

# Central Problems in Cultural Studies

## Language and Material

For Marxism, culture is a corporeal force locked into the socially organized production of the material conditions of existence. Marxism has argued that the material mode of production is 'the real foundation' of cultural superstructures. That is, the material – understood here as the economic – determines the cultural. However, this orthodox reading of Marx proved to be too mechanical and deterministic in exploring the *specific* features of culture.

Consequently, the narrative of cultural studies involves a distancing of itself from Marxist reductionism. Instead, the analysis of the autonomous logic of language, culture, representation and consumption was placed in the foreground. – Barker, pp. 25-26

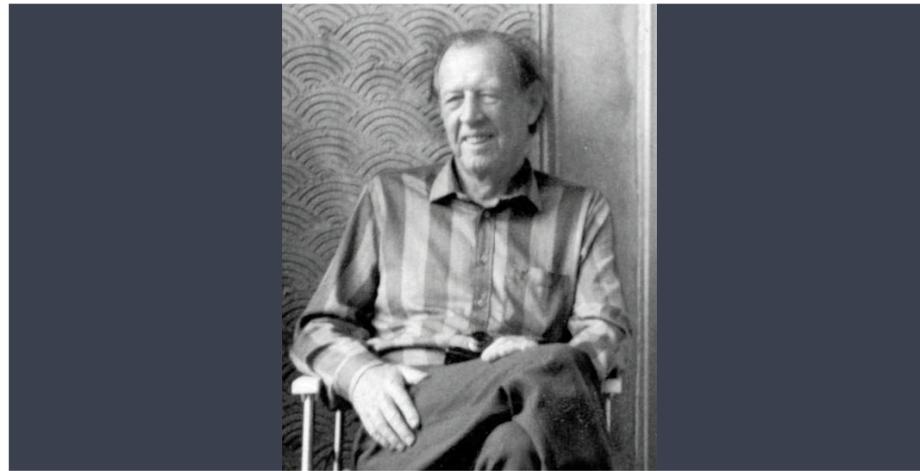
## The Textual Character of Culture

Most students of cultural studies are aware that culture can be read as a text, using concepts like signification, code or discourse. However, an emphasis on structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of signification has sometimes led cultural studies to reify language as a 'thing' or 'system' rather than grasp it as a social practice. – Barker, p. 26

The metaphor of culture as 'like a language' has a great deal to recommend it. However, there is also much to be gained by describing culture in terms of practices, routines and spatial arrangements. Not only is language always embedded in practice, but also all practices signify. Further, the identification of textual codes and subject positions does not guarantee that the proscribed meanings are 'taken up' by concrete persons in daily life (see Ang, 1985; Morley, 1992). – Barker, p. 26

## The Location of Culture

For Raymond Williams (1981, 1983) culture is located, for all intents and purposes, within flexible but identifiable boundaries. That is, culture is understood to be a facet of place. Indeed it is constitutive of place. In so far as culture is a common whole way of life, its boundaries are largely locked into those of nationality and ethnicity, that is, the culture of, for example, the English or perhaps the British. However, globalization has made the idea of culture as a whole way of life located within definite boundaries increasingly problematic. – Barker, p. 27



KEY THINKER: Raymond Williams

A Welsh academic, novelist and critic. His work laid the foundation for cultural studies and the cultural materialist approach. A committed socialist, he was greatly interested in the relationships between language, literature, and society and published many books, essays, and articles on these and other issues. The experience of working-class culture and a commitment to democracy and socialism are themes in his writings. His anthropologically inspired grasp of culture as ordinary and lived legitimized the study of popular culture.

**Key Writings:**

*Culture and Society* (1958)

*Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974)

*Keywords* (1976)

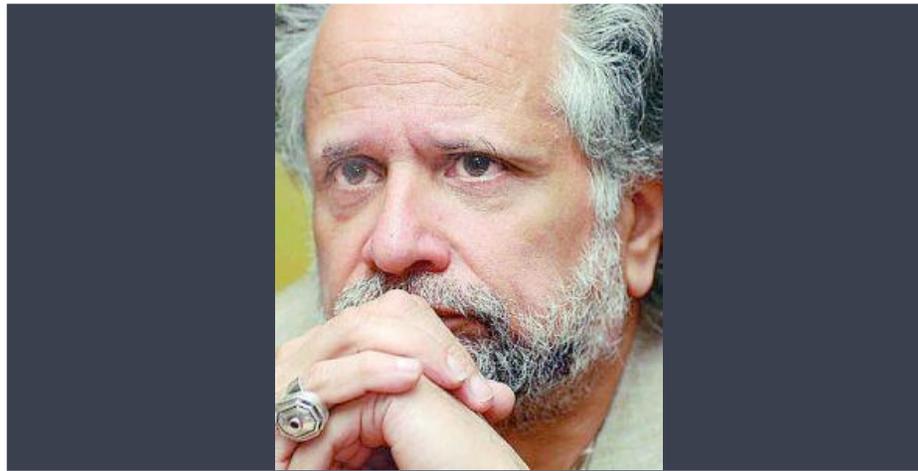
*Marxism and Literature* (1977)

The processes of globalization suggest that we need to rethink our conception of culture. Culture is not best understood in terms of locations and roots but more as hybrid and creolized cultural routes in global space. Indeed, the prominence given to difference in cultural theory has led many writers to think of culture, identities and identifications as always a place of borders and hybridity rather than fixed stable entities (Bhabha, 1994). – Barker, p. 27

**Cultures are not pure, authentic and locally bounded. They are the syncretic and hybridized products of interactions across space. -- Barker, p. 27**

- ▶ **Syncretism:** the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different forms of belief or practice, often while melding practices of various schools of thought.
- ▶ **Hybridization:** to produce or cause to produce a new thing by combining two different elements.

The *duality of culture* lies in its being both 'in-place' and of 'no-place'...Phrases like 'a whole way of life' or a 'local culture' no longer signify cultural entities but are expressions that mark out analytic boundaries drawn for particular purposes." – Barker, p. 28



KEY THINKER: Homi Bhabha

Born in India, he is a professor of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University. He is considered one of the central figures in contemporary post-colonial theory and is responsible for coining some of its key concepts including: hybridity and mimicry. Bhabha argues that colonialism shouldn't be seen as something locked in the past. Instead he shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding that we change our understanding of cross-cultural relations. His influences include Derrida and deconstruction, Lacan and psychoanalysis, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said.

**Key Writings:**

*Nation and Narration* (1990)

*Location of Culture* (1994)

## Rationality and its Limits

For over 200 years reason and rationality have been championed as the source of progress in knowledge and society. However, a range of postmodern thinkers have criticized the impulses of modern rationality. They argue that it brings us not so much progress as domination and oppression. The very impulse to control nature through science and rationality is, it is argued, an impulse to control and dominate human beings. – Barker, p. 30

## Regarding rationality, Michel Foucault argues:

- ▶ Knowledge is not metaphysical, transcendental or universal.
- ▶ Knowledge is a matter perspective.
- ▶ Knowledge is not pure or neutral but is always from a point of view.
- ▶ Knowledge is itself implicated in **regimes of power**.

However, Foucault also questions the idea of a clear and final break between enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought, or between the modern and postmodern. It is not a question of accepting or rejecting enlightenment rationality but of asking: 'What is this reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers?' (Foucault, 1984). – Barker, p. 30.

## The Character of Truth

How can we ground or justify cultural theory and cultural politics? This is one of the central problems of cultural studies. For modernists, the adoption of a realist epistemology has allowed writers and researchers to make universal truth claims. It follows that once we know the truth about the workings of social world, then we can intervene strategically in human affairs with confidence. All the social sciences, from sociology to economics and psychology, were founded on the premise that conceptual and empirical truth can be discovered. –

However, realist epistemologies have largely been displaced within cultural studies. This is a consequence of the influence of poststructuralism, postmodernism and other anti-representationalist paradigms. These widely accepted (within cultural studies) strands of thinking have undermined the notion of objective and universal truth. – Barker, p. 30

**Truth is understood to be a social  
commendation rather than an accurate picture  
of an independent object world. – Barker, p. 31**

Rorty argues we are always positioned *within* acculturated knowledge. There is no final vocabulary of language that is 'true' in the sense of accurately picturing an independent object world called reality. Our vocabularies are only final in the sense of currently being without tenable challenge. Thus our best bet is to go on telling stories about ourselves that aim to achieve the most valued description and arrangement of human actions and institutions. – Barker, p. 31

## Key Methodologies in Cultural Studies

- ▶ *ethnography*, which has often been linked with culturalist approaches and a stress on 'lived experience'
- ▶ a range of *textual* approaches, which have tended to draw from semiotics, poststructuralism and Derridean deconstruction
- ▶ a series of *reception* studies, which are eclectic in their theoretical roots

# Culture & Ideology

**Culture is not 'out there' waiting to be correctly described by theorists who keep getting it wrong. Rather, the concept of culture is a tool that is of more or less usefulness to us. Consequently, its usage and meaning continue to change as thinkers have hoped to 'do' different things with it. – Barker, p. 39**

**We should not ask what culture 'is.' Rather, we need to enquire about how the language of culture is used and for what purposes. – Barker, p. 39**

Culture is Ordinary.

A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep and personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. (Williams, 1989: 4). – Barker, pp. 41-42

**Meanings are generated not by individuals alone but by collectives.** Thus, the idea of culture refers to shared meanings. – **Barker, p. 42**

To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways. (Hall, 1997a: 2) – Barker, p. 42

# Culturalism/Cultural Materialism

**Culturalism = anthropological and historically informed understanding of culture (Hall)**

## Cultural Materialism -- Raymond Williams

Culture as everyday meanings and values is part of an expressive totality of social relations. Thus, 'the theory of culture' is defined as 'the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life' (Williams, 1965:

We need to distinguish three levels of culture, even in its most general definition. There is the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place. There is the recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts: The culture of the period. There is also, as the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures, the culture of the selective tradition. (Williams, 1965: 66) – Barker, p. 45

For Williams, the purpose of cultural analysis is to explore and analyze the recorded culture of a given time and place. In doing so he seeks to reconstitute the 'structure of feeling,' or shared values and outlooks, of a culture. At the same time, we need always to aware that cultural records are part of a selectively preserved and interpreted 'tradition.'

Williams insists that culture be understood through the representations and practices of daily life in the context of the material conditions of their production.

– Barker, p. 45

## Culture as Lived Experience

## In sum, culture for Williams is constituted by:

- ▶ the meanings generated by ordinary men and women
- ▶ the lived experiences of its participants
- ▶ the texts and practices engaged in by all people as they conduct their lives

**Meanings and practices are enacted on terrain not of our making even as we struggle to creatively shape our lives. Culture does not float free of the material conditions of life. – Barker, p. 46**

The meanings of lived culture are to be explored within the context of their conditions of production. In this sense culture is understood as a 'whole way of life.' – Barker, p. 46

## High Culture vs. Low Culture

For mainstream criticism, the romantic idea of the 'artistic object,' produced by the 'artistic soul,' is allied to a sense of the complexity and authenticity of the work of art. This in turn requires necessary skill and work by readers in order to access a genuine aesthetic experience...However, neither the form of art nor its context can secure universal meaning. – Barker, p. 47

**Art is not a copy of the world but a specific socially constructed representation. – Barker, p. 48**

Cultural studies has developed evaluative criteria based on political values and ideological analysis rather than on aesthetics. Here the role of criticism becomes the development of a more profound understanding of the way our cultural and symbolic process are connected to social, political and economic power (Eagleton, 1984). From this perspective, it makes little sense to discuss whether culture is formally and aesthetically 'good' or 'bad.' Rather, we need to consider, from an inevitably value-laden position, its 'ideological' construction and potential consequences. – Barker, p. 48

**Taste and cultural judgement mark out class boundaries, cultural competencies and cultural capital. – Barker, p. 49**

# Mass Culture: Popular Culture

A variant of the high-low cultural boundary is that which decries commodity-based culture as inauthentic, manipulative and unsatisfying. This perspective reproduces again the 'inferiority' of popular culture. The argument is that commodified capitalist 'mass culture' is:

- ▶ inauthentic because not produced by 'the people'
- ▶ manipulative because its primary purpose is to be purchased
- ▶ unsatisfying because it requires little work to consume and thus fails to enrich its consumers

## Creative Consumption

The production of popular music, film, television and fashion is in the hands of transnational capitalist corporations. However, consumption-oriented cultural studies argues that meanings are produced, altered and managed at the level of use by people who are active producers of meaning. – Barker, p. 50

To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous and spectacular production corresponds another production, called 'consumption.' The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order. (DeCerteau, 1984) – Barker, p. 51

**Popular culture can be regarded as the meanings and practices produced by popular audiences at the moment of consumption. Thus the study of popular culture becomes centered on the uses to which commodities are put. – Barker, p. 52**

These arguments represent a reversal of the traditional question: how do the culture industries turn people into commodities that serve their interests? Instead there is exploration of how people turn the products of industry into their popular culture serving their interests. – Barker, p. 52

In place of Truth, Foucault speaks instead about particular 'regimes of truth.' Similarly, Rorty (1980, 1989) argues that all truth is culture-bound and specific to times and places. Knowledge and values are located in time, space and social power. – Barker, p. 31