

# DARIO FO: THE ARTICULATE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE INARTICULATE CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The proposed study examines the subversive polemics of Fo's theatre which serves as a catalyst for social, political and cultural change. It aims to foreground the revolutionary politics of Fo who uses theatre to combat the oppressive system bringing to fore the working-class struggle for a classless society. The present study will be done with the help of the analysis of Fo's select plays. These plays will be interpreted using the Gramscian framework of cultural consensus, an enabling provision of authority and control and the role of intellectuals in countering the same.

**Concept.** The paper underlines the significance of art in facilitating a deeper understanding of the complex social realities of our world. The paper engages with the question of power and control, oppression and marginalisation as well as art and education as contextualised in Dario Fo's theatre.

**Results.** Fo's use of drama to humanise the history of Italian working classes tells us about the experience of art to engage with matters most urgent, which implies that art and culture can be an important link in the mobilisation authoritarianism.

**Conclusion.** A comprehensive discussion on power politics is presented in the paper with the aim of keeping people informed of the subtle working of these underlying structures which govern power relations in society.

**Originality.** The originality of the study is contingent on investigating into how power is acquired, legitimised, practised, and maintained, how it can be resisted and what role art and artists play in the construction, dissemination and opposition of it.

**Key words:** hegemony, polemics, politics, culture, cultural consensus



## INTRODUCTION

Dario Fo is a theatre artist par excellence known for his hilarious, subversive, and off-the-cuff performances. He engages with theatre not simply as a source of entertainment but as a source of knowledge defying oppression and marginalisation of the Italian working class. Fo upheld that the empowerment of the oppressed is imbibed in the importance of knowing. For him, knowledge is liberating. Fo's use of theatre to intervene in Italian society and politics is reflective of his politics of change. Theatre provides Fo with an outlet to speak out against the oppression and exploitation of the underprivileged and that too in their own language and idiom. He weaponised theatre for the political education of the backward classes. In this regard, Aleksander Kobylarek (2020, p. 5) states that "knowledge constitutes the fuel for development." Fo's theatre represents the socially and politically excluded. Empowering the powerless is the vision and mission of Fo's theatrical activism. Fo's politics of activism resounds Gramsci who too stressed the need of indoctrinating the workers and the farmers so that they could resist the status quo. Gramsci's concept of hegemony and his reflections on power, politics, culture, education, and the role of intellectuals were decisive in the outgrowth of Fo's Political Theatre. Ivan Cerovac (2020, p. 32) describes "democracy or freedom represents an idea of free and equal people making collective decisions that are binding on all members of the group." Moreover, Fo's preoccupation with popular culture used as a weapon in the political struggle of the working class stems from the Gramscian concept of hegemony which is the driving force of his theatre of protest and plays a significant role in defining it. According to Robert Scanlan (1998):

It was the writings of Gramsci that cemented Fo's determination to embrace the "low" cultural forms of unscripted improvisation, topical satire in peasant and working-class dialects, and the broad physical buffoonery and burlesque of a long stage tradition going back to Plautus (Scanlan, 1998, p. 98).

Gramsci was largely concerned with concrete socio-political, historical, and cultural realities of contemporary Italy. The political theories, expounded by Gramsci were largely seen as a deviation from classical Marxism and were fundamental to the expansion of the modern concept of power. Unlike, the traditional Marxists who articulated that the economy determined everything in the society, he investigates the objective realities, the practical conditions, and the ideas realised in the material forces of production.

Gramsci realised that social power is not a simple matter of domination on the one hand and subordination or resistance on the other. Rather than imposing their will dominant groups within democratic societies generally govern with a good degree of consent from the people they rule, and the maintenance of that consent is dependent upon an incessant repositioning of the relationships between the rulers and the ruled (Jones, 2006).

The social and political theories evoked by Gramsci gave new dimensions to class struggle as well as new interpretations of Marxist literary criticism in examining power relations. They are an exploration into how power is acquired, legitimised, practised, maintained and how it can be resisted. They have been colossal in organising anti-establishment resistance and contributed tremendously to the proletarian struggle for power at home and abroad. Diverse application of his thoughts to history, philosophy, politics, art, and literature transcended Gramsci of an "ism." David Forgacs (2000) writes:

He has survived the political conjectures which first gave him international prominence. He has survived the European communist movement itself. He has demonstrated his independence of the fluctuations of ideological fashion. Who now expects another vogue for Althusser, any more than for Spengler? He has survived the enclosure in academic ghettos which looks like being the fate of so many other thinkers of "Western Marxism". He has even avoided becoming an "ism" (Forgacs, 2020, p. 13).

In Gramsci's opinion, the dominant groups within democratic societies maintain their power not through enforcing their will on the subordinate group; rather they uphold their sovereignty by winning the consent of the masses. Thus, people themselves give their consent to be exploited by the powerful. So it is the control by consent not by coercion. He claims that power is diffused, elusive, and flexible which is internalised by the subjugated as a matter of common sense. He considers power not simply as an object but a complex of relationships embedded within social, political, historical, and cultural realities of which an individual is a product. Distancing himself from the reductionist approach to overemphasising economic relations, Gramsci focuses on socio-political and cultural relations for exploring the power dynamics. He contends that politics, culture, and economy are dovetailed into a web-like relationship that exists between the ruling and the ruled classes believing that a person is the product of ideological and material conditions specific to a society. It can be settled from the above argument that power for Gramsci is not an entity or a material possession but a process of negotiations and transactions between social classes which he calls hegemony. He defines hegemony in terms of consensual power relations and moral and intellectual leadership. He sees it as an internalised form of social control and an instrument through which oppression and exploitation are implemented. Gramsci further maintains that a hegemonic rule is neither a static realm of dominant ideas nor restricted to absolute and absolute authority that once achieved cannot be altered but a dynamic process "continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified" (Williams, 1977, p. 112).

The post-war political developments have helped Gramsci to understand that advanced Western capitalist states perpetuate their power through hegemony which he says: "Operates in many diverse ways and under

many aspects within the capillaries of society" (Santucci, 2010, p. 17). Therefore, a different line of revolution must be followed within such states. Gramsci believed in a disciplined working-class movement. The questions of culture and education were at the forefront of Gramsci's concept of power because he realised their potential in the construction of a working-class hegemony. He was primarily concerned with the education of working classes to emancipate them from mental slavery and to make them intellectually independent. His view about education is:

Learning process is a movement towards self-knowledge, self-mastery and thus liberation. Education is not a matter of handing out "encyclopedic knowledge" but of developing and disciplining the awareness which the learner already possesses. Through it, working-class members can develop a critical understanding of their own situation and of the revolutionary task and so liberate themselves from their dependence on an upper stratum of intellectuals who tend to deflect their class demands towards reformist solutions (Forgacs, 2000, p. 54).

Culture is an integral part of Gramsci's analysis of power because he held that "culture plays a decisive role in the making of men and historical subjects and thus is an essential part of politics" (Santucci, 2010, p. 39). Gramsci elaborated that culture was used as a tool of social domination and exploitation of the working classes. He adduced that the upper classes popularised a discourse about the inferiority of the popular culture and the superiority of the ruling class culture to perpetuate their authority over proletarians. Gramsci conceptualises culture as:

An organization, discipline of one's inner-self, a coming to terms with one's own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations (Forgacs, 2000, p. 57)

The concept of intellectuals is equally important to Gramsci. He says: "All men are intellectuals but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (Forgacs, 2000, p. 304). They are representatives of the entire cultural tradition of a social class or an ethnic group at the same time producers of hegemonic or counter-hegemonic discourses. He proposed that it is the duty of every intellectual to investigate power mechanisms which according to him are always ideological in a bourgeois-democratic state (unlike authoritarian regimes or oligarchies who neither care about winning the people's consent nor bother to conceal their interests) and to create an alternative or counter-current of thoughts that would empower the subordinate classes to reverse existing power structure in the society.

The social and political theories expounded by Gramsci revolutionised the minds of many thinkers and writers including Fo. The cultural problems identified by Gramsci and his concept of intellectuals as producers and organisers of knowledge are at the core of Fo's theatre who used it as a

tool for social and cultural change. One of the recurrent motifs in his plays is the subversion of official history and its representation from a peripheral point of view. This is best illustrated through his monologues dealing with serious issues of politics, religion, history, and culture in a style of popular theatre. As mentioned above the main motif of Fo's theatre is the affirmation of proletarian culture which he believed was falsified by the aristocracy to assert their sovereignty over the subalterns. He stressed the fact that knowing one's history is of utmost importance to know oneself. He defended Gramsci's claim that "Man is a product of history, not nature" (Forgacs, 2000, p. 57).

Therefore, locating Fo in the historical past is very important to understand the poetics as well as the politics of his theatre. His representation of history from the popular perspective is part of his project to deconstruct the myth of the superiority of the official culture and to recreate an alternative popular culture. According to Fo's understanding of Gramsci's writings, culture was used as an apparatus of power through which the dominant classes maintained their power. He believed that besides high-class culture, there exists a popular culture that was appropriated by the privileged classes and presented back to the people as something low and inferior. This was part of the hegemonic process of the ruling classes who by disseminating a false narrative about the low origin of the working classes won over their cultural life. Fo's passionate devotion to popular culture and his deliberate attempt to work in that tradition clearly show Gramsci's influence on him. Joseph Farrell and Antonio Scuderi argue that "Fo has always been the Gramscian word made flesh" (2000, p. 9). Recovering people's culture and tradition has been vital to the cultural politics of Fo. He attached immense importance to culture as it was integral to gaining political control; further, he realised the subversive power of the popular culture and used it as a weapon in the struggle against the dominant culture. His constant conflict with the Italian establishment and his commitment to recover people's culture highlights the role of intellectuals in a given society as propagated by Gramsci:

Intellectual guidance is sterile and pedantic unless it is embedded in the concerns and worldview of the popular class. Intellectuals must, therefore, learn how to feel, how to belong, and how to become impassioned. Only then can they understand the aspirations of the people, represent them to those above, and elaborate a superior conception of the world to those below. To make this sentimental connection with the people-nation, intellectuals must be prepared to enter into, understand, and use their culture (Jones, 2006, p. 90).

Intellectuals play a decisive role in forming the consciousness of people, in disciplining them, and in bringing about the revolution. The consciousness of people is not formed unless and until they are aware of their origin and their culture. And intellectuals must spread awareness among

the masses through a critique of capitalist civilisation because “A movement is never just a physical act, it is intellectual as well. Indeed it is always intellectual before becoming physical. Take away from the proletariat its class consciousness and what have you? Puppets dancing on a string” (Forgacs, 2000, p. 44).

Fo is very conscious of his art and his role as an artist. He used theatre as a means to deconstruct the pre-eminence of patrician culture and to inform the uninformed masses about their institutionalised exploitation by the stakeholders of power. Having realised the subversive spirit of popular forms he appropriated them to develop his militant theatre wielded to serve his dedicated political purpose of liberating the oppressed from the social and psychological slavery of the dominant culture. The bawdy humour of his plays welded into revolutionary and satirical contents turn them into a powerful political weapon against the establishment.

Theatre, in Fo’s eyes, that is comic theatre, satirical theatre, the theatre that flayed abuses with the severity Aristophanes, Plautus, Ruzzante, and Moliere had displayed, could perform a revolutionary function. When Fo chose to use theatre for that end, he turned to a modern philosophy–Marxism–and to theatrical devices of the past – those used by the *giullare* (Farrell & Scuderi, 2000).

Assimilating Gramsci’s political and cultural theory, Fo becomes the spokesperson of the oppressed representing their struggle against the ruling class hegemony. To consolidate their struggle, he stressed the political education of the workers that would enable them to perceive the “discursive practices” of the state through which power is maintained. These discursive practices are elusive and operate at an ideological level influencing the minds of people and controlling their thoughts. They are indirect methods of social control. Maria Judit Balko (2020) highlights public art and free access to all as it is for the general masses to understand and to think about the status quo.

Fo unmasks the institutions of power who ostensibly pose to patronise people’s democratic rights are the ones that exploit them. He also reveals the interconnectedness of these networks conjoined to exploit people and perpetuate the status quo. They are the beneficiaries of all profit who flourish at the expense of the poor. As said by Cahyani Tunggal Sari and Hadi Subagyo “art is for art not for mart and art for mart means it is for market not for the people” (2020, p. 371). His performances are an act of rebellion defying the arbitrary power of the religious and the political classes. They are an account of the misfortunes and sufferings of the Italian underdogs who are also the protagonist of Fo’s plays. This act of rebellion or revolt occurs not only at the thematic level but also at the structural level. His preoccupation with indigenous theatrical forms and the use of dialect and expletives as preferred mediums of communication reflect his rebellious attitude against the elitist culture and the established art forms.

**ANALYSIS OF *MISTERO BUFFO*, *OBSCENE FABLES*,  
JOHN PADAN AND THE *DISCOVERY OF THE AMERICAS*,  
*THE STORY OF THE TIGER***

In *Mistero Buffo* Fo denounces the hegemony of the Catholic Church. He has a different opinion of the Church and the role it has to play in the life of the people. Instead of serving the wealthy, the Church should represent the poor because this was the religion of Christ. This is Fo's criticism of religion at one level. On another level, *Mistero Buffo* is an attempt at demystifying the mystic quality attributed to religion and offering a secular interpretation of it. The purpose of Fo here is to give a humanised version of Christ linking him to the peasant population and their Bacchanalian revelries. He challenges the established Christianity monitored by Catholic Popes and tries to present it from the popular perspective that is from the viewpoint of the marginalised.

In extracting the grotesque elements of the mystery plays, Fo's intention is to bring to the foreground their popular origins. He also mocks the pomp and postures of the church hierarchy while popularising Christ and biblical legend, which is seen from the medieval peasant's point of view (Mitchell, 1999).

The play is a series of twelve monologues which are the expressions of the institutionalised suffering of the working classes woven into a seamless comic blend and savage satire. Stamped as the magnum opus of Fo's long theatrical career, *Mistero Buffo* well informs of his artistic and ideological framework. This criticism of Catholicism is contingent on cultural and historical scrutiny which provides the ideological background of his theatre. His reinterpretation of the religious historical facts is specified by the need to create a counter-current of thoughts contrary to the dominant ideology. As David L. Hirst (1989) asserts, "His specific aim in *Mistero Buffo* is to rewrite history, or, rather, to retell historical events from another point of view: that of the people, so challenging and subverting the official view" (1989, p. 119).

*Obscene Fables* is the subversion of the official view of history and culture imposed on people by the Church and the state establishments. The stories collated under this title are steeped in obscenity which is used as a weapon to lampoon the ruling dispensation and to liberate people from subservience to authority. They are a satiric inversion of the aristocratic culture which has been used as the tool of oppression. This time satire is in the vein of eroticism and scatology. The explicit scurrility and obscenity of these stories convey a feeling of resistance against the repressive culture and recreates the upside-down world of Mikhail Bakhtin. As Tony Mitchell (1999) explains:

Obscene Fables emphasizes Fo's direct link with the scatological "grotesque realism" and the "world upside down" of medieval carnival depicted by Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World*. The shit-slinging in The Bologna Riot is a direct illustration of Bakhtin's notion of the "material bodily

principle" in which the lofty intellectual and emotional affairs of the mind and heart are brought down to earth by excrement. It is also an illustration of the popular festive culture of folk humor in which excrement transforms fear into laughter. Similarly, the frank and comical approach to sex in *The Butterfly Mouse* and *Lucius and the Ass* draw on popular carnival celebrations of sexuality and the "reproductive lower stratum" as a way of mocking the pomposity and humorlessness of church and state authorities (Mitchell, 1999, p. 38).

The implausible set of events in these stories does not only induce laughter but also provides the playwright with a license to challenge the supposed hierarchy of religion and the state. Fo's appropriation of secular sources shows his admiration for popular culture and his eagerness to redeem it.

*John Padan and the Discovery of the Americas* reflects Fo's anti-imperialistic and anti-colonial attitude. In this play, he tried to subvert the details of official history narrating it from the point of view of a scoundrel who is on a running spree to escape inquisition imposed on him by authorities suspecting of his alleged involvement in practising witchcraft. It is a scathing satire of the imperialistic forces that robbed people of their lands, their rights, their dignity, their religion, and their culture, and called them savage. This is the explanation or rather justification given by them for the carnage they have done which is indeed sarcastic. The play unearths the worst side of human nature where humanity has taken a backseat in the quest for power. In this race for power, people have forgotten that they are humans. The voracity for power has infested them with hatred, bigotry, and distrust which sometimes culminated in violence. They want power by hook or crook, not even minding the great cost of human lives that are lost in this struggle for power. As a great advocate of people's democratic rights, Fo strongly condemns the violation of peoples' freedom by authoritarian regimes. His is the only religion that is of humanity and anything or anyone that falls out of this sphere is taken on by Fo. He wants a system of governance based on democratic principles, a system that works for the collective interest of the state and its citizens. The inclusion of the marginalised in the socio-political and cultural mainstream is the main cause espoused by Fo in his performances.

This issue of the marginalised representation and the role of the Italian Left have been discussed comprehensively in *The Story of the Tiger*, another of Fo's *Giullarata*. Considered as a political allegory, the play interrogates the deviousness of the political class who uses people as pawns in this game of power. The tiger is synonymous with positivity, potency, and self-determination. This is an attempt to deconstruct people's minds from ideological allegiance to any political group or organisation and to evolve a questioning mind. The purpose is to provide them with ideological clarity and political prudence so that they could study, think, and question rather than subliminally submit to the authority. He does not only blame the ruling party for this social division but also holds responsible the Italian Left for not addressing the problems head-on faced by marginalised groups, adopting the middle of the road policy for the socio-economic and cultural

development of these groups estranged from the Italian mainstream. Fo is indignant about the Italian Left who failed in keeping up its promise of proletarian revolution because of its susceptibility to power.

The relevance of his theatre to contemporary socio-political events cannot be doubted but restricting his theatre merely to a Political Theatre will ignore the complex and rich poetics of Fo's theatre. In addition to offering a discussion on contemporary politics, he emphasised culture because he believed that people's behaviour and their thinking are largely conditioned by culture – it defines power and governs power relations in society. Taking himself as the spokesperson of the ordinary people he fought for their rights and was fully committed to their cause. He played a pivotal role in upholding the rights of the marginalised who have long been denied justice by the forces of regression. His performances are praxis in cultural rehabilitation and reaffirmation of the Italian peasantry.

Workers' dignity, democracy, culture, and education remain central to Fovian theatre. He is not simply the promoter of their cause but also the representative of their prodigiously rich cultural legacy which has found due expression in his work. Recovering people's culture and traditions has been vital to Fo's cultural politics. He attached immense importance to culture as it was integral to gaining control. He associated power with culture, ideology, and knowledge. He emphasised that we cannot oppose, resist, affirm, and reaffirm an idea or a social discourse unless and until we are familiar with that. He further elaborated that capitalism does not directly or forcibly control the society but rather governs through ideological forces that are intangible. People readily subscribe to these ideas without questioning them, thus becoming vulnerable to exploitation.

For Fo, culture is also knowledge. Moreover, it is the principal provider of identity. Therefore, he dedicated his art to educating the workers and infusing awareness into them. He used theatre for the construction and dissemination of a counter-hegemonic discourse against the prevailing corruption, injustice, and exploitation. His theatre is an embodiment of his political views. He believed in the politics of social change but he also believed that without the power of ideology and cause there can be no change. His heartfelt concern for the oppressed and his inflexible opposition to the institutions of power reflects his radical Leftist orientations. Sohaib Alam and Farhan Ahmad (2020) accentuate:

Fo performances provoke resistance to the precarious survival of the weaker section of society and actively engage in the campaign for their rights whose freedom is dependent on the whims of others. They reflect the lived reality of Italian underdogs venting out outrage against their peripheral existence and are a powerful vindication of Fo's conviction determined by his conscious desire to develop a counter-hegemonic discourse against invasive powers of the state launching a scathing attack on the government accusing them of caring only for their interests and abusing their statutory functions and powers by abetting or perpetrating injustice. (Alam & Ahmad, 2020, p. 4)

Fo's alignment with revolutionary Left ideology helped him to identify himself with the proletarian cause that has been projected emphatically through his theatre. His performances are steeped in the popular tradition of protest attributed to the medieval jester and Harlequin of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Fo's identification with these popular figures is a reflection of his cultural politics and of his political ideology. His engagement with proletarian issues appears to be an extension of the year-old battle against the forces of regression. Considering them as his counterparts Fo carries forward the theatrical tradition set up by them. The theatrical tradition they represent is participatory, provocative, instructive, and irreverent, defying subservience to established literary norms. Taking up these elements of popular theatre, Fo fashioned his oppositional theatre protesting the prolonged suffering and woeful condition of the workers.

Fo's concern for the weak and the oppressed incites him to question the violation of workers' dignity and their autonomy. He targets the political and religious establishments for the heartrending condition of the workers. Protection and promotion of their rights and values: moral, religious, political, and cultural is the cornerstone of his protest theatre. The above-explored plays are an embodiment of Fo's selfless devotion to the proletarian cause.

Fo exposes the hypocrisy of the religious class and their tryst with power in the tradition of medieval *Giullari* (medieval strolling players). Following similar tradition, Fo takes his theatre to the people to educate them on contemporary socio-political and religious matters and to arouse them from a state of immobility to activity. His performances are representative of a class that has long been denied justice in a society that is corrupt and cruel. He does not merely speak of their problems but expresses them in their own idiom and jargon. He projects himself as the people's artist coming out of a theatrical tradition that has its root in pre-historic cultures. His recovery of ancient dramatic forms and techniques shows his commitment to the downtrodden and their culture. His theatre is the celebration of the working-class culture.

## CONCLUSION

Summing up, we can say that Dario Fo is a quintessential figure in Italian theatre, well known for his hilarious, agitational and scurrilous performances, exposing the unscrupulousness of the political as well as the ecclesiastical system. He is a versatile actor-director, stage-designer, painter as well as an accomplished writer who has at his theatrical root the great comic tradition of Italian past going back to the comedies of Plautus, the medieval *Giullari*, the Renaissance *Commedia dell'Arte* and the sixteenth-century theatre of Ruzzante which ushered a new comic trend throughout Europe. He is a theatre artist par excellence whose leadership of contemporary radical

drama remains undisputed. He, despite his iconoclastic attitude, follows a prodigiously rich theatrical tradition of the Italian past that enables him to connect with the lower strata of society and their culture. This identification with the popular culture begins with its appreciation and culminates in the theatrical celebration which is firmly rooted in that culture. To give breadth and width to the culture of the masses and to redeem it from bourgeois appropriation becomes the sole mission of his artistic endeavour. He considers culture as an essential component of the hegemonic process and his attempt to retrieve proletarian culture is the part of that process, reinforcing proletarian hegemony. Sohaib Alam, Sadaf Khalid, Farhan Ahmad, and Muhammed Salim Keezhatta (2021) express:

The modern domains of social sciences and comparative politics must raise objectionable and inquiry-prone issues on numerous subjects, such as colonial identity politics, ultra-nationalism, and mass culture contentions in general. But forced assimilation in adopting any dominant culture would abandon other ethnic minority groups, and they would reconsider their natural and logical identity mostly as “illegal” continue to remain under a precarious state in the country (Alam et al., 2021, p. 387).

The theatre of Fo is an expression of his polemical ideas on politics, religion, history, and culture which are inevitable to our social existence. Developing an understanding of these constructs is essential to making the meaning of our life. And this is what Fo seeks through his theatre, to keep people informed of the subtle working of these underlying structures which govern power relations in society. The aim is to furnish people especially the underprivileged with essential information about power politics. As rightly quoted by Aleksander Kobylarek, Peter Plavčan and Tahir Amini Golestani (2021, p. 6), “societies are wise with the wisdom of their representatives or stupid with their stupidity.” Fostering consciousness mainly the class consciousness is fundamental to Fo’s pedagogy of social change.

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