

Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies: Decoding Cultural Oppression

Represent! In American pop culture “to represent” means to carry the name of a certain area or group. For example, people can represent their neighborhood, sports team, or music group by shouting out, or wearing the right colors, tee-shirts, stickers, and so on. To represent means to faithfully carry the identity of an area or group, to do it honor and to make others aware. To represent is to express and experience social solidarity. As Benji from the pop-punk music group Good Charlotte says, “Keep representin’ GC ‘cause you know we’re representin’ you.” There’s an experience of power in representing. When you represent, you’re in charge of how others see you and how they see your group or area.

But what if someone else had control over your representing and representation? While “represent” is part of American pop culture at the moment, this other idea of representational control has been part of the critique of culture since the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois (1920/1996) was specifically concerned with representations of race: “The whites obviously seldom picture brown and yellow folk, but for five hundred centuries they have exhausted every ingenuity of trick, of ridicule and caricature on black folk” (Pp. 59 – 60). The effect of such representation is cultural and psychological: the disenfranchised see the representations and may become ashamed of their own image. Du Bois gives an example from his own work at *The Crisis* (the official publication of the NAACP). *The Crisis* put a picture of a Black person on the cover of their magazine. When the readers saw the representation, they perceived it (or consumed it) as “the caricature that white folks intend when they make a black face.” Du Bois queried some of his office staff about the reaction. They said the problem wasn’t that the person was black; the problem was that the person was *too black*. To this Du Bois replied, “Nonsense! Do white people complain because their pictures are too white?” (Du Bois, 1920/1996, p. 60)

Exposing the control of representation is one of the chief concerns of Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies. Cultural studies began at the University of Birmingham, England, in 1963. There Richard Hoggart established the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The Centre was initially part of the English Department, as Hoggart’s background is in English, but became an independent department under the leadership of Stuart Hall, who was director of the Centre from 1969 – 1976. It was during Hall’s directorship that the Centre achieved its most expansive growth and greatest notoriety. Due in no small part to Hall’s leadership, cultural studies is now an international, cross-disciplinary approach to studying culture and its effects. So, we’ll be referencing both Hall and the Birmingham School in general for most of our discussion of cultural studies.

Cultural studies is an approach to studying culture that lies at the intersection between the social sciences, most notably sociology, and the humanities, especially

literature. As a non-disciplinary study, cultural studies draws from diverse fields and academic traditions. In talking about the intellectual roots of cultural studies, Stuart Hall (1980) lists such diverse sources as Marx, Weber, Mead, Howard Becker, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Roland Barthes, Georg Lukács, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and various feminists. Due to this kind of background, cultural studies has often been referred to as an “anti-discipline.”

This anti-disciplinary stance has actually been healthy for the kind of work that goes on in cultural studies. The lack of a core has encouraged continued discussion of diverse ideas and possibilities. Though the roots and areas of study are diverse, we can say that cultural studies is a critical perspective that focuses on the political implications of mass culture. There are four ideas that are central to cultural studies: hegemony, signs and semiotics, representation and discourse, and meaning and struggle.

Hegemony: Merriam-Webster (2002) defines hegemony as having a “preponderant influence or authority.” Though the definition is short, it is important. *Hegemony* is defined as preponderant or dominant influence. The important thing that we want to tease out of this definition is that something is hegemonic if it has more influence or power than other possibilities. Hegemony, then, gives us a more complex way of talking about something you are probably already familiar with: Marx’s notion of ideology.

Karl Marx wrote a great deal about ideology and class relations. According to Marx (1932/1978), “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (p. 172). Marx’s approach clearly defines ideology as something that is oppressive and can only be escaped through the dialectics of capitalism. The idea of ideology in Marxism, then, doesn’t acknowledge or give much credence to the existence of other cultures or ideologies. But the idea of hegemony does. Rather than a single, ruling ideology, the idea of hegemony recognizes that there are many possible cultures that vary by time and circumstance. This idea of hegemony allows us to see ideology as active; it opens the door for us to see cultures in conflict, vying for position and influence.

Culture in an industrial society is never a homogeneous structure. Rather, it is multifaceted, reflecting different methods of coping with peculiar constellations of social and material life experiences. Though these cultures are differentially ranked according to the social group to which they are related (elite cultures will be ranked higher than poverty cultures), even the “dominant culture” is in truth fragmented and negotiated: “Almost always it requires an *alliance* of ruling-class fractions—a ‘historical bloc’” (Hall 1976, p. 39).

In contrast to Marx, the Birmingham school also moves to viewing *oppression as a cooperative achievement*. The hegemony of a culture is not achieved through coercion but requires some degree of consent from the subordinate class. One way to achieve consent is through cultural accommodation. In this, hegemonic culture draws bits and pieces of other cultures in without allowing them to dramatically impact central ideas and beliefs. As a consequence of accommodation, the “bourgeois culture” ceases to be entirely bourgeois—it has co-opted many other cultural elements—and the subordinated groups and their cultures are never directly confronted with or oppressed by a pure class culture; they see elements of themselves in the culture, but elements only.

Another principal method through which dominant groups elicit the subordinate’s cooperation is by co-opting their lived experiences: “It works *primarily* by inserting the subordinate class into the key institutions and structures which support the power and social authority of the dominate order. It is, above all, in these structures and relations that a subordinate class *lives its subordination*” (Hall 1976, p. 39). Because the oppressed must work and have much of their existence within organizations and

structures controlled by the elite, they must adapt to the expectations and ideas of the hegemonic culture.

Signs and semiotics: One of the chief methods that cultural studies uses to understand culture is semiotics. Semiotics is simply the study of signs or words. When semiotics is applied to culture generally, semiotics is a way of understanding culture as if it were language. For example, a semiotic analysis of the images in a magazine ad would look at the different images as if they were words or signs. We're going to review some ideas from semiotics; as we do, we'll be talking about signs and language, but keep in mind that Cultural Studies maintains that various cultural objects, such as pictures and symbols, can be read in the same way.

Semiotics began with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure argued that language is a system of signs in which all terms are interrelated and achieve their value only from the simultaneous presence of all other terms. The most defining feature of a sign, then, is its opposition to other signs. Linguistic elements are given meaning through their structural relations. Ultimately, then, signs themselves are not important, for it is the relationships among the signs that creates and limits meaning.

According to Saussure, there are two specific types of relationships between linguistic terms. Within a sentence, whether it is a written text or a conversation, combinations of elements are supported and given meaning by linearity. That is, the combinations of words that can appear together in a sentence are limited. These limited combinations define the meaning of any one word that stands within a combination through opposition to every other element that comes before or after it. Saussure (1916/1986) termed this relationship "syntagmatic" (p. 122).

The other specific relationship that a sign may have is more conceptual and lies outside the immediate sentence. These are associative relations and, because the concept behind the sign suggests other like concepts, they constitute relations of equivalence. Saussure offers the example of an architectural column. The column has a certain relationship with the rest of the building that it supports; this arrangement of physical elements in space illustrates the syntagmatic relation. But if the column is known to be Doric, it might suggest a mental comparison with other styles even though none of the other styles are present in physical space.

All this is less complicated than it might seem. Let's use the word "guitar" as an example. There are at least two elements in that sign: the word itself and the object it references. Though the relationship between the sign and object is arbitrary (we could have called the guitar anything), once established they seem to be the same thing. But what do we mean when we say "guitar"? Obviously, the word points to the object; but in terms of simply the sign itself, how do we establish its meaning?

One of the ways is through difference: a guitar is not a violin. They are both stringed instruments that are usually made of wood, but what makes them unique and identifiable are their differences. Thus, the meaning of guitar is constructed through the set of objects it isn't: a guitar is a stringed instrument that isn't a violin, viola, cello, bass, and so forth. This defining feature of difference is most clearly seen with words that have only one other companion word. These words are dichotomously defined. A good example is found in gender. The meaning of man is defined by its opposite: woman. To be a man is to not be a woman.

Another way words achieve meaning is through associative relations. The presence of one word may imply another, like "electric guitar" implies "acoustic guitar" or perhaps "drums," though the other words aren't present. Words also derive their meaning by the way they are used in sentences. Thus, "it's a critical approach to understanding theory"

has a different meaning than “it’s an approach to understanding critical theory”—the words are basically the same, but the different order creates a different meaning.

Another semiotologist, Roland Barthes, explains that cultural signs, symbols, and images can have both denotative and connotative functions. Denotative functions are the direct meanings of a sign. They are the kind of thing you can look up in an ordinary dictionary. Yet, cultural signs and images can also have secondary, or connotative, meanings. These meanings get attached to the original word and create other, wider fields of meaning. At times these wider fields of meaning can act like myths creating hidden meanings behind the more apparent.

Thus, systems of connotation can link ideological messages to more primary, denotative meanings. In cultural oppression, then, the dominant group represents the subjugated in such a way that negative connotative meanings and myths are produced. This kind of complex layering of ideological meanings is why members of a disenfranchised group can simultaneously be proud and ashamed of their heritage. As an example, think about the black office colleagues to whom Du Bois referred: they can be proud of being black but at the same time feel that an image is too black.

Even though we’ve been talking mostly about words and language, remember that cultural studies uses semiotics as a method of understanding all culture, not just language. Thus, for example, images in television commercials may be seen as signs whose meaning is read through the manner in which they are placed next to one another, just like the syntagmatic meanings of words. Such images can have denotative and connotative meanings as well; and, thus, reference entire myths and discourses.

Representation & Discourse: As we’ve noted, one of Hall’s principal concerns is with representation. The first definition that Merriam-Webster (2002) lists for representation is “one that represents or is represented: as a: a likeness, picture, model, or other reproduction.” However, this is not what Hall has in mind. Hall sees *representation as an act of reconstruction* rather than reflection. For example, the image of the woman on this month’s *Cosmopolitan* magazine doesn’t reflect what women look like. The image does reconstruct something; but it isn’t simply a woman.

Almost every image in a technologically advanced society is created for a reason, with some other or larger purpose in mind. There is, then, the surface appearance or denotative meaning of the image, but there is also a deeper, myth-like connotation there as well. In the case of our *Cosmo* woman, the surface meaning is a woman, but the reason that image was put together in the way it was has little to do with being a woman, naturally speaking. The image was constructed to sell a specific kind of life-style that in turn demands the use of detailed products and other commodities, though all of this is presented simply as “a woman.” Behind the image on *Cosmopolitan*, then, is an entire world of beliefs, ideas, values, behaviors, and relationships that must be decoded and laid at the doorstep of cultural entrepreneurs and myth-makers. Thus, a critical approach to cultural studies understands representation as an act of ideological recreation that serves the specific interests of those who control the media.

The idea of representation is a way of critically understanding culture that is usually focused on single images. The idea of discourse, however, is generally used to critique larger swaths of culture. A *discourse* for Hall (1996) “is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e. a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (p. 201). Discourses are produced through language and practices. They are ways of talking about and acting towards an idea or group of people. One of the most powerful insights concerning discourses is that “anyone deploying a discourse must position themselves *as if* they were the subject of the discourse” (p. 202, emphasis original).

The example that Hall gives us is the discourse of the West. Ever since the distinction between the East and the West was made, the West has been seen as more advanced, more modern, and so on. This is in fact one of the reasons the distinction was made—to talk about the West as superior. In this discourse the West is the model toward which the “Rest” must strive. This discourse also places an obligation upon the West to assist the Rest in their move up the societal ladder. While you as an individual may not believe in the supremacy of the West, in order to talk about the relationship between the West and the Rest you must adopt a position as if you did believe it. For example, any time we use the terms “third world nation,” “modernization,” or “globalization,” we are positioning ourselves within the West/Rest discourse and implicit Western superiority.

For us to be able to talk about world relations without invoking belief in Western supremacy, we would have to come up with another language, one that wouldn't be based on the East/West divide. This kind of problem has been the challenge of feminism and critical race theory: coming up with a language that didn't require the speaker to position him or herself as if the discourse is real. Of course, in creating such a language a new discourse is produced with its own set of assumptions, values, and beliefs. Thus, the idea of discourse lets us focus on the way knowledge, language, and culture is used, rather than any idea of ultimate truth or falseness. In fact, every knowledge system or discourse has its own way of deciphering (and thus creating) facts and lies. That being the case, “the very language we use to describe the so-called facts interferes in this process of finally deciding what is true and what is false” (Hall 1996, p. 203). Knowledge and power are always intertwined. Knowledge and culture simultaneously state the condition of the world and reproduce political beliefs and values.

Meaning and struggle: Generally, the dominant definition of a word, its taken-for-grantedness, is achieved as powerful individuals or groups give credibility to the association of sign and meaning and as the association is repeated by others over time, as in the media. These repeated meanings become part of the sedimented memory of the collective and form a reservoir of themes and premises from which participants may draw. One of the things we mean when we say that the meanings are sedimented is that they are taken for granted: we use them without even thinking. This taken-for-grantedness is part of what makes signs, symbols, and culture in general ideological.

According to Hall, there is a way in which culture becomes a dead language when it is taken for granted. Unless we are intentionally taking a critical stand, when we talk and act we are unknowingly reproducing discourses of oppression; and it's the taken-for-grantedness of culture that makes it appear naturally real. But when a sign or image becomes part of a conflictual discourse, Hall considers it part of the living “social intelligibility.” That part of culture then becomes alive. But if a sign is withdrawn from conflict, it simply becomes part of the taken for granted association between meanings and signs, which in Hall's way of thinking constitutes an ideology (Hall 1982, p. 77). Thus a culture is most alive when it is the subject of conflict.

Conflict over the meaning of a sign or a discourse is most likely to occur during times of problematized meanings. Meanings become problematized through unexpected events, events that break the social frame, when powerful interests are involved, or when a striking ideological conflict becomes apparent. The social struggle may be manifest in two ways: disarticulation and/or conflict over the means of signification production. Following Barthes, the Centre considers the connotative field of reference for a word to be the chief location through which ideology, and, thus, social conflict, enters a language. The connotation of a sign is usually challenged through either an inversion mechanism (as the early civil rights movement did: Black = despised, changed to Black = beautiful) or through a metonymic mechanism, using a new word to sign something can intentionally

create a slippery slope toward a chain of negative connotations (again, from the civil rights era: pig = disgusting animal; pig = police).

The struggle over meaning also entails conflict over the means of production of signification. In modern societies, Cultural Studies considers the mass media to be of primary importance. Culture requires communication, and in industrialized collectives the bulk of communication transmission occurs through the media. Early work at the Centre focused on the commodification of communication. In modern capitalist societies, the prime issues are who owns the means of communication and the manner in which the recipients of the communication (such as the viewing audience) are defined. The means of communication are owned by capitalists for the purpose of profit. And, thus, advertising has increasingly taken more and more communicative space, thus defining the transmission process. This advertising and all forms of large scale transmission are aimed at the masses: the “gullible, fickle, herdlike, low in taste and habit” (Williams, 1958, p. 303).

Advertising takes existing appetites and creates around them a fantasy that tends “towards a view of the world in which progress is conceived as a seeking of material possessions, equality as a moral leveling and freedom as the ground for endless irresponsible pleasure. These productions belong to a vicarious, spectators’ world” (Hoggart, 1957, p. 277). Thus, the false consciousness produced by advertising results in a trivialization of the real issues of life; nothing is concrete and personal, and increased uniformity of culture implies a leveling to the lowest common denominator.

Summary:

- Stuart Hall and the school of cultural studies takes a critical look at culture. Where people like Berger and Luckmann are concerned with how culture appears real, cultural studies is focused on the ideological, oppressive implications of culture. Cultural studies generally uses semiotics to study culture. Semiotics is the study of signs, and cultural studies approaches all culture as if it functions in much the same way as language, with meaning produced through difference, linearity, and syntagmatic and associative relations. Signs also have denotative and connotative meanings, with connotative meanings forming second-order meaning systems that operate much like myths. Hall also calls our attention to the ideas of discourse and representation—cultural images and signs do not simply represent, they reconstruct the ideologies and practices of those responsible for producing the images. Discourses are ways of representing (reconstructing) knowledge and practices. Discourses are ways of talking about or acting towards an idea or group of people that define the group or idea in its totality. The insidious nature of discourse is revealed in that to talk or act toward the idea or group at all requires a person to act as if the discourse was true.
- Hall and cultural studies also tell us that culture isn’t singular; there are many cultures present in a postindustrial society. These cultures vie for hegemony or power. Generally speaking, cultures associated with the economic or political elite will be more powerful, as they control the culture producing organizations, yet even they are in competition and must create an alliance in order to have hegemonic effects. Hegemonic culture is generally accepted by the masses because it co-opts certain elements of their cultures and thus appears as if it embraces all; the masses also tend to accept the hegemonic culture because they must work and live in and through organizations that are controlled by elite. The masses thus must buy into the elite culture to some degree in order to survive. If left unchallenged, hegemonic culture functions as ideology and oppression is taken

for granted and seen as normal. Cultural change comes through challenging these taken for granted assumptions and “talking back” or changing the associative meanings of words, through inversion or metonymic mechanisms.

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