

THE INFLUENCE OF MARX, GRAMSCI AND WILLIAMS ON STUART HALL'S THEORY OF CULTURE

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Abstract

The late Stuart Hall has had an enormous influence on the academic, political and cultural spheres of Great Britain. Along with other significant academics such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson, Hall played a key role in the development of the field of Cultural Studies and the way we understand the term 'culture' today. This article explores how Hall's thinking was influenced by Marx, Gramsci and Williams, covering a wide range of notions such as false consciousness, hegemony, ideology, economic determinism, language and communication and how these might be rethought through the lens of culture. Hall's work not only brought forward more sophisticated insights about social life and human interactions inside the context of institutions and social structures, it also advanced a critical approach to the study of a social world embedded in meanings, significances and power.

ON FEBRUARY 10th, 2014, *The Guardian* announced Professor Stuart Hall's death with a news article titled, "'Godfather of multiculturalism' Stuart Hall dies aged 82' (Butler, 2014). In the article, the author was careful to emphasise Hall's great influence on the academic, political and cultural spheres of Great Britain during the last six decades. Stuart Hall, along with other important academics such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson, played a key role in the foundation and establishment of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) during the 1960s, an institution that gave rise to the field of Cultural Studies as a formal academic discipline (Seidman 2008, 129). The relationship between culture and different elements of social life and whether the former exerted a deterministic role over the latter or vice versa had long captured the attention of these theorists, mainly as part of their efforts to rethink Marxism. Given the context of a

changing society in which not only commodities but also aspects of everyday life like information and entertainment were mass produced, there was an urgent need for an updated conceptual framework contemplating these new social realities. The BCCCS, under the leadership of Stuart Hall, took up the task of 'updating' that framework. Hall committed his life to understanding and explaining the processes, expressions, mediums and exchanges of culture, eventually becoming the 'guiding force' of the BCCCS and even of the entire field (Seidman 2008, 129).

However, as in any other discipline, the establishment of Cultural Studies was not an endeavour built through isolated individual efforts but an enterprise that benefitted from previous developments. As Hall acknowledges in one of his last interviews, Marx's social theory is the strong foundation of the field of Cultural Studies (Hall, 2012). Therefore, the aim of this article is to discuss the influence that Marx and key Neo-Marxist thinkers had on Stuart Hall's theoretical work, especially with regards to his theory of culture and the foundation of Cultural Studies as a formal and interdisciplinary school in the Social Sciences.

The prevalent understanding of culture preceding the establishment of the BCCCS portrayed cultural expressions either as exclusive of the higher classes—in the form of cultural texts such as books, music, theatre, etc., or as a derivative of the ubiquitous relations of production, a legacy of Marx's historical materialism (Couldry 2000, 3). Two facts challenged these traditions. First, the increasingly fundamental importance of so-called popular culture—i.e., cultural expressions such as popular music and dances, magazines, sitcoms, ads, etc., that didn't fall under the scope of the elitist 'high-culture'—with its new patterns of social life, was finally being recognized (3). This meant that popular culture was brought

to the fore to become a target of serious study for the first time. Second, the decade of the 1950s had witnessed the failure of different Marxist political projects (David 2004, 8). The inability to explain and forecast the crises facing socialists, communists and other left-wing activists propelled a wave of revisionism by Neo-Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, whose aim was to illuminate the factors that contributed to such failure (Hodkinson 2011; Hall et al., 1980).

The first theorists that attempted to extend the reach of cultural studies as ‘an interdisciplinary field that explored the linkages between society, politics, identity and the full range of culture (from the high to the popular or mass media, language, discourses and communicative practices)’ were the BCCCS founding theorists (Ritzer, 2006). They understood that culture in its broad sense involved a set of meanings and interactions that constructed and created social life. In fact, Hoggart and Williams were the first to propose that literary or ‘high culture’ was just one expression of a broader cultural dimension. Thus, the field of Cultural Studies began as a ‘critique of earlier elitist approaches to culture’ (Couldry 2000, 2). Since popular culture had gathered immense social power in the post-war period, television, radio and advertising had an increasing impact on the broader social structures. Therefore, novel ways of thinking that explained the close link between culture and societal structure and politics, especially in regard to questions about democracy and equality, were required (2).

Since culture and its expressions could only be understood in the broader social context of institutions, power relations and history, Hall relied on developments from diverse areas like studies of deviance, subcultures and popular culture whilst, at the same time, turning his

attention to European Marxism (Althusser and Gramsci) in the search for a new paradigm (Rojek 2001, 362). In this instance, Gramsci's reflections on hegemony, resistance, and popular cultural forms, as well as Althusser's concepts, i.e. Ideological State Apparatus, proved useful to better understand the nature of ideological formations, institutions' power relations, and a number of relevant considerations involved in the study of culture (Ritzer, 2006).

Stuart Hall, like many of his fellows in the BCCCS, started his career by questioning long held Marxist assumptions. One of those assumptions, for instance, predicted an imminent failure of the capitalist mode of production in the light of its own contradictions (Sayers 1998, 8). According to Marx, capitalism's unbearable negative effects—increased exploitation of workers, a continual decline in wages, longer working hours, and an inevitable shrinking of the middle class—would trigger an awakening of the working classes whose newly adopted 'class solidarity' and newly found 'class consciousness' would allow them to overcome a prior stage of 'false consciousness.' This concept of 'false consciousness' can be understood as a social state sustained by the widespread ideology of the ruling classes, whereby the working classes help to maintain their own subservience. The power relations between the dominant and subordinate classes within the 'social, political and spiritual processes of life' were, according to Marx, determined by 'the mode of production of material life' (cited in Hodkinson 2011, 107). This relationship between the economic base of society and its superstructure has been subject to a whole range of interpretations and misinterpretations. In fact, Hall blames traditional Marxists for attaching an overly economic-deterministic character to these useful analytical tools (Davis 2004, 15). As a consequence, Hall committed his efforts to developing a theoretical approach that avoided economic

determinism by implementing a more accurate revision of Marx's concepts of base and superstructure (Seidman, 2008).

In his paper 'Culture, Media and the "Ideological effect"' Hall supports the claim that 'culture has its roots in what Marx, in *The German ideology*, called man's "double relation": to nature and to other men' (1977, 315). From the beginning of history, man's relationships with his surroundings and fellow members of society were expressed through labour, as a way to meet his basic needs. Since, in every social group, human beings need to cooperate to sustain their livelihoods, social relationships emerge from a given mode of 'production of material life' (Marx and Engels [c1845-46] 1965, 10). In a capitalist society, the broad social interactions were shaped by conflicting relationships between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Similarly, in an allegedly communist society, interactions between its members should be shaped by a unconflicted economic base, at least in theory. But critical historical events during the last half of the twentieth century revealed the failures of political systems that claimed to follow Marxist ideologies. Meanwhile, the capitalist system continued to pervade and embed in way that seemed to get stronger with time. Hall and his fellow theorists looked for explanations that would help them make sense of the tumultuous social and political scene. The question was, if, according to Marx's historical materialism, culture and widespread social relationships were only a derivative of the economic relations of production existing within a specific time period, why would the economic base of an allegedly communist society give rise to a super-structural catastrophe? The reality was that, unlike communism, capitalism demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to adapt and change, and Hall recognised this.

In his work 'A Sense of Classlessness' (1958), Hall argued that the capitalist mode of production had brought a remarkable stability and growth to the society of the Post-World War II era. Furthermore, despite Marx's predictions, the workers failed to develop the class consciousness that would allow them to overcome their 'false class consciousness.' Instead, Hall proposed, the mechanisms of contemporary capitalism had left the working classes with a 'sense of classlessness.' The workers had exchanged their values of co-operativism and community for a desire for 'advancement' through the social ladder expressed in the form of status and 'lifestyles.' This they tried to obtain by means of new consumerist ideas and practices whose construction, development and diffusion had been carried out by factors such as the mass media, advertising and culture. These factors were not simply peripheral to nor derivative of the economic infrastructure. Rather, they were important elements with the ability to affect and change economic relationships at the core, as well as the beliefs, behaviours and practices that formed those relationships. In other words, culture was not a simple reflection of the mode of 'production of material life,' in Marx's terms (Marx and Engels [c1845-46] 1968). Hall insisted that relegating every expression of social life to productive relations, as the traditional interpretations of Marxists had proposed, meant leaving out 'too much of importance' (Hall 1958, 32). For 'there are points in which "ideas" or a "structure of assumptions" directly impinge and affect, if not the nature of the "economic base," then certainly the way it behaves' (32). For Hall, the concepts of base and superstructure were analytical tools, not absolute realities. Between base, superstructure and the individual experience, there was a sort of 'organic relationship' bridging every aspect of social life, from economic relationships to 'the way we see ourselves' (32). It becomes clear that, for Hall, this 'organic relationship' was *culture*.

In 'The Culture, Media and the "Ideological Effect"' (1977), Hall provides a conceptual reference of culture that shows his commitment to the revision of Marxist notions. According to Hall, Marx identifies culture as the form, the 'identifiable pattern' materialized by specific social relations (practices of labour) in different social structures which emerge within determinate historical conditions, in a definite point in time, and which is 'passed on from generation to generation as man's second nature' (Hall 1977, 318-319). This identifiable pattern, a 'mode' of living, depicts the 'content' of social organization as well as the way, the form, the *how*, it is lived or experienced by social beings. It is also important to note that, according to Hall, Marx identified language as the main medium through which culture and knowledge are transmitted:

[Marx] had identified language, the principal medium through which this knowledge of man's appropriation and adaptation of nature is elaborated, stored, transmitted and applied, as a form of 'practical consciousness' arising 'from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men' [...] Culture is the accumulated growth of man's power over nature, materialized in the instruments and practice of labour and in the medium of signs, thought, knowledge and language through which it is passed on from generation to generation as 'man's second nature' (Hall 1977, 319).

Hall's focus on language as the major field for the study of culture and its expressions is also probably the result of Raymond Williams' influence. As the latter pointed out, culture consists of 'shared and contested networks of meanings,' that is to say, 'culture consists of changing networks of signification' in which expressions or products 'are made to exist as meaningful objects' (in Storey 2010, 34-37). Hall's understanding of culture associates it

with language and communication, 'the meanings, symbols and interpretations of reality that are a part of social life' (Seidman 2008, 133). Thus, culture does not lie in the expression, product or commodity per se; it relies upon the *meanings* whereby those cultural products are said to take place. For Hall and his colleagues at the BCCCS, it is only through culture that the social world becomes an entity with some sort of significance. It is only through culture that the world has meaning. Although, Hall makes clear that these *meanings* are not free from power relations and class interests. Meanings, he claims, are socially and historically constructed, transformed, interpreted and contested (Seidman 2008). Even so, he defends the human capability of choice, because the audience is not a passive recipient of meaningful contents, but an active participant in their creation (Hall, 1980).

At this point, a discussion of the relevance of Antonio Gramsci on Hall's thought becomes necessary. An Italian Neo-Marxist, Gramsci suggested one of the most accepted revisions to Marx's economic determinism. He held that although the economic infrastructure did not condition the superstructure, it provided a general background for social phenomena (Davis 2004, 78). Unlike Marx, Gramsci proposed a more realistic, reciprocal influence between the structure and superstructure of society, meaning a detachment from the idea that the economy is the sole determinant of other social relations. Gramsci stressed the importance of ideas in society and highlighted the process whereby these ideas became 'the tools that ruling elites use to perpetrate their power, wealth and status' (Boggs 1976, 39). His theory of hegemony connected ideological representations to cultural formations. This connection required that ideological assertions become self-evident cultural assumptions held under the rubric of 'common sense.' Hegemony also required social consent, 'a willing agreement

to be governed by principles, rules, and laws' that people believed obeyed their 'best interests' (Lull 1995, 34). In this sense, Hall advanced Gramsci's emphasis on ideas to identify hegemony as the process by which the dominant classes 'set the limits' (cultural, mental, ideological, structural) 'within which subordinate classes live and make sense' of their world in a way that perpetuates the dominance of the ruling class (Hall 1977, 333). This conceptualisation of hegemony offered Hall an explanation of the origins of power, which became another stepping stone in his theory.

According to Hall, power lays in hegemonic control—in a set of ideologies expressed in the realms of language and culture which form part of common sense (Boggs, 1976). In brief, whoever controls meanings, controls the hegemony. This means that as meanings are embedded in every aspect of social life, the battlefields where there is a struggle of power include culture and language. Therefore, the study of culture is essential to understand the way in which different social groups engage in the conflict for power through their ability to attach significance and meanings to their cultural expressions (Seidman, 2008). Similarly, any chance for resistance, countertendencies and human agency appear in the limits of dominant cultural forms which challenge established cultural assumptions (*Stuart Hall: The Red and the Black*, 1985). As Hall states, 'ideological resistance involves reinventing and reformulating institutional messages for purposes that differ from the creator's intentions'; that is, by fostering alternative, resistant, and contradictory messages (ibid.). Like Gramsci, Hall was a firm believer of the role that the subaltern classes, intellectuals and revolutionary political parties played in triggering social change. Most probably, this was the main reason for his engagement with British politics and his active role as a 'public intellectual' (Paul, 2014).

In conclusion, Stuart Hall will be remembered as one of the revolutionising theorists of the Twentieth (and perhaps Twenty-first) Century. His efforts to understand social structures in terms of culture as well as his profound engagement with the development of a new social paradigm are his major successes. His work did not only bring forward more sophisticated insights about social life and human interactions inside the context of institutions and social structures, it also advanced a critical approach to the study of a social world embedded in meanings, significances and struggles for power. His analysis regarding capitalism, his rethinking of Marxism, his thoughts on popular culture and the way it affects power, were views that challenged the existent perceptions of the time. It must not be assumed however, that such extensive work was the result of Hall's effort alone. He was influenced by great social thinkers like Marx, Gramsci, and Williams, from whom he borrowed key understandings and concepts useful for the study of culture. Certainly, the extent of his engagement with cultural studies can be ascertained by the positive international reputation that both the BCCCS and Hall himself enjoy in the academic world.

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