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On Media, Culture & The Prospects For a New Liberatory Project: An Interview with Ken Loach

Theodoros Papadopoulos

Papadopoulos - *What in your opinion is the relationship between class and culture? Can the elites force their culture on the rest of society?*

Loach - I think this comes down to very concrete questions. We have to define the terms in the classic old fashion way. What is culture? If we take the popular meaning, culture can be the means of communicating, the means of expression, the way we reflect the world we are in. But of course, this reflection is never neutral, it is always informed by an ideology and, so, the reflection always takes place through the distorting lenses of a particular ideology. The culture of any age carries with it the ideas of this age. The ideas of our age are expressed in very concrete ways. You can see this happening, for example, through broadcasting and the news - the clearest way in which the world is reflected back to society. There, you can very clearly see the political and social ideas that determine what news is. This is especially the case with newspapers which are openly driven by political ideas. Broadcasters are driven by the same political ideas but in a covert way. The way in which the dominant ideology is transmitted through broadcasting and the press is, in a way, like the Church of the past, where the dominant ideology was communicated from the top. I mean, in our country those organizations are controlled by political appointments. People who are appointed are the ones who can be relied upon to safeguard the ideology which is transmitted downwards. This is reflected in the phrase "what can we get away with" which is a phrase that all broadcasters understand - in other words, how far can we go in challenging the basic assumptions before somebody says "that is enough!". So, I guess the answer to the question "can the elite force their culture on the rest of society" is "yes they do" and it is inconceivable that they should not. And even if one got rid of the elite - one could imagine a post-revolutionary situation, where a people's democracy or a socialist democracy is established - nevertheless, the ideas of this democracy would then be implicit in the culture. Even though you would not want to have an explicit position on culture, the ideas of socialism, equality and fraternity and solidarity would be implicit in the culture.

Papadopoulos - *Given this almost absolute control of the mass media by economic and political elites, what meaning can we assign to the right of free speech? Is it only a facade which is used by the elites in covering the real role of the mass media in reproducing the ideology of an exploitative and hierarchical society?*

Loach - Free speech exists as an abstract concept. I mean, the weight of the ideological consensus at the heart of the press and broadcasting and ordinary discourse is so great that free speech becomes meaningless. Somebody coined the phrase "repressive tolerance", which I think is very appropriate in this case. Points of view that are perceived as being strange, odd or bizarre are tolerated but, then, some of their force is taken away because of the strength of the prevailing ideas. So, they exist as eccentricities around the edge. In this context, those in power can say "yes, we have freedom of speech" but these ideas, or more accurately these speeches, are rendered ineffective by the overwhelming tidal weight of the prevailing ideas.

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Ken Loach is a radical film-maker whose themes express his uncompromising political stand against the capitalist system and the reformist 'Left'. Among his films are the ground-breaking film on homelessness *Cathy Come Home* (1966); the award-winning *Kes* (1969); *The Big Flame* about the strike of Liverpool dockworkers; *Days of Hope* (1975) about the defeat of the 1926 general strike; *Questions of Leadership* (1983) about the bureaucracies in the union movement which was banned from Channel Four; *Land and Freedom* (1995) about the role of the communist party in the Spanish Civil war; *Carla's song* (1996) about the liberation struggle in Nicaragua and others. His latest film is *My name is Joe* (1998).

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Papadopoulos - *Two related questions refer to the debasing of culture, as a result of its commercialization in a market economy. At present one can observe a homogenization of culture: cities become more and more alike, people all over the world listen to the same music, watch the same soap operas on TV, buy the same brands of consumer goods etc. It has been argued that this phenomenon is directly related to the liberalization and deregulation of markets and its by-product, i.e. globalization, which, in turn, has led to a) the present monopolization of the production and distribution networks by US privately-owned conglomerates and b) to the trivialisation and debasement of world cultures. How has globalization affected the cinema and the work of cinema directors? Do you think that this cultural homogenization is reversible within the framework of the internationalized market economy?*

Loach - I do not think that cultural homogenisation is reversible within the framework of the global market economy. The laws of the market are inexorable. They lead to monopoly; a continuous search for profits where new technology has to be constantly harnessed to cut labour costs in order to increase production etc. We find ourselves in this spiral which is actually actively pursued by politicians who try to increase the growth rate. In doing so, they increase the spiral of exploitation and overproduction, reducing profit margins and so on. I think that if this is the system you are in, its laws are inexorable. So, I do not think it is possible to reverse it. People can do what I mentioned earlier as eccentricities around the margins but the central thrust in cinema, as in everything else, is driven by economics and investment.

As far as the world of cinema is concerned, the pressure from the US is unremitting. They make occasional concessions, or they talk about concessions, to the Europeans and to the rest of the industry. However, they are dominant and they are pushing for more and more free trade which means more and more access for them to European cinemas. Even the small subsidies that the French are giving to their own cinema are under threat from the US, especially by pursuing the MAI proposal (Multilateral Agreement on Investment) which, among other things, aims to increase free trade in the cinema industry. According to this agreement, the subsidies that the French give, have to be granted to everybody, so it would further weaken European cinema. Against that, you have very weak European politicians who have a rhetoric of safeguarding European cinema but in practice, apart from the French, do very little. So, the Italian cinema has more or less been wiped out, the Spanish cinema is battling hard, the British cinema for a long time was wiped out and it is just struggling back but with not much help from the state. Although there is a continuous effort from people who care to rescue some kind of cinema other than the one that the US industrial model produces, this is constantly being knocked back and all the pressure from the US is for unrestricted access to all markets for US films. Interestingly, in cinema, where the US is dominant, they talk about free trade but in other industries where the US is not so dominant they are protectionist like, for instance, in some sections of the computer industry. They are very protectionist when they want to defend their own industries, but when they think they can dominate someone else's they become very liberal.

Papadopoulos - *In this context, what do you think are the chances for the creation of an alternative culture within a capitalist society?*

Loach - I think it is very hard. People can develop little enclaves, briefly, but then again it is like trying to make islands of sand when the tide is coming in. The wash of implicit propaganda for capitalism, for this mode of production, is just inexorable. It is just coming and coming and it is implicit in so many things. It is implicit in language, in the stories people hear and in the ways they interpret them. It is very hard to create an alternative culture. I suppose the classic example here is Robert Owen and his workers' community in New Lanark. It held out for some time but it was very hard for it to survive within capitalism. Some of the communes that people set up in the sixties and seventies had the same fate. In these instances, it was hard because on the one hand you had the rampant capitalism of the West and, on the other, the Stalinist bureaucracies of the East. So there was nowhere where you could look for support or for a model in establishing something revolutionary. People get caught in ideas that are a little eccentric, like the "back to the land" idea; they get caught in things that can not work, in things which are idealistic rather than rooted in a sense of a real change in material circumstances. That is not to say of course that the impulse behind them is not very genuine and very good. But I think that if they are abstracted from revolutionary politics then, at the end, they are eroded, because there is no base of analysis, which can operate as a defence to this erosion.

Papadopoulos - *Based on this analysis, should we perhaps direct our efforts towards integrating such attempts in a struggle to build a new political and social movement which will fight for - and at the same time create - alternative systems of social organisation, beyond the oligarchic control of the mass media in a market economy, as well as beyond the totalitarian state control of the economy (and of mass media)?*

Loach - This is the big question that we all have been trying to answer. Obviously I agree with you and I think, oddly enough, the circumstances now are such that, especially in this country [Britain], a gap has opened for the left. This is something that I think Blair, in his move to the centre ground, in his embrace of big business and their culture, in his acceptance of sponsorship by business, in proclaiming Labour as the party of business, has created. The working class is clearly not represented now. Before, the Labour Party's rhetoric was about representing workers but in fact they represented business. Now, even the rhetoric is switched to supporting business. A large section of the community just has no representation and I think people are increasingly becoming aware of this lack of representation. So there is an opportunity for the re-emergence of the left. It is interesting, I just came back from Scotland - where there is a long tradition of socialism which is much stronger than here in England - and there you can see signs of a re-alignment starting. I think there is an opportunity; maybe it is slim but it is an opportunity.

Papadopoulos - *Would you agree that such a re-alignment is also a matter of defining a new liberatory project? Given the collapse of state socialism and the 'triumph' of the market economy would you agree that the challenge facing the left today is how to integrate all the movements' experiences, ideas and actions into a new synthesis?*

Loach - This brings us back to the old question of sectarianism which has always bedevilled the Left. I agree with you about the need for this synthesis and, in some cases, one can see some signs of hope. For instance, one day in Liverpool while we were making a documentary about the dockers' dispute - where the dockers were sacked and non-union agency workers were put in their place - the "Reclaim the Streets" people came and led this amazing, anarchic demonstration through Liverpool. The dockers, who were traditionally industrial workers with their traditional way of thinking and operating in trade union terms, suddenly found that they have got allies in ... fire eaters, people who were dressed in war paint or singing songs. Initially, this was an amazing union of opposites, but after a while they got on very well and once they were prepared to view each other as people and not through the stereotypes that they held for each other they became very good comrades. It was very good.

This synthesis is needed; absolutely. But then it is one thing to say it and another thing for it to actually happen. I mean there is always the old problem, which you probably know about, of left groups which are dominated by one or two gurus who defend their little principalities against, for instance, new people joining and the moment it looks like they get bigger they divide themselves again. There is this constant sectarian war which is very depressing.

I was involved for sometime in the late sixties-early seventies with one left group. In many ways they were magnificent. They were the most dedicated people, immensely class conscious, very much driven by a sense of justice and solidarity. But the group became dominated by a clique who almost forbade us to speak to the group closest to us. So, our biggest enemies became the International Socialists! Despite the fact that they agreed with 99 per cent of everything we said. This constant search for theoretical purity was eventually at the expense of a broad solidarity.

Papadopoulos - *It is well known that a TV series you have prepared a few years ago on the consensus approval by the trade union bureaucrats of the Thatcherite anti-union legislation was never shown. What can you say about the matter and what broader issues it raises about freedom of speech in UK mass media under Thatcherism?*

Loach - Indeed, we made a series of films in which the right-wing trade union leaders were criticised. The union leaders demanded to see the films before they were transmitted and one of men who was criticised contacted the Independent Broadcasting Authority and the films were stopped. The head of Channel Four, the head of the IBA and senior figures of Central TV who paid for the films were all Labour right wingers, sympathetic to the new Social Democratic Party, as were the criticised trade union leaders. So, those in authority used their power to suppress opposition to their friends. It was crude political censorship but done in a very British way by endless bureaucratic delays.

Papadopoulos - *This subject is topical again in view of the lukewarm opposition by trade union bureaucrats against the Blairite legislation on union rights. What can you say about Blairism?*

Loach - The fundamental problem with the Labour Party is that they always believed that capitalism as progressive and that they could re-distribute the crumbs that fell off the table more equitably. This was always the reality of the Labour Party. Even when the Attlee government nationalised basic services like the railways or the coal mines it was only because it was convenient for the rest of private industry that these services should be run with a public subsidy. It only made sense for their own production.

Another example is the very first Labour prime minister, Ramsey MacDonald, who started a coalition with the Tories. In a sense, Blair is absolutely in line with the Old Labour of MacDonald, who entered this coalition with the Conservatives. Blair is now moving towards a coalition with the Liberal Democrats and possibly the Euro-Tories. He is also in line with the Labour government of Harold Wilson who attacked various strikes as politically motivated.

Blairism is not an -ism at all. It is Old Labour with a new marketing strategy. When people talk nostalgically about Old Labour they are misleading themselves. They are remembering the rhetoric but they are not remembering what the Labour Party did in office. The only exceptions to this are the creation of the National Health Service and a very few other things that the Attlee government did. But apart from these exceptions the Labour Party in government has done what Business wanted.

Papadopoulos - *What could the role of the media be in the society of your vision?*

Loach - I think this role would be to reflect the ideas of a socialist, democratic society. I do not talk about the social-democratic vision here, but a vision of a society which will be democratic in its economics, its ownership of industry, in short, in everything. In such a society you need lots and lots of different points of view which, in the case of newspapers for instance, could be well established with co-operatives of journalists and print workers and so on. Each grouping could be democratically organised. That is not to say that everybody will necessarily decide what will be in the paper every day but that the editor(s) will be accountable to the people of this organisation rather than to a proprietor. You would need the same kind of democratic structure with broadcasting organisations where the people who are determining the policy of a channel or an organisation would be accountable downwards and not upwards. And that the 'state' as such would have no view on cultural questions. I think it was Trotsky, in one of his essays on the relationship between politics, class and art, who said that the 'state' should have no view on art or culture. That this is a matter for artists, painters, musicians or whoever.

In short, I think that the means of expression have to be independent and democratic so that you can have different points of reference. If you are turned down by one place you want to be able to go somewhere else and if they turned you down there to go somewhere else again. Diversity and accountability: something the liberal democracies do not understand. One day...!

