Cultural Imperialism

*Essays on the Political Economy of Cultural Domination*

Edited by

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Foreword

The ascendance of economic and political power in the modern age makes it possible to underestimate the importance of culture in understanding human societies. This text serves as a timely reminder that the assault on local culture serves “the powers that be” and that any effort to reclaim the local must include the preservation and restoration of the diversity of the cultures of place. For the majority of our sojourn here on this planet, we assembled ourselves in small human communities and anchored ourselves in diverse local cultures that were grounded in a special knowledge of our immediate surroundings. Over the past 10,000 years, centres of power have slowly emerged in some of these societies and have extended over the entire globe. This power first coalesced in state formations and then in market structures. Indeed, the assemblage of the axial institutions of our time in a political (state) economy (market), operating at the local, national, regional, and international levels, has come at the expense of culture which was the primary source of social cohesion in earlier times. Local culture has been thwarted, negated, eroded, forbidden, usurped, eclipsed, and undermined ever more completely by the political and economic apparatus of the most powerful political and economic interest groups as they sought to extend their control wherever possible in pursuit of their special interests. Through many forms—conquest, invasion, mercantilism, colonialism, imperialism, and empire—the centres of power assailed local cultures whenever they interfered with the growth of political or economic power.

It may be helpful to remind ourselves of Marx's classic formulation in The German Ideology: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.” Indeed, the material forces of political economy are increasingly organized at the supranational level, but they continue to shape the content and distribution of ideas. It is this preponderant influence or ideological hegemony which is the central focus of this especially vital cultural discourse.
Legitimating Domination: 
Notes on the Changing Faces of Cultural Imperialism

Katharine Sarikakis

It would not be unreasonable to argue that the concept of “cultural imperialism” is one of the few powerful theories that has directly been incorporated into the world of international politics. It has been the ideological force behind one of the most daring, and most unsuccessful, attempts of the United Nations (UN) in the field of culture and communication, the New World Information and Communication Order, and has continued to hold a central position in the debates surrounding globalization. Despite criticisms, the term continues to express a profound imbalance in the processes of cultural production and consumption and maintains its presence in international and supranational politics. This chapter seeks to explore the relevance of the concept of cultural imperialism within the context of international affairs and in particular to locate the new spaces of cultural domination. Within this framework, new, intentional, or accidental strategies of legitimation of cultural imperialistic practices and policies are considered. In particular, the chapter will explore the case of the European Union (EU) in its complex intersections of internationalized governance regime and the assumed role of representational politics against this background. The culture domain has been a contested object of policy in the EU but has also been used as a major ideological component of the new European identity and the key in the development of the EU: a process of transformation from a strictly economic to a social and cultural organization.

Problems with Cultural Imperialism

The concept of cultural imperialism is as complex and contested as the phenomenon it seeks to describe. With a history of over three decades, the thesis of cultural imperialism has sought to emphasize how power relations of economic and political dimensions infiltrate the cultural sphere. The profound interest of early cultural imperialism was in the effects of the imposition of core cultures over peripheral and semi-peripheral societies in their struggle to speak for and govern themselves.

Media and cultural imperialism is used in this context as a more comprehensive term that addresses the role of the media in the symbolic construction
nation: Cultural Imperialism

The concept of "cultural imperialism" has traditionally been understood as unsuccessful attempts of one culture to dominate another, with the New York Times and other media maintaining its presence in the cultural sphere. Despite critical views of the theory, cultural imperialism is still relevant today, with new forms of communication, such as the Internet, and the rise of transnational marketing devices for industries. Of course, the concept of cultural imperialism is closely tied to the idea that global media constitute businesses themselves. The development of the theory of cultural imperialism in the late 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Schiller 1969) makes direct links between mainly American media dominance and the threat to cultural identities. The debate over cultural preservation and protection from the forces of globalization was particularly strong in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the MacBride Report and the efforts of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to establish a more equitable global communication order. The failure of UNESCO to establish equitable patterns of global communication systems is considered to be the outcome of the unwillingness of the US to comply with policies that would seek to restrict the corporate activities of American media (see Hamelink 1994; Vincent et al. 1999).

Media/cultural imperialism is argued to be part of the intensification of globalization processes underway in the last two decades. Globalization is seen as predominantly the Westernization of the globe (Robins 1991). The expansion of late capitalism and its hegemonic position is processes materialized through the homogenization of the production and distribution processes, but also of the homogenization of the goods themselves, as the McDonaldization thesis supports (Ritzer 2000). These are also processes intensified and further integrated into local spheres and cultures through the flow of information. The latter is better understood as a consequence of the hegemonic position of powerful countries, but is also used to connote the imbalanced information flow between North and South. The media/cultural imperialism thesis implies that such imbalances occur due to the one-dimensional flow. Critique of this thesis claims that fragment and the multipolarity of cultural expression, living experiences, and subjectivities are factors not adequately acknowledged. Furthermore, cultural imperialism suggests that cultures are somehow "pure" and fails to account for processes of hybridity, evolution, and dialogue among cultures. Therefore, the thesis is thought to not effectively explain today's world, whereby the flow of discourses from North to South and West to East does not necessarily constitute domination (Baker 2002).
Although it is true that subjectivities have a potential for active resistance, the power of free interpretation and recreation—in other words, human agency—can only with difficulty be compared to systemic mechanisms that assure the propagation of capitalism in general and its major agents, the US and the West, in particular.

Despite certain processes of decentralization in the EU countries, decision-making centres continue to be mainly situated in geographies of economic and military power that maintain their influence through indirect ways over national markets and resources. Such geographies are related but not limited to formerly dominant centres, such as the empires and colonial powers of the United Kingdom, Germany, and France as well as the US and military powers such as Japan. Considering the current processes of economic “integration,” cultural imperialism should not be misunderstood as a phenomenon exclusively linked to relations among nations. Wallerstein's peripheries and semi-peripheries (1974) become now more relevant than ever to express not only relations among nations but also inner-national dynamics. Although some structures and practices have changed, global organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), or the G8 are controlled by a core group of nation-states. Similarly, organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or even the UN can be seriously compromised by the power of a few nation-states. Moreover, within the centres (cores), in their national or regional formations (such as the EU), there is a multiplicity of peripheries and semi-peripheries; socio-economic divisions of class, race, and gender; inequalities in access to decision-making processes; and restriction in self-determination. A world of peripheral entities constructed as cultural, ethnic, linguistic minorities constitutes further geographies of gender and generational inequality.

The question arises: is national and local commodification of culture worth defending vis-à-vis imperial Hollywood? Does it offer space for resistance? Is resistance to American imperialism a matter of reversal into ideas of a homogenized, pure, local culture threatened by the impurities of American capital? On the one hand, local and national culture industries are directly colonized by core culture industries. The McDonaldization of the music industry finds expression in the transnational Music Television (MTV) that draws from local cultures to produce commercial goods saleable to local/national markets, directed from a centre not identical to their operation locus.

Furthermore, local and national cultures copy, become part of, and propagate further commercialization by reverting into conservative, often reactionary, and easy consuming stereotypes of narratives about themselves (e.g., discourses of uniqueness) and constructed “others.” Appadurai (1991) points out the levels of this process: “others” in this globalized era become not the distant cultures (such as portrayed in American film) with which generations grew up but neighbours (the Russianization of former Soviet states is of more concern for their cultures than is their Americanization).
The immediate special locality takes on new significance: images of intruders (refugees and asylum seekers) into the space of local culture coexist with images of exoticized cultures (holiday resorts, "foreign" cuisine) and images about "others" (ethnic minorities), who give a core its multiculturalist credentials. In the meantime, multicultures often have to lead lives parallel to the core and seldom as an integral part of it. (The decision to build a wall between Asian and white communities in Bradford, UK, after racial riots in 2001, signals that the global village is something we experience on television or the Internet but seldom in our streets where localisms, nationalisms, regionalisms, sexism, and racisms stand at our door.)

The extreme introvert and extrovert polarizations of the world (global capital, global communications, and ethnic wars) do not necessarily point to more cultural poles on the globe. The existence of multiple cultural spheres does not quantify their equality in power. Powerful cultural and media industries (in the US) have educated the world's audiences into a certain form of media literacy that recognizes the conventions of a musical, expects closure in sit-coms, understands news as information provided by elite circles, and accepts new forms of entertainment and information that make references to those familiar forms. In that sense, the artificial polarization of local cultures versus globalization is an oversimplified assumption about the purity of local cultures. However, at the same time, overexcitement about the centrality of localities underestimates the extent of power imbalances.

Some of the points made by dependency theorists (e.g., Wallerstein 1974) are particularly useful today to explain the dominance of specific forms of structures and content. The argument that neo-imperialist forces imposed their media forms and traditions on other societies can explain the dominance of certain values over others. One example is the Anglo-Saxon journalism style that derives directly from the dominance of British communication systems (Marconi cable) during both the era of the British Empire and the ascendancy of the US after World War II, and its values of objectivity (as defined by a male-dominated, Western-shaped journalism profession) and impartiality (rather than, for example, civic journalism and engagement). A second is how the individualistic and context-free nature of technologies promoted by the West have overtaken the communitarian and contextualized approach of African cultures (Mickunas and Pilotta 1998).

Representational Politics and Cultural Imperialism

The wave of deregulation, which spread the American model of cultural industries throughout Europe and the world in the 1980s and 1990s, created spaces for further market expansion through the privatization of public service broadcasters and publicly owned telecommunication industries. Media conglomerates with experience and means benefited the most from the new markets, and the most familiar media cultures came to dominate to a large extent the direction of the production of meanings through the export of Western (particularly American) content. In this way, the media
exemplify the processes whereby the world’s cultures/media try to fit into the cultural and economic parameters defined by the West.

What is at stake in this process, according to Mattelart and Mattelart (1992), is the commercialization of public spaces. Commercialization, privatization, and ownership concentration—in fact, the feudalization—of public spaces are the dimensions most prominent at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, what is important is that public spaces are now occupied by a few companies owned by the strongest Western media in the world.¹

The commercialization of public spaces, whether by national or transnational capital, does not necessarily guarantee the enrichment of social debate. Difficult, uneasy social issues are often avoided, both in terms of content (stories not based on stereotypes) and objectives (access and participation by all), as they are unprofitable. Social change does not take place in the marketplace; rather, the market accommodates social change. Furthermore, the expansion of representation of private interests in public space reduces participation of citizens to increasingly confined spaces and their role to that of consumers. Increasingly, it is transnational corporations and governments of powerful states that organize the conditions of the economic and cultural life of the planet through a net of international organizations, agreements, and global regulation.

The globalization of capital expansion is intensified by communications media in two major ways. First, media defeat spatial restrictions through the transmission of information software and remote control of corporate/daughter companies. Second, communications media serve the commodification of the production and distribution of cultural products and increasingly act as shopping gateways for markets created by globalizing processes.

Globalization depends on regulatory environments that harmonize national laws and provide legitimization of the specific nature of trade. International organizations and regional formations, such as the EU, are expressions of economic and administrative responses to this new environment. Milward (1992) suggests that the internationalization of trade was the main source for the restructuring of postwar Europe. The Europeanization process was a prerequisite if European domestic markets were to sustain income and growth. Although Milward locates the move toward European integration as a political inevitability if the nation-states were to justify their existence in postwar Europe, he also emphasizes the centrality of the role of international trade in this process.

¹ Thirty out of 50 top advertising companies in the world and 24 out of the top 50 mergers/acquirers in the world are based in the US; 106 companies in the world are targeted by foreign investors, while the UK was the most aggressive acquirer in 1998 (Screen Digest 1998). The financial significance of media and cultural industries is also evident by the fact that they are the fastest growing industries in the US: predictions see an 8.6 per cent annual growth of advertising revenue while end-user spending has increased by 106 per cent since 1994 (Veronis Suhler 2002).
The EU is predominantly an economic union; its most significant goal is the establishment of a single market and the free movement of goods, capital, and labour across borders. To achieve that, certain policy-related steps have been necessary, such as the harmonization of national laws, which often (but not necessarily) takes place under the principle of the common denominator. However, the EU is increasingly dealing with the social and political implications of economic integration: workers' rights, health and safety, cultural/religious, and other social/cultural matters, a phenomenon that EU students call the spill-over of policies.

The involvement of European institutions (Council of Ministers, Court of Justice, Commission, Parliament) in these processes is of particular interest not least because they constitute a microcosm not only of domestic (European) political systemic arrangements but also of features of the international system. In particular, the delegation of the administration of transnational matters, such as trans-border trade and services, by supranational agencies is one major component of the system of international and transnational commercialization of cultural goods. The main and most important difference from other international organizations is that the EU structure utilizes a form of democratic representation in its supranational politics. In this sense, the EU has fortified its democratic basis, but also has tried to address the legitimacy crisis by providing the European Parliament (EP) with legislative powers. The EP (voted directly by Europeans) acts as a citizens' representative at this supranational level. Although decisions are taken at several levels—between nation-states at a regional level and also among institutions—that point out a rather dispersed system of policy-making, the main gatekeepers are the Council (representation of nation-states) and only recently the EP. Nevertheless, the EP is much more powerful than national parliaments. The institution is also a symbolic agent in that it aims to represent European cultures and societies and not nations. Its relation to the preservation of local cultures vis-à-vis the cultural imperialistic effects in Europe of domination by the American media of European markets has been a central idea in the development of media and cultural policy. Around this idea liberalists and protectionists have attempted to regulate matters of the market.

The significance of a representational politics in the form of a supranational parliament in international trade and policy regimes can be appreciated in comparison to both the existing policy-making structures that are called upon to organize economic activities and the degree of grassroots political participation. In the process of the globalization of culture as industry, the EP constitutes a unique institution in international politics with the potential to influence global policy. International-level negotiations point out the increasing significance of cultural goods as economic factors but also the concern of smaller nations to maintain space for domestic productions (McChesney 2001). Cultural goods are included in the WTO negotiations, in the trilateral agreements of the North American Free Trade...
Agreement (NAFTA), the protectionist policy of the US towards its own media and cultural industries, and the revenue growth of the industry in countries that are strong exporters. Furthermore, the economic aspect of cultural and media technologies and information rights are of central importance in the deliberations of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). In this process, the significance of representation at a supra/international level is better appreciated when the role that organizations of civil society, such as the WSIS Gender Caucus, African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), and the Communication Rights in the Information Society Campaign, Indigenous World Association, will play is still questionable. In top-level negotiations, such as the WSIS or the most recent World Summit on the Environment in Johannesburg, governments and the private sector barely welcomed the civil society at the table.

The Historical Context of Institutional Opposition to Cultural Domination

In the globalized environment of international trade and information traffic, policy-making has adapted to the demands created by these forces. Policy is still not well-defined (see Bobrow et al. 1977). Against a fragmentist view of policy as distinctive moments and loci of political decision-making, I refer to the concept as an end-product of political decision-making, through a process closely interrelated to politics, taking into account historical development and a given institutional background, and involving negotiations among actors not necessarily transparent to the public or accountable to public scrutiny (e.g., Landau 1977). Drawing on the above as well as taking into account the administrative functions of policy, it is possible to argue that the direction of policy and the nature of decisions made in the cultural and media area are expressions of a broad and complex net of relations between forces with the power to influence the conditions within which cultural processes (production/creation, distribution, consumption, synthesis) take place.

Media and cultural policies and policies destined to (at least) directly affect media and culture (such as competition policy regulating cultural industries) have a significant effect upon the spheres of cultural expression, representation of cultures and creativity, traditions and values, and the means for their dissemination and reproduction. Historically, the development of media and cultural policies in the EU has its roots in the political engagement of the EP. From very early on, agenda-setting strategies of a weak institution (EP 1982) provided not only the first comprehensive EU policy initiative specifically dedicated to the complexities of media but also constituted the basis on which policy debates about the field would be made in the following decades (Sarikakis 2004). Economic integration was the means to the political unification of Europe and the media were one of the most important tools for its achievement. The first proposals of the EP in the early to mid 1980s, under the statement that media and civil
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Information traf-fic forces. Policy fragmentist view-making, through a historical developing negotiations accountable to as well as taking possible to argue, in the cultural context of relations within which assumption, synthesis at least) directly guiding cultural cultural expres-sions and values, and, critically, the developments in the politi-cal setting strategies. Comprehensive ties of media but the field would mimic integration of the media were first proposals of the media and civil society are inseparable concepts (EP 1984a), contained at least two distinctive areas that would dominate media policy in the beginning of the twenty-first century: new media and communications technologies and transnational broadcasting.

Due to the effects of expanding markets and transnational capital, the project of the harmonization of national and regional policies was necessary for the provision of the relative predictability of markets and societies to enable capital activity. Regulation is a task vital for the transformation of market-state and market-market relations; in other words, intervention is necessary even for the aims of deregulation. The EU follows the logic of harmonization of laws and policies for the establishment and development of a common market, but increasingly intergovernmental, international, and supranational authorities assume the tasks of policy-making with very little communication to and with the citizens. This disconnection from the citizens and the centrality of culture and media in political participation were among the main concerns of the EP. Another main concern was the extent of private interests in the transnational media and cultural landscape and the role of powerful nations (e.g., EP 1984b, 1984c, 1985a, 1985b).

In its efforts to democratize European media space, the EP has concentrated its policy proposals in three interlinked areas that also signify particular periods of the transformation of the character of the institution. These are the overall changing media and cultural climate in Europe, the character of public debate, and the position of strong actors and, in particular, industries. Respectively, the first period involves the introduction of the fundamentals of media and cultural policy discourses. It expands from the first EP initiative in 1982 to the establishment of the most important single policy for the realization of a single pan-European market in 1989, the Television Without Frontiers Directive (TVWF) (Peterson and Bomberg, 1999: 204–05). During this period, the liberalization of state-owned sectors took place, with the privatization of public spaces, such as the airwaves, and the establishment of trans-border broadcasting activities. The EP presented an overarching political goal, in favour of a media model of social responsibility, similar to the aims of what had become known as the MacBride Report.1 At this time the EP's status was no better than that of the civil society in general: it had a limited role in policy-making and a second-class standing among the powerful Commission and the Council of Ministers. Due to its own commitment to the ideas of public space and ownership and due to the policy and governance vacuum in the field, the EP created and inserted an agenda from which the future policy actors in the EU found it quite difficult to break away. Among others, it introduced the concept of pan-European spaces of culture and media and emphasized the political dimension of cultural expression. These initiatives were

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1 For a timely discussion of the relevance of the MacBride Report and current international policy initiatives, see for example Raboy (2000).
aimed at two parallel threats: the dominance both of American-originated media and media content and of private interests on the airwaves.

In the second phase, which ended with the 1997 amendment of the TVWF, the major transactions that offered media moguls the opportunities to augment their market shares took place, and their expansion into national/linguistic markets was underway. The policies of content quota (both attempts failed to produce definitive and binding policy), proactive protection of media content pluralism (rather than media ownership), and the protection of public service broadcasters (PSBs) became central items. Not all of them were fruitful, as private interests proved too strong to be overcome by a non-united front of anxious PSBs, self-absorbed national representatives, and local/regional conditions too fluid to agree on pluralism matters. More radical proposals (such as proactive measures for realistic representations of women and men based on principles of citizenship equality and a policy tackling pornography) were immediately rejected by the Council.

In the current state of affairs of the European media and cultural market, the commercialization of cultural industries has not left much for the PSBs in most European countries. The commercialization of content in the public sector indicates the shift of cultural products towards easily consumable artifacts that imitate rather than innovate. The usual suspects here are the main beneficiaries: media and communications technology conglomerates dominate the market through vertical and horizontal integration of services and production (e.g., TVinsite 2002). Despite this gloomy picture, a significant boost in national and local production in the EU and an increase in the distribution and consuming of European works has held the domination of Hollywood at an all time low of 66 per cent (European Audiovisual Observatory 2002). This encouraging change (which cannot be taken for granted or as a permanent feature of audiovisual statistics) owes a great deal to policies establishing funds, space, and programs for the active development of the industry vis-à-vis the American domination of such products. Responding to the Commission's monitoring report on the TVWF effect in European countries, the EP (2001) calls for further amendment to the Directive to include technological development despite the Commission's suggestion for the opposite. A new amendment would be of particular interest, as it would demonstrate continuity or changes in the debates led by the EP.

**Limits of Resistance to Cultural Imperialism**

In the EU but also in areas of "free" trade agreements, the trading in cultural goods is subject to a number of factors that influence the content of these goods. Marketability, which in turn depends on other factors such as language, accessibility, easiness of use, and consumption, is a major determinant in the production of cultural and media goods. Cultural domination is part of a constant process of negotiation that includes moments and spaces of resistance and that occasionally allows the creation of avenues
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dia goods. Cultural domi-
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for self-expression. In its current “struggle” to protect European cultural
spaces, the EU (predominantly through the EP and not necessarily in its
entirety) has concentrated on the threat coming from “across the ocean.”
In that respect, so-called “protectionist” policies such as content quotas or
support for indigenous production consider only the threat from outside.
Inner-European expansions and forms of cultural and market domination
are being shifted to the margins. The commercialization of cultural spaces
through ownership concentration, market control through linguistic domi-
nation, and other imperatives of the cultural sphere of symbols and fashion
(where trends may dictate what is acceptable or parochial) are aspects of
forms of cultural domination that do not attract the attention of policy-
makers. For example, the political economic dimensions of gender-based
inequalities in access, skills, and participation in cultural expression are
similarly part of the generalized discourse of “social exclusion.” The harmo-
nization of laws and the unification of the market in the inner-European
space legitimate the dominance of economically privileged countries and
actors, as well as those cultural and social elements that already have the
benefit of pre-established dominance in the cultural and market spheres.

The limits of resistance to processes of cultural imperialism are reflected
in the degree to which national industries have been supported vis-à-vis
“foreign” ones. In that respect then, the EP has certainly provided valuable
advocacy for national PSBs and domestic productions. It has also mobilized
training programs, achieved a very moderate but nonetheless secure fund-
ing system for European works, and intervened in matters of content provi-
sion. As its own raison d'être would assume, it continues to defend the political
significance of the cultural sphere in the prospect of international agree-
ments (WTO negotiations, position in the light of the WSIS, etc.).

Cultural and media policies take into account future developments in
the field of culture and communications. Even the policies of the allegedly
most pro-free-market nation (US) are protectionist of its own domestic
porate products by imposing very strict controls over the import and
distribution of European works in the US (European Audiovisual
Observatory 2002). “Protectionist” policies of national cultural production
are a direction often adopted by nation-states to protect national markets
and capital. However, this is not identical to the proactive support of inde-
pendent producers and grassroots authors from local or trans-local cultures
and communities. Governments are subjected to pressures from stronger
ations with stronger market forces and are more vulnerable to media
commercial interests (Galperin 1999; Hoffmann-Riem 1996). Are policies
in the EU designed to truly boost indigenous cultural creativity, therefore
resisting the effects of monocultural domination through media or do they
contribute through the unification of markets and political apathy on
behalf of the citizens (low electoral turn-out for example) to the legit-
imization of cultural imperialistic practices? Does European cinema
deserve supportive policies to produce reactionary, xenophobic, or sexist
images any more than commercial channels such as Sky and RTL with
their action-hero Hollywood bliss? Is the protection of the interests of Bertelsmann vis-à-vis those of Murdoch in any real question? And is the role of representational politics to support inward commercialization or a culture that would promote political participation?

One of the roles that the EP is called upon to fulfill is to provide a degree of legitimation to the European project. With this role comes unintended consequences of legitimating practices that do not necessarily provide resistance to forms of domination. Yet, resistance is provided in the space given for the debates over citizenship issues, the role of citizens as not just consumers, cultural entities in Europe, expression, and diversity. In that sense, the thesis of cultural imperialism is of particular importance for Europeans because it contributes towards a deeper understanding of the extent of American market domination in Europe, despite proactive measures to slow it down. But it also helps to identify similar practices of internal cultural domination at the expense of internal minorities and not market-driven creative and other public spheres. The possibility of debating an alternative to media and cultural consumerism, be it in the review of the role of the PSBs as important vehicles of such expression, provides an oppositional discourse to market sovereignty.

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