

## PROJECTIVE READINGS: CULTURAL STUDIES FROM HERE

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Over the last ten years Cultural Studies has developed from being a significant strain within British Marxist theory and practice into one of the major articulations of the anglophone human sciences. In that period its influence has spread from England to North America, Australia and South Africa. The field has undergone academic institutionalization: a number of first degrees in English Polytechnics; the Cultural Studies Programme at Trent; and a growing presence in Communication Studies in Canada, the United States and Australia. We have seen the publication of a number of important books, as well as the appearance of a number of journals specializing in the area: the Hutchinson series<sup>1</sup>; *Theory, Culture and Society*; the revised *Screen*; *Formations*; *The Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*; and, the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* itself. The announcement of the forthcoming *International Journal of Cultural Studies* is perhaps the most significant sign.

These very signs of success, however, are also signs of potential liabilities. Academic institutionalization brings with it all too often the sedimentation of a critical field of inquiry into a settled discipline. The construction of a canon of texts, and of histories of the field, can easily lead to the kind of codification that constricts a loose problematic into a paradigm. Cultural Studies emerged as a critical practice located at an interdisciplinary site: between Marxist historiography, ethnomethodology, semiotics, and literary studies. Moreover, its emergence cannot be

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separated from the specific conjunctures that the British Left operated in during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. The current international spread of Cultural Studies, then, is problematic in a dual sense. As a transferable intellectual commodity (critical cultural capital) cut off from the context of the specific political and epistemological debates in which it emerged, it is relatively easy to frame the field as a set of propositions constructed as normal social science. More crucially, as levels of abstraction and analytic categories developed within the British social formation are borrowed into the new world, the spread of Cultural Studies has tended to lead to a lack of specificity in our own analyses. Thus, to read Cultural Studies from here is to engage its propositions critically from the historical moment of the mid-eighties and from the site of political contradictions located here.

Around the turn of the decade the key epistemological debates within the field revolved around the so-called Culturalist/Structuralist split. In part, this was connected to different objects of study, ranging from working class culture on the shop floor to the ideological address of the cinematic apparatus. It was also due to the differential influence of other disciplines: for example, psychoanalysis versus ethnomethodology. Politically, it can be traced to the ways in which the question of the subject and the challenge of feminism were taken up.<sup>2</sup> What is clear at this point is that this split wasn't so much resolved as dispersed. The critical orthodoxies that led to the polemics of the period ran out of steam. *Screen* theorists began to question the relations between subject positions in texts and located practices of reading. Researches into located sub-cultural forms began to appropriate aspects of discourse theory's structural approach to subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

The legacy of this split and its non-resolution has been to foreground (for me at least) the crucial position of mediation within the problematics of the various positions within Cultural Studies. From Raymond Williams on, of course, the term culture has come to designate a theoretical space within which the base/superstructure metaphor could be overcome.<sup>4</sup> The domain of the cultural has come to designate the relations between levels of the social formation, as well as the realtions between the human subject and the social field. The deliberate ambiguities in Williams' own propositions (in the definition of culture itself, or the "structure of feeling"), can be seen as symptomatic of the problematic 'reach' of any simple concept of mediation. Certainly, the core of Cultural Studies has been the examination of the discourses and practices that articulate power and social difference within particular social formations. The Culturalist/Structuralist split was ultimately centered in a debate over the levels of abstraction which were most important to such a project. The sub-cultural theorist's concern with the relations between class, culture

and the social formation led them to focus on social signification as a set of practices: precisely the struggle over social location and power. Discourse theory's concern with textuality, ideology and subject formation led to a textualization of practices themselves. 'Culturalist' approaches conceptualized mediation within the arc of a sociological pull. Shop-floor culture or punk style were read off as privileged sites of the negotiation of social identity within a capitalist social formation in decline. 'Structuralist' approaches conceptualized mediation as a kind of social epistemology. The human subject, social texts and ideologies were read off in relation to one another: as positionalities constructed in discourse and inhabited by subjects.

In the eighties the field has passed through the theoretical moment of the split in three ways. The first has been to work on specific aspects of the conceptual apparatus without necessarily questioning the underlying model of mediation. The concepts of codes, of class and of hegemony have all been variously scrutinized and fine-tuned.<sup>5</sup> The second kind of intervention has been a more directly political one. This work has turned outward from epistemological debates towards the changing nature of the historical conjuncture. The important work on 'Authoritarian Populism' and Thatcherism is perhaps the best example of this direction.<sup>6</sup> Within this approach the various conceptualizations of the field have been elaborated in relation to the strategic demand of struggles over the field of the social formation itself. The third direction for work has been to question the theoretical apparatus of the field from specific sites of social difference. In this way, some of the residual baggage of the base/superstructure metaphor (for example, the relative privileging of class formations) has been separated out from cultural studies' analysis of difference and social power. It has been feminism which has provided the bulk of this movement, but the analysis of racial difference has also been important.<sup>7</sup> All of this work has had an important and beneficial impact on the development of cultural studies. In general, all three forms of intervention have tended to bring cultural studies back to its strengths as a form of critique of late-capitalist, patriarchal social formations. The second and third directions in particular, by refocusing the movement between levels of abstraction on concrete sites, have resisted the trend towards codification and institutionalization.

To move forward from the mid-eighties however, an additional strategy seems necessary. Grounding analyses of mediation in concrete examples of contradiction and struggle will always be key tactics. The analysis of Thatcherism and Reaganism has altered not only our conceptualization of the politics of the moment; it has sharpened the forms of critique clustered around the problematic of hegemony as well. But the risk contained in this conjunctural turn in the development of cultural studies

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is that it will spin out refined conceptions of one site (and model) of mediation without rearticulating the underlying conceptual framework. It should be added that much recent feminist discourse analysis projects the opposite liability, in extending a critique of gender representations based in a normalized model of social representation.<sup>8</sup>

The Culturalist/Structuralist debate remains an unresolved 'trouble in the text'(s) of cultural studies. In the diversity of approaches in practice today, there still remain two clusters which reproduce the terms of the split. In one the dominant model of mediation is one of representation as a discursive process. In the other it is social reproduction which takes centre stage. The additional strategy that seems necessary to me is a rewriting of the problematic of mediation from the ground of multiple sites, both within and across borderlines. This kind of strategic epistemology would mine the analysis of specific conjunctures in order to work over the theoretical first principles. This is all the more crucial at a moment when the key theoretical challenge to cultural studies has shifted. It is no longer a more political-economic version of marxism which is the leading rival. Rather it is (particularly in North America) postmodernism, which denies the importance of mediation itself as a problematic for the analysis of modern power formations.<sup>9</sup>

One first step in this strategic response to the international codification of the field, and to the complacency of grooved logics of inquiry, is a kind of projective reading of the tradition. It is past time that we, within the new world, began to question the conceptual apparatus of the discipline in relation to our own intellectual traditions as well as our own historical conjuncture. Projective readings then, would begin to rearticulate the central terms of debate for Canadian and American cultural studies. How does class function differently in relation to cultural practices here? How might this affect the analysis of youth-culture and popular music? How might Canadian feminist debates over pornography rearticulate Cultural Studies analysis of gender representation? If Canada is to a unique extent, a 'technologically mediated' social formation, can the post-modernist critique of mediation be integrated with the practice of cultural studies? Can video and film practices function as interventions within cultural studies, but outside the academy? The essays that follow are a beginning in what I hope is an on going process of 'landing' cultural studies here.

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Notes

1. This is the continuation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Working Papers series.
2. See Stuart Hall "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* 2 1980, Richard Johnson "Histories of Culture/Theories of Ideology: Notes on an Impasse," M. Barrett, et al eds. *Ideology and Cultural Production* (NY: St. Martins, 1979). For a more recent overview see Richard Johnson, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" *CCCS* stencilled occasional paper 1983.
3. See Philip Corrigan and Paul Willis, "Cultural Forms and Class Mediations," *Media Culture and Society*, 2 1980.
4. See Stuart Hall, "Rethinking the Base-and-Superstructure Metaphor," in J. Bloomfield, ed., *Class Hegemony and Party* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977).
5. For example, John Corner, "Codes and Cultural Analysis," *Media Culture and Society*, 2, 1980.
6. See, Stuart Hall, "Popular-Democratic vs. Authoritarian Populism: Two Ways of 'Taking Democracy Seriously'," in Alan Hunt. ed., *Marxism and Democracy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980). See also, *Formations of Nation and People*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
7. For examples of the feminist critique see, *Women Take Issue* (London: Hutchinson, 1978) and Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Sub-cultures," *Screen Education*, #34, Spring 1980. For the critique based on the analyses of race see, *The Empire Strikes Back* (London: Hutchinson, 1983).
8. For example, Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*, (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1985).
9. As one example of the beginning of this engagement, see Dick Hebdige, "The Bottom Line on Planet One," *Ten*: 8, 1985.