation of society, to sum up, the show, not only in its themes, but also in its format, reflects American society.

In the still open website an offer flickers insistently: "Oprah.com Membership. [Become part of Oprah's world.](#)" – Shut up and sing! Win loads of Grammys; Buy "Red", buy, buy! You are what you own. – We chose to analyze *The Oprah Winfrey Show* eager to uncover conservative values in cultural/moral camouflages wrought by Economic needs. We chose to see the system through its eyes to be able to really see it – even though it can't see itself.

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