

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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Stuart Hall: The Origins of Cultural Studies

Transcript

Introduction

HALL: When I first went to the University of Birmingham in 1964 to help Professor Richard Hoggart found the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, no such thing as cultural studies yet existed. Of course languages, literature, history, the fine art departments in our faculties of arts were dedicated to the preservation of the cultural heritage, though they refused to name, let alone to theorize or conceptualize culture, preferring it so to speak to seep through by a process of academic osmosis. Social sciences, on the other hand, dealt sometimes with what they were pleased to call the cultural system, but this was a pretty abstract thing composed of networks of abstract norms and values. There was little of the concern which Richard Hoggart and I had in questions of culture. That is to say, and I won't attempt to provide any kind of comprehensive definition of the term, but nevertheless, the changing ways of life of societies and groups. The networks of meaningfulness which individuals and groups used to make sense of and communicate with one another, what Raymond Williams once called whole ways of communicating which are always whole ways of life. The dirty crossroads where popular culture intersects with the high arts, that place where power cuts across knowledge or where cultural processes anticipate social change. These were our concerns, where to study them.

A Point of Disturbance: Cultural Studies & the Academy

HALL: At that time we taught no anthropology at Birmingham, and besides, the English on whom we wished to turn our inquiring ethnographic gaze had not yet learned to conceive of themselves as the natives.

I remember sitting in Richard Hoggart's room discussing what we should call ourselves. Institute, he suggested. Well that sounded suitably grand and austere, but to be honest the two of us, who constituted at that time the entire faculty, and indeed the students of the enterprise, could not find it in our hearts to take ourselves that seriously. Well what about "centre"? Yes, that had a more informal, rallying point sort of feel to it, and we settled for that. Cultural studies

came much more naturally. It was about as broad as we could make it, thereby ensuring that no department in either the humanities or social sciences who thought that they'd already taken care of culture could fail to feel affronted at our presence. In this latter enterprise, at least, we succeeded.

Now cultural studies programs exist everywhere, especially in the United States, there's not a touch of envy about that, where they've come to provide a focal point for interdisciplinary studies and research and for the development of critical theory.

Each program in each place, as is appropriate, joined together a different range of disciplines, and adapting itself to the natural academic and intellectual environment. Cultural studies, wherever they exist, reflect the rapidly shifting ground of thought and knowledge, argument and debate about a society and about its own culture. It's an activity of intellectual self-reflection. It operates both inside and outside the academy. It represents something indeed of the weakening of the traditional boundaries between the disciplines and the growth of forms of interdisciplinary research, which don't easily fit or can't be contained within the confines of the existing division of knowledge. As such, it represents inevitably a point of disturbance, a place of necessary tension and change in at least two senses.

First, it constitutes one of the points of tension and change at the frontiers of intellectual and academic life, pushing for new questions, new models, new ways of study, testing the fine line between intellectual rigor and social relevance. It's the sort of necessary irritant in the shell of academic life which one hopes will sometime in the future produce new pearls of wisdom. But secondly, in thrusting onto the attention of scholarly reflection and critical analysis, the hurly-burly of a rapidly changing discordant and disorderly world, in insisting that academics sometimes attend to the practical life that everyday social change exists out there in a rapidly changing world.

It tries in its small way to insist on what I want to call the vocation of the intellectual life. That is to say the necessity to address the central, urgent, and disturbing questions of a society and a culture in the most rigorous, intellectual way we have available. That is, above all, in my view, one of the principle functions of the university, though university scholars are not always happy to be reminded of it.

Post War Britain: An Unexamined Cultural Revolution

HALL: Cultural Studies was, therefore, in the first place precisely that.

In the aftermath of the war, British society and culture was changing very rapidly and very fundamentally. The answer to the long process of Britain's decline as a world superpower, the impact of modern mass consumption and modern mass society, the Americanization of our culture. The postwar expansion of the new means of mass communication. The birth of the youth cultures. The exposure of the settled habits and conventions and languages of an old class culture to the disturbing fluidity of new money and new social relationships.

The dilution of a very homogenous social population of the United Kingdom, by the influx of peoples from the new commonwealth, the Caribbean and the Asian subcontinent especially, in large numbers leading to the formation at the very heart and center of British cultural life, of its cities, of its social and political existence, the new black British diasporas of permanent settlement. In this last aspect, we could see the old imperial dream, which had been dealt with so to speak at arm's length and overseas, at last coming home to roost, completing that triangle which had connected Africa, the metropolitan society, and the Caribbean over such a long time.

The paradox of that was that this coming home to roost of the old empire was happening at exactly the moment when Britain was trying to, so-called, cut the umbilical chord. And the cultural trauma, as yet in my view uncompleted and unrequited in English life, of the loss of an old imperial identity and role, the difficulty of discovering a new cultural and national identity. Now all those we could see were profoundly, and to the roots, transforming English culture, shifting the boundaries which had made the contours of daily existence familiar to people. Setting up new disturbances and letting loose those profound anxieties which always accompany radical social change.

In short, a kind of Cultural Revolution in front of our eyes. And nobody that we could see was studying it seriously. Nobody thought it worth, let alone right and proper to turn on this dramatically shifting kaleidoscopic cultural terrain, the searchlight of critical analytic attention. Well, that was the vocation of cultural studies. That is what cultural studies in Britain was about. It's not my purpose to review its history or indeed to comment on the role of the Centre for Cultural Studies in which I have worked for over fourteen years in this enterprise. But I would insist on this starting point. I would insist on the tension characteristic in this work, which marked my own intellectual development and my own intellectual work ever since.

The maximum mobilization of all the knowledge, thought, critical rigor, and conceptual theorization you can muster, turned in an act of critical reflection, which is not afraid to speak truth to conventional knowledge, and turned on the most important, most delicate, and invisible of objects, the cultural forms and practices of a society, it's cultural life.

In giving me an honorary degree you have perhaps without quite knowing it, inevitably honored that version of the intellectual vocation. And since in a moment for better or worse, you will have conferred on me one of your highest honors, I thought it only fair to tell you before you did that what it is you're getting.

Who Are the English? Race & the Decline of Empire

HALL: Perhaps you will understand what I've been trying to say better if I take an example. And the one I've chosen is the work that I've been involved with in the area of race, culture, and communications. Now someone from England trying to tell audiences in the United States about race is a little bit like carrying coals to Newcastle, if you'll forgive the metaphor. And yet one of the things that cultural studies has taught me is indeed the importance of historical specificity, of the specificity of each cultural configuration and pattern.

There may undoubtedly be, and I think there are, general mechanisms in common across the globe, which are associated with the practices of racism. But in each society, it has a specific history. It presents itself in specific, particular, and unique ways, and these specificities influences its dynamic and have real effects, which are different one society to the other. One thing which cultural studies has taught me is indeed not to speak of racism in the singular but of racisms in the plural. Now though you might find it hard to believe, in the early 60s when cultural studies began, there was apparently no visible urgent question of race in contemporary English culture at all.

Of course the question of race had permeated the whole history of imperialism and the contacts established over five centuries between Britain and the peoples of the world. The history of the rise of Britain as a commercial and global power could not have been told without encountering the fact of race. But it was very largely relegated to the past and those who studied it, those who studied the Atlantic slave trade, those who looked at the family fortunes that had made possible the Agrarian Revolution of the 18th century, those who had been involved in the antislavery movements or who were experts in colonial history and administration.

It seemed to have no active purchase as a contemporary theme in understanding British 20th Century culture, which has already been spoken of as postcolonial. The ways in which the colonizing experience had indeed threaded itself through the imaginary of the whole culture, what one can only call racism as the cup of tea at the bottom of every English experience, as the unstirred spoonful of sugar in every English child's sweet tooth, as the threads of cotton that kept the cotton

mills going, as the cup of cocoa that sweetened the dreams of every English child.

These things have been somehow relegated to the past and suppressed as an active cultural question. The way in which the popular culture of English society, from advertising to the music hall, to pageantry, to celebration, to diamond jubilees, to the heritage industry, to theatrical melodramas, etc. had been orchestrated around the theatre; the spectacle empire had been largely forgotten. Or the way in which English masculinity itself had proved itself, not simply on the playing fields of Eton, but in the foothills of Hyderabad, or facing down the howling dervishes in the Sudan.

Or the very English drama of corruption and conscience, nicely balanced against one another, continually reenacted face to face with the Heart of Darkness. Well these things had been effectively liquidated from the culture in an active way. They had been blown away by what the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was pleased to call "the winds of change."

It was the great migrations of the 50s and 60s, from the Caribbean and from the Asian continent, and the formation of black communities at the heart of English experience, which provoked the theme of racism in a new form to life again, and when it emerged, though it assumed many of the forms we had come to understand by the term in the past and from other societies, it had also acquired specifically different forms. In terms of the ways in which the black experience was represented in the culture in the media, it carried of course all the connotations which racism has had elsewhere, of an alien culture and peoples who are less civilized than the native ones, of a people who stand lower in the order of culture because they are somehow lower in the order of nature, defined by race, by color, and sometimes by genetic inheritance.

But in the new forms of racism, which emerged in Britain in this period and which have come to define the field in English culture since, these earlier forms have been powerfully transformed by what we can only call a new form of cultural racism. That is to say the differences in culture, in ways of life, in systems of belief, in ethnic identity and tradition, no matter more than anything which can be traced to specifically genetic or biological forms of racism. And what one sees here is the fact, the existence of racism, contracting new relationships with a particular form, a defensive and besieged form of argument around not who are the blacks?

But who are the English? It's a question, which went right to the heart and center of English culture, itself. And I can give you an example of what I'm calling cultural racism. Two years ago, the white parents at a school in Dewsbury, New Yorkshire withdrew their children from a predominantly black state school. One of

the things that they said that they gave as a reason for doing so was that they wanted their children to have a Christian education. They themselves then added that they were not, as it happens, Christian believers at all. But they regarded Christianity as an essential part of the English cultural heritage. They regarded the Anglican Church as part of the English way of life, rather like roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

Race & Cultural Studies: Representation & Silence

HALL: Now how to study the many different ways in which these new manifestations of race, ethnicity, and racism were figured and represented in the mass media was one of the problems, which confronted us in the Centre for Culture Studies. How to bring to light the deeper historical traces of race in English culture?

What were available to us were principally the models developed in communication studies elsewhere, borrowed from societies, which had confronted these problems much earlier than we had. And cultural studies, as it was appropriate then and now, devoured them. We were alerted to the nature of racial stereotyping, to the negative imagery of race and ethnicity in the mass media, to the absence of accounts of the black experience as a central part of the English story, to the repetition in the mass media of a very simplified and truncated way of representing black history, life, and culture.

These provided us with certain methods of analysis and study, which were of immense importance to us in the early phase. The point I want to make comes across in the ways in which my own understanding of and work on the questions of race and racism have been subsequently transformed by developments within the field of cultural studies itself. I'm only able to hint at this here, but it's something I want to do in order to return to my central point at the end. A shift, for example, in the way in which we understand how the media construct and represent race.

The early approach led us to ask questions about the accuracy of media representations. We wanted to know if the media was simply distorting, like a distorting mirror held up to a reality, which existed outside of itself. But what cultural studies has helped me to understand is that the media play a part in the formation, in the constitution, of the things that they reflect. There is not the world outside there which exists free of the discourses of representation, but what is there is in part constituted by how it is represented.

The reality of race in any society is, so to speak, to coin a phrase, media-mediated. And distortions and simplifications of experience, which are certainly

there and above all absences, above all absences, we have to develop a methodology which taught us to attend not only to what people said about race, but in England, the great society of the understatement, to what people couldn't say at all about race. It's the silences that told us something. It wasn't there. It what was is it that was invisible, what couldn't be put in the frame, what was apparently unsayable.

You see, if you want to ask, what can content analysis teach you? Well, one of the questions one has to ask is, what about the peoples who appear to have no content at all? Are just pure form, just pure invisible form. You can count lexical items if they're there, but you need a different approach if you really want to, as it were, read a society and its culture symptomatically. And that is, indeed, what we had to try to begin to learn to do. In face of the logics of racism, which worked we were to discover, rather more like Freud's dream work than they worked like anything else.

Racism expressing itself through displacement, through denial, through the capacity to say two contrary things at the same time. The surface imagery speaking of an unspeakable content, the repressed content of a culture. Every time I watch a popular television narrative like, well say, "Hill Street Blues" or "Miami Vice," with its twinning and coupling of racial masculinities at the center of its story, I have to pinch myself and remind myself that these narratives are not a somewhat distorted reflection of the real state of race relations in American cities.

They are functioning much more as Levi-Strauss tells us myths do. They are myths, which represent in narrative form the resolution of things, which can't be resolved in real life. What they tell us about is about the "dream life" of a culture. But to gain a privileged access to the dream life of a culture, you had better know how to unlock the complex ways in which narrative plays across real life. Once you look at any of these popular narratives, which constantly in the imagination of a society construct the place, the identities, the experience, the histories of the different peoples who live within it, one is instantly aware of the complexity of the nature of racism itself.

Of course one aspect of racism is certainly that it occupies a world of Manichean opposites. Them and us, primitive and civilized, light and dark, a black and white symbolic universe. But once one's analyzed or identified this simple logic it seems, you see, all too simple. You can fight it, but you can't spend a lifetime studying it. It's almost too obvious to spend anymore time on. It's kind of a waste of time to write another book about a world, which absolutely insists, on dividing everything it says into good and bad.

My conviction now would be completely different from what one graduate student said to me when she indeed came to the Centre to study popular narratives of

race. And after two years she said, it's just so, forgive me, bloody obvious. There's nothing more to say. Once I've said it's a racist text, what is chapter 5 and chapter 6 and chapter 7 do? Just say the same thing over again. I would now give her very different advice than the advice I gave her then. Contrary to the superficial evidence, there is nothing simple about the structure and the dynamics of racism.

A New Understanding of Race: The Return of the Repressed

HALL: My conviction now is that we are only at the beginning of proper understanding of its structures and mechanisms. And that is the case because its apparent simplicities and rigidities are the things that are important symptomatically about it. It is its very rigidity, which is the clue to its complexity. Its capacity to punctuate the universe into two great opposites masks something else. It masks the complexes of feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and conceptions, which are always refusing to be so neatly stabilized and fixed. The great divisions of racism as a structure of knowledge and representation are also now; it seems to me, a deep system of defense. They are the outworks, the trenches, the defensive positions around something, which refuses to be tamed and contained by this system of representation. All that symbolic and narrative energy and work to secure us over here and them over there, to fix each in its appointed species place, it's a way of marking how deeply our histories actually intertwine and interpenetrate. How necessary the other is to our own sense of identity. How even the dominant colonizing imperializing power only knows who and what it is and can only experience the pleasure of its own power of domination in and through the construction of another, of the other.

The two are the two sides of the same coin. And the other is not out there, but in here. It is not outside, but inside. And that is the profound, the very profound insight of one of the most startling, staggering, important books in this field, Frantz Fanon's "Black Skin, White Masks." "The movement, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant. I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart, and now the fragments have been put together by another self." You see here, in addition to the mechanisms of directed violence and aggression, which are characteristic of racial stereotyping, are those other things, the mechanisms of spitting, of projection, of defense, and of denial.

The attempt to suppress and control, through the symbolic economy of a culture everything that is different. The danger, the threat which difference represents, the attempt to refuse, to suppress, to fix, to know everything about the different so that you can control it. To make what is different an object of the exercise of power. To symbolically expel it to the far side of the universe. And then, the

surreptitious return by which that which has been expelled keeps coming back home to trouble the dreams of those who thought a moment ago that they were safe. The violence, aggression, hatred implicit in racist representation is not to be denied, but we understand very little as yet about its double-sided nature, its deep ambivalences. Just as so often the cultures of the West, the representation of women has currently appeared in its split form, the good-bad girl, the good and the bad mother, Madonna and whore.

So the representations of blacks keep at different times exhibiting this split double structure. Devoted, dependent, childlike, the blacks are simultaneously unreliable, unpredictable, and undependable, capable of turning nasty, plotting treachery as soon as you turn your back. And despite being the object of an infinite benevolence, they're inexplicably in a society predicated on freedom, given to escaping from us along the Freedom Trail.

Or in a society, which calls itself Christian of singing songs about the Promised Land, and so they just won't be where they ought to be. And side by side with those representations is a discourse, which cannot seem to represent nobility or natural dignity or physical grace without summoning up the black primitive. Just as in the discourse of modern advertising, the tropics, which are in fact savaged by debt and ravaged by hunger and malnutrition, has become the privileged signifier of the erotic, of good times, of pleasure, of playing away.

The primitive nobility of any aging chief or the natives' rhythmic force simultaneously express a nostalgia, a desire in civilized society for an innocence, an erotic power of the body, which has been apparently lost to so-called civilized societies. At the same time, it represents a fear at the heart of civilization itself of being overrun by the recurrence of a dark savagery. This double syntax of racism, never one thing without the other, is something which we can associate with old images in the mass media, but the problem about the mass media is that old movies keep being made. And so the old types and the old doubleness and the old ambivalence keeps turning up on tomorrow's television screen. Today's restless native hordes are still alive and well and living as guerilla armies and freedom fighters in the Angolan or the Namibian bush.

Blacks are still the most frightening as well as the most well dressed crooks and policeman in any New York cop series. They are the necessary feet-footed crazy-talking hip men who connect Starsky and Hutch to the drug-saturated ghetto. Where else would they know how to go? The scheming villains and their giant-sized bully boys of the prevention novel have spilled out into everything that now passes as what we call adventure. Sexually available, half-caste slave girl is still alive and kicking, smoldering away on some exotic television set or on the cover of some paperback, though she is no doubt simultaneously also the center of a very special covetous aspiration and admiration in a sequin gown supported by a

white chorus line. Primitivism, savagery, guile, unreliability, always just below the surface, just waiting to bite.

It can still be identified in the faces of black political leaders or ghetto vigilantes around the world, cunningly plotting and plotting the overthrow of civilization. The old country, white version, is still often the subject of all the nostalgic documentaries on English television. Pre-war Malaysia, Sri Lanka, old Rhodesia, the South African veld where hitherto reliable servants as is only to be expected plots treason in the Outback and steal a way to join ZAPU or the ANC in the bush. Tribal man in green khaki.

If you go to racism today, in its complex structures and dynamics, one question, one principle above all emerges as a lesson for us. It is the fear, the terrifying internal fear, of living with difference. It arises as the consequence of the fatal coupling of difference and power. And in that sense, the work which cultural studies has to do in mobilizing everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources to go on understanding what keeps making the lives we live and the societies we live in profoundly and deeply anti-humane in their understanding and capacities to live with difference is a message for academics and intellectuals but fortunately for many other people as well. In that sense, I have tried to hold together in my own intellectual life, on the one side, the conviction and the passion of devotion to objective interpretation, to analysis, to rigorous analysis and understanding, to the passion to find out, to the production of knowledge, which we did not know before. But on the other hand I am convinced that no intellectual worth it sought and no university which wants to hold up its head in the face of the 21st Century can afford to turn its dispassionate eye away from the problems of race and ethnicity which beset our world.

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