

Subjects & Identities

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If you followed our course from the start, you might have realized (maybe to your disappointment) that Cultural Studies is not too keen on straightforward definitions. Instead, Cultural Studies employs various, often conflicting theoretical approaches in order to come to grips with phenomena such as culture, meaning and media. However, rather than setting out to create a perfect super-theory of its own, Cultural Studies is “wrestling with the angels”¹ of theory in order to find the tools to actually *study* (and not just theorize) phenomena in a more down-to-earth way.

To recapitulate:

First, we began with discussing two kinds of *culture*: a *lived experience* of a shared meaningful world on the one hand, and contested *representations* of culture on the other, a culture that makes us and a culture we make. As we saw, Cultural Studies is most interested in the way these aspects of culture are conjoined, or *articulated*, rather than defining a culture in a definitive, terminal way.

Second, we learned about two kinds of *signs*: on the one hand, *Saussure's* insistence on the *arbitrary* relation between signifier and signified and the purely conventional nature of meaning; on the other, *Peirce's* reply that not all signs are arbitrary, and that not all meaning is conventional, but that some signs have a more direct relation (resemblance, causality) to what they stand for. Combining such positions, Cultural Studies emphasizes that the creation of meaning is a *practical, often contested social activity*, where different kinds of signs are employed to create, stabilize and transform meaning.

And third, we came to meet with two different concepts of *media*. On the one hand, the idea of media as a kind of *postal system* which puts a fixed meaning in an envelope merely to transport it before it can then be unwrapped relatively intact by the receiver; on the other hand, the notion that media are not merely the box in which meaning is delivered, but that the *medium is the message*, that means of communication affect recipients more than the contents of these messages. Cultural Studies, again,

acknowledges the importance of these insights, but highlights that the use of media is a *practical activity that makes signs and meaning part of a socially created material and economic world*.

When we now speak about humans, we will once again come to a dialectical position which shows these humans as being both *subjects of power*, and *subject to power*. In fact, Cultural Studies' position on humans can be delineated from the previous deliberations on culture, meaning and media. When we introduced the idea of a *homo symbolicum*, we described humans as living in a mediated relation to the material world. These humans are first of all interpreters who have learned to apply a code in order to decipher the language of signs; they are cognitive beings, concentrated readers, distanced observers of the world; they have detached themselves from the immediate constraints of the material world, they have put mind over matter and act freely upon their own will.

Such a *homo symbolicum* as we just described (in slightly exaggerated form) is approaching the classical (idealist) notion of the *subject* as “the active mind or the thinking agent”,² as an autonomous, “fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action”.³ (*Who wouldn't want to be that guy?*)

We can now confront this *homo symbolicum* with what we might call a *homo performans*: for this human, it is not the immaterial message but the material medium that counts, massaging the senses of the not so distanced observer; for this human, meaning is not hidden in a box, but performed as a spectacle; this human is not all cognitive mind, but a body full of emotions. This human we now described (again in exaggerated form) is approaching a materialist notion of the *subject* as “a person under the dominion of a lord or sovereign”.⁴ This subject is “not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relation to ‘significant others’, who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabited”.⁵ While our man the *homo symbolicum* is a *maker*, fully in control of his actions and his environment, the *homo performans* is *made*, controlled by her emotions and her environment, in need of a helping hand. (*See what I just did there?*)

Now, you could say, these are just different theories about the nature of human beings: what do such philosophical sophistries have to do with Cultural Studies? And you're right, posed as abstract questions they are of little interest to Cultural Studies – were it not for the fact that in the real

world such abstract notions are often employed to distinguish between actual living human beings. In fact, the distinction between what we called a *homo symbolicum* and a *homo performans* would matter little, if it wasn't the basis for evaluating different human beings and offering them different subject positions and different opportunities in life.

If we look back in history, we find that these subject positions are not distributed randomly across the population, but that reason and emotion, agility and passiveness, production and consumption are gendered, racialized, and have a class bias. For example, who was considered to be worthy of the pen, to be an artist, a creator, even a genius? In the first one hundred years of its existence, the Nobel Prize in Literature was given to ninety men, and to nine women only; of these, five were from Europe, two from North America, one from South America and one from Africa; only two of them, Toni Morrison and Gabriela Mistral, had a non-white background. In fact, *gender* as well as *race* have been two of the most central fault lines employed to separate powerful subjects from those subjected to power, to separate productive (artistic) subjects from those that merely consume, to separate those that *make culture* from those that are *made by culture*, those that govern from those that are governed.

Cultural Studies' origins lie in the analysis of a more straightforward hierarchical structure, namely the distinction of *class*, which separates people within a capitalist system and puts them in different positions. Here, a historically specific mode of production and social relations "constitutes subjects in particular ways", as owners and workers, the one dominating and exploiting the other.⁶ At the time of Cultural Studies' emergence, most forms of Marxist critique had concentrated on the economic distinction between those who own the means of production and reap the profits (bourgeoisie), and those who have to sell their labor power, because they have no other means to survive (working class) – and on the mechanisms that produce and perpetuate such distinctions. In order to challenge said subject positions one would have to challenge the capitalist economic system directly: through party politics, industrial action etc. The sphere of culture was deemed secondary within this Marxist mode of critique, no more than an effect of the sphere of economic production which forms the real foundation of society.

When Cultural Studies was forming in the 1960s, it continued to believe in the centrality of class antagonism, but reevaluated the role and function of culture in the struggle over subject positions. Doing Cultural Studies

meant to ask how the structural inequality produced by the economic system is upheld and *reproduced* through culture, and how it is also *challenged* through culture. It was Raymond Williams who argued

against the literal operations of the base/superstructure metaphor, which in classical Marxism ascribed the domain of ideas and of meanings to the ‘superstructures’, themselves conceived as merely reflective of and determined in some simple fashion by ‘the base’, without a social effectivity of their own.⁷

As a consequence, Cultural Studies championed a wider concept of culture to include not only traditional works of art, but also everyday rituals and leisure activities, and it argued that non-bourgeois cultures can be a means of resistance, challenging the norms and values of an ascribed subject position.

Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* from 1977 is a classic example from the field of Cultural Studies which shows how after-school and leisure activities contribute to reproducing an existing class system; in the end, the sons proudly and consciously follow their fathers to the factory. Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* from 1979, on the other hand, is a prime example of the idea of cultural resistance. Here, subcultures are seen to challenge a dominant ideology, not by the traditional means of a political pamphlet, but by using cultural means to say you’re not okay with the way things are going:

[Punk’s] transformations go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority’, which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus.⁸

Most importantly for our context, such studies of youth and subcultures challenged and complicated the question of who was a ‘thinking agent’ and who had the ‘capacity of action’. Working-class people, here, are as active and creative as anyone else; they have their own means of expression, they are making culture, too. There is no reason, thus, why they should be deprived of the means of production, why their work should be devalued and exploited.

The change of focus from an economic system in a narrow sense to the (popular) cultural sphere was central to Cultural Studies' criticism of bourgeois representation of working-class life, and the subject positions this entails. However, it still repeated and reproduced a central form of subordination within bourgeois life: namely, that of women to men. While ascribing agency to the subaltern subject of the working class, Cultural Studies often failed to see on whose backs such agency was built. It was often women who took care that workers could return to the workplace refreshed and rejoiced in the morning.

Female researchers within Cultural Studies soon took issue with the thematic limitations of the objects of study within the field. In 1980, Angela McRobbie thus wrote:

There have been studies of the relation of male youth to class and class culture, to the machinery of the state, and to the school, community and workplace. Football has been analysed as a male sport, drinking as a male form of leisure, the law and the police as patriarchal structures concerned with young male (potential) offenders. I don't know of a study that considers, never mind prioritises, youth and the family; women and the whole question of sexual division have been marginalised.⁹

Concentrating on male performances out on the street and in the stadium, and thus neglecting more private, quieter activities in the home, for example, Cultural Studies was found to replicate traditional distinctions between the public and the domestic sphere, between work and home, between productive and reproductive labor. What Cultural Studies was failing to see was "how class and patriarchal relations work together".¹⁰

In a similar way, and at around the same time, Cultural Studies realized that the experience of working-class people differs not only according to one's gender, but also due to racial attributions. What kind of work you are allowed to do, how you are paid and treated on the job, and how likely you are to lose that job, all this is not only determined by your class position, but also by your gender, and by what Stuart Hall calls 'race': "Race is thus, also, the modality in which class is 'lived', the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'." Hall was eager to add that this is not

just a problem for Black workers: “This has consequences for the whole class, not specifically for its ‘racially defined’ segment”.¹¹ A divided working class, Hall argued, was easier to control; at least there was always someone still worse off to look down upon.

Of course, both in the US and the UK, white men made and still make up a substantial part of the workforce,¹² but their fate can neither be understood nor fought unless it is related to those who are not white and/or male. Especially in the US, it was often social movements that highlighted the marginalization of women on the one hand, and people of color on the other, as well as, in a later step, the *double marginalization* of women of color. In order to confront this marginalization in the name of achieving universal emancipation, women of color came to address the particular circumstances that stopped them from getting ahead. Somewhat paradoxically, they had to highlight and emphasize that which they were seeking to overcome: *difference*.

In the name of what they called ‘identity politics’, the Combahee River Collective, a group of black lesbian socialist women, issued a collective text in 1977, called “A Black Feminist Statement”. Here, the group argued that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking”,¹³ and proclaimed that “we need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers”.¹⁴ The specific situation of Black women had somehow fallen between the chairs of both the black liberation movement and the women’s liberation movement, and had thus to be addressed specifically. The ‘worker’ is not merely an abstraction, but a concretely situated living being.¹⁵ A single Black mother has different needs than a white family father of two or a young woman living in a multi-generational household: they need different working hours and different structures of care, as well as different forms of ‘industrial action’.

However, by claiming that their specific lived experience was different, the Combahee River Collective did *not* posit an *essential* difference between them and others of a different gender, skin color or sexual orientation. In recent times, it has often been levelled against ‘identity politics’ that such politics lead to a fragmentation and tribalization of society, especially if ever new, specialist identities are created; often, such identities are positively matched by a consumer economy keen on thrashing out ever more diverse products: *a slogan t-shirt for everyone*. At worst, such slogans play a blame-game that tries to advance sectarian

political interests and thus undermines any possibility of solidarity and collaboration. Wrongly understood, ‘identity politics’ can indeed be divisive – especially if it is employed by the political, identitarian right.

But that was not what the Combahee River Collective had in mind.¹⁶ Instead, they argued that everyone’s road to universal emancipation was specific, determined by the specific kind of obstacles that were put into their path: “the synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives”.¹⁷ These conditions are different for workers and owners, but also for men and women, for white people and people of color, for straight and queer folks, for abled people and those who are being handicapped. Not because these people are essentially different, but because they are treated differently by society; not because of mere ‘cultural’ differences, but because such distinctions are writing themselves into the land. All these *different* people are *similar*, however, in what they want to achieve: an end to exploitation and domination, equal access to food, housing, health and education.

This is to say, even though it might sound strange, that identity politics come before identity claims, that racism comes before ‘race’, that sexism and misogyny come before gender, that ableism comes before disablement. This is not to say that no differences between humans exist outside of culture, outside of the social. Rather, it is to say that whatever is out there in the ‘real world’, it only becomes a social issue when we endow it with meaning: “It is important for, it matters to me to be a woman – that’s on a different level than a biological definition”.¹⁸ It matters, in a very real sense, to be treated as a woman, as much as it matters to aspire to be a man, or wanting to go beyond this distinction.

But why claim an identity when your aim is to overcome differences? Who needs identity in the first place? In order to address subordination and exploitation, you need a voice, you need someone who listens to you; you need a certain position of power. The traditional worker is at least a man, his woman is at least white, and both are at least straight. Those who came together as the Combahee River Collective enjoyed none of these privileges: “We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have”.¹⁹ The concept of identity deployed in Cultural Studies is therefore “not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one”.²⁰ It is about what you are made to be and what you want to become.

Cultural Studies' incentive to intervene in questions of identity

stemmed from experiences of being misrepresented and misrecognized – as a woman, gay man, black person – in public media or commercial forms, such as advertising, or political versions of the nation or academic knowledge. This common experience often quite directly fuelled a kind of cultural study that interrogated dominant representations [...].²¹

This interrogation of said “dominant representations” was built on Cultural Studies' understanding of the work of media as a process of *encoding* and *decoding*. Media productions might *encode* dominant cultural meanings about the role of workers, women, black or old people, but it relies on consumers of media to *decode* the message in a corresponding, homologous way. If the consumer does so, they will find themselves properly represented, and it is in this moment of reading, watching, listening that we learn to “identify with (or emotionally invest in) descriptions of ourselves as male or female, black or white, young or old”.

²² We are learning to take up a specific subject position through seeing what people like us are expected to do, and rewarded for. The consumer of media is thus *formed* by “the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us”.²³ It is, among other things (like schools and families), popular cultures that

provide us with preformed frameworks of meaning or ways of making sense of our social experience, that [...] equip us with value systems by which to orient ourselves toward the events of our everyday lives, and that [...] teach us to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate pleasures.²⁴

Media representations, then, “become effectively the foundation for self-images, identities and attitudes towards life”.²⁵

But what about those whose experiences do not resonate with the dominant discourse presented in the media? They can either subject their lived experience to the given ideological representations, or *oppose* what they see and hear. However, where does it leave you, if you do not find your experience represented in any way, if your experience resonates with nothing you see and hear? “The critique of the dominant,” which Cultural Studies practices, therefore, has to be supplemented by “a second side: the aim to secure the representation of marginalized or subordinated

groups, spaces or themes in various ways”.²⁶ Of course, even the best intended representations of a group carry an element of the stereotypical. Not all men act ‘masculine’, not all people with dark skin act ‘black’; lived experience is too complex, and too diverse, to be represented in a single image. But that’s not what representations are there for, anyway, to simply provide you with a preformed identity.

Identity, like so many other terms, holds a paradoxical position within our language, our culture: on the one hand, identity is the name for the “the individual characteristics by which a person or thing is recognized”; it is the state of being identical only with oneself, of being an individual. On the other hand, identity describes “the state of being the same in nature, quality, etc.”, the state of being the same as others, of being identical with other women, gays, Irish etc.²⁷ While seemingly diametrically opposed, personal identity and collective identity are indeed connected, articulated in a dialectical performance: “we can only give an account of ourselves to an audience that is prepared, and already at least partly knows how, to listen to us through some form of shared vernacular”.²⁸ Individual identity, thus, is neither oppositional to a collective identity, nor is it identical with it; instead, our personal identity can only exist as a thread woven into the tapestry of a wider, shared experience. This is true no matter whether you’re black or white, a Christian or a Muslim, a boy or a girl. It is more difficult, however, for those whose experience fails to be represented in the dominant discourses.

Claiming a collective identity, an identity shared with others, is, then, first of all a way of challenging what a dominant discourse fails to offer you, that is, a full subject position, an individual identity, and what it offers you instead, that is, stereotypical depictions that try to pin you down. For Cultural Studies, thus, identities are of interest only insofar as they can help build the foundations for action, only if they can help to get you into a position to participate in culture more equally, only if they are the basis for political agency and real change. However, the identities we can find and create are always relative to what society offers us, and thus our capacity to change things is determined by the situation we find ourselves in. We are *subjects* of our own narrative only within a story we are *subjected to*. Together, we might rewrite the script, and change the material conditions of our experience. Here, then, the struggle against economic exploitation with which cultural studies began meets with the new interest in matters of gender, race, ability, sexual orientation etc.

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2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed., New York: 1983, p. 310.
3. Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity", in: *Modernity and its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held & Tony McGrew, Oxford: 1992, 273-326, here p. 275.
4. Williams, *Keywords*, p. 308.
5. Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity", p. 275.
6. Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., London: 2008, p. 221.
7. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", *Media, Culture, Society* 2 (1980), 57-72, here p. 60.
8. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, London: 1987 (1979), p. 18.
9. Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique", in: *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*, eds. Tony Bennett, Graham Martin, Colin Mercer & Janet Woollacott, London: 1980, 111-123, here p. 111.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
11. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance", in: *Sociological Theories. Race and Colonialism*, ed. UNESCO, Paris: 1980, 305-345, here p. 341.
12. Cf. Phil A. Neel, *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict*, London: 2018.
13. The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" (1978), *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42:3/4 (2014), 271-280, here p. 271.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
15. Cf. Verónica Gago, *Feminist International. How to Change Everything*, trans. Liz Mason-Deese, London: 2020.
16. Cf. Olúfemi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture. How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)*, London: 2022, p. 6-9.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
18. Barker, *Cultural Studies*, p. 13.
19. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement", p. 276.
20. Stuart Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" in: *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay, London: 1996, 1-17, here p. 3.
21. Richard Johnson, Deborah Chambers, Parvati Raghuram & Estella Tincknell, *The Practice of Cultural Studies*, London: 2004, p. 15.
22. Barker, *Cultural Studies*, p. 11.
23. Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity", p. 277.
24. John Fiske, "Popular Culture", in: *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed., Chicago: 1995, 321-335, here p. 322.
25. Aleida Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Topics, Concepts, Issues*, Berlin: 2012, p. 99.
26. Johnson et al., *The Practice of Cultural Studies*, p. 15.
27. *Collins English Dictionary*, ed. Ian Brookes, 12th ed., Glasgow: 2014, p. 967.
28. Lynne Segal, "After Judith Butler: Identities, Who Needs Them?", *Subjectivity* 25 (2008), 381-394, here p. 390.

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