

Soft Power: The Culture Weapon in The Cold War and South Asia

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We all know that what is called “soft power” is an important part of international diplomacy and “war by other means”. It includes weapons of propaganda, public relations and, at a somewhat higher level, art, literature, the theatre, the cinema and so on. Culture, in this sense, is almost a necessary part of ideological and political struggle. In the words of a culture critic.

Culture, that, is not an abstract force
that floats around in space and settles
upon us – though given the seemingly sublime
ways it influences us, it can feat like
a disembodies , ubiquitous entity. In
fact, culture is mediated though a
social structure (Parenti : 12)

Culture has often been used as a political weapon, an instance of soft power. During the Cold War, culture was used as a means of soft power on both sides but more expertly and successfully by the West. This paper will briefly discuss the matter, with a special section on the effect of the cultural Cold War in South Asia.

Congress for Cultural Freedom

Perhaps the most important instrument of the conflict, on the part of the West, was the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an umbrella organization that sponsored many journals and so on.

The Congress for Cultural Freedom
was founded in 1950, Even to
outward appearance, it had a quasi

official character. Of the two men most active in promoting the organization, one, Michael – Josselson, was a former officer in the office of Strategic Services, while the other, Melvin J. Lasky, had earlier served in the American Information Service and as editor of Dar Monat, a magazine sponsored by the United States High Commission in Germany.

(Lanch : 63)

The first meeting was held in West Berlin, then considered the frontier between Communist Europe and “free” Europe. The avowed object was to counter the powerful peace movement, launched world over by the Soviet Union. The object was clearly political but this was not stated openly. Trevor-Roper, a noted British historian and a delegate to the meeting, questioned whether “it would have obtained all its sponsors or all its delegates if it had been correctly advertised” (Lanch : 63)

Some of the most distinguished intellectual, writers and scientists from both sides of the Atlantic were present at the Conference. But the strongest voice was that of ex-Communists turned anti-communists, such as Burnham, Borkenau, Koestler, who insisted that their own experience had taught them the danger of Communism and that they were the vanguard of the anti-communist crusade of Borkenau, Trevor-Roper remarked.

Pouring out his German sentences with hysterical speed and gestures, he screamed that he was a convert from communism and proud of it, that past guilt must be atoned for, that the ex-Communists alone understood communism and the means of resisting it. (Lanch : 64)

Moreover, his speech was greeted by

”” hysterical German applause””

It was an echo of Hitler’s

Nuremberg. (Lanch : 65)

Borkenau considered the Second World War as little more than an extension of the Popular Front, that is united action by the Soviet Union, local Communists and the Western democracies against Fascism. However Borkenau pointed out the positive side of the picture. Every contact with Communism brought a kind of inoculation. Koestler argued in the same way.

The Congress fostered or founded a number of journals, such as “Partisan Review”, “Kenyan Review”, as well as journals in certain continental languages. The most well-known and popular among these was “Encounter” published in England edited by distinguished personalities, Stephen Spender , Irving Krital, Melvin J. Laski. The journal was pronounced from the beginning to be “journal de combat” and “an organ of protest against the Trahison des clerics.” The refers to the famous book by the French author, Benda Trahison des Clercs (Treason of Intellectuals). This was exclusively considered and identified with Communism. (Lanch : 72-73). The immediate aim of the journal was to put an impression on British culture, which was supposed to be isolationist, parochial, anti-American, all of which really meant not sufficiently anti-communist.

“Encounter” combined ultra sophistication with a well planned “folkey” attitude. For example, Leslic Fiedler, a well known American literary critic

“”where uncanny instinct for

cultural fashions, combined with

a gift for racy language (“Come back to the Raft Ag’in Huck Honey”)

made him a suitable spokesman for

cultural freedom in the fifties (Lanch : 71)

“Encounter” and Fiedler took the same line of defence when the so-called comic books began to injure the reputation of the U.S.A.

“Professor Lestic A, Fiedler’s “The Middle against Both Ends”, a defence of America’s “comic books”. This was written at a time when hostile criticism of these works of art and literature was considered to be causing some damage to America’s image in the world. Professor Fiedler’s theirs , argued as cleverly as possible in the unpropitious circumstances, war to the effect that anti-comic book talk was all petty-bourgeois and middlebrow, the ordinary man likes these books and real intellectuals, like Professor Fiedler, at least tolerate them.

(O’Brien : 171)

“Partisan Review” , which had started in the thirties, was also sponsored by the Congress for cultural freedom (Henceforth referred to as C.C.F.). These journals published short stories, extracts from fiction, literary and philosophical articles and other interesting pieces, placing them side by side with anti-communist polemics. Thus politics of a special brand was made attractive and intellectually acceptable. The aim was to prove “that the American government, unlike the Soviet government, greatly cares for the life of the mind” (Lanch : 98).

In the mid sixties, it was openly admitted that the C.C.F. was funded and created by the C.I.A. This rather lowered its alleged neutrality and reputation for intellectual independence. Some distinguished members resigned. However, the main aims of the Cold War cultural front had succeeded.

While “Encounter” “Partisan Review” or the Italian “Tieple Presenti” presented a high though hardly unbiased intellectual profile, journals such as the very popular “Readers’ Digest” presented anti-Communism for the common man. The “Readers’ Digest” series of condemned books included racist and colonial minded fiction or

reportage based works, such as “The Tribe that Lost its Head or Hunt for Kimathi.” It was, in the fifties and sixties, when anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa were often linked with, or made to appear linked with Communism.

Nor was the Cold War cultural front confined to literature. Academic freedom was attacked, on the ground that it was not applicable to those engaged in an international struggle on behalf of a foreign power. The film world was invaded, with the blacklisting of the Hollywood ten, the threat of banning Chaplin films, and the Anglo-American industry churning out spates of ideologically motivated, anti-Communist films. Some of these were of the thriller, spy story type, combining this genre with a political ideology. The encouragement of abstract art in Western Europe was also, in part, the result of such campaign.

The culture Cold War in South Asia.

India, the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, had been partitioned and gained independence in August 15, 1947. The partitioned part became another state, Pakistan. India, at the time of independence, was a large, resource rich country, with the potential of becoming an important regional player. Both the superpowers tried to enlist her, in their own camps. In the end, India, led by the Prime Minister, Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi opted for non-alignment, though with a pronounced pro-Soviet tilt. India became the leader of the non-aligned block of nations, together with Egypt of Nasser and Tito's Yugoslavia. Here we may get a glimpse at the “soft power” and cultural weapons used by both sides in the South Asian context.

In February, 1951, a meeting of the CCF was held in India. At first, the venue was to have been New Delhi the capital of India, but the Indian Government refused what would have been a stamp of state approval. Instead the Conference was held in Bombay, considered the financial capital of the country. Many distinguished members of the CCF and noted intellectuals appeared as the vanguard of the cultural army. Denis de Rougemont, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Igrazio Silone, Louis Fischer, Norman Thomas, James Burnham, (Burnham's book, *The Managerial Revolution*, was the most important book of that time, appearing to prove the thesis that the distinction between capitalism and socialism had become irrelevant, the whole world being governed by a single managerial class.) However, many Indian intellectuals kept aloof, because of the

political credentials of the Conference. Nor did the undiluted anti-Communist rhetoric of the CCF prove a success in the changed political context. To India, liberated from colonialism only a few years ago, the Western liberal democracies appeared imperialist powers, rather than bastions of freedom.

When Rougement, for example, commented on the impossibility of neutralism and compared India's neutrality between the two superpowers and blocks to the neutrality of a sheep between the wolf and the shepherd, an Indian delegate drew a rather different moral from the fable. He pointed out that a shepherd, after protecting the sheep, sheared and, perhaps, slaughtered it. So perhaps the difference between the wolf and the shepherd was not so great after all, as far as the sheep was concerned !

Robert Trumbull, a correspondent of the Times, tried to assure his readers about their "peculiar" point of view. The Indian speakers weren't really neutralist, they were only "manifesting the common Indian oratorical tendency to stray from the real point of the issue in hand "A dispassionate observer might have concluded that they understood the point all too well (Launch : 77)

Of course, the Western, particularly American attempt at soft power did not stop here. For example *The God that failed*, a well known book written by six ex-communists turned anti-communists, was republished by an Indian publishing house. It was also translated in various vernacular Indian languages. A noted fiction writer, Tarashankar Banerjee, wrote an introduction for the Bengali version. "Quest" an English Language journal of high intellectual standards, published from Calcutta, was funded by the CCF. It was associated with some well-known Indian writers and intellectuals, such as Ayyub Khan, Buddhadeb Bose, Shibnarayan Ray. The revelation of the source of funding caused them considerable embarrassment, Bose, Ray and other intellectuals

artists, authors, as well as political leaders, as Jayprakash Naraya, attended occasionally international conferences of the CCF.

“Readers’ Digest” was extremely popular among Indian readers, while “Encounter” found a limited but significant readership among highbrows. The U. S. Embassy in New Delhi published “The American Reporter” a journal that was the mouthpiece of the U. S. Government dealing with controversial, contemporary issues, such as the Vietnam War and the Black Movement in the U.S.A. The West had an advantage, in the fact that most educated Indians were acquainted with the English language. However, it was difficult even for pre-Western readers to identify with such publications on issues such as colonialism and racial theories of White supremacy. The “Encounter”, for instance, said as little as possible of the Black movement, while describing the American social-political scene.

Last August “Encounter” had a special number ‘Negro Crisis’ which on the whole put as good a face on things as possible (whites suffering more than blacks, rapid progress, end in sight, and so on) This revealed that “we liberals” had been struggling for civil rights for a long time....

These liberals were not saying this in “Encounter” throughout the reach of any normal adult memory. A check for the first five years (1953-58) shows that at that time they were saying as little as possible about the matter and giving the impression, in occasional asides that appeared among the copious comments on the American scene, that it

was of no great significance, and in any case well on the way to a solution).....

...On South Africa it has presented “both points of view”

(O’Brien : 172)

“Readers’ Digest” was even more overt and crude in this respect. In September 1970, the journal published an article by no less a person than the U. S. ambassador to South Africa, strongly supporting the apartheid regime.

Anglo-American films, particularly Hollywood black-busters were extremely popular in India and certainly served as an instrument of soft-power. However, Cold War style spy thrillers were sometimes counter productive. For example, a James Bond, film led to a popular riot. More nuanced and socially sensitive films, such as “Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner” created a different impression of the U.S.A.

The Soviet Union, though perhaps appearing somewhat late on the scene, was not far behind in extending soft power in South Asia, Journals such as “Soviet Land” “Soviet Woman”, “Soviet Sports”, “Soviet Literature” and so on were published in India, in English as well as various Indian languages. Publications such as Vostack, 20th Century of many turned out translations of many Soviet books, fiction and political works, as well as scientific and technological texts, Soviet films, though far less numerous than Anglo-American ones, were popular, folk dances or puppet plays even more so. The Bolshoy Ballet on the screen held spectators spellbound. The Soviet Union also offered the Nehru peace prize to prominent Indian authors of a progressive trend. A number of distinguished authors went to the Soviet Union to work as translators, most for a few years, while a tiny minority took up permanent residences.

Even juvenile literature could be considered part of soft power. In the U.S.A. , for example, in the fifties and sixties, a journal for children, “My Weekly Reader” created quite an impact. While English language juvenile literature, like other English languages books, enjoyed a natural market IN South Asia, Soviet childrens’ , books, fairy tales, nursery rhymes and so on, were

translated in abundant numbers into English and various Indian languages. Some Indian journals for children contained an overt political slant.

The Cold War game and conflict of soft power left its mark on the culture of all the countries involved including India, for good or bad. While the Cold War is over, the communication and media revolutions, the use of the internet, e-mail, films shown on the computers etc. makes the cultural impact and the use of soft power even more important.

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