

Cultural Studies and Ethics

Douglas Kellner

(<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>)

The movement of cultural studies that has been a global phenomenon of great importance over the last decade was inaugurated by the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1963/64 led at the time by Richard Hoggart (1958) and Stuart Hall. During this period, the Centre developed a variety of critical approaches for the analysis, interpretation, and criticism of cultural artifacts. Through a set of internal debates, and responding to social struggles and movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, the Birmingham group came to focus on the interplay of representations and ideologies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in cultural texts, including media culture. They were among the first to study the effects of newspapers, radio, television, film, and other popular cultural forms on audiences. They also focused on how various audiences interpreted and used media culture in varied and different ways and contexts, analyzing the factors that made audiences respond in contrasting ways to media texts.

The now classical period of British cultural studies from the early 1960s to the early 1980s initially adopted a Marxian approach to the study of culture, one especially influenced by Althusser and Gramsci (see, especially Hall 1980a). Although members of the school of British cultural studies Hall usually omit the Frankfurt school from his narrative, some of the work done by the Birmingham group replicated certain classical positions of the Frankfurt school, in their social theory and methodological models for doing cultural studies, as well as in their political perspectives and strategies. Like the Frankfurt school, British cultural studies observed the integration of the working class and its decline of revolutionary consciousness, and studied the conditions of this catastrophe for the Marxian project of revolution. Like the Frankfurt school, British cultural studies concluded that mass culture was playing an important role in integrating the working class into existing capitalist societies and that a new consumer and media culture was forming a new mode of capitalist hegemony.

Both traditions focused on the intersections of culture and ideology and saw ideology critique as central to a critical cultural studies (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1980a and 1980b). Both saw culture as a mode of ideological reproduction and hegemony, in which cultural forms help to shape the modes of thought and behavior that induce individuals to adapt to the social conditions of capitalist societies. Both also see culture as a form of resistance to capitalist society and both the earlier forerunners of British cultural studies, especially Raymond Williams (1961 and 1962), and the theorists of the Frankfurt school see high culture as forces of resistance to capitalist modernity. Later, British cultural studies would valorize resistant moments in media culture and audience interpretations and use of media artifacts, while the Frankfurt school tended, with some exceptions, to see mass culture as a homogeneous and potent form of ideological domination -- a difference that would seriously divide the two traditions.

From the beginning, British cultural studies was highly political in nature and focused on the potentials for resistance in oppositional subcultures, first, valorizing the potential of working

class cultures, then, youth subcultures to resist the hegemonic forms of capitalist domination. Unlike the classical Frankfurt school (but similar to Herbert Marcuse), British cultural studies turned to youth cultures as providing potentially new forms of opposition and social change. Through studies of youth subcultures, British cultural studies demonstrated how culture came to constitute distinct forms of identity and group membership and appraised the oppositional potential of various youth subcultures (see Jefferson 1976 and Hebdige 1979). Cultural studies came to focus on how subcultural groups resist dominant forms of culture and identity, creating their own style and identities. Individuals who conform to dominant dress and fashion codes, behavior, and political ideologies thus produce their identities within mainstream groups, as members of specific social groupings (such as white, middle-class conservative Americans). Individuals who identify with subcultures, like punk culture, or black nationalist subcultures, look and act differently from those in the mainstream, and thus create oppositional identities, defining themselves against standard models.

As it developed into the 1970s and 1980s, British cultural studies successively appropriated feminism, critical race theory, gay and lesbian theory, postmodern theory, and other fashionable theoretical modes. Thus, they turned to examining the ways that cultural texts promoted sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, or promoted resistance and struggle against these phenomena. This approach implicitly contained ethical critique of all cultural forms that promoted oppression and domination while positively valorizing texts and representations that produced a potentially more just and egalitarian social order.

With a postmodern turn in cultural studies, there was an increasing emphasis on the audience and how audiences produce meanings and how cultural texts produce both popular pleasures and forms of resistance (Ang 1985; Fiske 1993). Critics of this phase of cultural studies claim that the project has been losing its critical edge, has fallen into a postmodern cultural populism (McGuigan 1992), and has surrendered the political radicalism and critical thrust of the original project (Kellner 1995). Defenders of the turn toward cultural populism argue that the original more critical model tended to be overly elitist and excessively critical of popular pleasures, while neglecting the complex ways that cultural texts can be appropriated and used.

Rather than focusing on ethics per se, British cultural studies and its later variants tend to engage the politics of representation. Employing Antonio Gramsci's model of hegemony and counterhegemony (1971 and 1992), it sought to analyze 'hegemonic,' or ruling, social and cultural forces of domination and to seek 'counterhegemonic' forces of resistance and struggle. The project aimed at social transformation and attempted to specify forces of domination and resistance in order to aid the process of political struggle and emancipation from oppression and domination. Their politics of representation thus entailed a critique of cultural representations that promoted racism, sexism, classism, or any forms of oppression. Any representations that promoted domination and oppression were thus negatively valorized, while representations that promoted egalitarianism, social justice, and emancipation were positively valorized.

In this optic, ethics tends to be subordinated to politics and the moral dimension of culture tends to be underemphasized or downplayed. Thus, one could argue for a cultural studies that more explicitly stresses the importance of ethical analysis, scrutinizing cultural texts for the specific ethical norms portrayed and evaluating the work accordingly. Or one could explore in more

detail and depth than is usually done in cultural studies the moral and philosophical dimensions of cultural texts, the ways that they carry out moral critiques of society and culture, or embody ethical concerns regarding good and evil, and moral and immoral behavior or phenomena.

Yet ethical concerns permeated cultural studies from the beginning. Culture is, among other things, a major transmitter and generator of values and a cultural studies sensitive to the very nature and function of culture should be aware of the ethical dimension to culture. Thus, concern with ethics, with the moral aspects of cultural texts, should be a central and fundamental focus of cultural studies, as it was with non-formalist literary studies. While it is unlikely that the texts of media culture have the ethical depth and complexity of great literary texts, it is clear that ethical concerns are of fundamental importance to the sort of popular cultural artifacts that have been the domain of cultural studies.

Finally, it should be noted that there are a great heterogeneity and diversity of types of cultural studies today ranging from a cultural populism that celebrates the pleasures of popular cultural artifacts or activities such as shopping or sports, to more critical feminist, race-theory based, or post-structuralist variants. Some works in contemporary cultural studies combine concern with gender, race, class and ethical values and add new ethical and political substance to the earlier project of cultural studies (see, for example, hooks (1984, 1992, and 1994) and Jefford (1989 and 1994). Yet on the whole ethical analysis has not been adequately thematized and developed within the tradition of cultural studies. In regard of the global wave of cultural studies in recent years that have greatly expanded the field, I would conclude that the time is now ripe to make ethical analysis and concern with values a fundamental part of a future cultural studies.

Notes

1. For standard accounts of this phase of British cultural studies, see Hall et al 1980; Hall 1980a and 1980b; Johnson 1986/7; Fiske 1986; O'Conner 1989; Turner 1990; Grossberg 1989; Agger 1992; McGuigan 1992; and Kellner 1995. For readers which document the positions of British cultural studies, see the articles collected in Grossberg, Nelson, Trenchler 1992 and During 1992.
2. For the classic Frankfurt school model, see Horkheimer and Adorno 1972 [1947]. On British cultural studies and the Frankfurt school, see Kellner 1997.
3. The turn to the audience was already anticipated in Hall 1980b; but the earlier Birmingham model balanced focus on text, context, and audience, while later cultural studies would focus primarily on audience appropriation and use of cultural artifacts.

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