

DRAFT

**Winning Hearts & Minds**  
*Combatting Cultural Imperialism to Defend Independence*

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ABSTRACT

Socialism is a system of well-studied criteria for building a society that avoids all brutality of a development system based on capitalism—now in the process of globalization of information and culture. Socialism is also a system of organization of a society where man is not exploited by man. The norms and values ultimately are different. This paper defines and examines evidences of the concept of cultural imperialism (Beltran, L.R.) and discusses the ideological aspects of such outlook from the point of view of a developing country, like Vietnam, who won independence from colonialism and the U.S. war of so-called anti-communism, and now is deeply involved in the defense of its cultural norms, values and heritage against the onslaught of a global hegemony (as identified by Gramsci).

“The exercise of imperialist domination...requires cultural oppression and the attempt at direct or indirect destruction of the essential elements of the culture of the dominated people.” So said the great African revolutionary leader of Guinea Bissau, Amilcar Cabral, who was assassinated in 1973 by agents of the Portuguese colonialists.

Vietnam’s victory over imperialism and independence was achieved by a tremendous sacrifice of blood and bone. The fight was not only for formal independence, but for meaningful independence and liberation — for a society where the needs of humanity comes before profit. This has economic, political and cultural dimensions.

In imagining and shaping a new society, the role of culture looms large. Here I don’t refer to culture only as the amalgam of the performing and visual arts, but as the relations between people and between people and the whole of society — as a whole social process in

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which men and women define and shape their lives. Some have defined culture as, “how humans live and work.”<sup>2</sup>

Combining traditional and revolutionary values, Vietnam had developed a culture that valued equality, sharing and collectivism. This was part and parcel of an ongoing struggle against certain backward cultural remnants of feudal/peasant economic relations. This achievement highlights the Vietnamese Communist Party’s efforts to combine Vietnamese national culture “in combination with a selective acceptance of the cultural essence of humankind”. (General Vo Nguyen Giap’s characterization of President Ho Chi Minh’s view of development of a new society.)<sup>3</sup>

Now, 26 years after liberation, Vietnam’s culture has had to adjust to *doi moi*. The improved economic conditions have often not been accompanied by cultural progress. To a person, my Vietnamese friends remember the immediate post-war period as a time of terrible economic hardship but also as a time of togetherness and solidarity. Many bemoan the loss of those communitarian relations, in today’s dog-eat-dog market-oriented society.

As culture has as its material base the development of the productive forces and the mode of production, these changes have gone hand in hand with the introduction of market relations in Vietnam. Faced with the pressures from global capital, Vietnam has had to reintroduce certain capitalist relations in order to survive and feed its people. The interjection of profit and exploitation into Vietnamese society has provided opportunities for corruption, cynicism, individualism and for commodification of culture. The culture thus created, in turn, influences the productive forces and relations.

Much attention has been devoted to trying to protect Vietnam’s independence, in the economic and political spheres. I want to focus on the cultural sphere — on how U.S. commodity culture has been inculcated with market relations and how such culture may be shaping production and other human relations. I then want to suggest some steps that may be taken to counter cultural imperialism and safeguard Vietnam’s independence, including how we outside the country can help.

### ***What is Cultural Imperialism?***

Cultural imperialism may be simply defined as the operation of global capital in cultural relations or, more specifically, as the attempted domination of the cultures of the world by U.S. capital.

It has also been called “a verifiable process of social influence by which a nation imposes on other countries its set of beliefs, values, knowledge and behavioral norms as well as its overall style of life”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Haug, Wolfgang Fritz, Commodity Aesthetics, Ideology & Culture, *International General*, 1987, pgs. 26-41.

<sup>3</sup> Giap, Vo Nguyen, The World is Still Changing, But Ho Chi Minh Thought Will Live Forever, 1991, in *Ho Chi Minh Thought Will Light Our Path Forever*, The Gioi Publishers, 2001, pg. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Beltran, L.R., Communication and cultural domination: USA-Latin American case, *Media Asia*, 5, (4), 1978.

The victory of the Vietnamese people over U.S. military might contributed to the importance of cultural imperialism in the arsenal of the U.S. government. With the advent of “the Vietnam Syndrome”, the U.S. shifted emphasis from protracted land wars to high tech, quick strike wars and to economic, ideological and cultural means of dominating and exploiting other countries.

Antonio Gramsci identified the concept of *hegemony* — the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as ‘common sense’ and ‘natural’.

In this era of neo-liberal structural adjustment, and increased concentration and centralization of media, entertainment, and information, achieving cultural (and ideological) hegemony has never been more possible or dangerous.

If there is any doubt about the increasing domination by the U.S. of information and cultural production and distribution, a few figures should suffice:

- Cultural products are now the largest United States export.<sup>5</sup>
- In 1992, the United States purchased only \$288 million in cultural products from the nations of the European Community (EC) combined, while the EC nations bought \$3.7 billion in U.S. cultural products, including films and television: more than 10 times the United States’ import expenditures.<sup>6</sup>
- Of the Top 100 films in the world in 1993, 88 were American.<sup>7</sup>
- U.S. films account for 60% of box office revenues in France and 95% in England. In 1996, the U.S.’ share of the European Union film market was 70%.<sup>8</sup>
- Mergers of media giants such as Time-Warner and AOL have increased the consolidation of media power — “‘made in America’ cultural and informational outputs and the English language now dominate movie and TV screens, music-making, entertainment centres and business conversation.”<sup>9</sup>

Cultural imperialism is not limited to U.S. based transnational medial corporations; a number of other media giants, like Bertelsmann and the Murdoch empire, have similar interests. I also don’t want to imply that cultural imperialism is limited to the export of U.S. media and entertainment products; often global media/entertainment capital is better served by cultural products of local subsidiaries which package their values in a local ‘voice’. For example, Disney characters in many countries are now customized linguistically and sartorially for local audiences.

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<sup>5</sup> Deen, Thalif, Globalization Threatens Third World Cultures, *InterPress Service*, 1999, (quoting figures from UNESCO’s Human Development Report); Farhi, Paul & Rosenfeld, Megan, Made in America – American Pop Penetrates Worldwide, *Washington Post*, 10/25/98.

<sup>6</sup> Schlesinger, Philip, Europe’s Contradictory Communicative Space, *Daedalus*, March 22, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Rockwell, John, The New Colossus: American Culture as Power Export, *The New York Times*, January 30, 1994: section 2.

<sup>8</sup> McChesney, Robert W., *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, The New Press, 2000, pg. 104.

<sup>9</sup> Schiller, Herbert I., Dominating the Electronic Era, Towards a New Century of American Imperialism, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 1998 (English translation, <http://www.globalpolicy.org>).

Some in U.S. ruling circles are not shy about announcing their control and dominance in the cultural arena. David Rothkopf a director of Kissinger Associates and a former official of the Commerce Department in the Clinton administration minces no words in proclaiming U.S. cultural hegemony (in an article entitled *In Praise of Cultural Imperialism*, no less):

“For the United States, a central objective of an Information Age foreign policy must be to win the battle of the world’s information flows, dominating the airwaves as Great Britain once ruled the seas... The United States dominates this global traffic in information and ideas. American music, American movies, American television, and American software are so dominant, so sought after, and so visible that they are now virtually available literally everywhere on the Earth. They influence the tastes, lives, and aspirations of virtually every nation.”<sup>10</sup>

As it integrates into the global economy, Vietnam must contend with the mandates of multilateral institutions to follow intellectual property law and open its markets to media/entertainment imports. This is not the first time Vietnam has had to deal with cultural imperialism. In his Report to the Third Session of the First National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1953, President Ho Chi Minh, in his remarks on culture, noted that, “in the areas still under his temporary occupation, the enemy strives to disseminate a depraved culture and hooliganism, in order to poison our people, especially our youth”.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Impact of Development of Market Relations on Culture***

The advent of the market economy with a socialist orientation brought into existence productive forces and new relations of production. These forces and relations have had a noticeable affect on Vietnam’s culture.

#### *Marketization*

The Communist Party of Vietnam, in its line and statements, has been clear and vigorous in maintaining revolutionary values and morality. It has consistently understood the development of culture as that which creates a new person imbued with “creativity, a sense of community, benevolence, tolerance, respect for humanity, a cultured lifestyle [and] a harmonious relationship with the family, community and society”.<sup>12</sup>

The Party has itself recognized “unhealthy trends” in cultural development related to negative aspects of the market economy. “Certain cultural values and social ethics have been on the decline; and superstition and backward habits, on the rise.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rothkopf, David, In Praise of Cultural Imperialism? Effects of Globalization on Culture, *Foreign Policy*, June, 22, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Writings*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977, pg. 160.

<sup>12</sup> *Political Report of the Party Central Committee, 8<sup>th</sup> Tenure, to the 9<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

My personal experience is that many, if not most, Vietnamese Communist Party members are honest, dedicated revolutionaries who continue to make sacrifices in the interest of the Vietnamese people. In often lengthy and ongoing discussions, however, these comrades raise their concerns about the influence of money and individualism in Vietnamese society and the impact this has on relations between people.

Not being an economist, I will not attempt to present a full picture of the impact of Vietnam's market economic relations. I will present some anecdotal evidence of the effect of marketization on cultural relations:<sup>14</sup>

- Money changes everything — The elimination of many subsidies, the reduction of the government sector of the economy and the increased opportunities for private business have increased the role and importance of money and profit in Vietnam. With this has come a certain attitude placing the achievement of wealth above other societal and collective values. Plainly put, it has changed the way people look at and treat each other, sometimes treating human relations as a commodity.
  - + The most flagrant form of this is the growth of corruption along with the widespread practice of “gift giving” to ensure access to goods, services, employment, etc.
  - + A more subtle (but insidious) development is the growth of individualism and cynicism about the goals of the Vietnamese revolution. With this comes an assumption that because one is educated, successful, or wealthy, one is somehow more worthy than those who are ordinary workers or peasants. I have met with several mid-level cadre who expressed their opinion that educational resources were better spent on the children of the intelligentsia than on the majority of rural children, because ‘peasants don’t need much education’.
  - + A corollary to this is a tendency to competitiveness, envy and jealousy in achieving a certain level of lifestyle. This reduces peoples’ worth to the sum of their possessions, bank accounts (or rank). I remember being shocked the first time a comrade in Vietnam told me, with great pride, that his house was bigger and better than comrade so and so’s.
- Structural adjustment — To feed it’s population and adjust to the international realities, Vietnam has had to reduce spending and the size of the government.
  - + This has resulted in a partial defacto privatization of areas such as health care and education (where in order to survive, doctors and teachers must do private work in hospitals or schools after their work as state employees). Some cadre have been negatively influenced by this in such a way as they undervalue their duties in the public interest and concentrate on the private work.
  - + Cultural workers have also been affected by the need to supplement their salaries. Their cultural production is often commodified; meaning they have to produce for market rather than for “art’s sake”. Writers are often paid more for translating a pulp fiction U.S. novel into Vietnamese than for writing an original work. Even the choice of foreign novels translated is dictated by what is familiar and what is thought to sell, (as

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<sup>14</sup> I want to stress that these tendencies are far from universal and may be more applicable in the urban areas than in the countryside.

well as intellectual property laws), leading to a plethora of translations of Danielle Steele, Sidney Sheldon and other such junk.<sup>15</sup>

+ The necessity and opportunity to develop family and other small enterprise has tended to lower the traditional Vietnamese regard for educating children, particularly in some very poor families. According to a friend in Hanoi, who is a teacher, this especially limits educational access for girl children who are sometimes kept home from school to help in the family business or farm.

+ The development of the market economy has also had some unfortunate repercussions for the way women are viewed. Prostitution is now rather widespread as is pornography and “hugging bars” with scantily clad waitresses. While the majority of Vietnamese women work and Vietnamese women hold an enviable portion of leading positions in the economy and government (at least from the U.S. perspective), the objectification of women as sex objects or commodities is worrisome.

+ Insecurities associated with the market economy (and disorientation in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc) have led to an increase in superstition and other non-materialist outlooks even among certain cadres.

These problems are also reflected in modern Vietnamese literature. Not a few stories and novels by contemporary Vietnamese writers describe family dramas wherein familiar respect has been replaced by the love of money and position. A film made in the 1980’s called, if I remember correctly, the *Woman in the Boat* or the *Woman on the Lake*, tells the story of a prostitute on a boat during the war of liberation against the U.S. She risks her life to save an NLF fighter from capture. After liberation, the fighter, who has become a ranking cadre, refuses her requests for help and treats her like she doesn’t exist.

### *The Role of U.S. Cultural Imports*

Separating the effect of marketization on Vietnam’s culture from the effect of international capital is really a false dichotomy. In reality, Vietnam has had to embark on marketization in order to survive in a hostile world dominated by U.S. imperialism. The Vietnamese Party and government are trying to handle the resultant contradictions described above — clearly in a manner that promotes the development of a socialist future. How well they are able to do this is impacted by the more direct influence of U.S. and western commodity culture.

The most noxious U.S. cultural export is not Coke or Kentucky Fried Chicken or *Gone with the Wind*. It is the idea of U.S. superiority and supremacy. It is the idea that the U.S. is number 1; that the U.S. is the most democratic, freest country on earth; the illusions about the way the majority of U.S. working people live. I don’t have to explain to those attending this conference that none of this is true; that despite its wealth and technological development, the U.S. has one of the largest gaps between the rich and the poor in the world with homeless people

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<sup>15</sup> In an address to cultural cadres, former VCP Secretary General, Le Kha Phieu criticized the “trend to commercialization...which is on the increase, with regard to books, newspapers, periodicals...even for adolescents and children...The lowering of the cultural character...for the sake of achieving big sales and making profits have brought about no small harm to the tradition of the national culture.” In *Vietnam Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Selected Speeches and Writings*, The Gioi Publisher, 2001, pg. 85-86.

sleeping on the streets of every U.S. city. The official 2000 census report found that one out of six children in the U.S. live in poverty.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. ruling class is adept at communicating the myth of U.S. superiority. U.S. products and advertising and cultural exports are pressed into service. Talking among themselves, they are quite bold about their chauvinism. “The United States should not hesitate to promote its values... Americans should not deny the fact that of all the nations in the history of the world, theirs is the most just, the most tolerant...and the best model for the future.”<sup>17</sup>

But the message that is conveyed to people in other countries is not a blatant message of superiority — it is a message that equates the U.S. with modernity and the pursuit of “cool”. All things U.S. are portrayed as modern and stylish and cool. This may even mean appropriating symbols of resistance or countercultural elements (as in the use of U.S. 60’s radical culture to sell cars). It may mean coopting forms of national culture (such as the transformation of much of hip hop music in U.S. African American communities from progressive music to commercial music whose only “radical” features are the use of profanity and violent, misogynistic images).

One of the more dangerous U.S. exports is the equation of democracy with the right to consume commodities, also known as the right to shop. Before the 2000 presidential elections there appeared, outside of my home in New York, stickers which read, *shop, don’t vote*. The promotion of some store or other, it epitomizes the consumer rather than citizenship approach to democracy.

The exports of U.S. music/literary/entertainment products promotes these values as well. U.S. culture is certainly not monolithic; nor is it completely in the realm of commodity culture. The U.S. has a long history of people’s culture; of culture of struggle and resistance. However, what is exported to or arrives in Vietnam tends to be the most commercial of U.S. culture.

Advertising is the most widespread and visible means of U.S. cultural influence. In 1999, foreign companies spent \$116 million on advertising in Vietnam. “Consumer goods giant Unilever topped the list of advertisers, spending over \$14 million...Proctor & Gamble, which spent \$4.11 million on advertising, ranked second, and Coca Cola...remained the country’s third ad buyer”.<sup>18</sup>

On the streets of Hanoi, booksellers hawk copies of the latest Danielle Steele or Sidney Sheldon book. *Gone with the Wind*, that glorification of the slave plantation system in the U.S. South, continues to be widely read.

In addition to being poorly written, this type of book gives a wildly inaccurate portrayal of life in the U.S. They contain either rags to riches stories or stories situated entirely within the echelons of the rich and powerful. Combined with advertising of U.S. products and “lifestyle”,

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<sup>16</sup> Sengupta, Somini, How Many Poor Children is Too Many?, *New York Times*, Week in Review, July 8, 2001; many experts believe the number of poor children to be far higher than the conservative figures from the U.S. government.

<sup>17</sup> Rothkopf, David, *supra*.

<sup>18</sup> *Vietnam News*, Trade Section, [http://www.vacch.org/VN\\_04150.htm](http://www.vacch.org/VN_04150.htm).

they promote the love for possessions over the love for people or they promote the love for people **as** possessions.

The problem here is not that these types of books and other entertainment commodities are translated and published in Vietnam, it is that they are the predominant examples of U.S. culture available.

Nor is the problem that Vietnamese culture needs to be protected from outside influence. Vietnam has long recognized the need to incorporate the best of foreign culture in its development while at the same time maintaining its independence. In the 1951 Political Report to the Second National Congress of the Vietnam Workers Party President Ho Chi Minh said that, “the enslaving influence of imperialist culture must be systematically rooted out. Simultaneously, we must develop the fine traditions of our national culture and assimilate the new in world progressive culture in order to build a Vietnamese culture with a national, scientific and popular character.”<sup>19</sup>

### ***Impact of Commodification of Culture on Vietnam’s Development***

How does the commodification of culture imposed on Vietnam effect its efforts to build an independent socialist society?

Here I’d like to return to Gramsci’s idea of hegemony — the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as ‘common sense’ and ‘natural’.

People’s ideas about “the way things are” are shaped by a combination of their own experiences and external communications. The dominant class in the world today — the capitalist class — exerts tremendous influence on such communications. Internationally, this has led to serious consideration of even the most ludicrous theories, for example, Francis Fukayama’s theory about the end of history being upon us.

In socialist countries like Vietnam and Cuba, the commodification of culture threatens to undermine revolutionary values of egalitarianism, collectivism, equality, brotherhood/sisterhood and solidarity by substituting worship of elitism, competitiveness, individualism, racism/sexism and selfishness. This, in turn can have an effect on peoples’ attitude towards the economy and the building of socialism.

First, the very monetizing of societal cultural relations valorizes profit above all else. As Herbert Schiller puts it:

“The selling of the culture in the form of more and more ‘paid for’ human activity is quickly leading to a world where pecuniary kinds of human relationships are substituting for traditional social relationships. Imagine a world where virtually every activity outside the confines of family relations is a paid-for experience, a world where traditional reciprocal

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<sup>19</sup> Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Writings*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977, pg. 126.

obligations and expectations, mediated by feelings of faith, empathy and solidarity, are replaced by contractual relations...<sup>20</sup>

The values thus promoted seem to be the natural order of things because that is how people experience their relationships. For example, if gift-giving to cadre to obtain government services becomes the cultural norm, it changes the relations between people, privileges those with money and eventually becomes accepted as “the way things are”. Those who call this practice bribery or corruption are dismissed as unrealistic, old-fashioned, ultra-left or holier-than-thou. **They** become the disrupters of the smooth operation of society, rather than those who have accommodated themselves to this transaction.

Second, the commodification of culture invariably promotes (unfair and unhealthy) competition and comparison between Vietnam and other, particularly developed, countries. This comparison is based on illusions, fed by U.S. cultural imports — illusions both about the reality of life for working people in the west and the ability of underdeveloped countries such as Vietnam to attain a fair share of the world’s resources in this age of global capital. In this competition, Vietnam will always come up short. The portrayal of capitalist countries as rich and successful is conflated with the illusion of people in capitalist countries as rich and happy. This provokes a question about whether capitalism is “natural” if that’s the way things ‘are’ elsewhere.

This accommodation to the world of relations mediated through money is contradictory to socialist politics and economics. Socialism is a society developed in the interests of the working people — the workers and peasants (and, as Vietnam has added, working class intellectuals). I need not elaborate why a mentality that values personal enrichment above all is incompatible with this goal.

Ideology and culture are also closely related. Perhaps the most pernicious effect of commodification of culture is its negation of Marxism-Leninism and the legacy of President Ho Chi Minh. The collapse of the Soviet bloc has caused uncertainty in the minds of many — the growth of a culture of money effectively solidifies these doubts. The daily experience of having to live many aspects of life via the medium of monetary exchange is alienating and destructive of human values, but it “works”, given its own twisted internal logic. Even if one is on the losing end of this arrangement, there is always the hope of “striking it rich” (like in those Danielle Steele novels) or the resort to superstitious practices to change ones ‘destiny’. The struggle required to build a new society with the “new person” Ho Chi Minh wrote about seems distant and quixotic. The culture of pragmatism (that quintessentially American philosophy) soon leads to the idea that it doesn’t matter if society is capitalist or socialist; the only thing that matters is whether one succeeds. With this attitude, who can expect people to subordinate some of their individual interests in the process of building an independent and socialist society?

Commodification of culture is similarly destructive to Vietnam’s efforts to build a strong socialist economy. Commodity relations can negatively impact on the education and health of the population, reducing the creativity and ability of Vietnamese workers. This, in turn, reduces

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<sup>20</sup> Rifkin, Jeremy, Can Civilization Survive With a Greatly Reduced Government and Cultural Sphere, With Only the Commercial Sphere Left as the Primary Mediator of Human Life?, *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2000.

the peoples' mastery over their role in the economy and production, leading to increased exploitation of working people.

As the state sector is made more efficient and is forced to lay off workers, and the private sector expands, some workers may conclude that the future of the country lies "where the money is". This could hurt attempts to recruit the talented people to the state sector and discourage efforts to start collectively owned and run enterprises. Already, among many young people in Vietnam, it has become trendy to study business and to go into the fields of finance, banking, or entrepreneurial work. This, in turn, may result in a shortage of teachers and other much needed government workers.

At the same time, international demands to open up Vietnam's communications and entertainment market to U.S. and transnational companies may also undermine this sector of the domestic economy.

Consumerism and conspicuous consumption is also harmful to the Vietnamese economy (and to its ecology), devoting scarce land and other resources to luxury housing and production.

### ***Defeating U.S. Cultural Imperialism***

Cultural imperialism is a struggle for the hearts and minds<sup>21</sup> of the people. On one hand, the U.S. uses bi-lateral and multilateral agreements to penetrate Vietnam's information market. On the other, it projects itself as the epitome of modernity and cultural cool, especially to young people.

Vietnam's ability to change international intellectual property laws and treaties is limited, but it can try to interpret international agreements in such a way as to protect its own cultural production as much as possible.

Censoring or banning international material, for the most part, will be difficult and counterproductive. Sometimes the lure of the forbidden makes even the worst junk more attractive.

What is needed is conscious attention on the part of the Communist Party, the mass organizations and the government to popular education and cultural development.

While the U.S. government advises other countries that there is no role for the state in cultural affairs, which are better left to the dictates of the market, they don't follow this "advice" themselves. Kissinger colleague David Rothkopf, stresses U.S. control over the "Global Information Infrastructure", saying that despite the role of the marketplace in its development, "governments will control crucial elements of it."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Winning hearts and minds was also the term used by the U.S. government during its war against Vietnam as part of its program of assassination of NLF leaders and detention of peasants in so called strategic hamlets.

<sup>22</sup> Rothkopf, *supra*.

The Vietnamese government can use the power of the state to ensure support for genuine cultural work (by subsidizing or otherwise assisting artists and providing cultural programs for the entire people). It can encourage and promote the publication and distribution of international culture that has real artistic value (as opposed to junk commodity culture). There are many foreign books, films, and songs that represent people's culture and can appeal to popular tastes in Vietnam. A number come to mind:

- Roc - a popular TV comedy show about a working class family in the U.S.
- TV Nation - a hilarious cable TV satire show with a leftist orientation
- Novels by Alice Walker, Dorothy Allison and Walter Mosley
- Music from artists as diverse as jazz drummer Max Roach, singers Sweet Honey in the Rock and hip hop performer Common

A less tangible part of the struggle against cultural imperialism is the building of a modern culture, combining the finest traditional values with Ho Chi Minh's idea of the new socialist person and the best of the culture of humanity.

This requires exposure of the negative elements resulting from the commodification of culture. Professor Tuong Lai speaks of the modernization of tradition and the traditionalization of modernity. It is important to counter the U.S.' attempt to equate modernity with U.S. commodity culture. Commodity culture can be deconstructed and critiqued in a dynamic and non-dogmatic way. The idea that money is the most important thing can be fought using both the history of Vietnam and the international struggle against globalization, global capital and neo-liberalism.

Alongside this critique, the assertion of a positive Vietnamese culture can engage the creative energies and intellect of people, and especially, youth. A new meaning of "fashionable", "cool" and modern can emerge from such cultural movements. This will empower young people to both develop and defend their own culture.

Increasing the quality of ideological work is also a necessary accompaniment to building a new culture.

### ***What Can We Do?***

Supporters of the Vietnamese revolution abroad can make a number of contributions to cultural work in Vietnam.

- We can help to dispel illusions about life in the west by providing informational and cultural materials about the reality of life for working people. This doesn't mean we should stress only the negative side — the wealth and scientific and technological development cannot be denied — but at the same time, it brings the poverty of so many into even sharper contrast. In doing this, we can undermine a central premise of cultural

hegemony — that as Margaret Thatcher said, *there is no alternative*.<sup>23</sup> We can show that, for the survival of humankind, there **must** be an alternative.

- We can help to bring people's culture from our societies to Vietnam and encourage real cultural exchange. This includes helping the Vietnamese government to find books, films, CDs which represent the best of international culture and not (necessarily) the most profitable.
- We can take part in the struggle against global capital in our own countries and regions, with the knowledge that any weakening of this system will give Vietnam (and Cuba and other countries) more options in determining their cultures and their futures.

Is it possible to win the struggle against cultural imperialism? Can what we do make a difference? This is a question we will answer together.

Despite the difficult balance of forces in today's world, I am confident that the future belongs to the dreams of so many — as President Ho Chi Minh said, in his prison poem, *Advice to Myself*:

Without the cold and bleakness of winter  
The warmth and splendor of spring could never be  
Misfortune has steeled and tempered me  
And strengthened my resolve even further

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<sup>23</sup> This saying gained such currency, that it is now known by its abbreviation, *TINA*.