

A Study on CULTURAL STUDIES

Vishnu Balaji. P
St. Joseph's College of Commerce

Summary:

Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field, drawing on theories and practices from a range of humanities and social sciences disciplines, that seeks to investigate the ways in which cultures produce and are produced. At the centre of Cultural Studies sits a host of questions, such as what constitutes a text, how some texts, visual images, and cultural artifacts come to be valued over others, and how questions of value relate to the distribution of power and authority.

Rather than concentrating exclusively on the group of elite texts that make up so-called "high culture," Cultural Studies takes as its focus the whole complex of changing beliefs, ideas, feelings, values, and symbols that define a community's organization and sense of itself. Culture in this sense is often understood to be a primary vehicle of globalization in the contemporary world and deeply enmeshed in particular social, economic and political environments. As such, when we study culture, we are studying the world we live in and how we function in it.

Abstract:

My purpose in this paper is to complicate the genealogies of the concept of culture as a way of life that have held sway within cultural studies. I do so by reviewing key aspects in the development of this concept within the American tradition of anthropology pioneered by Franz Boas in the opening decades of the twentieth century and continued by a generation of Boas's students including Ruth Benedict, Alfred Kroeber and Margaret Mead. I focus on three issues: the respects in which the 'culture concept' was shaped by aesthetic conceptions of form; its spatial registers; and its functioning as a new surface of government, partially displacing that of race, in the development of American multicultural policies in the 1920s and 1930s. In relating these concerns to Graeme Turner's enduring interest in the processes through which culture is 'made national' I indicate how the spatial registers of the culture concept anticipate contemporary approaches to these questions. I also outline what Australian cultural studies has to learn from the American evolution of the culture concept in view of the respects in which the latter was shaped by the racial dynamics of a 'settler' society during a period of heightened immigration from new sources. In concluding, I review the broader implications of the fusion of aesthetic and anthropological forms of expertise that informed the development of the culture concept.

Introduction:

When teaching students across the humanities, the practical arts and the social sciences, and from many different countries, we are still sometimes asked what is cultural studies in this chapter we respond afresh to this curiosity, by introducing cultural studies as a particular approach within a wider field of the study of culture. We organise the chapter around two further questions, trying to offer something new for 'old readers' too. Our first question concerns the reasons for an interest in culture in the first place: why does it become an object of critical study? In answering this question, we approach cultural studies as one 'selective tradition' which defines what is interesting about culture in a particular way. We take the idea of a selective tradition from Raymond Williams, who mainly uses it to criticize '[the] deliberately selective and connecting process which offers a historical and cultural ratification of a contemporary order' (1977: 116). We use it here, however, as a means of critiquing our own tradition-building and therefore for critical self-reflection and renewal. We view the cultural studies tradition alongside other approaches to the study of culture, other selective traditions, the complicated and contested history of which we can only evoke. This may be enough, however, to identify what has been distinctive about the cultural studies approach, and to set the scene for dialogues with others.

The second organising question is the relation with academic disciplines and disciplinarity more generally. If our research questions come from a larger, often political, concern with the cultural, our approaches and methods are drawn, initially at least, from adjacent disciplines. This is a familiar issue, but today it has some new features. What is 'cultural studies' today when every discipline has made the cultural turn? What are the implications, for our intellectual strategies, of this 'trans disciplinarity' of the study of culture?

Why is cultural studies important?

Cultural studies of any country are of the utmost importance, due to the fact that in order to be able to understand how the people and therefore the language function in these countries, one needs to first come to terms with the context in which these people live and communicate and how they develop socially,

Scope of cultural studies:

Aims and scope Cultural Studies examines how cultural practices relate to everyday life, history, structures of power, affect, ideology, economy, politics, knowledge, technology, and the environment.

Cultural studies as politics:

It remains difficult to pin down the boundaries of cultural studies as a coherent, unified, academic discipline with clear-cut substantive topics, concepts and methods that differentiate it from other disciplines. Cultural studies has always been a multi- or post-disciplinary field of enquiry which blurs the boundaries between itself and other 'subjects'. Yet cultural studies cannot be said to be anything. It is not Physics, it is not sociology and it is not linguistics, though it draws upon these subject areas. Indeed, there must be, as Hall (1992a) argues, something at stake in cultural studies that differentiates it from other subject areas. For Hall, what is at stake is the connection that cultural studies seek to make to matters of power and cultural politics. That is, to an exploration of representations of and 'for' marginalized social groups and the need for cultural change. Hence, cultural studies is a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice. Here, knowledge is never a neutral or objective phenomenon but a matter of positionality, that is, of the place from which one speaks, to whom, and for what purposes.

Central problems in cultural studies:

Each chapter focuses on a key issue that the author finds continually cropping up in cultural studies work: the status of language-the power of representation, the nature of subjectivity, the globalization of culture, and the role of consumer capitalism, all as located within the web of global media culture.

Different types of culture:

1. Culture and Power:

In a narrowly defined version of cultural studies, the typical questions have been about the production or organization of meaning as a site of power. Cultural processes are important and interesting because they are a medium through which powerful social relationships are played out and in which possibilities for social betterment are opened up or closed down. A typical way of posing 'power questions' has been in terms of identity, especially where identity is seen as a problematic issue, and where individual and collective identities are understood as being always created under social pressures. For recent debates on identity see Brah and Coombes, 1999 Du Gay and Hall, 1996. The cultural question can be asked differently. Implicit in the culture-as-power issue and the questions that arise from it is the idea that everyone participates, however unequally, in the cultural process of making

meanings and fixing and shifting identities. Yet the best-known definition of the cultural, and perhaps still the dominant one in everyday use, tends to narrow the cultural field down to specialized, often elite, 'high cultural' practices and products which are distinguished from 'common culture' and which are 'owned' by experts or privileged groups.

2. Culture as Value:

In this approach it is the aesthetic or moral value of literature, music or art which is supposed to make them worth studying not, primarily, their complicity in powerful inclusions and exclusions. This way of thinking about culture held sway in traditional humanities disciplines until quite recently, and continues to be powerfully defended outside the academy. Indeed, conservative academicians still fight for it, often against the canon-breaking claims of cultural and other interdisciplinary approaches (Bloom, 1987). There remains a widespread incredulity, surfacing in attacks on media studies especially, that anyone could spend academic time - and therefore take seriously - studying pop star celebrities, television quiz shows or romantic fiction (for example Golding and Woodhead, 2000; Patten, 1993). It is important to note that though we may be critical of excluding the popular in this way, researchers in the culture-as-power tradition have their own problems with issues of value.

3. Culture as Policy:

Culture is also conceptualized narrowly, though in a different way, when the question is about 'cultural policy'. This discourse of 'cultural policy' is selective in two ways. First, it tends to address the policies only of large-scale institutions especially of governments. In the versions that have grown out of cultural studies, by debt and critique, the study of 'cultural policy' is structured around a particular reading of Foucault. The key focus is on governmentality or, in Tony Bennett's words, 'the governmental programs through which particular fields of conduct are organized and regulated' (Bennett, 1998: 84; see also the Series Introduction in the same volume: ii-iv). Governmentality is wider than 'government' as the stress on 'conduct' implies. Yet, in practice, policy studies tend to return us to the needs of formal institutions, not least through the funding of research. Second, the discourse of cultural policy tends, in practice, to treat culture as limited to these 'particular fields of conduct'. Although these fields transgress the older high/low divisions, they are limited to practices in which formal institutions have an interest, typically, sport, art and museums and 'heritage'. To promote a primarily 'policy' orientation within cultural studies can therefore recapitulate some older reductions. As Raymond Williams argued, such usages involve a class or hierarchical appropriation of culture in its more general and positive root meanings, as cultivation, education, or individual and social improvement (1983: 87--93). In the case of policy studies, they also reproduce the old identifications of cultural agency with state - or quasi-state - institutions or cultural elites and forms of official action. This can imply that some of the characteristic addressees of cultural studies - radical professionals, artistic practitioners, students, academics and social movements, or indeed 'ordinary' citizens - do not have 'cultural policies or strategies for living of their own.

4. Culture as standardization:

A different question about culture has focused attention on standardization or convergence. Uniformities can arise from 'mass culture' (the capitalist commercialization or commodification of forms of popular culture), or from 'globalization', or from bureaucratic or instrumental rationality, work discipline or other forms of 'social control'. Standardization or regulation are often seen as accompaniments of modernity and have been a pervasive preoccupation of sociological theory from Max Weber onwards. Such concern has a Marxist variant in the cultural and aesthetic critique of mass culture among some Frankfurt School theorists. Held, 1980; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972. Indeed, some versions of globalization theory and studies of 'international communication' paint this picture large on a world-wide scale, while in many ways, standardization remains the cultural thesis of sociological theory. This form of abstract and generalizing social description tends to centre on a single dynamic of change - 'the risk society', 'MacDonaldization', 'Disneyfication' and some versions of

globalization (for example Beck, 1992; Ritzer, 1993). Though diversity is often an implied and preferred critical value here, this form of cultural study rarely grasps cultural differences or investigates particular ways of living. Again, there are points of exchange (and contestation) between this common sociological agenda and cultural studies, especially in the conceptualization of ideology or hegemony. Hall, 1988; Larrain, 1983; Thomas, 1999; Thomson, 1990) Does cultural power work by securing cultural sameness or by working on and through the differences? This question will concern us again in Chapter 7 when we address the analysis of dominance.

5. Culture as language or 'understanding':

Not all agenda of interest in the cultural are so obviously 'political' (though they all have political connections). Neither classical structuralism nor contemporary hermeneutics, which offer important resources for cultural studies, can be understood (or understand themselves) in such directly political ways. Structuralism has asked how meaning is constructed through the conventions and codes of languages in the broadest sense, through signs, myths or symbols. (Culler, 1981) Hermeneutics has asked how understanding the other is possible, whether the other is a text, or a different language, or an alien culture, or a different point in time. Though it contains, as we shall see, a view of the whole circuit of culture, it has focused on reading or 'interpretation'. (Gadamer, 1989 and see Chapter 2 below)

Conclusion:

In this chapter we have sought to answer an old question - 'what is cultural studies?' - in fresh ways. We have given two sorts of answers. First cultural studies is a selective tradition which is interested in culture as a source of power, difference and emancipation, closely connected with social movements and with cultural critique. Second cultural studies is a way of being in the academy, of being academic, or not quite academic. This means prioritising agenda from outside the academy, being critical of academic limits but using and developing the resources we find there. In the current situation, when most or all humanities and social science disciplines have something to say about the cultural, this includes being especially attentive to the work of colleagues and students in or around other disciplines.

References:

<https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/cultural-studies/about-the-program/index.html#:~:text=Cultural%20Studies%20is%20an%20interdisciplinary,cultures%20produce%20and%20are%20produced.&text=As%20such%2C%20when%20we%20study,how%20we%20function%20in%20it>

[https://www.google.com/search?q=why+cultural+studies+is+important&sxsrf=ALeKk02OBP3cs2PMKkRhrSD2_wE_GdjmDg%3A1616824219373&ei=m8deYK2zFvaprt0Ppf6k4AY&oq=why+cultural+studies+is+important&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsANQAFgAYJWCAWgBcAJ4AIAB3gGIAd4BkgEDMi0xmAEAgEHZ3dzLXdpesgBCMABAQ&scient=gws-wiz&ved=0ahUKEwjt7InK48_vAhX2lEsFHSU_CWwQ4dUDCA0&uact=5](https://www.google.com/search?q=why+cultural+studies+is+important&sxsrf=ALeKk02OBP3cs2PMKkRhrSD2_wE_GdjmDg%3A1616824219373&ei=m8deYK2zFvaprt0Ppf6k4AY&oq=why+cultural+studies+is+important&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsAMyBwgAEecQsANQAFgAYJWCAWgBcAJ4AIAB3gGIAd4BkgEDMi0xmAEAgEHZ3dzLXdpesgBCMABAQ&scient=gws-wiz&ved=0ahUKEwjt7InK48_vAhX2lEsFHSU_CWwQ4dUDCA0&uact=5)

https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+the+scope+of+cultural+studies&sxsrf=ALeKk02eVUrlDwfBtHP2is1vczecM9fx1A%3A1616824237002&ei=rMdeYO3cPNml9Q00j4G4Bw&oq=why+cultural+studies+is+important&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EBJQAFgAYPnrDGgAcAJ4AIABcogBcpIBAzAuMZgBAKABBqoBB2d3cy13aXrAAQE&gs_ivs=1&scient=gws-wiz#tts=0

https://www.google.com/search?q=cultural+studies+as+politics&sxsrf=ALeKk01oHKKJqD86anEIZY-kMdV2iFNV2A%3A1616824448118&ei=gMheYP7vBo7grQGCg6XgAQ&oq=what+is+the+scope+of+cultural+studies&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EBIyBAGjECc6BwgAEecQsANQpYgC WKWIAMCd8QNoAXACeACAAaEBiAGVApIBAzAuMpgBAKABAaABBqoBB2d3cy13aXrIA QjAAQE&gs_ivs=1&scient=gws-wiz#tts=0

https://www.google.com/search?q=central+problem+in+cultural+studies&sxsrf=ALeKk02JJckMwnhERte0DfGhCP9vsUrAAA%3A1616824627592&ei=M8leYPjCI_yprtoPvKGqoAs&oq=central+problem+in+cultural+studies&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EAMyBAGjECc6BwgAEecQsAM6BwgjELACECdQ2y5YnjVgsj5oAXACeACAAd8BiAHFCpIBBTauNy4ymAEAoAEBqgEHZ3dzLXdpesgBA8ABAQ&scient=gws-wiz&ved=0ahUKEwi4qN2M5c_vAhX8lEsFHbyQCrQQ4dUDCA0&uact=5

https://www.google.com/search?q=conclusion+of+cultural+studies&sxsrf=ALeKk01-JsCXz9y2P6quX3_hoC_n8DMqkw%3A1616824636572&ei=PMleYOCpIoy-9QOxnIz4BA&oq=central+problem+in+cultural+studies&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EBJQAFgAYMfBBWgAcAJ4AIABcYgBcZIBAzAuMZgBAKABBqoBB2d3cy13aXrAAQE&gs_ivs=1&scient=gws-wiz#tts=0