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Cultural Products and World Politics

Rebecca S. Dobrinski

The following essay was written as the final assignment for a graduate level history course, The World Since 1945. The required reading list for the course included: Fareed Zakaria’s *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*; Albert Memmi’s *Decolonization and the Decolonized*; John Lewis Gaddis’s *The Cold War: A New History*; Lynn Hunt’s *Inventing Human Rights*; David Reynolds’s *One World Divisible: A Global History Since 1945*; Gilles Kepel’s *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*; and Samantha Power’s “*A Problem from Hell*: America and the Age of Genocide.” Through the narrow lens of the coursework, this essay looks at how a diverse group of authors viewed cultural products and the effects they have on world history.

Throughout the course, students found a number of common themes in the assigned readings. One theme in particular, the affects cultural products have on world politics, was peppered throughout many of the books. For this paper, cultural products will refer to intellectual property – creative works of a fictional or non-fictional nature or a work of fiction based on fact, including film, novels, photographs, television, radio, and the Internet.

In addition to the books, the class viewed one film, Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers*, which contributed greatly to the discussion. The film set the tone for much of the interpretation of not only the Muslim aspects of the readings, but also the evolution of modern terrorism. In the January 12, 2004, *New York* magazine review of the film, Peter Ranier quoted former United States National Security
Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski’s assessment of the film as: “If you want to understand what’s happening right now in Iraq, I recommend *The Battle of Algiers*.”¹ As Ranier pointed out in his review, the movie has been co-opted by different groups as beneficial to their causes, from Brzezinski and the Pentagon’s use of the film in relation to the situation in Iraq to the Black Panthers use in the 1960s as a training film.

The original idea for the screenplay was written by Algerian National Liberation Front leader Saadi Yacef, while he was imprisoned in France. Although a work of fiction, Pontecorvo’s use of non-actors, Yacef and Brahim Haggiag, as the protagonists gave it a documentary feel. Many of Yacef’s scenes were, in essence, reenactments of episodes of his life leading up to his imprisonment.² No matter how one interprets the film, its impact on understanding the French-Muslim situation in Algeria and the subsequent colonization, decolonization, and democratizing efforts throughout the world is unmistakable. Viewing *The Battle of Algiers* prior reading led the way for students to analyze the assignments through the use of interpretation and comparison with other cultural products.

In *Inventing Human Rights*, Hunt’s use of eighteenth and nineteenth-century popular literature contributed to her argument of how novels influence readers’ thoughts and ideas. She especially interpreted this as one of the ways the idea of human rights crept into the psyche of the Enlightenment generation, something she felt is often left out in the discussion on how the concepts of human rights evolved. Early in the book Hunt wrote, “Scholars have written at great length about the emergence of individualism and autonomy as doctrines, but much less

² Ibid.
about how the self itself might change over time.”³ She described how the development of enlightenment thought evolved while the novel emerged and reading became more of a pastime.

Hunt specifically addressed the lack of women’s rights in a number of places in the narrative. One example was how the novel provided empathy towards the plight of women, “Readers found the heroine’s search for independence especially poignant because they immediately understood the constraints such a woman inevitably faced.”⁴ With novels published as early as the mid- to late-1700s, one has to wonder why it took over 100 years for women to gain the rights many others, such as slaves, non-property holders, actors, etc., gained much earlier.

Another concept Hunt discussed was “The Self-Contained Person.” She theorized that “a new concern for the human body” went hand-in-hand with the new concept of empathy with the judicially condemned.⁵ This way of thinking affected not only human rights, but the way humans lived: “Eighteenth-century changes in musical and theatrical performances, domestic architecture, and portraiture built upon these longer-term alterations in attitudes.”⁶ Hunt’s narrative often raised the modern concept of “empathy.” She wrote, “In the eighteenth century, readers of novels learned to extend their purview of empathy…. Without this learning process, ‘equality’ could have no deep meaning and in particular no political consequence.”⁷ Hunt often revealed how empathy and concern for the human body were carried out in the personal lives of

⁴ Ibid., 59
⁵ Ibid., 82.
⁶ Ibid., 83.
⁷ Ibid., 40.
those who lived during and immediately after the Enlightenment.

Hunt described how Voltaire’s attitudes and the theme of empathy in novels played a role in the abolition of judicial torture: “Natural compassion makes everyone detest the cruelty of judicial torture, insisted Voltaire. […] A civilized nation, Voltaire concludes, can no longer follow ‘atrocious old customs.’”

Hunt successfully made the argument that abolishing judicial torture and implementing human rights could not have happened independently of one another.

Hunt explained how late eighteenth century novels were often written by the philosophers and great thinkers of the age. In one example, two of the “great thinkers” served as editors of a popular collection of fictional letters published at the time. Hunt stated, “The ‘editors’ of the letters, as Richardson and Rousseau styled themselves, created a vivid sense of reality precisely because their authorship was obscured within the letters’ exchange.” It can be inferred from Hunt’s narrative that Richardson and Rousseau understood the potential impact of these novels and how they occasionally broke through class boundaries.

Towards the end of the narrative, Hunt described a return to torture, racism, and oppression of women – problems she attributed to a vicious cycle of the evolution of human nature. In modern times, she explained, use of the media allows people to get firsthand accounts of these incidents. However, the modern media seems unable to provide viewers with a sense of empathy to these victims. She considered how mass media may be partially responsible for a shift in how people view human rights.

In the introduction to The Future of Freedom, Zakaria wrote, “It

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8 Ibid., 75.
9 Ibid., 42.
gave the person or group with access to that technology the power to reach the rest of society. That’s why the first step in a twentieth-century coup or revolution was always to take control of the country’s television or radio station.”

While this was the first step for many revolutionaries, this type of revolution turned out to be short lived, thanks to the development of the Internet.

The Internet and the dissemination of knowledge have, in many ways, leveled the playing field between the governing and the governed. Via the Internet, as Zakaria noted, terrorists found instructions for nuclear weapons, which are based on easily accessible fifty-year-old technology. He called this the “democratization of violence” and explained that the state no longer has the monopoly on the use of force as a means to an end.

In the chapter titled “The Islamic Exception,” Zakaria discussed how “globalization has caught the Arab world at a bad demographic moment.” Arab countries continued to experience a “bulge” of youth in that more than half of their populations are under the age of twenty-five. He goes on to show how a “bulge of young men” can be detrimental to society in any culture. This is especially apparent in how the majority of crimes are often committed by young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, and how this segment of the population is heavily influenced by popular culture.

This “bulge” of youth has also had positive consequences throughout history. Zakaria showed how it was also an instrument of change as in the French Revolution in 1789, the Iranian revolution in 1979, and the social revolution of the 1960s in the United States. As shown

in the fictional account in The Battle of Algiers as well as in the events

11  Ibid., 140.
described in Memmi’s *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, the French were caught up in Algeria’s “bad demographic moment.” The film and essay showed how Algeria’s moment could produce something seen simultaneously as a positive and a negative consequence, depending on which side of the argument one happened to be.

In *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, Memmi asserted that sometimes fiction told more of the truth than news media. His argument considered how literature usually has fewer restrictions and, therefore, can say “more” than is reported by traditional news sources. The ideas in his narrative incited one to wonder if there ever is a truly “free press.” He did, however, provide a valid justification of the ways literature can be a useful tool in looking at the past. Memmi compared the differences between fiction and reality in the section “The New Citizen.” He contended that “fifty novels from a given period provide a richer source of insight than tons of newsprint published during the reign of a dictator.”

The writers and intellectuals who opted to stay in colonized Arabic countries, such as Algeria, often turned to writing fiction as a way to disseminate ideas that were contradictory to those of their colonizers. Memmi explained, “They can attribute to fictional characters things they themselves feel and think.” He then argued that primary documents are subject to censorship and therefore are ruined as sources for future historians. He placed great importance on fiction as a more accurate version of the real world. The fiction written by those who remain in an occupied country can often serve a better purpose than memoirs by the ones who were lucky to have left. Time not only clouds one’s judgment

12 Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
13 Ibid., 36.
of a situation, but judgment often is affected by nostalgia for their family and homeland left behind. It can be inferred from Memmi’s narrative that it was this “defect” of human nature that should lead one to question the validity of some memoirs and to reexamine the value of fictional accounts of the times.

The form of cultural products varied throughout the readings. Photographs were used as cultural products in Gaddis’s book, *The Cold War*. At first glance, these photos seemed randomly inserted rather than integrated to the narrative. One could infer that the photos selected were most likely meant to represent meaningful events and people the author believed had an effect on the Cold War. For example, the use of the photo of Vaclav Havel and the Rolling Stones is an appropriate way to represent the changes taking place at the end of the Cold War. It showed not only the mixing of politics and popular culture, but the entrance of the strictly western phenomenon of rock and roll into a formerly Communist country where such things were at one time banned. On the other hand, the photo of Brezhnev and Nixon drinking champagne is misleading as it does not show any progress in world affairs but was merely a staged “photo opportunity.” The final photo, an empty and snow covered image of Red Square with a few people walking in the night, “Last days of the Soviet Union: Red Square,” was symbolic of the end of, as well as the entire, Cold War.

Interestingly, Gaddis began calling the politically influential, as well as one of the book’s chapters, “actors.” Underneath the chapter title, he quoted three of his “actors”: John Paul II, Deng Xiaoping, and

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15 Ibid., bottom photo on ninth photo page.
16 Ibid., bottom photo on last photo page.
17 Ibid., 195.
Mikhail Gorbachev. Gaddis introduced readers to an often-forgotten fact about Pope John Paul II: when he was still known as Karol Wojtyla, he was an accomplished artist, specifically an actor and playwright. John Paul II was one of the era’s leaders who instinctively, and apparently by training, knew how to “move the hearts and minds of the millions who saw him and heard him.” This talent was something that many of his contemporaries on the world stage lacked. Shortly after Wojtyla became pope, another actor was elected to a prominent position – Ronald Reagan as President of the United States. As compared to other world leaders, their backgrounds in theater prepared them for their roles in politics – as William Shakespeare so succinctly put it in As You Like It, “All the world is a stage.” Ultimately, their theatrical training made John Paul II and Ronald Reagan more effective in leading their respective, mostly western, populations towards the end of the Cold War.

References to another work also prevailed in Gaddis’s narrative, The Prince by Machiavelli. In one of the more famous ideas from The Prince, Machiavelli asked if it was better to be loved or feared. On the other side of the Cold War, Gorbachev veered away from his predecessors’ styles of ruling the Soviet Union and chose to be loved rather than feared. In many ways, John Paul II and Reagan exercised their empathetic theatrical training to garner the affections of the people they governed and were eventually considered great leaders. Despite Gorbachev also choosing the affection route, he never achieved the status of a great leader. Gaddis explained this phenomenon in that great leaders such as Reagan and John Paul II “had destinations in mind and maps for reaching them.”

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 252.
20 Ibid., 257.
to solve the problems of his constituents and worked harder towards gaining the people’s affections. Although this is merely one example, the Machiavellian standard, as shown in *The Prince*, continues to be referenced throughout politics.

Since 2001, the media has gone to great lengths to try to explain how terrorists use technology to communicate and how the image of the United States as portrayed in cultural products continues to incite the hatred of the west. The terrorist group Al Qaeda has used television broadcasts to rally its supporters worldwide as well as to take credit for acts of terrorism. The group uses modern western technological advancements to condemn the very inventors of their choice of communications venues. Politics does indeed make for very strange bedfellows.

In *The War for Muslim Minds*, Kepel addressed the nature of terrorism. He wrote, “Terrorism has missed its political aim, but it continues to manifest its resilience in the face of repression and to cause havoc around the world.”21 Does this mean that the use of terrorism has made any gains for different factions throughout the world? Terrorists’ failures often coincide with the shortcomings of the western powers and, therefore, make one question who is victorious in the Middle East. Still, the use of written and televised media has effectively helped and hindered both sides of the “war on terrorism.” The Al Qaeda cause has lost supporters and so has the United States’ involvement in the Middle East. Sometimes the tools backfire, too.

Since 1945, especially in the United States and the western world, new forms of mass communication have brought details of world events

to more people than ever before. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was the mass production of the telephone and television that introduced people to their fellow world citizens. News and information could be sent and received much faster and communicated farther. The Vietnam conflict was the first war to be televised on a large scale. As Reynolds discussed in *One World Divisible*, there was no way these new forms of communication could not have changed peoples’ views of the world around them. One point Reynolds failed to consider was how long this change would remain in effect. Does the visual image, however fleeting it is when delivered in ninety second media “sound bites,” have the same impact as the written word and novel?

Samantha Power, in *A Problem from Hell*, addressed the nature of films in the age of genocide. She depicted how this medium can sometimes be used to alter the way difficult subjects are presented. She cited the ending of the film *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a primary example. The movie was changed to prevent creating a depressing end. The first ending depicted Anne in a concentration camp, her ragged clothing blowing in the wind. It was changed to something more hopeful prior to the movie’s release in 1955, with an ending not “too tough in audience impact.” In contrast, by the 1961 release of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, movies began depicting a more realistic account of the concentration camps. *Nuremberg* included some of the actual footage of the liberation of the concentration camps.

It could be considered that Americans in the 1950s were not yet far enough removed from the atrocities of the war to want an honest

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depiction of life in concentration camps. The backlash to the 1950s, the social revolutions of the 1960s, may also present why filmmakers were more insistent in portraying it more realistically in the following decade. However, neither film seems to have the overarching reach that the introduction of popular novels had during the Enlightenment.

In *Inventing Human Rights*, Hunt argued that the novel helped to introduce compassion and understanding, often leading to a respect and struggle for human rights. Power seemed to dispel this way of thinking in regards to film. It has an impact, but it does not seem to last as long as the empathetic ideas depicted in novels.

What are the effects of cultural products on world politics? Do these products have lasting impacts on how the citizens of the world interact and relate to each other? In addition to these, the course readings leave the student with a variety of questions in need of answers.

Hunt wrote of how novels have affected political thinking. Her ideas of empathy were extremely relevant in the development of Enlightenment thought as well as the emergence of human rights. Without empathy for one’s fellow human beings, the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights could never have come into existence. The effects of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel continue to be felt into the twenty-first century. It is through the view from Hunt’s empathy that readers can best examine both Memmi’s and Gaddis’ discussions on using novels as tools of political change. Memmi’s theories on the use of fiction in historical research also point to the lasting impact of the novel. On the contrary, as in Reynolds, could the conflict in Vietnam have received less political support due to its portrayal on
television?

In comparing Al Qaeda, as described by Kepel, to the terrorist network seen in the film *The Battle of Algiers*, one finds similarities and contrasts. In *Algiers*, the nationalists, or terrorists depending from which side one views the film, can been seen in a sympathetic light. Rarely, if ever, in the western world are Al Qaeda members and actions seen with sympathy or understanding. Other films referenced in the readings, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Judgment at Nuremberg*, were impactful at the time. Due to the rise in modern terrorism, *Algiers* was brought back to the forefront and attached a new significance. However, overall do films resonate in the same lasting way that concepts circulated via the written word continue to affect people?

The written word seems to have a more lasting impact – is it because the amount of time given to reading versus the brief visual images brought to us by television and film? Does the age of the novel affect the lasting impact of its concepts? However, it may be too soon to tell what the overall political impact of the visual media, much less the Internet, will have on the world.