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Approaches to cultural hegemony within cultural studies

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The cultural studies perspective as it developed in the 1960s and 1970s began to focus attention away from the more mainstream mass communication debates on media effects and audience attitude/behaviour change, towards an emphasis on the wider cultural environment. To the psychological and sociological frames that had hitherto dominated media research, cultural studies brought the benefits of a radicalized literary studies tradition, with North American (e.g. Radway, 1984), European (e.g. Barthes, 1972; and Eco, 1977) and British (e.g. Hoggart, 1958; Williams, 1958; and Hall, 1971) variants.

Also referred to as the cultural effects theory, this approach assumed that the media as part of the culture industries did have important effects; but these were not short term and immediate, or at least they were not *merely* so, but were the contribution of media to popular consciousness through the language, symbolic and cultural codes in which the media framed the world, not as neutral organizations working to serve the public good in some kind of independent 'fourth estate' or 'watchdog' role, but as institutions embedded in existing patterns of social relations and, in common with all powerful institutions within a given social system, serving to reproduce the social relations in which their own power is invested. Media work in this model is essentially ideological work, but to understand the media it is also necessary to understand their place with reference to more extensive social and cultural codes from which they draw and to which they contribute. There is considerable debate in this tradition as to the extent to which the ideological work of media is directly determined by the interests of social élites, by underlying economic forces, or whether they can function autonomously, with spaces for resistance and subversion that arise from oppositions within the system, for example between the interests of specific professional groups such as broadcasters and broader interests of the social class from which they are recruited, or between different factions of the social élite in their struggles for power. Although Marxism is a powerful influence in early manifestations of this approach, there is evidence of considerable intellectual innovation here, particularly with respect to analysis of media texts, much of which is pursued in relation to subordinate groups, including the working class, women, youth groups and ethnic communities.

Much of the work of the Frankfurt school only became available in English in the early 1960s, when it proved influential to young Marxist and neo-

Marxist radicals. Emphasizing the totalistic commercialization of culture in mass society, the Frankfurt approach offered an attractive and above all critical base for the analysis of mass media in radical opposition to the anodyne and conservative models of media effects which had prevailed hitherto. Through Marcuse (1964), furthermore, a bridge was offered between Marx and Freud, and a place found for the role of sexuality within processes of social oppression. The focus on culture raised important questions about the adequacy of Marx's own discussions of culture, and the relationship between economic 'base' and 'cultural superstructure'. A variety of positions emerged concerning the relative autonomy of culture from the economic base (see, in particular, the work of Althusser), but a theory of cultural hegemony acquired particular influence.

The notion of ideology as hegemonic derives principally from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971), who likens it to the trench warfare of the First World War, with each side gaining and losing ground in a continual, shifting contest over time. Here ideology is not simply dominant, it is hegemonic, which is to say that the concept allows for the dimension of struggle and opposition, of confrontation between differing cultures, where hegemony has to be negotiated and won. Cultural studies, as developed in its widely influential British form, conceived of society made up of a number of competing cultures. The central question was the degree to which mass media output reflects and communicates a dominant version of culture as though it were the only culture, through which the structure and leading ideas of a world that has been organized to serve one or a range of competing élites is made to appear as part of a 'natural' order of things, beyond rational questioning, and thus completely de-legitimizing or even obliterating other possible versions or, rather, other possible visions of the world as it might be. It is through the shifting nature of power and political élites that ideological consensus evolves and is maintained.

The common ground of the articles included in this section is their concern to explain how such processes of cultural domination through the media should be conceptualized and understood. The first extract, often acknowledged as a starting point in cultural studies, is taken from Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution*. In his chapter on 'The analysis of culture' Williams defines three related meanings of culture, of which one prefigures the position of Stuart Hall who in his introduction to the first *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, wrote that 'culture is the way social life is experienced and handled, the meanings and values which inform human action, which are embodied in and mediate social relations, political life, etc.' (Hall, 1971, p. 6). For Hall as for Williams and Hoggart (1958) the media should be studied not as 'effecting culture', but as an indicator of social values and meanings, a text through which cultural meanings are revealed and evaluated.

There is a great deal of emphasis on the symbolic codes of textual expression, drawing from the traditions of linguistics, semiotics, sociolinguistics and literary structuralism. Within such work there is a tension between, on the one hand, the structuralist proposition that the 'meanings' of texts, including cultures-as-texts, can be revealed by accessing fundamental oppositions and their other underlying structural characteristics, and on the

other hand, the view that the meanings of texts have to be understood by reference not to fundamental regularities of structure but to the ways in which texts are generated within specific social and cultural situations and among particular historically-located human beings. Paradoxically, these social contexts are themselves often investigated along structuralist lines with reference to key sociological parameters of social class, etc., whereas more recent studies, through ethnographic method, attempt to establish meanings directly from the evidence of the parties to communication.

Hall considers the various legacies which nurture culturalist and structuralist paradigms in cultural studies. He explores the all pervading nature of culture in society as expressive of ideologies. Bennett develops this to discuss the relationship between cultural studies, with its concern for subordinate and subordinated cultures, and the structuralist ingestion of the text, through the adoption of the Gramscian approach to hegemony. In doing so he illustrates the benefit to both camps of the 'reading through popular forms' that so characterizes the cultural studies approach. Inevitably both articles point the way to the 'struggle over meaning' and the polysemic nature of the message, a direction or 'turn' in cultural studies that is taken up in Section 10.

The second extract by Hall sees the emergence of the concern with ideology as critical to development of the field of mass communication study. From the standpoint of the early 1980s he reflects a paradigm shift in media studies from a largely pluralistic model to one in which media institutions, working ideologically through a wide variety of textual devices in construction and composition are understood to 'manufacture consent'.

Carey takes up this relationship between mass communication research and cultural studies, and discusses the essential difference between the behavioural science model of mass communication and the human experience approach of cultural studies. His position is not dissimilar to that of Williams, for whom cultures are 'structures of feeling', which communicate and are in every sense lived. This position rejects the 'false consciousness' approach to the culture of subordinated classes which is common to Marxism, wherein working class culture is defined in terms of the extent of its self-delusion. Carey emphasizes the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, suggesting that for a cultural science of communication the understanding and interpretation of the meaning structure of symbols applied to contemporary culture is the key task.

Carey implicitly examines the terms of reference for mass communication, finding that it is constituted in such a way that it misses much of the wider style and focus of investigation common to a study of culture, thus isolating itself from the very emphasis on ordinary and everyday life experience which, as we have seen, Williams, Hall, and Geertz make the centre of their projects. It is this populist strand in cultural studies that lies at the heart of the eloquent criticism mounted by McGuigan in the final extract. Dwelling on the writings of Williams and Hall, and on the period in which the cultural hegemony approach dominated critical debate, McGuigan is particularly quizzical of the relationship between the culture of intellectuals and that of other people, which he sees as 'inherently paradoxical' (McGuigan, 1992, p. 5). Hall and Williams are the best examples of this since their work emerges

from an engagement with left/Marxist issues during the period of the rise of Reagan and Thatcher.

This chapter charts the decline of the hegemony paradigm and looks towards a resurrection of or at least a reconciliation with the base/superstructure model, in coming to terms with the culture industries rather than just the content of their products, and together with the economic dynamics of cultural globalism.

As much as cultural hegemony proved a rallying point for those concerned with relationships between cultures and those concerned with ideology in text, it also generated sufficient points of new theoretical departure to fragment the initial ideas of writers such as Williams and Hall. The following sections of the reader stand to some extent in testament to this. Feminism, and moving image analysis emerge and pursue their own discourses apart from such classic texts as Hall's (1980) treatise on *Encoding/decoding*, or the structuralist and psychoanalytic traditions of cultural studies. In particular, any examination of ideology and ideological effects has now to be problematized in the light of the emphasis on audience decoding and ethnography often attributed to David Morley (1980) at the CCCS, but also drawing on a range of works such as those of Ang, Radway, Hobson, Brundson and others, which are cited in the references to Section 10.

References and further reading

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