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Craig Brandist

## From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies

In 1991 the British cultural theorist Antony Easthope published a widely received book called *Literary Into Cultural Studies* (Easthope 1991) in which he argued that post-structuralism had decisively undermined the opposition between the canon and popular culture on which literary theory was based. Once literature was understood as merely one discursive practice among others the field became decentred and literature became merely one more part of culture. The title of Easthope's book was, on the one hand, a reflection on an already achieved intellectual shift, wherein the exceptional status of literature has been discredited but, on the other hand, it was an imperative, urging literary scholars to embrace the new reality.

Easthope held a lectureship in English at Manchester Polytechnic from 1969 and became professor of English and cultural studies when it became Manchester Metropolitan University under the Thatcher-era reforms of British Higher Education. The erasure of the titular distinction between the polytechnic and university sectors was often presented as a democratizing move by the Conservative government, but in reality it signaled the leveling down of the higher education open to the majority of potential students in the UK, and its underfunded expansion, justified by an ideology of market populism. Elite institutions survived, but were reduced in number (the so-called Russell Group of twenty-four research intensive universities established in 1994), the sector became increasingly stratified, burdensome tuition fees were levied on students and their maintenance grants cut, placing the survival of less vocational areas of the humanities under particular pressure at less prestigious institutions. This is important since what appears to be an egalitarian development in theory may turn out to be nothing of the sort when considered in its institutional context.

Easthope's work largely concerned the place of English as a discipline within the academy, outlined by F. R. Leavis's centering the discipline on the 'great tradition' at Cambridge in the 1930s, when that university was still focused on creating an administrative cadre for the Empire. The implication was that the canon embodied values cherished by the British establishment, that its study and promotion would exert a salutary influence on both the urbanized masses of the metropolitan centre and on the subjects of Empire. Such assumptions were brought into fundamental question by then Althusserian Marxist Terry Eagleton in the same university faculty half a century later (Eagleton 1991, 3–5). The exclusivity of literature, held by Leavis to bear the class-bound and ethnically specific "standards that order the finer living of an age" (1991, 4) was, however, questioned just as the study of non-vocational subjects was, once more, becoming viewed by gov-

ernment as a “luxury” (1991, 3). The decentred paradigm for studying canonical and popular culture together that Easthope promoted resounded in specific historical conditions. The same imperative might, in various circumstances, raise the social significance and value of the critical study of a wider range of cultural forms, or treat those forms as mere manifestations of an ideology or of entertainment. Disciplines develop and operate within institutions, and the social significance of paradigms cannot be separated from those institutions.

## 1 European precursors

The questions with which Easthope grappled were ones that had a history that was much wider than the study of English in UK universities. Literary studies as a discipline achieves self-conscious expression with the work of the Russian formalists around the time of World War I, when most of the other disciplines we now accept as part of the university syllabus were forming. Linguistics and literary studies emerged from philology, while sociology, psychology and other disciplines emerged from philosophy. The most systematic philosophical rationalisation of such disciplines was provided by German neo-Kantians, who argued the individual disciplines were aligned to certain objects of knowledge produced by rational, or even mathematical, procedures. The object of linguistics was differentiated from that of philology by focusing not on language in all its multidimensionality but the system of phonetic differences, *langue*. The foundational text for the discipline was the *Course in General Linguistics*, compiled by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye from notes on lectures given by Ferdinand de Saussure at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911. It was published in 1916. For the Russian formalists, *inter alia* Viktor Shklovskii, Boris Èikhenbaum and Roman Jakobson, the object of literary studies was similarly not literature as such but *literariness* (*literaturnost'*), the quality that distinguished a literary work from other works. This began with an attempt to differentiate ‘poetic’ from ‘practical’ language, but later resulted in more sophisticated attempts to present literariness as a *Gestalt* quality arising from the dynamic interaction of a range of factors. Formalism focused attention on what made texts literary, rather than the social, psychological or biographical objects that analysis of such texts had foregrounded hitherto (see Igor’ Pilshchikov’s chapter on Russian formalism in this volume).

While the nature of disciplines was rationalised according to philosophical principles, institutional factors often proved decisive: competition for funds and chairs among university staff was particularly important. This was most dramatically shown in the heated debates over ‘psychologism’ in German universities,

where experimental psychologists had encroached upon the territory claimed by German idealists (see Kusch 1995). Disciplines needed to be rationalised in ways that appealed to the agencies of the states that funded universities, and many new European states were emerging after the collapse of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. The grand narratives of Indo-European philology, which had dominated much of the humanities in the nineteenth century, held less attraction here than appeals to the role vernacular literatures could play in the consolidation of the rule of national elites and the promotion of a unitary national identity. Yet many of the most prominent proponents of literary theory were intellectuals who had become refugees from their 'own' states, such as the Russian formalist and then structuralist Jakobson and the Hungarian Marxist György Lukács (Tihanov 2004). The focus of such intellectuals fell on the features of literature that transcended particular national traditions, and so literary theory developed as a field subject to national and international pressures in an age when mass literacy and mass media were becoming significant social forces.

Leavis had no time for the systematizing trends of literary theory, but was nevertheless a part of a wider European movement that perceived modernity and the rise of mass society as a degeneration in which mass taste threatened traditional values and a focus on practical concerns led to vulgarity. In Germany this conservative trend championed the profundities of *Kultur* against the superficial virtues of *Zivilisation*, the manners, knowledge and skills associated with the practicalities of modern life (Elias 2000 [1939]). The former was held up by German nationalist intellectuals as delineating their achievements as the distillation of the values of the German people as opposed to the secondary achievements of the Francophone court. Indeed, some German intellectuals viewed World War I as a conflict between German *Kultur* and Anglo-French *Zivilisation* (Sluga 1993; Luft 2007). Literature entered this sphere as one of the refined articulations of the national psychology and was contrasted to the popular press and forms of mass entertainment that accompanied industrialisation and urbanisation. *Kulturkritik*, as it became known, embodied these ideas, viewing *Kultur* as the moral force of traditional hierarchies in combating the degeneration of culture brought about by industrial capitalism.

## 2 Aesthetics and politics

There is, however, no simple equivalence between socio-political and cultural values. A defense of high culture is not *necessarily* incompatible with egalitarian politics, while cultural leveling does not *necessarily* imply a drive for politi-

cal and social liberation. Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), for instance, held the leveling down of culture that the market promotes to be as much of a threat to the masses’ ‘right’ to develop their highest faculties as the gross material and educational inequalities that goes along with it. In the aftermath of the October 1917 Revolution, Lenin and Trotsky recommended newly enfranchised, and often barely literate, workers prioritise mastery of the high culture of the past rather than seek to hothouse a proletarian culture that often, but not always, combined nihilism and utopianism. The Stalin-era doctrine of Socialist Realism, which claimed to be the expression of a classless society, was to a considerable extent a codification of middle-class taste, which coexisted with a paternalistic attitude towards the masses, the elimination of democratic institutions and a considerable widening of social inequality. Responding both to Stalinism and the emergence of mass culture before and after World War II, members of the Frankfurt School such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, held the commodification of culture and its presentation as ‘popular’ to undermine the critical capacities of the masses, while resistance to such forces lies in the more elite forms of avant-garde culture. The apparent egalitarianism of the market, rooted in the idea that equal value should exchange for equal value is, for these thinkers, illusory as long as society rests on a division between those who own and control the means of production, on the one hand, and those who sell their labour power to survive, on the other.

Alongside *Kulturkritik* there was, therefore, a Marxist trend that viewed culture as a stratified phenomenon embedded in wider socio-economic processes. Rejecting nationalist and imperialist agendas, Marxists of the inter-war period to varying degrees both critiqued and succumbed to various assumptions of *Kulturkritiker*. In the Stalin-era USSR assumptions of European superiority were decisively challenged, with well-funded projects to highlight the achievement of non-European writers. Nevertheless, policy imperatives to make common cause with ‘progressive’ bourgeois governments in a popular front alliance against rising fascism required continuities between the ‘progressive era’ of bourgeois culture and Socialist Realism to be foregrounded. Lukács’s work on the novel as the bourgeois epic was perhaps the most sophisticated theoretical justification of this perspective. Thus, classical realism was championed over the modernist literary forms that were allegedly the products of the bourgeoisie in the age of reaction. The most prominent Marxist critic of such a perspective was the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who championed the multiple ways of portraying reality, which needed to be assessed according to practice rather than aesthetics. Drawing on the innovations of Russian and German avant-gardistes, who had adopted and reworked popular forms such as circus and cabaret in their works, Brecht fashioned a form of theatre oriented on the incomplete and unresolved present.

Burgeoning folklore and ethnographic studies meanwhile subjected some forms of popular culture to serious study, and such concerns made their way into mainstream literary theory in the work of figures such as Viktor Zhirmunskii, who wrote on the Turkic epic, and Mikhail Bakhtin, who presented the novel as the heir to forms of critical folk culture. These critics also drew heavily on sociological analyses of literature developed in Germany in the inter-war years, such as the work of Oskar Walzel and Levin L. Schucking, for whom literary forms were manifestations of ideological orientations on the social world. Literature was not simply one cultural form among many for such thinkers, however. For Bakhtin, while one could not justifiably posit a special language of literature as the early formalists had, there was no simple continuity between forms of pragmatic and literary language. The novel, for Bakhtin, represented at once the coming to self-consciousness of culture, and its radical decentering. The democratizing impulses within popular culture, that were opposed to forms of elite culture became, in and through the novel, systematized, deliberate and so historically effective. While the special status of literature was certainly reconsidered here, with the novel having its roots in popular culture and relativising other canonical genres, a hierarchy of cultural and historical value nevertheless remained in place. Symptomatic of this is the conspicuous silence in Bakhtin's work on the most popular, burgeoning medium of the time: cinema, even though writing on the subject by both practitioners and commentators was reaching a significant level of theoretical sophistication at the time.

### 3 The Frankfurt School

In inter-war Germany the Frankfurt School (see Michał Mrugalski's chapter on the Frankfurt School in this volume) focused on the stabilisation of capitalism and the assimilation of the individual into the structures of bureaucracy and the market. Political isolation and the rise of both Stalinism and Nazism often resulted in a profound pessimism, especially among Jewish exiles who ended up in the United States (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947]). Formulations such as the 'culture industry', and the 'totally administered society', typically erased the distinction between various forms of mass culture and failed to discern the critical potential therein. Particularly notorious was Adorno's (1989–1990 [1936]) conflation of commercial forms of, predominantly middle-class white, jazz music and the radical forms of jazz that played an important role in the formation of a black consciousness movement (for a contrast see Kofsky 1970). As Mike Davis (1990) has shown, Horkheimer and Adorno also failed to distinguish between

standard Hollywood genres and the critical forms of consciousness at work in, for instance, film noir. While insufficiently sensitive to these distinctions, the work of these intellectuals had considerable critical power in analyzing the encroachment of the commodity form and modern bureaucracy into the cultural sphere. The overarching pessimism of such perspectives, however, led to a rethinking as oppositional social and political movements began to emerge in the 1960s, along with insurgent forms of popular culture.

Former Frankfurt School thinker Herbert Marcuse combined elements from Freud and Marx in his influential works where he challenged the pessimism of Horkheimer and Adorno. Marcuse drew upon Freud's late works *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (1927, *The Future of an Illusion*) and *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*) in which the distinction between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* was scornfully rejected (Freud 1985 [1930], 184). Freud now saw culture/civilisation as the learned social behavior humans develop to cooperate and progress historically, which is founded on the repression and sublimation of human instincts. In his 1966 'political preface' to *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Marcuse proclaims that "the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the *political* fight" and that it is industrial capitalism that prevents humanity from realising the potential of technology to establish a society that is no longer repressive (1966, xxv). Where Freud viewed the fundamental conflict in society as between work as such (the so-called 'reality principle' or life without leisure) and Eros (the 'pleasure principle' or leisure and pleasure), Marcuse argued it was between *alienated* labour (the 'performance principle', or economic stratification) and Eros. Eros had been the preserve of the ruling class, while the workers were only permitted a pleasure that does not obstruct productivity. Socialism, Marcuse argued, would involve the displacement of alienated labour by "non-alienated, libidinal work" (1966 [1955], 47–48), resulting in a non-repressive civilisation based on non-repressive sublimation. By the time of his next major work *One Dimensional Man* (1964), however, Marcuse had returned to some of the more pessimistic ways of thinking of the Frankfurt School, arguing that the reduction of 'high' culture to mass culture collapses the distance between culture and the present reality, rendering culture a mere appendage of advertisements and consumerism.

## 4 Structuralism and after

Perhaps the most influential trend emerging at this time was a convergence of structuralism and Marxism, in France in particular. The structuralist understanding of a specific domain of culture as a structure, modelled on Saussure's ideas

about language viewed as a synchronic system of signs, *langue*, was important in treating culture as a ‘third order’ distinct from both extra-discursive reality and the imagination. Already in his 1957 book *Mythologies*, an engaging compilation of short essays originally published as French magazine articles in 1954–1956, Roland Barthes had shown that structural analyses of cultural phenomena as varied as advertisements about soap powders and detergents, Romans in films and the cultural relevance of wine and milk in French culture could yield impressively critical results. Each could be analysed as texts structured around certain binary oppositions and embedded within a wider context of established social codes. ‘Mythologies’ result when an object, devoid of any inherent meaning, is endowed with ideological significance through a deliberate social construction of its meaning.

In the work of French Marxist Louis Althusser the configurations of such codes were synonymous with the articulations of what Marx, in the preface to his 1859 book *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy)*, called the ‘superstructure’. While Althusser stressed the ‘relative autonomy’ of the superstructure, insisting only on economic determinations in the ‘last instance’, the structuralist methodology meant that the ‘lonely hour of the last instance’ never actually struck. Instead Althusser embarked on “an ‘elaboration of the theory of the particular essences of the specific elements of the superstructure’” (Althusser 2006 [1968], 114; original emphasis), the coherence of which resulted from what Althusser called ‘ideological state apparatuses’, such as the mass media and educational system, into which ideologies are embedded. Another consequence of Althusser’s structuralism was his contention that, as Colin Sparks (1996, 87–88) puts it, “ideology was fundamentally an unconscious operation which was constituted through the entry of the subject into language”:

In order to speak, the individual had to negate itself by entering a preconstituted realm of radical alterity. Since society would be unthinkable without language, ideology was a necessary feature of all human societies. Ideology was thus essentially unitary, without history and all-pervasive. What is more, the operation of ideology was coercively to construct the individual as subject.

This perspective was to be passed on to postmodernist thinkers who followed through the implications of culture as a ‘third order’ and used it to justify their withdrawal from collective politics. Poststructuralists had shown the instability of the system of language once considered in isolation from its referent and the pragmatic dimensions of language. Now ‘post-Marxist’ thinkers finally uncoupled the superstructure from the ‘base’. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985, 85) put it: “the very unity and homogeneity of class subjects has split into a set of precariously integrated positions which, once the thesis of the neutral character



of the productive forces is abandoned, cannot be referred to any necessary point of future unification". Indeterminate, ambiguous and shifting identities came to be seen as the results of the fluid operations of power, based on Nietzsche's idea of the 'will to power', particularly as theorised by Michel Foucault. The potentially depoliticising potential of these ideas were most systematically developed when they entered academic discourse in the United States.

## 5 The rise of cultural studies

An alternative perspective on culture had developed in Britain, where a group of thinkers began to concern themselves with questions similar to that of the Frankfurt School, namely the threat to the culture of the working class represented by mass culture. The first major statement was Richard Hoggart's 1957 book *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*, in which the decline of close-knit working class communities with established forms of working class culture was correlated with forms of manufactured mass culture. While Hoggart was not closely associated with Marxism, two other key thinkers, Edward Palmer Thompson (1924–1993) and Raymond Williams (1921–1988) were, to varying degrees, associated with the British Communist Party, though recoiled from its Stalinist doctrines in the aftermath of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. This gave their thought a distinctly critical distance from what was then mainstream Marxist theory, even while they remained committed to the liberatory project of Marx and the centrality of class in their analyses.

For Thompson, a founder of the social history of the British working class and long-time Communist Party activist, Althusser's anti-humanism, replacement of mass experience in struggle with 'theoretical practice', and insistence on the inescapable forms of ideology were regarded as last-ditch theoretical justifications for Stalinism. Thompson's most outspoken work on the matter, *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), stimulated considerable discussion within British Marxism, that was documented by Perry Anderson (1980). In the late 1950s Williams who, like Hoggart, was closely involved with the workers' educational movement, was already critical of the narrow conceptions of culture among still-dominant Leavisites at Cambridge (the so-called 'Great Tradition') and what he viewed as the tendency of contemporary Marxists to reify culture as 'superstructure' and construct their own selective tradition. For Williams, an anthropological conception of culture should flow from Marxism if pursued consistently: "from their emphasis on the interdependence of all elements of social reality, and from their analytic empha-

sis on movement and change, Marxists should logically use ‘culture’ in the sense of a whole way of life, a general social process” (Williams 1963, 273). For both Thompson and Williams the centrality of class consciousness, the self-activity of the working class and its creativity in shaping their perspectives, and the importance of wider cultural aspects in this process formed important bridges between Marxism and what was to become cultural studies. Williams became more overtly Marxist in his later years and, in 1977, was among the first seriously to engage with Antonio Gramsci’s ideas about hegemony, which appeared in English translation in the early 1970s, as a resource for the study of culture.

In *Marxism and Literature* (1977) Williams heralded hegemony as retaining the importance of class-specific ways of thinking, but refusing “to equate consciousness with the articulate formal system which can be and ordinarily is abstracted as ‘ideology’” (Williams 1977, 109). Rather than suggesting mere “manipulation” or “indoctrination”, hegemony refers to “a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living [...]. It is a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming” (Williams 1977, 110). Hegemony is a “culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes” (Williams 1977, 110). The notion of hegemony for Williams was a powerful weapon against those structuralist and poststructuralist approaches that downplayed the agency of the masses: “it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own” (Williams 1977, 112). The roots of the idea in Gramsci’s early studies of historical linguistics, the proletarian culture movement in Russia and Italy and in the attempts to build proletarian leadership over the peasantry in the Russian Revolution (see Brandist 2015) were unknown to Williams. Thus decontextualized and connected with a range of theoretical positions quite distant from Gramsci, the idea of hegemony was quickly adopted by such influential scholars as Edward Said (1978) and became a key resource for what became postcolonial studies and cultural studies. Here Gramsci’s subtle considerations of the cultural dimensions of political struggles were contrasted with an allegedly class-reductionist Marxism, even though Gramsci remained a Leninist until his death, and his discussions of hegemony were fundamentally considerations of the lessons of Bolshevism for the Italian Communist Party in the 1930s. In the mid 1980s these works were employed to justify the policies of the reforming wing of the CPGB centred on the journal *Marxism Today* aimed at building a ‘broad democratic alliance’ against the ‘authoritarian populism’ of the Thatcher government among whose leaders was the Jamaican-British sociologist and cultural theorist, Stuart Hall.

Cultural studies developed into a budget holding discipline at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University between 1968 and 1979 first under the leadership of Hoggart and, from 1969, Hall. It was during this period that a 'neo-Gramscian' approach by degrees came to supplant Althusser's structuralist Marxism in the work of the Centre, to be supplemented with recent developments in gender and race theory. Hall also sought to incorporate the perspective on language developed by Bakhtin and his colleague Voloshinov to weaken the hold of structuralism and poststructuralism. Cultural studies now focused its attention on the very aspects of the 'mass' culture of late capitalism that had so repelled *Kulturkritik*: cinema, television, popular journalism, advertising, shopping and the like. As Francis Mulhern (1997, 45) puts it: "its leading political theme [...] has been that such culture is not a mere opiate, successfully designed to induce passivity in a homogenized mass, but on the contrary that popular perception in it is active, deliberate, selective, and even subversive". In terms of methodology, there was a bold incursion of the methods of the social sciences into the humanities: "ethnographic fieldwork, interviewing, textual and discourse analysis, and traditional historical methods of research to investigate a wide variety of communication-related issues" (Schulman 1993). What Mulhern (1997, 44) calls a "procedural equilization" between literature and other bearers of social meanings had truly been established, with a focus on the social position of artists and writers; the social composition and orientation of audiences; the formation of social attitudes; the production and distribution of texts and the interactions between writers and their audience (Hoggart 1964, 251–252). In many respects results such as Hall et al's (1978) analysis of the law and order debate in the UK and Morley's (1980) analysis of TV audiences have been impressive in focusing attention on hitherto neglected areas of cultural production and reception and highlighting the negotiated meanings of cultural phenomena.

## 6 Concluding remarks

While Hall was distinctly equivocal about following Laclau and Mouffe in finally abandoning the determining role of class in his work, the dominant trends in cultural studies were less constrained and much more eclectic. With a focus firmly on popular culture, practitioners of cultural studies have often succumbed to populism, understood as a valorisation of popular forms over those of the elite, rather than a focus on the dynamics of a 'whole way of life'. While the active and even subversive side of popular forms have been rescued from the pessimistic over-totalizing analyses of the Frankfurt School and structuralist Marxism, the commod-

ified and conformist trends within corporatized forms of recreation that they diagnosed has too readily been discarded rather than qualified. Cultural difference has often tended to usurp social and political categories, erasing the important distinctions and disjunctures between cultural and political phenomena. Literary studies may, as Easthope suggested, have been absorbed into cultural studies, but what has often resulted is a mode of investigation that is the flip side of *Kulturkritik* rather than a fully transformed type of analysis.

The internationalisation of cultural studies has taken a variety of forms and has revealed many previously understudied forms of cultural domination and resistance, especially in the context of colonialism and its aftermath. The same tensions and ambiguities have been reproduced at a number of levels, however, as pre-colonial, indigenous cultures have sometimes been valorized as having an organic unity as opposed to the fragmentary cultures and identities of post-colonial societies. While new phenomena is subject to study, the inversion of the values of colonial paradigms while retaining its fundamental architecture often produces a scholarship that is little less one-sided than that which preceded it. Cultural studies has therefore often opened up a range of questions for investigation rather more successfully than it has managed to answer them.

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