

Cultural Studies: A Theoretical, Historical and Practical Overview

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ABSTRACT

Cultural studies has become an unavoidable part of literary criticism and theory. Cultural studies is an advanced interdisciplinary arena of research and teaching that examines the means in which “culture” creates and transforms day to day life, individual experiences, power and social relations. As a developing field of study it is important to know the beginning and growth of cultural studies as a field of knowledge. This article is an attempt to present an introductory information regarding the beginning, definitions, schools important theoreticians and practical aspects of cultural studies. This study is analytical in nature and historical information are presented mostly. The objective of this article is to give a quick understanding about the beginners in the field of Cultural studies.

Key words: Cultural studies, literary theory, Birmingham School, Frankfurt School.

Once Socrates said: “The unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato 12) while making people aware about the necessity to evaluate life with the help of self-knowledge and wisdom. He believed in necessity of life evaluation for further improvements and betterment. The underlying principles of cultural studies has traces to Socrates’ statement. Cultural studies, as the theoretical and empirical analysis of culture, investigates the way cultural practices are related to various systems of power and social-phenomena. The field considers culture as a constantly interacting and changing sets of practices and processes. Though there have been multiple attempts to define culture yet it is hard to provide an all-inclusive definition of what culture is all about? In his essay “Culture and Anarchy” (1867), Matthew Arnold refers culture to special intellectual or artistic endeavours or products, what today we might call “high culture” as opposed to “popular culture”. This definition of culture is closely related to aesthetics than to social science. Edward Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1870) defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. The primary and theoretical definitions has come from the field of anthropology. Among contemporary theorists, Raymond Williams has written extensively on culture. In his essay “Culture is Ordinary” he points out: “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” (Williams 93).

Cultural studies can be defined as the study of ways in which culture is constructed, organized and the ways in which it evolves and changes over time. English Oxford living dictionary defines

cultural studies as an academic field of study characterized by a multidisciplinary approach (derived from the social sciences and the humanities) to the study of contemporary (especially mass) culture. M.H Abrams defines cultural studies as

A recent and rapidly growing cross-disciplinary enterprise for analysing the conditions that effect the production, reception, and cultural significance of all types of institutions, practices, and products; among these, literature is accounted as merely one of many forms of cultural "signifying practices." A chief concern is to specify the functioning of the social, economic, and political forces and power-structures that produce all forms of cultural phenomena and endow them with their social "meanings," their "truth," the modes of discourse in which they are discussed, and their relative value and status. (Abrams 56)

In his book *A Short History of Cultural Studies* (2002) John Hartley tend to answer the question related to cultural studies:

It was a philosophy of plenty. It was a dedicated to the study of the expansion of difference in human affairs (during an era of increasing globalisation, corporate concentration and technological integration of those affairs). An assemblage of intellectual concerns about power, meaning, identity and subjectivity in modern societies. An attempt to recover and promote marginal, unworthy or despised regions, identities, practices and media (it was a profane pursuit). A critical enterprise devoted to displacing, decentring, demystifying and deconstructing the common sense of dominant discourses. An activist commitment to intellectual politics – making a difference with ideas, to ideas, by ideas (Hartely 13).

The origin of cultural studies can be traced in two major incidents. One is the identification of the limitations of classical Marxism and the growth of New Left movement. Stuart Hall traces the origin of cultural studies in the limitation of Marxism.

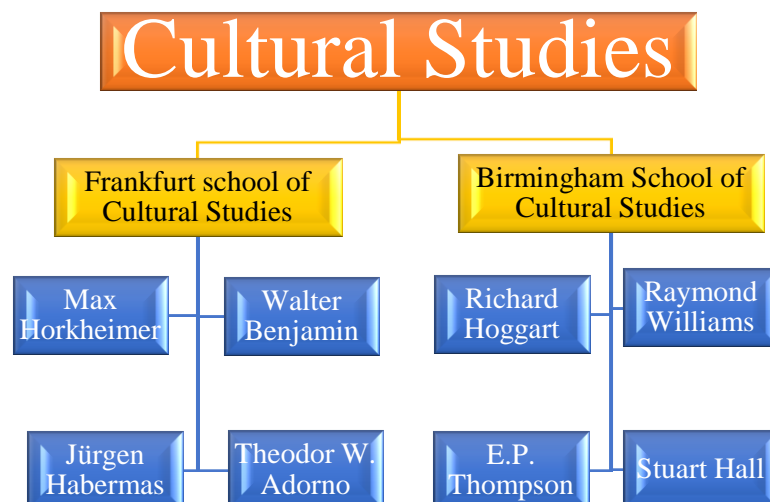
The power, the global reach and history-making capacities of capital; the question of class; the complex relationships between power, which is an easier term to establish in the discourses of culture than exploitation, and exploitation; the question of a general theory which could, in a critical way, connect together in a critical reflection different domains of life, politics and theory, theory and practice, economic, political, ideological questions and so on; the notion of critical knowledge itself and the production of critical knowledge as a practice (Hall 101).

Second factor is the struggle between High and Low culture. For this second group of cultural theorists, cultural studies is the study of mass or popular culture, especially the mass media in a mass society. It is engrossed with cultural politics, which in this framework denotes to a fight among high or minority culture and popular or mass culture. These cultural theorists are interested in popular culture that is the struggle for a structural position within a radically unequal class society. The scholarship of cultural studies has a history of its own. The founding practitioners like Richard Hoggart (cultural studies as the democratised literary imagination) and Stuart Hall (cultural studies as the political theory of popular resistance and change) wrote about

it. Stuart Hall's successor at Birmingham, the historian Richard Johnson (cultural studies as bemused materialism) also contributed to the history. Many introductory books about cultural studies – by, say, John Storey's *Cultural Consumption and Everyday Life Cultural studies in practice* (1999), Nick Couldry's *Inside Culture* (2000), Chris Barker's *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (2000) – incorporate historical accounts into their exposition of methodology and their analytical and conceptual exegesis. Leading figures of cultural studies like Charlotte Brunson, Paul Gilroy, Elizabeth Wilson, Angela McRobbie, and David Morley included historical accounts in their own unfolding compositions. Though not falling in the main arena of cultural studies, people like Fred Inglis and Ioan Davies, contributed to the studies in their own way. Cultural studies displays its plurality in the subject matter, approach towards the subject and people who contributed in it too. The discipline of cultural studies begins with three major texts. They are: *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) by Richard Hoggart, *Culture and Society* (1958) by Raymond Williams and *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) by E.P. Thompson. Richard Maxwell is considered as father of British Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams though complain about the Anglo- American-Australian Anglophone bias of cultural studies yet quote mainly from such sources. This strange behaviour did not go well with the students who intended to know what was what and when, but it was inevitable, because cultural studies was a critical not a disciplinary enterprise.

Schools of Cultural Studies and Important Theoreticians

British cultural studies describes the forms of culture in the 1950s and early 1960s which articulated conditions in an era where significant tension between an older working class-based culture and the newer mass-produced culture which was a result of American culture industries in England. The first project of cultural studies developed by Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson attempted to highlight the struggle of working class culture against aggression of mass culture produced by the culture industries. The attacks on mass culture and defenses of working class culture by Hoggart and Williams, Thompson's historical inquiries into the history of British working class institutions and struggles were part of a



socialist and working class-oriented project. It believed that the industrial working class was a force to bring progressive social change and a struggle can be mobilized against the inequalities existing in the capitalist societies to ensure a more egalitarian and socialist society. Williams and Hoggart were deeply involved in projects of orientation toward socialist working class, working class education and politics and saw cultural studies as an instrument of progressive social change. They gave a new dimension for the field.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, England was an important component that contributed to the growth of cultural studies. Richard Hoggart was the first director of the school. Then Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson, and Michael Green took the directorship. In the introductory lecture after his selection as Professor of English at the University of Birmingham in 1962, Richard Hoggart declared his purpose to conduct research into 'mass' culture. Two years later, Hoggart had established the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The Centre was funded in part by Penguin Books in recognition of Hoggart's star performance in the Lady Chatterley's Lover (1928) obscenity trial. Hoggart wanted the initiative to expand on *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), his earlier book on working-class cultures and the mass media, and to study everyday forms of popular culture using skills drawn from literary scholarship.

Frankfurt school is more suitable for analysing the current forms of society and culture because of their focus on the intersections among the culture, industries, technology and the economic-situation in contemporary capitalist societies. The Frankfurt school, to a large extent initiates critical studies related to culture and mass communication, and thus produces an early model of cultural studies. They formulate the term 'culture industries' to represent the process of the commercial force and industrialization of mass-produced culture which drove the system. The theorists analyse all mass-mediated cultural artefacts within the context of industrial production, in which various commodities/ constituent practices of a culture exhibited the same features as other products of mass production. The culture industries fulfil the obligation of furnishing ideological legitimation for the existing capitalist societies and of combining individuals into the framework of the capitalist system. Frankfurt school, we need to understand, is the first attempt to systematically analyse and criticise communications and mass-mediated culture within critical social theory. It is one of the first neo-Marxist groups to study the effects of mass culture and the advancement of the consumer society on the working classes which had been to be the site and mechanism of revolution in the classical Marxian scenario. They have witnessed fascism in Europe and had seen Nazis used mass culture instruments to make submission to fascist culture and society. They have also analysed the way American "popular culture" worked to promote the interests of American capitalism.

The culture industries which are directed by massive corporations, are controlled according to the structures of mass production, churning out a vast commercial system of culture which conciliate on the values, life-styles, and institutions of American capitalism. Therefore theory of 'the culture industries' by the Frankfurt school expresses a historical alteration to an era where mass consumption and culture has been essential to produce a consumer society which grounded on homogeneous needs and desires for mass-produced products.

The purpose and applicability of cultural studies can be seen in multiple fields. The field cultural studies and literary criticism discusses the questions like why does culture remain so important to literary writers, critics and publishers? Why has studying culture been so political? Cultural studies and other social theories deal with opposition between popular and high culture. What is the possibility, for instance, of popular culture carrying forward serious content, from Shakespeare to contemporary music and media? Cultural studies and art history highlights the question how are the ingredients of realism, constructivism, civic humanism and art combine in the cultural studies recipe? Cultural studies and political economy explore the answer for what has been the nexus between economy and culture; and what has determined the economic, political and cultural spheres? Cultural studies responses to the query If 'culture is ordinary', then how to study ordinary, everyday activities – for example walking, travel shopping, eating? Cultural studies in the context of teaching deals with the question how does cultural studies address its own readers? How does it create a large, transnational, multidisciplinary readership, and bring both astute peers and uncommitted entry-level readers along to share its interests? Cultural studies looks for the politics of publishing involved in many publishing firms and industries.

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