



Cultural Studies: Developments in North America

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Abstract

Cultural Studies can be practically defined as a study of culture with the intention to understand a society and its politics. Cultural Studies has flourished as an important branch of knowledge and has widened its scope by formulating new branches of knowledge by incorporating itself with other branches of knowledge's. It has become multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary in nature. As an important branch of knowledge it is decisive to study in detail about various aspects of cultural Studies. This research paper is an attempt to explain the recent developments taken place in the field of Cultural Studies especially in North America. This paper will be useful for all Cultural Studies readers to update their information and understanding related to the field.

Keywords: cultural studies, North American cultural studies, literary criticism, literary theory, cultural studies theory

Introduction

In the late 1970s, newly established interdisciplinary curriculums and sub-fields developed in the academia. Programs and curricula like, Queer Studies, Women's Studies, African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicano and Chicana Studies, Ethnic Studies, or Postcolonial Studies contributed to a new understanding of American society and culture that highlights numerous proportions of cultural differences in terms of race, class, ethnicity, or gender. In spite of variances in degree and direction, these projects were concerned with serious intermediations into racist or sexist societal structures and methods of representation, and fetched subject matters to the forefront that had been chiefly ignored by American Studies in more traditional patterns. The self-reflective turn in Western history, which was the effect of the industrialization, of colonialism and empire-building, of the rise of capitalism, the rationalization of political processes gave way to a turn from American studies to a more specific American cultural studies.

The American political scientist Benedict Anderson and the British historian Eric Hobsbawm have discovered the roots of national spirit and traditions. In *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Hobsbawm proposes that national traditions work to generate consensual combined identities even though traditions are more often than not created or invented and projected into the past (Hobsbawm 13). In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson argues that "the nation" is a collective imagination, stabilized by purported traditions, narratives, songs, images, symbols, etc. (Anderson 14). Cultural studies in America has opened a wide platform of critical understanding of the subjects around. It was not merely limited to center of the term culture. It widened the topic of discussion to everything related to the whole society.

The Cultural studies has attempted to address the contemporary crisis in the humanities that has followed the recognition of disparities between the ideals of

humanistic liberalism enshrined in academic curricula and continuing presence of hunger, sickness, and ignorance tolerated by our societies (Brantlinger 6).

American society had varieties of topic to discuss in the field of cultural studies. The attempt to turn the attention from Euro-centrism to American hegemony was evident in the society. There were also problems of with ethnicity, race, and social violence. The hybrid nature of American people was a topic of serious discussion in the field of cultural studies. National narrative, the victory of democracy and freedom, the hegemony of white males were also considered as topics of impact and seriously dealt with American cultural studies in its first phase. Frank Shuffelton in his essay "Power, Desire, and American Cultural Studies" detail describes the trend in American cultural studies.

Its self-conscious insistence upon the contingent, provisional nature of its methodologies might seem to offer important safeguards against mindlessly present its impositions upon the past, even as it allowed for thoughtful applications of later conceptual developments in an attempt to understand that past as an articulated cultural system. Fragmentation and continuing crisis characterized early America, with its increasing divergence from European cultural norms and practices; it's continuing problems with ethnicity, race, and social violence; and above all its distinctly different patterns of local settlement and development, which were in many ways as distant from each other as from the reified Europe they thought of as "home." Historians and literary scholars alike have given disciplinary order to this material by subsuming it under a notion of "America" that, as William Spengemann has pointed out, turns "early America" into a euphemism for "those colonies that eventually became the United States." While this imposes a national narrative of

founding, political and cultural development, and triumphant independence? Various registered as the victory of democracy and freedom, the hegemony of white males, or some combination of the two? Upon the bewildering variety of American experiences, it does so by reading the post-1787 nation, perhaps even the post-1865 nation, back into that age of crisis that was both like our own and extremely unlike it (Shuffelton 96).

Cultural studies in America was interdisciplinary in nature. That commonsensical liberal pluralism of American cultural studies has now mutated into multiculturalism. The prominence of knowledge in the papers issued by American Studies indicates that individual obligations ground the participants' sense of whether they can hold, discard, or carefully support hypothetical viewpoints and practices rising from "outside" the American community. Those involvements are filtered over a very broad assumptions about American reality and its link to the human realities which describe the rest of the world. These assumptions may be labeled as two general forces working within American Studies: on one hand we have an internationalism which transports forward the common sense expectations of particular aspects of the classic discipline; on the other we have an externalism expressing contemporary adjuncts, viewpoints that break with the old center while holding a deeply buried commitment to it. As force-filled discourses there are strong and weak forms of both viewpoints which allow for some sharing of material, terms, political concerns and professional and personal experience. The development of a commercialized mass culture in the phase of the radio, the vinyl record, mass-circulated newspapers, and the movies had a permanent influence on American culture. It paved the gap between highbrow and lowbrow ^[1], with intellectual and elite culture often placing itself contrary to the mass-cultural sphere. It combined the United States through the national reach of its media; and it mobilized an ever-growing portion of the American population in the quest of an ideology of social progression, self-assurance, self-realization, and personal motivation. In this sense, it became part and parcel of the cultural imaginary. The active changes enhanced by modernity and capitalism has become a subject of analysis in cultural studies. This flexibility in the area of study has improved the scope of cultural studies in America. Hall denotes this character of cultural studies.

a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' ...[and] belongs to the future as much as to the past...not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture...fixed in some essentialized past, [but] subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power (Hall 225)

The collapse of ideas of American exceptionalism and class consensus was focused in huge part by social movements of the 1960s. Those movements also fixed in wave, a profound rethinking and rewriting of human origin, race, sexuality,

gender and other modalities of "difference" that again tested uniform notions of Americanness. This progression was powered by the rise of ethnic and women's studies within and outside American Studies. The new academic consideration paid to formerly marginalized subjects of history deeply reformed theories and approaches of study.

This group in specific points up the insufficiencies of categorization, especially in interdisciplinary work. Unravelling race from gender and sexuality and from my other categories threatens to re-marginalize them just as they are demanding their significance to any cultural analysis. Theoretical concerns emerging from a reconceptualization of associations between assumed cultural "centers" and "margins" was the primary area discussed in American cultural studies. They totally re-conceptualized what has been called the "mainstream." Feminist, gay/lesbian/queer, racial and ethnic theory have had a deep influence on all levels and kinds of humanities and social science learning. As a result the interdisciplinary approach and its practical contributions to other fields, for example the theorization of gender, race, sexuality and other constructions of cultural difference, lead to the mutual illumination of knowledge. This was the greatest impact of American cultural studies as a field of knowledge.

A very important alternative to the ideas of Birmingham School was established in Toronto. The method developed in Toronto highlighted more on the channels of communication, the media itself. The exact development of communication and media studies as theoretical disciplines indebted much to the significant Toronto scholars Northrop Frye, Eric Havelock, Harold Innis, and Marshall McLuhan. Moreover, the diverse academic lenses afforded by the 'Toronto thought' has fascinated numerous thinkers, both domestic and international, active in an widespread diversity of expeditions both theoretical and academic. Such thinkers include:, Carl Williams, Tom Easterbrook, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Edmund Carpenter, Dorothy Lee, Walter J. Ong, Ray Birdwhistell, Peter Drucker, Sigfried Giedion,, Karl Polanyi, Jane Jacobs, Glenn Gould, and Buckminster Fuller. *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) by Marshall McLuhan is considered an important book in the Toronto school. The important qualities of this school can be marked out in this work. He states

They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments (McLuhan 26)

McLuhan's celebrated quote is "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 26). With this he means that culture is affected more by the features of a medium than by the real content. The cinema for example is all about the experience of going to a theater. Conceivably you go on a date with somebody, purchase popcorn, wait for the movie to start, talk about the performances, sit in the dark together et cetera. All of this is made thinkable by the specialties of the channel. This is a common human experience about watching a film in the theatre. One could just see the movie at home, it keeps a lot of

¹ Lowbrow, relating to, or suitable for a person with little taste or intellectual interest

money and one can stop it if one required to go to the washing. The movie experience in the cinema and at home are obviously totally dissimilar, not for the reason that the content is diverse but the channel one uses is different. McLuhan clarifies that media all have their own features and these features drive in themselves in the experience. If one tell a joke in someone's face it will be not the same than if one send it by text message. That is why, for McLuhan, one should study the method how channels of communication, modify and form our culture. New media for example by their very nature constantly disturb the existing state of affairs because they permit for novel methods of communicating, and innovative methods of shaping reality. Technologies, according to McLuhan in his revolutionary book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), are not only things we use to make life informal, they in fact re-invent us as people. For example the printing revolution, made possible by the improvement of the printing press, totally altered the means people intermingled, how they shaped ideas and shared cultural standards and facts. With every great media revolution, like the rise of the newspaper, the printing revolution, and television, mankind was culturally re-invented. New media permitted new ways for people to converse each other, to join. New ways to fill in time. New ways to contribute sense to the world around us and discover the problematic analysis of who we are. McLuhan foretold in 1962 that the growth of television and computers guide in an electronic age that will yet again strengthen society to rearrange itself to deal with subjects like enlarged spirits of uncertainty, social division and globalization.

The very development of communication and media studies as academic disciplines owes much to the formative Toronto scholars Harold Innis, Eric Havelock, Northrop Frye, and Marshall McLuhan. Moreover, the diverse intellectual lenses afforded by the 'Toronto thought' has attracted a great many thinkers, both domestic and international, active in a wide variety of pursuits both academic and otherwise. Such thinkers include: Edmund Carpenter, Tom Easterbrook, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Carl Williams, Dorothy Lee, Walter J. Ong, Sigfried Giedion, Ray Birdwhistell, Peter Drucker, Karl Polanyi, Glenn Gould, Jane Jacobs, and Buckminster Fuller.

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