



Review: The British are Coming...Again! The Hidden Agenda of "Cultural Studies?"

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The British Are Coming . . . Again! The Hidden Agenda of "Cultural Studies"

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Cultural Studies is a substantial volume, consisting of some forty essays, many of them from a 1990 conference held at University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. The empirical content of the papers is varied, stimulating, and topical, stretching from the history of cultural studies to gender and sexuality, colonialism and postcolonialism, race and ethnicity, and the politics of aesthetics. The level of scholarship and writing is generally high, the arguments often provocative and challenging. It is, indeed, because of its scope and potential significance that we cannot allow this intellectual effort to pass without challenge.

Cultural Studies advocates not generic cultural sociology, but rather a specific brand of work. Its sheer bulk, at almost 800 pages, is certainly one testament to its ambition. No tentative expedition into uncharted territory, this is nothing less than an attempt to put a definitive stamp on the empirical study of culture itself, particularly in the United States; for, according to the editors, "It is the future of cultural studies in the United States that seems to present the greatest need for reflection and debate" (p. 10).

"The issue for U.S. practitioners," the editors tell us, "is what kind of work will be identified with cultural studies" (p. 10). Despite what initially promises to be an ecumenical tone—we are told that it is "probably impossible to agree on any essential definition or unique narrative of cultural studies"—we are immediately informed in the next paragraph that cultural studies "cannot be just anything." Tony Bennett insists, in the first substantive contribution, that what the contributors share is "a commitment to examining cultural practices from the point of view of their intrication [*sic*] with, and within, relations of power" (p. 23). Apparently, the failure to link culture with power is what American cultural studies particularly lacks. The editors inform us that while Americans may say they are doing

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cultural studies, they are, in fact, sadly "ignorant" of the real theoretical commitments that allow work actually to go under this name. "Some United States academics," they lament, "are willing to generalize about cultural studies in complete or virtually complete ignorance of the work that runs from [Raymond Williams] to many of the contributors in this book" (p. 9). Shaking their heads in despair, the editors remark that "it is hard to think of another body of work where that level of ignorance could be sustained unchallenged" (p. 9).

But is the problem one of ignorance or simply ignoring? While the editors' scientific concern for the steady accumulation of knowledge is admirable, the failure of the specifically British version of cultural studies to penetrate American social science may not result from a lack of information. Perhaps, after careful consideration, American social scientists who practice cultural studies in the 1990s have rejected the neo-Marxist theory upon which British cultural studies is based.

That, at least, is the thesis we wish to pursue here. We regard *Cultural Studies* as a self-conscious attempt by the once and future members of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, England, to revive their collective approach amid the current renaissance of social scientific cultural work of a very different sort. The center, also sometimes affectionately known to its partisans as the "CCCS," was a powerful and influential force in neo-Marxist cultural work in the 1970s and early 1980s. Two of the editors of the current collection, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, last wrote a book for

this same Routledge series, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, which was a short course on the life and times of CCCS.

We soon realize, then, that the initial stab at ecumenicism is really nothing more than a feint. Stuart Hall, doyen of CCCS and now at Milton Keynes's Open University, tells us in his contribution that "cultural studies is not one thing . . . it has never been one thing." As an empirical observation, this is certainly true. As an index of the attitude of both the center and most of the authors in this book, it is most certainly false. Rather than presenting cultural studies inclusively and pluralistically—to represent accurately the state of social scientific investigations into culture today—the authors see it instead as the legacy, the very nearly exclusive property, of the CCCS.

The editors tell us that the cultural studies of the Birmingham school resulted from "complex negotiations with Marxism and semiotics" (p. 9). Ten years after the demise of that school, we live in a far different world. Renouncing the romantic dream of postcapitalist socialism, the current epoch is torn between postmodern cynicism and the revival of liberal democratic ideals. It is not surprising, then, that cultural studies must now be presented, even by these CCCS inheritors, in a slightly different way, as an "alchemy that draws from many of the major bodies of theory of the last several decades, from Marxism and feminism to psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and postmodernism" (p. 2). Yet this lip service to eclecticism is deceiving. In their selective quotations from the volume's articles and in their own theoretical interjections, the editors present a highly theorized, relatively coherent image of the approach to cultural studies that they wish to impress on the ignorant American mind. This is nothing other than the cultural Marxism of CCCS in a more contemporary form.

The editors stress, quite rightly, how important it is to distance contemporary cultural work from anthropological accounts of the seamless cultural web of earlier, simpler societies. This is a starting point that is shared, of course, by virtually every contemporary interpreter of the cultural scene. Their position becomes distinctive because the editors insist that what is different about contemporary societies can be encompassed by the gestalt of "capitalism," which implies

such processes as "increasing commodification" and the "disintegration" of *gemeinschaftlich* communities (p. 5). It is from this theoretically produced empirical frame that the principal assumptions of "cultural studies," according to CCCS, derive. There seem to be five of these.

1. Institutionalized social structures are hierarchical and oppressive. Social order is not voluntary or intersubjective, but "constrains and oppresses the people" (p. 5).

2. Culture is not merely related to power but is intertwined with and in a very real sense reduced to it—"it simultaneously invokes symbolic *and* material domains" (p. 4). Hence the centrality of the concept of "articulation," which "provides a way of describing the continual severing, realignment, and recombination of discourses, social groups, political interests, and structures of power" (p. 8).

3. While cultural forms are often invoked on behalf of established power, as implied by the central concept of "hegemony" (p. 14), culture may also be employed as an instrument against it, hence the importance of "identity" (p. 14). Even in the latter case, it is important to note, power remains the instigator of culture, which at every point is implicated in "struggle."

4. Action informed by culture is less Burke's meaning-oriented and literary "symbolic action" than Bourdieu's "practice," strategic and down-to-earth action geared to the nature of the struggle at hand. The issue is equality and hierarchy, not communication and meaning: "Cultural practices . . . create, sustain, or suppress contestations over inclusion and exclusion" (p. 12). They "continuously reinscribe the line between legitimate and popular culture, and of what they accomplish in specific contexts" (p. 13).

5. As a theoretical enterprise, cultural studies must be deeply ideological, for "the politics of the analysis and the politics of intellectual work are inseparable" (p. 6). This is merely the logical conclusion of the intertwining of culture and power: "Struggles over power must increasingly touch base with and work through the cultural practices, languages and logics of the people" (p. 11). Cultural studies has "a long history of commitment to disempowered populations" (p. 12). The challenge is what kind of "social difference theory can make" (p. 12).

These theoretical tenets have the paradoxical effect of pushing "cultural studies" from the domain of meaning into that of social structure. Intertwined with power, aiding either the domination or liberation of oppressed peoples, practical in its aims, culture inspires a highly ideological field that aims "to rearticulate history in terms of specific material contexts" (p. 15).

While it would certainly be a disservice to this volume's myriad contributors to suggest that each of their essays closely follows the reductive program we have described, it would be a disservice to the editors to suggest that the parts of their volume add up to something substantially different than the whole they have described. To be sure, as in any collection of this size, the thinking and writing are highly uneven, ranging from the clear and probing analyses of Fiske and Hall to the abstruse postmodernism of Hosni. There are also some real gems. Simon Frith, James Clifford, and Hall himself are consistently fine writers and astute observers of cultural life, despite the constrictions of the framework within which they work.

John Fiske's sophisticated attempt to link macro to micro theories of culture through the body, in "Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life," may be the best essay of the lot. However, its ultimate failure tells us a good deal about the problems of the CCCS approach as a whole. Moving beyond the inertial qualities of Bourdieu's original concept, Fiske shows that the "habitus" of the "everyday" person is not simply a lowbrow cultural prison of political and economical oppression, but a realm that exists in the tension between "creativity and constraint," where actors construct their own social identities (p. 161).

Yet, while Fiske rightly asserts that "accounts of the social and cultural systems which neglect the positive input of people are not yet complete" (p. 161), the limiting principles of CCCS remain in place. On one hand, he confines the "social agent" to a series of determinate structures, no matter how elegantly elaborated and revised as Bourdieuan habitus or Foucaultian discourse.

The organization of bodily behavior in space and time forms the basis of the social order. For the system to work, we must occupy certain "work stations" at certain

times in the office or factory. . . . similarly, every body's individual history, his or her accumulation of behaviors, is recorded and rated. . . . our society works on a highly elaborate system of surveying, and recording, ranking and individuating our everyday behaviors. (P. 161)

In this part of Fiske's argument, then, we recognize the same old problems of agency and alienation that Marxism in any form, as well as postmodernism, has consistently faced: If social actors are the victims of their constraints, how can any agency be possible? At the same time, Fiske seeks to neutralize this determinism by claiming the ever-present potential for rebellion:

Various formations of the people . . . oppose and disrupt the organized disciplined individualities produced by the mechanisms of surveillance, examination, and information which Foucault has shown are the technologies of the mechanism of power. (P. 161)

But isn't the point, really, that people are neither confined to the disciplines of power nor relegated to being knee-jerk rebels against it? Beyond their roles, they exist not merely as individual "agents" but also in relationships with social and personal others, with "persons" who have as meaningful identities, psychologically and socially, as their own. Who, after all, when asked to identify themselves in a general sense, would refer to themselves merely in terms of a school record, a work record, or a credit rating—or, for that matter, as social agents? Actors are created as selves and others because they participate in the codes and narratives of a culture that encircles power and reflects upon it.

In his essay, Stuart Hall addresses the concern, raised also by several others in the volume, that Marxism as a political practice was somehow incompatible with the abstraction of social theory. In doing so, he asserts that cultural studies itself is a "grand narrative" and that he himself is making the effort to "renarrativize" CCCS's "detours" through theory (pp. 277, 283). We would argue, however, that it is precisely by elevating cultural studies to the level of a grand narrative—to a story of tragic degradation and heroic rebellion—that Hall and his

colleagues make their fundamental mistake, for they fatally confuse their own radical-intellectual conceptions of the social realm with those of the social actors they study.

Indeed, the narratives that the latter-day CCCSers employ are as abstract as their theory. The brand of cultural studies they purvey remains confined within these abstracted political narratives, rather than engaging the stories by which social actors themselves navigate their reality. The essence of the CCCS narrative, of course, lies in the exegesis of malevolent power and its manipulation. Exegesis replaces interpretation, for the object of analysis is not meaning but objective reality itself. Agents and hegemonics inhabit this objective world; selves and others, as real subjects, are shoved out of the empirical frame. The irony here is that most of the contributors in this book see their work as accomplishing the very opposite. For them, cultural studies allows socially hypostatized "others"—the worker, the minority, the woman—to become heroes in their own stories.

Although the editors of *Cultural Studies* purport to offer a "rough map . . . of the major categories of current work in cultural studies," then, we take strong issue with their claim. They neither encompass nor typify the range of perspectives available for, and in, the contemporary analysis of culture. In fact, their book is imperial rather than inclusive in its ambition, ignoring some of the most significant strains in cultural analysis as it is practiced in America today.

Most sociologists would agree that the three foundational figures of the discipline, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, each made highly significant contributions to the study of culture. Certainly, the traditions and concepts they established have subsequently informed much empirical work and research. Of these founding figures, however, only Marx and his schools are well represented in this collection. The other two fare poorly.

Yet it was Durkheim who initiated the entire structural, semiotic approach to secular culture, an emphasis that, in America during the late 1960s and 1970s, ushered in a new kind of symbolic anthropology. This was crystallized by Clifford Geertz but also developed in significant ways by two English analysts, Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, who found American academic life to be a

more hospitable intellectual ground. In the years since, what might be called "late-Durkheimian" sociology has inspired wide-ranging studies of the dynamic relationships between binary collective representations, pollution, and sacrality, on the one hand, and political and social conflicts on the other, dynamics that typically involve explosive moments of secular ritualization. (In addition to the well-known works of Geertz, Douglas, and Turner, see, e.g., Wagner-Pacifici [1986], Smith [1991], and the contributions in Alexander [1988] in sociology; Hunt [1984] and Sewell [1980] in history; and Sahlins [1976, 1981] and Dirks [1990] in anthropology.)

Weber introduced Dilthey's hermeneutics into historical and comparative sociology, developing an interpretive approach that has found its way into virtually every contemporary sociological study that avoids economic reduction, on one hand, and state centrism, on the other. From Bellah's studies of comparative civil religion and Walzer's work on the meaning of justice to Zelizer's cultural economic history and Eisenstadt's studies of axial age civilizations, the Weberian emphasis on religious ethics, transcendental values, and the institutionalization of charisma has received more forceful articulations in America than in the social science of any other nation, Germany included.

For evidence of our claim that these non-Marxist traditions of cultural analysis are ignored, one need look no further than the index and bibliography of *Cultural Studies*. In table 1 we list a number of scholars who are

Table 1. Selected Author Citations in *Cultural Studies*

Name	Number of Pages,	
	Mentioned or Discussed	Number of Works Cited
Stuart Hall	74	29
Karl Marx	43	2
Antonio Gramsci	32	1
Pierre Bourdieu	20	2
Louis Althusser	12	4
Jean Baudrillard	10	5
Max Weber	11	1
Mary Douglas	4	1
Emile Durkheim	1	0
Clifford Geertz	1	0
Victor Turner	0	0

generally considered to have made a significant contribution to cultural studies. Beside them we give first the number of pages on which, according to the index, their work is discussed or cited and, second, the number of their works that are cited in the bibliography. With respect to the book's accountability to the breadth of the traditions informing contemporary cultural studies, these figures speak for themselves. Unless the combined importance of Durkheim and Weber is equivalent to that of Louis Althusser, it seems clear that *Cultural Studies* affords only a very partial redaction of the perspectives available to cultural analysts today.

Clearly, any survey will draw upon some strands of thinking more than others. Selectivity is often necessary for creative intellectual endeavor. Yet the editors present *Cultural Studies* as an effort that "seeks to identify the dimensions of cultural studies and its varied effects, to discuss cultural studies in relation to its intellectual history, its varying definitions, its current affiliations and affinities and diverse objects of study, and its possible futures" (p. 1). This statement cannot hold. By ignoring some of the major strands of thinking on cultural issues, both classic and contemporary, *Cultural Studies* must fail in its professed goal. It thus performs a massive disservice, not only to its own aims but to the field of study it addresses.

In fact, it may well be the neo-Marxist strands of British and French cultural studies that mark the insular fields of contemporary activity. Social structure is hardly an unknown point of reference for American students of culture, as the large and impressive body of work by such sociologists as DiMaggio, Griswold, Wuthnow, and Lamont demonstrates. States, markets, organizations, and stratification systems are continuous referents in the studies and the theorizing that these sociologists conduct. What separates them from their continental counterparts is the absence not only of Marxist concepts but also the grand narratives that, when employed in social science, make for such tendentious ideology. The vitality of American cultural studies can be demonstrated, moreover, in the very fact that such work is fiercely contested by those working in the Durkheimian, Weberian, and Parsonian traditions we cited above. In the historical works of such scholars as Zelizer, Greenfeld, Sewell, and

Hunt and the more contemporary studies of such sociologists as Wagner-Pacifici, Zerubavel, Alexander, and Seidman, one sees not only the distancing from Marxist language but also a much stronger emphasis on the relative autonomy of cultural action and meaning systems, emphases that distinguish this developing body of work much more strongly from the British and French influence that *Cultural Studies* presents. From within this latter group of authors, too, concerted efforts at developing new general theories about culture have been made (e.g., Rambo and Chan [1990], Kane [1991], Sewell [1992], Swidler [1986], Alexander [1989, 1991]).

It seems to us, indeed, that it is here, in the conflicts and cross-currents of this American field, that new models of cultural studies are emerging. Insofar as this is true of the more social-structural approaches, it indicates a more creative, synthetic, and objective extension and revision of the Marxist currents that have dominated cultural studies in Britain and France. However, the growing body of contemporary work that has emerged from the Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons traditions, and that marks its origins in the writings of Bellah, Geertz, Douglas, and Turner, involves a much more radical alternative. This school of American cultural studies engages social actors and their subjective perceptions, rather than treating them as objects, as most of the authors in *Cultural Studies* seem to do. This emphasis on subjectivity allows us to look beyond the material understanding of "society" to the realm of meaning. Only then can we begin to understand the imagined communities by which the social, rather than the merely societal, is sustained. By the *social* we mean the representational dimension of institutions and societies, which must be examined not as isolated physical and material structures but as elements of social texts, patterns that are part of larger codes and narrative frames. The societal is an infinitely varied signified, subject to continuous fragmentation. The social is a signifier that unifies and organizes these fragmenting parts into genres, myth, and literature, with religious implications.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies built a brilliant reputation in the 1970s and early 1980s by demystifying the seemingly free-floating objects of culture, demon-

strating that everything from fashion and foods to sports, politics, and films were tools of capitalist oppression. Twenty years later—in a world that is celebrating the downfall of communism, not the decline of capitalist democracies—it is, perhaps, the resilience and autonomy of symbols and ideals vis-à-vis power, not their vulnerability, that should be the object of study.

Culture need not be reduced to power in order to be powerful. The question propelling contemporary cultural studies should not be how to demystify culture by showing that it “really” represents something else, but rather how culture allows contemporary actors continually to remystify their social worlds. We must study how, despite the continuing disappointments and degradations of the modern world, persons manage to maintain their beliefs in transcendent values and “true” solidarity, how they still fear evil and persevere in their pursuit of the good, and how they engage in ritual renewal rather than merely strategic behavior. Only if these processes are fully faced can they be fully understood. And only then will social scientists be able to supply the kind of “demystifying” reflexivity—regarding not just established power but also intellectual and social narratives of all kinds—that it remains our vocation to provide. This task requires an orientation that the authors of *Cultural Studies* rarely engage: an emphasis on the meaning in the minds and hearts of those persons who make up the social world.

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