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2

British Cultural Studies and the Pitfalls of Identity

Paul Gilroy

It is only in the last phase of British imperialism that the labouring classes of the satellites and the labouring classes of the metropolis have confronted one another directly 'on native ground'. But their fates have long been indelibly intertwined. The very definition of 'what it is to be British' - the centrepiece of that culture now to be preserved from racial dilution - has been articulated around this absent/present centre. If their blood has not mingled extensively with yours, their labour power has long since entered your economic blood-stream. It is in the sugar you stir; it is in the sinews of the infamous British 'sweet tooth': it is the tea leaves at the bottom of the 'British cuppa'.

(Stuart Hall)

Whenever I felt an inclination to national enthusiasm I strove to suppress it as being harmful and wrong, alarmed by the warning examples of the peoples among whom we Jews live. But plenty of other things remained over to make the attraction of Jewry and Jews irresistible - many obscure emotional forces, which were the more powerful the less they could be expressed in words, as well as clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy of a common mental construction. And beyond this there was a perception that it was to my Jewish nature alone that I owed two characteristics that had become indispensable to me in the difficult course of my life. Because I was a Jew I found myself free from many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect; and as a Jew I was prepared to join the Opposition and to do without agreement with the 'compact majority'.

(Freud)

This short piece cannot hope to provide a comprehensive exposition of the concept of identity, its surrogates and kin terms in the diverse writings of cultural studies. Indeed, if the discrepant practices that take place under the tattered banners of British cultural studies can be unified at all, and that must remain in doubt, exploring the concept of identity and its changing resonance in critical scholarship is not the best way to approach the prospect of their unity. Reflecting upon identity seems to unleash a power capable of dissolving those tentative projects back into the contradictory components from which they were first assembled. Highlighting the theme of identity readily flushes

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out disagreements over profound political and intellectual problems. It can send the aspirant practitioners of cultural studies scuttling back towards the quieter sanctuaries of their old disciplinary affiliations, where the problems and the potential pleasures of thinking through identity are less formidable and engaging. Anthropologists utter sighs of relief, psychologists rub their hands with glee, philosophers relax confident that their trials are over, sociologists mutter discontentedly about the illegitimate encroachments of post-modernism while literary critics look blank and perplexed. Historians remain silent. These characteristic reactions from the more secure positions of closed disciplines underline that few words in the conceptual vocabulary of contemporary cultural analysis have been more flagrantly contested and more thoroughly abused than 'identity'.

The history of the term, which has a lengthy presence in social thought, and a truly complex philosophical lineage that goes back to the pre-Socratics, is gradually becoming better known (Gleason 1983; Hall 1992a; Calhoun 1994). However, though it has received some attention in debates over modernity and its anxieties, little critical attention has been directed towards the specific puzzle involved in accounting for identity's contemporary popularity. Though the philosophical pedigree of the term is usually appreciated by today's users, identity is invoked more often in arguments that are primarily political rather than philosophical. The popular currency of the term may itself be a symptom of important political conflicts and a signal of the altered character of post-modern politics especially in the overdeveloped countries. Another clue to this change is provided by the frequency with which the noun 'identity' appears coupled with the adjective 'cultural'. This timely pairing is only the most obvious way in which the concept 'identity' directs attention towards a more elaborate sense of the power of culture and the relationship of culture to power. It introduces a sense of *cultural* politics as something more substantial than a feeble echo of the *political* politics of days gone by. This cultural politics applies both to the increased salience of identity as a problem played out in everyday life, and to identity as it is managed and administered in the cultural industries of mass communication that have transformed understanding of the world and the place of individual possessors of identity within it.

The stability and coherence of the self has been placed in jeopardy in these overlapping settings. This may help to explain why identity has become a popular, valuable and useful concept. Though the currency of identity circulates far outside the walls of the academy, much of its appeal derives from a capacity to make supply connections between scholarly and political concerns. These days, especially when an unsavoury climate created by the unanswerable accusation of 'political correctness' makes too many critical scholars, political thinkers and cultural activists hyper-sensitive about professional standards and the disciplinary integrity of their embattled work, identity has become an important idea precisely because of these bridging qualities. It is a junction or hinge concept that can help to maintain the connective tissue that articulates political and cultural concerns. It has also provided an important means to both rediscover and preserve an explicitly political dynamic in serious interdisciplinary scholarship.

It would be wrong, however, to imagine that the concept of identity belongs exclusively to *critical* thought, let alone to the emancipatory intellectual and

political projects involved in enhancing democracy and extending tolerance. Identity's passage into vogue has also been mirrored in conservative, authoritarian and right-wing thought, which has regularly attempted to use both enquiries into identity and spurious certainty about its proper boundaries to enhance their own interests, to improve their capacity to explain the world and to legitimate the austere social patterns that they favour. The crisis involved in acquiring and maintaining an appropriate form of *national* identity has appeared repeatedly as the principal focus of this activity. It too makes a special investment in the idea of culture, for nations are presented as entirely homogeneous cultural units staffed by people whose hyper-similarity renders them interchangeable.

Apart from these obviously political claims on identity, the concept has also provided an important site for the erasure and abandonment of *any* political aspirations. Clarion calls to comprehend identity and set it to work often suggest that mere politics has been exhausted and should now be left behind in favour of more authentic and powerful forms of self-knowledge and consciousness that are coming into focus. Thus, if the idea of identity has been comprehensively politicized it has also become an important intellectual resource for those who have sought an emergency exit from what they see as the barren world of politics. Identity becomes a means to open up those realms of being and acting in the world which are prior to and somehow more fundamental than political concerns. Any lingering enthusiasm for the supposedly trivial world of politics is misguided, untimely and therefore doomed to be frustrating. It also corrodes identity and can profitably be replaced by the open-ended processes of self-exploration and reconstruction that take shape where politics gives way to more glamorous and avowedly therapeutic alternatives.

This type of reorientation has occurred most readily where reflection on individual identity has been debased by simply being equated with the stark question 'who am I?' This deceptively simple question has been used to promote an inward turn away from the profane chaos of an imperfect world. It is a problematic gesture that all too often culminates in the substitution of an implosive and therefore anti-social form of *self*-scrutiny for the discomfort and the promise of public political work which does not assume either solidarity or community but works instead to bring them into being and then to make them democratic. That memorable question ends with a fateful and emphatically disembodied 'I'. It refers to an entity, that is represented as both the subject of knowing and a privileged location of being. When it sets out in pursuit of truth, this 'I' can be made to speak authoritatively from everywhere while being nowhere if only the right methods are brought to bear upon its deployment. This fateful fiction has a long and important history in the modern world, its thinking and its thinking about thinking (Taylor 1989; Haraway 1991). This 'I' can readily become a signature and cipher for numerous other problems to which the sign 'identity' can help to supply the answers. For example, if we are committed to changing and hopefully improving the world rather than simply analysing it, will political agency be possible if the certainty and integrity of that 'I' have been compromised by its unconscious components, by tricks played upon it by the effects of the language through which it comes to know itself or by the persistent claims of the body that will not easily accept being

devalued in relation to the mind and the resulting banishment to the domain of unreason? Is the 'I' and the decidedly modern subjects and subjectives to which it points, a product or symptom of some underlying history, an effect of individual insertion into and constitution by society and culture? At what point or under what conditions might that 'I' bring forth a collective counterpart, a 'we'? These are some of the troubling questions that spring to mind in a period when the previously rather contradictory idea of 'identity politics' has suddenly begun to make sense.

This is a time in which *what* (no longer even *who*) you are can count for a great deal more than anything that you might do, for yourself and for others. The slippage from 'who' to 'what' is absolutely crucial. It expresses a reification (thingification) and fetishization of self that might once have been captured by the term 'alienation', which was itself a significant attempt to account for the relationship between the subject and the world outside it upon which it relied. Today, social processes have assumed more extreme and complex forms. They construct a radical estrangement that draws its energy from the reification of culture and the fetishization of absolute cultural difference. In other words, identity is inescapably political, especially where its social workings – patterns of identification – precipitate the retreat and contraction of politics.

No inventory currently exists – either inside or outside the flimsy fortifications of existing cultural studies – of the ways in which identity operates politically and how it can change political culture, stretching political thinking so that modern secular distinctions between private and public become blurred and the boundaries formed by and through the exercise of power on both sides of that line are shown to be permeable. Before the preparation of that precious inventory can proceed, we must face how the concept of identity tangles together three overlapping but basically different concerns. This suggestion involves a degree of over-simplification, but it is instructive to try and separate out these tangled strands before we set about making their symptomatic interlinkage a productive feature of our own thinking and writing. Each cluster of issues under the larger constellation of identity has an interesting place in the chequered history of the scholarly and political movement that has come to be known as cultural studies.

The concept of identity points initially towards the question of the self. This is an issue that has usually been approached in the emergent canon of cultural studies via histories of the subject and subjectivity.¹ We should note, however, that it has not been the exclusive property of cultural studies' more theoretically inclined affiliates. These ideas and the characteristic language of inwardness in which they have been expressed are extremely complex and immediately require us to enter the wild frontier between psychological and sociological domains. On this contested terrain we must concede immediately that human agents are made and make themselves rather than being born in some already finished form. The force of this observation has had a special significance in the development of modernity's oppositional movements. Their moral and political claims have arisen from a desire to estrange social life from natural processes and indeed from quarrels over the status of nature and its power to determine history.

Feminist thought and critical analyses of racism have made extensive use of the concept of identity in exploring how 'subjects' bearing gender and racial characteristics are constituted in social processes that are amenable to historical explanation and political struggle. The production of the figures 'woman' and 'Negro' has been extensively examined from this point of view (de Beauvoir 1960; Fanon 1986; Schiebinger 1993). The emergence of these durable but fictive creations has been understood in relation to the associated development of categories of humanity from which women and blacks have been routinely excluded. This kind of critical investigation has endowed strength in contemporary political thinking about the modern self and its contingencies. This is not solely a matter of concern to the 'minorities' who have not so far enjoyed the dubious privileges of inclusion in this official humanism.

The obligation to operate historically and thereby to undermine the idea of an invariant human nature that determines social life has been readily combined with psychological insights. This blend provided not only a means to trace something of the patterned processes of individual becoming but to grasp, through detailed accounts of that variable process, the kind of protean entity that a human agent might be (Geertz 1985). The endlessly mutable nature of unnatural humanity can be revealed in conspicuous contrast between different historically and culturally specific versions of the boundedness of the human person. Labour, language and lived interactive culture have been identified as the principal media for evaluating this social becoming.

Each of these options stages the dramas of identity in a contrasting manner. Each, for example, materializes the production and reproduction of gender differences and resolves the antagonistic relationship between men and women differently. All raise the question of hierarchy and the status of visible differences, whether they are based on signs like age and generation, or the modern, secular semiotics of 'race' and ethnicity. The ideal of universal humanity certainly appears in a less attractive light once the unsavoury exclusionary practices that have surrounded its coronation at the centre of bourgeois political culture are placed on display. Nietzsche showed long ago how an archaeological investigation of the modern self could lead towards this goal.

Identity can be used to query the quality of relations established between superficial and underlying similarities in human beings, between their similar insides and dissimilar outsides. By criticizing the compromised authority invested in that suspect, transcendent humanity, identity – understood here as subjectivity – presents another issue: the agent's reflexive qualities and unreliable consciousness of its own operations and limits. Posed in this way, the theoretical coherence of identity unravels almost immediately. The concept is revealed to be little more than a name given to one important element in the interminable struggle to impose order on the flux of painful social life.

The impossible modern quest for stable and integral selfhood points towards the second theme that has been (con)fused in the compound inner logic of identity. This is the equally complicated question of sameness. It too has psychological and psychoanalytic aspects. In this second incarnation, identity becomes visible as the point where a concern with individual subjectivity opens out into an expansive engagement with the dynamics of identification: how one

subject or agent may come to see itself in others, to be itself through its mediated relationships with others and to see others in itself. Dealing with an agent's consciousness of sameness unavoidably raises the fact of otherness and the phenomenon of difference. Politics enters here as well. Difference should not be confined exclusively to the gaps we imagine between whole, stable subjects. One lesson yielded up by the initial approach to identity as subjectivity is that difference exists within identities – within selves – as well as between them. This means that the longed-for integrity and unity of subjects is always fragile.

In many of the political movements where the idea of a common identity has become a principle of organization and mobilization, there is an idea of interplay between 'inner' and 'outer' differences that must be systematically orchestrated if their goals are to be achieved. For example, differences within a group can be minimized so that differences between that group and others appear greater. Identity can emerge from the very operations it is assumed to precede and facilitate. The investment in ideas of essential difference that emerges from several different kinds of feminist thinking, as well as from many movements of the racially oppressed and immiserated, confirms that deeper connections have been supposed to reside unseen, hidden beneath or beyond the superficial, non-essential differences that they may or may not regulate.

Identity as sameness can be distinguished from identity as subjectivity because it moves on from dealing with the formation and location of subjects and their historical individuality into thinking about collective or communal identities: nations, genders, classes, generational, 'racial' and ethnic groups. Identity can be traced back towards its sources in the institutional patterning of identification. Spoken and written languages, memory, ritual and governance have all been shown to be important identity-producing mechanisms in the formation and reproduction of imagined community. The technological and technical processes that create and reproduce mentalities of belonging in which sameness features have also come under critical scrutiny. Exploring the link between these novel forms of identification and the unfolding of modernity has also provided a significant stimulus to politically engaged interdisciplinary research (Gillis 1994). So far, Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking discussion of the role of print cultures in establishing new ways of relating to the power of the nation-state and experiencing nationality has not acquired a postmodern equivalent. The mediation and reproduction of national and postnational identities in cyberspace and on virtual paper await a definitive interpretation. The changing resonance of nationality and the intermittent allure of subnational and supranational identities demand that we note how theorizing identity as sameness unfolds in turn into a concern with identifications and the technologies that mediate and circulate them. We must acknowledge the difficult work involved in thinking about how understanding identification might transform and enrich political thought and action.

Analysis of communal and collective identity thus leads into the third issue encompassed by identity: the question of solidarity. This aspect of identity concerns how both connectedness and difference become bases on which social action can be produced. This third element moves decisively away from the subject-centred approach that goes with the first approach and the inter-subjective dynamic that takes shape when the focus is on the second. Instead,

where the relationship between identity and solidarity moves to the centre-stage, another issue, that of the social constraints upon the agency of individuals and groups, must also be addressed. To what extent can we be thought of as making ourselves? How do we balance a desire to affirm the responsibility that goes with accepting self-creation as a process and the altogether different obligation to recognize the historical limits within which individual and collective subjects materialize and act? This reconciliation usually proceeds through an appeal to supra-individual identity-making structures. These may be material, discursive or some heuristic and unstable combination of them both. Attention to identity as a principle of solidarity asks us to comprehend identity as an effect mediated by historical and economic structures, instantiated in the signifying practices through which they operate and arising in contingent institutional settings that both regulate and express the coming together of individuals in patterned social processes.

Apart from its extensive contributions to the analysis of nationality, 'race' and ethnicity, the term 'identity' has been used to discern and evaluate the institution of gender difference and of differences constituted around sexualities. These unsynchronized critical projects have sometimes coexisted under the ramshackle protection that cultural studies has been able to construct. Conflicts between them exist in latent and manifest forms and have been identified by several authoritative commentators as a key source of the intellectual energy (and perversely as a sign of the seriousness) in some cultural studies writing (Hall 1992b). These tensions have also been presented as part of a corrective counternarrative that has been pitched against some inappropriately heroic accounts of political scholarship and pedagogy in the institutional wellspring of cultural studies: the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. Undermining those overly pastoral accounts of the Birmingham experience that might obstruct the development of today's cultural studies by mystifying it and sanitizing its embattled origins may be useful. However, those conflicts – which are usually presented as phenomena that arose where the unity of class-oriented work supposedly crumbled under the impact of feminisms and anti-racist scholarship – are only half the story.

In assessing the importance of the concept of identity to the development of cultural studies, it is important to ponder whether that concept – and the agenda of difficulties for which it supplies a valuable shorthand – might have played a role in establishing the parameters within which those conflicts were contained and sometimes made useful. I am not suggesting that the term 'identity' was used from the start in a consistent, rigorous or self-conscious way to resolve disagreements or to synchronize common problems and problematics. But rather that, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to imagine a version of the broken evolution of cultural studies in which thinking about identity – as subjectivity and sameness – can be shown to have been a significant factor in the continuity and integrity of the project as a whole. It may be that an interest in identity and its political workings in a variety of different social and historical sites provided a point of intersection between the divergent intellectual interests from which a self-conscious cultural studies was gradually born. I will suggest below that a tacit intellectual convergence around problems of identity and identification was indeed an important

catalyst for cultural studies, and by implication, that identity's capacity to synthesize and connect various enquiries into political cultures and cultural politics is something that makes it a valuable asset even now – something worth struggling with and struggling over.

There is an elaborate literature surrounding all three aspects of identity sketched above. It includes work in and around the Marxist traditions that contributed so much to the vision, verve and ethical commitments demonstrated in British cultural studies' early interventionist ambitions. Much feminist writing has also made use of the concept of identity and generated a rich discussion of the political consequences of its deployment (Fuss 1990; Haraway 1990; Riley 1990). But before that generation of feminist scholar-activists was allowed to find its voice, the themes of identity as sameness and solidarity emerged in the political testing ground provided by the urgent commentary on the changing nature of class relations: conflict, solidarity and what we would now call identity. A new understanding of these questions was being produced as new social and cultural movements appeared to eclipse the labour movement, and old political certainties evaporated under pressure from the manifest barbarity of classless societies, a technological revolution and a transformed understanding of the relationship between the overdeveloped and underdeveloped parts of the planet that had been underlined by decolonization and mass migration. These half-forgotten debates over class are a good place to consider subjectivity, sameness and solidarity because they took place beyond the grasp of body-coded difference in a happy interlude when biology was not supposed, mechanically, to be destiny and classes were not understood to be discrete bio-social units. No one dreamed back then of genes that could predispose people to homelessness or drug abuse.

If a deceptive oblique stroke was sometimes placed between the words 'culture' and 'identity', this was done to emphasize that the latter was a product of the former – a consequence of anthropological variation. This literature on class encompassed research into both historical and contemporary social relations. It was governed by political impulses that were not born from complacent application of anachronistic Marxist formulae but rather from an acute comprehension of the political limits and historical specificity of Marxist theory. This stance suggested that class relations were an integral part of capitalist societies but that they were not, in themselves, sufficient to generate a complete explanation of any political situation. Insights drawn from other sources were needed to illuminate the process in which the English working class had been born and in order to comprehend the more recent circumstances in which it might be supposed to be undergoing a protracted death. The subtle and thoughtful concern with class and its dynamics yielded slowly and only partially to different agendas set by interpretation of countercultural movements and oppositional practices that had constituted new social actors and consequently new politicized identities. Women, youth, 'races' and sexualities: under each of these headings interest in subjectivity, sameness and solidarity developed the order of priorities that had taken shape as a result of exploring class. Partly, this was because an important divergence existed between political movements and consciousness in which the body was an immediate and inescapable issue and those where the relationship to pheno-

typical variation, though certainly present, was more attenuated, arising, as it were, at one remove.

Historical materialism as a political and philosophical doctrine was strongest where the politicization of the body and the consequent grasp of embodiment as the guarantor of shared identity were weakest. The reluctance to engage biology or the semiotics of the body produced a heavy theoretical investment in the idea of labour as a universal category that could transcend particularity and dissolve differences. Willingness to accept the exclusion of the body from the domains of rational cognition and scientific inquiry was thought to establish the hallmark of intellectual enterprise. The abstraction 'labour power' was offered as a means to connect the actions and experiences of different people in ways that made the kind of body in which they found themselves a secondary and often superficial issue. Marx's cryptic observation that there is a 'historical and moral element' that affects the differential price paid for the labour power of different social groups suggests otherwise and is an important clue to comprehending how these superficial differences could resist the embrace of a higher unity. This unity was situational. Consciousness of solidarity and sameness as well as collective class-based subjectivity grew from common submission to the regime of production and its distinctive conceptions of time, right and property.

Edward Thompson's 1963 *Making of the English Working Class* broke with the complacent moods of mechanical materialism and productivism and reformulated class analysis in an English idiom that supplied later cultural studies with vital political energy and a distinctive ethical style. Recognizing the strongly masculinist flavour of this important intervention should take nothing away from contemporary attempts to comprehend how it could have grown as much from the context supplied by CND, the New Left and 'practical political activity of several kinds, [that] undoubtedly prompted me [Thompson] to see the problems of political consciousness and organisation in certain ways.' (Thompson 1980: 14). Thompson's famous statement of the dynamics of class formation is relevant here:

We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers. And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.

(pp. 8–9)

This is not the place to attempt some hasty resolution of the difficult issues implicit in this formulation, such as the base and superstructure relationship, the tension between different forms of consciousness and the epistemological valency of immediate experience. Nor is this an appropriate moment in which to try and chart the convoluted debates arising from the need to conceptualize the material effects of ideology and the materializing capacities of discourse (Butler 1993). Thompson's celebrated formulation links identity to selfhood, self-interests and political agency. To say that his politicized notion of identity derived from an engagement with powers which operate outside of and sometimes in opposition to those rooted in production, for example, in the residential community, would be too simple. An interest in identity was not

injected into the thinking of the labour movement and its scholarly advocates by an alternative feminist historiography. An explicit and implicit concern with the political mechanisms of identity emerged directly if not spontaneously from complex analyses of past class relations. This work by Thompson and others was produced in a continuous dialogue with the urgent obligation to understand the present by seeking its historical precedents. Almost without being aware of the fact, these analyses reached beyond themselves, not towards an all-encompassing holy totality but, in the name of disconcerting complexity, towards deeply textured accounts of bounded and conflictual consciousness that could illuminate contemporary antagonisms.

Though he makes use of the idea of identification rather than the concept of identity, something of the same political and imaginative enterprise can be detected in the closing pages of Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* (1961:354). Grasping for the 'new creative definitions' through which that oppositional process might be maintained if not completed, Williams wrote of 'structures of feeling – the meanings and values which are lived in world and relationships' and 'the essential language – the created and creative meanings – which our inherited reality teaches and through which new reality forms and is negotiated' (p. 293). Williams's conclusion seeks to make the individualization effect of contemporary society into a problem. It is not therefore surprising that he avoids the ambiguities of identity – a term which has a strongly individualistic undertone. However the theme of political identity as an outcome of conflictual social and cultural processes rather than some fixed invariant condition is clearly present:

the reasonable man ... who is he exactly? And then who is left for that broad empty margin, the 'public opinion of the day'?

I think we are all in this margin: it is what we have learned and where we live. But unevenly, tentatively, we get a sense of movement, and the meanings and values extend.

(p. 354–5)

It took me a long time to appreciate how the founding texts of my own encounter with English cultural studies could be seen to converge around the thematics of identity. The key to appreciating this architecture lay in the ideas of nationality and national identity and the related issues of ethnicity and local and regional identity. Structures of feeling and the forms of consciousness that they fostered were nationally bounded. Similarly, for Thompson, the magical happening of class was something that could only be apprehended on a national basis. Along with Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* and Williams's *The Long Revolution*, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) can be positioned so that it triangulates the rather ethnocentric space in which cultural development and cultural politics came to be configured as exclusively English national phenomena. Though each of these critical thinkers had his own subnational, regional and local sensitivities and obligations, culture and its political forms were comprehended by all of them on the basis that nationality supplied. To be sure, the nation was often recognized as riven with the antagonist relations that characterized the struggle to create and maintain the domination of one group by others. But the boundaries of the nation formed the essential parameters in which these conflicts took shape.

Though by no means always celebratory in tone, none of these important texts conveyed a sense of Britain and British identity being formed by forces, processes that overflowed from the imperial crucible of the nation-state. Williams's fleeting mentions of jazz or Hoggart's scarcely disguised apprehension about the catastrophic consequences of uniform 'faceless' internationalism (his code for the levelling effects of American culture) suggest other conclusions and reveal their authors' direct interest in what might be worth protecting and maintaining amidst the turmoil of the post-war reconstruction of British social life.

Each of these founding texts in the cultural studies canon can be read as a study of becoming: as an examination of class-based identity in process – transformed by historical forces that exceed their inscription in individual lives or consciousness and, at the same time, resisting that inevitable transformation.

This often unspoken fascination with the workings of identity has several additional facets. It does not always initiate the tacit collusion with Englishness that has been the festive site of cultural studies' reconciliation to a bunting-bedecked structure of feeling that its democratic, libertarian and reconstructive aspirations once threatened to contextualize if not exactly overturn.

The significantly different political alignments and hopes of these writers, as well as their contrasting stances within the generative political context that the New Left supplied for their attempts to grapple with class, popular culture and communications (Thompson 1981), should not be played down. That the direction of Hoggart's investigations was parallel to those of Thompson and Williams was signalled in the force of his opening question 'Who are the working classes?'. His thoughtful and stimulating book elaborated the distinguishing features of working-class English cultural identity. They were apprehended with special clarity even as they were assailed by the insidious forces of Americanism and commercialism: as they yielded 'place to new' in a process he understood exclusively in terms of diminution and loss: 'the debilitating mass trends of the day'. The diseased organs of a vanishing working-class culture were anatomized in a sympathetic conservationist spirit. This mournful operation captured the pathological character of their extraordinary post-1945 transformation.

Hoggart's interest in the class-based division of the social world into 'them' and 'us' and his enthusiasm for the 'live and let live' vernacular tolerance that thrived there could not be sustained once the insertion of post-colonial settler-citizens was recognized as a fundamental element in the transformation of Britain that alarmed and excited him. Immigration would become something that tested out the integrity and character of national and class identities in ways that he was not able to imagine. Hoggart's interesting speculations about the lack of patriotism in the working class, their spontaneous anti-authoritarianism and 'rudimentary internationalism' sounded hollow. This was not only because complications introduced into the analysis of class and nationalism by the existence of a 'domestic' fascism (Mosley 1946) were somewhat brushed over but, more importantly, because he was entirely silent about the social and political problems that mass black settlement was thought to be introducing into the previously calm and peaceable urban districts of England and Wales. It is not illegitimate to point to the narrowness of

Hoggart's concerns or, in the light of the subsequent patterning of British racial politics, to remind ourselves that his enigmatic silences on that subject could be used to undermine the authority of his pronouncements overall.

This is not just a question of hindsight. Before Hoggart's great book was published, Kenneth Little's *Negroes in Britain* (1947) had included a section entitled 'the coloured man through modern English eyes' (pp. 240–68). Michael Banton's *The Coloured Quarter* (1955) – which had preceded Hoggart into print by some two years – had drawn explicit attention to the problems precipitated by large-scale 'Negro immigration' into 'the large industrial cities of the North and the Midlands, in particular Leeds, Sheffield and Birmingham' (p. 69). By this time, the morality and injustices of the British colour bar had been extensively discussed in a wide range of publications including the *Picture Post* (Kee 1949). The moral and physical health status of 'colonial coloured people' had been given a good public airing by this time and associated panics over the proliferation of half-caste children, Negro criminality and vice were all established media themes when Hoggart's book was published.²

Learie Constantine (1955) attempted to sum up the situation when, as Harold Macmillan has revealed, the Conservative government discussed the possibility of using 'keep Britain white' as its electoral slogan (Macmillan 1973: 73–4). Constantine's insightful view of the class and gender topology of English racism in the same period that produced *The Uses of Literacy* is worth quoting at length. It is a valuable reminder to anyone who would suggest that a sensitivity to the destructive effects of racism did not arise until after the 1958 'race riots' in London's Notting Hill and Nottingham (see Pilkington 1988):

After practically twenty-five years' residence in England, where I have made innumerable white friends, I still think it would be just to say that almost the entire population of Britain really expect the coloured man to live in an inferior area devoted to coloured people, and not to have free and open choice of a living place. Most British people would be quite unwilling for a black man to enter their home, nor would they wish to work with one as a colleague, nor to stand shoulder to shoulder with one at a factory bench. This intolerance is far more marked in lower grades of English society than in higher, and perhaps it disfigures the lower middle classes most of all, possibly because respectability is so dear to them. Hardly any Englishwomen and not more than a small proportion of Englishmen would sit at a restaurant table with a coloured man or woman, and inter-racial marriage is considered almost universally to be out of the question.

(Constantine 1955: 67)

Repositioned against the backdrop of this minoritarian history, it seems impossible to deny that Hoggart's comprehensive exclusion of 'race' from his discussion of postwar class and culture represented clear political choices. His work certainly exemplifies a wider tendency to render those uncomfortable political issues invisible. The same fate awaited the unwanted 'coloured immigrants' to whose lives the problems of 'race' in Britain became perversely attached. It may be too harsh to judge his inability to perceive the interrelation of 'race', nationality and class as a form of myopia induced by an indifferent ethnocentrism and complacent crypto-nationalism, but that is exactly how it seemed to me as a student of cultural studies on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *The Uses of Literacy*.

What is more important to me now, almost twenty years later still, is the possibility that the distinctive sense of cultural politics created by those precious New Left initiatives supplied critical resources to the investigation of identity. And further, that mingled with insights drawn from other standpoints, these very resources encouraged us to see and to transcend the limits of the quietly nationalistic vision advanced by British cultural studies' imaginary founding fathers.

Thankfully these days, the writing of contemporary cultural history has become a less self-consciously ethnocentric affair than it was in the 1950s. Stuart Hall uncompromisingly insisted that, contrary to appearances, 'race' was an integral and absolutely internal feature of British political culture and national consciousness; Hall made a solid bridge not so much from scholarly nationalism to internationalism but towards a more open, global understanding of where Britain might be located in a decolonized and post-imperial world order defined by the cold war. Hall's consistent political engagements with the identity-(re)producing actions of Britain's mass media allocated substantial space to the issue of racism and used it as a magnifying glass through which to consider the unfolding of authoritarian forms that masked their grim and joyless character with a variety of populist motifs.

Particularly when appreciated in concert with the interventions of Edward Said, whose study of the Orient as an object of European knowledge and power endowed cultural studies with new heart in the late 1970s, Hall's work has supplied an invigorating corrective to the morbidity and implisiveness of figures like Williams, Thompson and Hoggart. Said and Hall are both thinkers whose critiques of power and grasp of modern history have been enriched by their own experiences of migration and some ambivalent personal intimacies with the distinctive patterns of colonial social life in Palestine and Jamaica. Both draw explicitly upon the work of Antonio Gramsci and implicitly on the legacy of the itinerant anglophile Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James. With the supplementary input of these intellectual but non-academic figures, cultural studies' evaluations of identity were comprehensively complicated by colonialism as well as the enduring power of a different, non-European or marginal modernity that had been forged amidst the cultures of terror that operate at the limits of a belligerent imperial system.

The nation-state could not remain the central legitimizing principle brought to bear upon the analysis of the cultural relations and forms that subsumed identity. It was not only that core units of modern government and production had been constituted from their external activities and in opposition to forces and flows acting upon them from the outside. Henceforth, identities deriving from the nation could be shown to be competing with subnational (local or regional) and supranational (diaspora) structures of belonging and kinship.

The main purpose of this inevitably cursory and oversimplified genealogy of identity is not to rake over the fading embers of the 'Birmingham School' or to endorse a specific canon for cultural studies' institutional expansion. It has been to prompt enquiries into what cultural studies' committed scholarship might have to offer to contemporary discussions, not of culture, but of multiculturalism and *multiculturalism*. Today, the volatile concept of identity belongs above all to the important debate in which multiculturalism is being

redefined outside the outmoded conventions that governed its earlier incarnations, especially in the educational system. The obvious reply to this demand – for a new theory of multicultural society that can yield a timely strategy for enhancing tolerance and respect – renounces innocent varieties of orthodox pluralism and starts afresh by rethinking cultural difference through notions of hierarchy and hegemony. This is surely valuable but can only be a beginning. Multiculturalism in both Britain and the United States has retreated from re-examining the concept of culture in any thoroughgoing manner and drifted towards a view of 'separate but equal' cultures. These parcels of incompatible activity may need to be rearranged in some new compensatory hierarchy or better still, positioned in wholesome relations of reciprocal recognition and mutual equivalence that have been denied hitherto by the unjust operations of power which is not itself comprehended in cultural terms. In this approach, power exists outside of cultures and is therefore able to distort the proper relationship between them. The best remedy for this unhappy state of affairs is supposedly to be found in strengthening political processes and modernity's neutral civic identities so that cultural particularity can be confined and regulated in appropriately private places from which the spores of destructive incommensurability cannot contaminate the smooth functioning of always imperfect democracy. A political understanding of identity and identification – emphatically not a reified identity politics – points to other more radical possibilities in which we can begin to imagine ways for reconciling the particular and the general. We can build upon the contributions of cultural studies to dispose of the idea that identity is an absolute and to find the courage necessary to argue that identity formation – even body-coded ethnic and gender identity – is a chaotic process that can have no end. In this way, we may be able to make cultural identity a premise of political action rather than a substitute for it.

Notes

1 This was a strong component of the early analyses of subculture produced by Paul Willis, Iain Chambers, Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie. See also Probyn (1994).

2 For a preliminary survey of the English political discussion of race during this period, see Carter et al. (1987). See also Smith (1986) and Rich (1986).

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