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Editor: Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



. Meaning, Scope and Aim of Cultural Studies

Manreet Dhaliwal

Assistant Professor

Postgraduate Dept. of English

Guru Gobind Singh College for Women, Chandigarh

Email: manreetkaur.dhaliwal@gmail.com

Abstract: ‘Cultural studies’ is an interdisciplinary area of research and teaching that studies everyday lived culture and examines meanings, ideas, behaviour, values, beliefs and attitudes held by a community. These meanings are generated and controlled by those in power. Cultural studies focuses on the politics of culture and its history by relating aspects of culture to social class, nationality, ethnicity and gender. The present paper examines the meaning, scope and aim of cultural studies.

Keywords: Culture, masses, power, meanings, ideology.

‘Cultural studies’ is an interdisciplinary area of research and teaching that examines the manner in which individual experiences, everyday life, social relations and power are created and transformed by culture. Thus, everyday lived culture forms the main focus of study for this research field. It examines not just the specific elements of a culture, but also the manner of everyday living in any society. Cultural studies is an amalgamation of various theories such as the political theory, feminist theory, social theory, history, philosophy, media theory and film studies. It hypothesizes about the dynamics from which all human beings work out their daily lives.

Cultural studies came to be established as a competent and independent field of study with the opening up of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies or The Birmingham School at the University of Birmingham in the UK in 1964 under the directorship of Richard Hoggart. Its commencement is connected with the rise of popular culture. Hoggart was assisted by Stuart Hall in directing this centre. Hall took over as the Director of the centre in 1969 after Hoggart’s retirement, and effectively administered till 1979, passing on the directorship to Richard Johnson. Later in 1999, a new Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology (CSS) was formed after the annulment



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of The Birmingham School. This department was also abruptly dissolved in 2002, inciting a massive international protest. Hall, Raymond Williams, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, Tony Jefferson, Michael Green and Angela Mc Robbie are the main proponents of this field of study.

The term 'cultural studies' evades an exact definition. Even the scope and objectives of this academic discipline cannot be fit into a particular consolidated methodology or a theory. Several theorists have pointed towards this ambiguity. Colin Sparks in "The evolution of cultural studies ..." expresses the difficulty of defining the term precisely. He expresses the impossibility of drawing a sharp line and marking the proper province of cultural studies. He also articulates the futility of having a unified theory or methodology that is typical to cultural studies. He states: "A veritable rag-bag of ideas, methods and concerns from literary criticism, sociology, history, media studies, etc. are lumped together under the convenient label of cultural studies" (14). Simon During in 'Introduction' to his work, *Cultural Studies Reader*, also observes that cultural studies "is not an academic discipline quite like others. It possesses neither a well-defined methodology nor clearly demarcated fields for investigation" (1). Stuart Hall, the famous Jamaican-born cultural theorist, political activist and sociologist in his work, "Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies," gives reasons for the inconclusiveness and indefiniteness of this research field:

Cultural studies has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories. It is a whole set of formations; it has its own different conjunctures and moments in the past. It included many different kinds of work. It was 'centres' only in quotation marks, in a particular kind of way which I want to define in a moment. It had many trajectories; many people had and have different trajectories through it; it was constructed by a number of different methodologies and theoretical positions, all of them in contention. (99)

The word 'culture' is derived from the Greek word 'cultura' which means 'to cultivate.' Pramod K. Nayar in his work, *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*, elaborates on the meaning of culture as meant in cultural studies. Culture as meant in cultural studies is a mode of cultivating meanings, ideas, behaviours, values, beliefs and attitudes held by a community for generations. These meanings are created and controlled by those in power. So the focus of cultural studies is on



the politics of culture and its history. It relates these ideas, meanings, values and beliefs to social class, nationality, ethnicity and gender.

Nayar defines cultural studies as a research area that focuses on mass or popular culture and everyday life. By popular culture he means everyday culture of the masses comprising of beliefs, practices, values, and artefacts that are shared widely by the members of a community. It constitutes the everyday “food habits, fashion, forms of transport, the music, the reading habits, the spaces they occupy and traverse” (6). Popular culture includes comic books, mass cinema (in opposition to art cinema), graffiti, popular music (in opposition to classical music), the open spaces of the city (in opposition to art galleries), sports, etc. Nayar observes that in past, the term ‘mass culture’ was used in the negative sense. The culture of the wealthy minority section was considered to be the true or the standard culture.

Nayar notes that cultural studies interrogates the economic, spatial, ideological, erotic and political aspects of culture. It seeks to understand how specific objects attain meaning and value in a society or a community. Nayar is of the opinion that culture according to cultural studies is not something natural but is produced by those in power. And cultural studies “is interested in the production and consumption of culture” and “*the production and consumption of culture is linked to power and identity*” (Nayar 6). Nayar asserts that an advanced analysis of cultural artefacts requires a close scrutiny of five basic elements: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. These elements together make ‘the circuit of culture’ (as noted by Paul du Gay et al). He lays out the main objectives of cultural studies:

- studies the languages in and through which meanings are made in a particular culture
- questions how such meanings reflect the power struggle within that culture
- explores how certain meanings are privileged in that culture at the cost of others.

(16)

Cultural studies originated with the publication of some ground breaking works: Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*, Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society* and *Long Revolution*, and E. P Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*. Sparks attributes the origin of this research



field to Williams' repudiation of a particular notion of culture ('high culture'). Sparks observes that the "dominant tradition was openly unashamedly and profoundly anti-democratic" and cultural studies, from its inception, was a champion of democracy" (15).

Hall in his article, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," discerns that the term 'culture' as meant in cultural studies takes its meaning from Williams' two different ways of defining culture as espoused in *Long Revolution*. He elaborates that the first meaning of culture is related to the "sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences" (33). This definition, Hall observes, democratizes and socializes the conception of 'culture'. He concludes that the focus of culture has shifted from the 'best that has been thought and said' to the 'common' or 'ordinary' culture. The second definition refers to culture as social practices, deduced from the simple definition by Williams – "culture is a whole way of life" (34). From Williams' ideas about culture, Hall concludes:

'Culture' is not a practice; nor is it simply the descriptive sum of the 'mores and folkways' of societies- as it tended to become in certain kinds of anthropology. It is threaded through all social practices, and is the sum of their inter-relationship. . . . The 'culture' is those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves - in 'unexpected identities and correspondences' as well as in 'discontinuities of an unexpected kind' –within or underlying all social practices. (34)

Hall asserts the need to analyse and study the relationship between all these patterns so as to understand the manners in which the interplay between these practices and patterns are lived and experienced as a whole, in any specific period.

Richard Johnson in his essay, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" defines cultural studies "as an intellectual and political tradition, in its relations to the academic disciplines, in terms of theoretical paradigms, or by its characteristic objects of study" (78). He asserts the imperativeness for cultural studies to be inter-disciplinary, and sometimes anti-disciplinary in its tendency (78). In Johnson's opinion, "cultural studies is about the historical forms of consciousness or subjectivity, or the subjective forms we live by, or, in a rather perilous compression, perhaps a reduction, the subjective side of social relations" (80). Johnson asserts that cultural studies is inevitably and



deeply involved in relations of power. The main objective of cultural studies' theorists is to decentre the text as an object of study. Johnson elaborates:

The text is no longer studied for its own sake, nor even for the social effects it maybe thought to produce, but rather for the subjective or cultural forms which it realizes and makes available. The text is only a *means* in cultural studies; strictly, perhaps, it is a raw material from which certain forms . . . may be abstracted. But the ultimate object of cultural studies is . . . *the social life of subjective forms* at each moment of their circulation, including their textual embodiments. (97)

During observes that cultural studies affirms otherness and negates meta-discourse. This focus according to him should be “understood in terms of the accelerated globalizing of cultural production and distribution from the 1970s on” (14). Though globalization led to the dissolving of the differences between ‘first’ and third world countries, it created new “vertical” differences between them and accelerated poverty, urbanization, ecological degradation, and deculturization (14). Cultural studies thus “became the voice of the other, the “marginal” in the academy” (14).

Johnson attributes the emergence of cultural studies to some important historical events. He observes that the first “important moment here was the development of the post-war traditions of social history with their focus on popular culture, or the culture of ‘the people’ especially in its political forms” (76). Johnson asserts the role of the Communist Party Historians’ Group in this regard. He points towards the paradox. The historians were concerned more about understanding the long British transition from feudalism to capitalism and the popular struggles and traditions of dissent associated with it than with the contemporary culture or even with the twentieth century. This work, observes Johnson, became a second matrix for cultural studies (76).

Johnson observes that cultural studies is Marx-influenced. The focus of cultural studies like that of Marxism is on form. It examines the forms inhabited subjectively: language, signs, ideologies, discourses, myths, etc. Johnson brings attention to the three main premises where culture has been influenced by Marxism. The first is related to the close connection of cultural processes “with social relations, especially with class relations and class formations, with sexual divisions with the racial structuring of social relations and with age oppressions as a form of



dependency” (76). The second premise, Johnson notes, is that culture is associated with power and it aids in producing an imbalance in the endowments of individuals and social groups to define and accomplish their needs. The third premise, an outcome of the previous two, “is that culture is neither an autonomous nor an externally determined field, but a site of social differences and struggles” (76).

John Storey in his essay, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction,” also opines that cultural studies is informed by Marxism in two essential ways. Firstly, it is imperative to analyse culture in relation to its social structure and historical contingency in order to understand the meanings of culture. Secondly, cultural studies theorists contend that culture is one of the main sites where divisions on the basis of ethnicity, gender, generation and class, are established and contested. Johnson however points towards a basic difference between the aim of cultural studies and Marxism. He notes that cultural studies analyses social processes from another complimentary point of view. The objective of cultural studies theorists is to “abstract, describe and reconstitute in concrete studies forms through which human beings ‘live’, become conscious, sustain themselves subjectively” (81).

Johnson points towards one major theoretical and methodological division that runs through cultural studies. On the one side, some theorists insist that ‘culture’ must be analysed as a whole in their material context, and on the other hand, others emphasize on the relative independence or effective autonomy of subjective forms and means of signification. Johnson classifies the objectives of cultural studies into three main models. There is ‘production-based studies’ that indicates an attempt to curb or change the most potent means of cultural production, or to employ substitute means through which a counter-hegemonic approach may be followed. Radical political parties are an example of this model. Then there is ‘text-based studies’, that centres on the forms of cultural products and have often shown interest in the possibilities of a transformative cultural practice. For eg, critics, teachers, *avante-garde* practitioners. The third model involves the study of lived cultures. In this they bring to the forefront the various representations reinforced through culture. The emphasis is on upholding the ways of life of subordinate social groups and exposing the agenda of the dominant public forms (107).



John Fiske in his article, “British Cultural Studies and Television,” defines the meaning and scope of Cultural Studies as follows:

The term culture, as used in the phrase ‘cultural studies’, is neither aesthetic nor humanist in emphasis, but political. Culture is not conceived of as the aesthetic ideals of form and beauty found in great art, or in more humanist terms as the voice of the ‘human spirit’ that transcends the boundaries of time and nation to speak to a hypothetical universal man (the gender is deliberate – women play little or no role in this conception of culture). Culture...is a way of living within an industrial society that encompasses all the meanings of that social experience. (115)

The main concern of cultural studies, asserts Fiske is with the generation and circulation of meanings in industrial societies. He opines that a society is not an organic whole but a complicated network of groups. Each of these groups has different interests and is connected to each other in terms of their power association with the dominant classes. Fiske believes that “social relations are understood in terms of social power, in terms of a structure of domination and subordination that is never static but is always the site of contestation and struggle” (116). He is of the view that culture is ideological. He asserts that the dominant class’s endeavour to project meanings as naturally produced has be understood as the consequence of an ideology impressed/inscribe/carved in the social and cultural practices of a class and its members. Thus, the main focus of current work in cultural studies is on culture “as a constant struggle between those with and those without power” (121).

Meaghan Morris in her work, “Banality in Cultural Studies,” notes that the contemporary cultural studies speaks of encouraging cultural democracy. It appreciates difference, and views mass or popular culture “not as a vast banality-machine, but as raw material made available for a variety of popular practices” (156). Morris appropriately states the meaning and aim of cultural studies:

Cultural studies is a humane and optimistic discourse, trying to derive its values from materials and conditions already available to people. On the other hand, it can become an apologetic ‘yes, but ...’ discourse, that most often proceeds from admitting class, racial, and sexual oppression to finding the inevitable saving grace – when its theoretical



presuppositions should require it at least to do both simultaneously, even 'dialectically'.

(160)

Hall in his other work, "Race, Culture, and Communication: Looking Backward and Forwards at Cultural Studies," states that cultural studies exhibits the rapid changes taking in thought, knowledge, argument and debate regarding a society and its own culture. Hall considers it "an activity of intellectual self-reflection" that functions inside as well as outside the academy" as it "insists on the necessity to address the central, urgent, and disturbing questions of a society and a culture in the most rigorous intellectual way . . ." (337). This research area, observes Hall, shows the blurring of the conventional boundaries among the disciplines. It also shows the development of forms of interdisciplinary research that cannot be enclosed within the limits of the existing categories of knowledge.

Over the years, cultural studies has expanded its scope and undergone a great change in its politics. However, it is still concerned with issues related with race, class, ethnicity, inequality, gender, etc.

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