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Cultural Studies and Critical Communications Research

Eileen R. Meehan

Key Speech

International Symposium on Critical Communication Research:

Renewing the Foundations and Neo-Marxist Perspectives

Fudan University

Shanghai, People's Republic of China

15 December 2010

(The following is an expanded version of Professor Meehan's 2010. –Ed.)

My dear colleagues,

It is a pleasure to be here. It is an honor to speak with you. Like the other foreign scholars,¹ I am charged with three tasks:

First, to make some contribution to the development of critical communications research;

Second, to suggest some ideas that may help you found a Center for Critical Communications Research;

And third, to do so by addressing a particular topic – in my case, how to rethink cultural studies as a thoroughly critical endeavor.

To do this, I will briefly comment on the founding of cultural studies in England. Then I will sketch the development of cultural studies in the United States. I will pay attention to the definition of 'culture' in each context. I will also sketch two main types of cultural research in the United States: celebratory and critical cultural studies. Based on the US context, I will present four suggestions for rethinking cultural studies as a form of critical communications research. I hope that you find these suggestions helpful.

So, we turn first to cultural studies in England. For American scholars, the field of critical cultural studies is associated with Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and E. P. Thompson—and with intellectual ferment in England at the end of World War II (Williams 1958, 1961; Hoggart 1957; Thompson 1963). Again from the perspective of US scholars, one outcome of that ferment was the founding of a critical cultural studies with a strong emphasis on class, representation, and lived experience. The term culture was detached from its definition as 'the best art, the best literature, and the educated discernment thereof,' which

only the privileged few could attain. Instead, culture was defined as ‘a whole way of life, a way of living and being in the world,’ which every human had regardless of class, caste, gender, race, etc.

As American scholars tell the story of English cultural studies, that redefinition was a radical move. Of course, overtime, English cultural studies developed in various directions, often referred to as schools, e.g., the Birmingham School and the Leicester School. I’m sure that our colleagues Graham Murdock and Colin Sparks could enlighten us on that topic given their important contributions to critical cultural studies in the U.K. context from the 1970s on (Murdock 1978, 1995; Sparks 1996). Suffice to say that their work represents a melding of cultural studies and political economy, which stood in contrast to the work of Stuart Hall (Hall et al., 1978) with its grounding in Althusserian structuralism and resistant readings (Hall 1980). Under Hall, the Birmingham School developed a twin focus on mediated texts and media-based subcultures (Hebdige, 1979) with a particular interest in subcultures’ ability to resist the dominant ideology embodied in mainstream texts. At University of Leicester, where Murdock and his colleagues intertwined cultural studies and political economy, research uncovered tensions between agency and structuration found in media artifacts, politics, audiences, and economics—and also found in connections between artifacts, politics, audiences, and economics (Golding and Murdock 1977; Murdock 1978; Schlesinger et al. 1983). Overtime, of course, these positions developed further and other positions emerged, but this sketch will serve our purposes today.

Now let us move to the United States. Also at the end of World War II, a form of cultural studies was emerging there. Elite intellectuals advanced the proposition that the US had become the first global superpower partly due to the unique—but universally appealing—set of values and beliefs that were expressed through American culture (Boorstin 1958, 1965, 1973; Lipsett 1963). By culture, they meant the best of American art and literature. Working scholars expanded that to mean all of American art, literature, and media (Berger 1970; Cawelti 1971; Browne 1972; Gans 1975). To defend that expansion, these scholars borrowed a definition of culture from Franz Boas (1948), who had founded American cultural anthropology decades earlier. Like Williams, Boas had defined culture as a whole way of life. Boas used that definition to guide his observations of non-industrial societies and to explain them in terms of an idealist totality with core values expressed through every act and artifact.

By the mid-1960s, American cultural studies was focused on celebrating those core values by seeking evidence of them in phenomena that included Hollywood movies, traveling circuses, television programs, popular rituals, advertisements, etc. These were all called popular culture and were celebrated as the people’s culture with no attention paid to the roles of corporations, market structures, laws, or regulations that constrained them. The acknowledged leader of this approach was Ray B. Browne who founded the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1967, the Popular Culture Association in 1969, the first Center for Popular Culture Studies in 1970, and the first Department of Popular Culture in 1973—all at Bowling Green State University in Ohio (Hoopenstand 1999). The Bowling Green approach to cultural studies communicated an upbeat fascination with all things American, which con-

tinues unabated in its journal (Mayerle 1991; Jenkins 2011) and elsewhere (Lawrence 2009).

Working with similar notions of subcultures, cultural communities, and mediated texts, James W. Carey and his colleagues at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana sought a more theoretically sophisticated approach to cultural research in mass communications (Carey 1975; Carey and Kreiling, 1975). The Carey culturalists focused on close readings as they sought to trace the assumptions, world views, values, experiences, and decodings that typified a cultural community in terms of its internal culture and its preferred media products.

Working with them, but strongly influenced by Hall, was Lawrence Grossberg (Grossberg 1989). Grossberg was instrumental in introducing Hall and Hall's version of English cultural studies, Althusserianism, and cultural resistance to American cultural studies through his research and teaching (Budd et al., 1990). He also collaborated in organizing a key conference at Champaign-Urbana: "Cultural Studies Now and in the Future," which met from April 4-9, 1990. The conference's program defined cultural studies as a field mixing high theory with close readings, showcased Hall, and resulted in a definitive and weighty volume that mixed papers and discussions from the conference with invited essays written for the collection (Grossberg et al., 1992).

Although Carey rejected Hall's and Grossberg's "structural turn" in cultural studies (Carey 1995), both Carey and Grossberg celebrated subcultural communities as active audiences. Such audiences interpreted commercial media products, usually through readings against the grain that scholars could draw from the text or from observations of the community. Over all, the various approaches to cultural studies practiced at Champaign-Urbana and Bowling Green embraced subcultures, finding much to celebrate in those subcultures and in the commercial texts consumed by those subcultures.

As suggested by our discussion thus far, from the 1990s to the current day, American scholarship in celebratory cultural studies has relied on two lines of research: one that produces close readings of mediated texts and another that produces ethnographies of media audiences. The latter is typically informed by the researcher's mastery of the relevant mediated text and membership in its dedicated viewership (Mayerle 1991, and Rowe 1995).

Scholars doing close readings of media products assume that any cultural artifact can be treated as if it was a book to be read. That text is presumed to be polysemic so that audiences can read with or against the grain, to use Hall's terminology. Readings made against the grain resist dominant ideology and can be either reactionary or revolutionary. Cultural studies scholars can detect these potential readings because they have a special literacy, grounded in their mastery of high theory, that allows them to read closely and to discern meanings hiding beneath the text's obvious meaning. The vast majority of these scholarly readings produce resistant readings, suggesting that the audience interprets commercial media in ways that undermine capitalist hierarchies (Budd et. al., 1990; Rapping 1994; Stabile 1995, 2006).

The second line of research in celebratory cultural studies focuses on ethnographies of subcultures. Here, researchers document the social practices of such groups and their rela-

tionships to mediated texts. Generally, these scholars are members of the relevant subculture and fans of the relevant texts. Sometimes called academic fans and often referring to themselves as aca-fans (Hills 2000; Dwyer 2011), they write about their favorite media products and their fellow fans (Amesley 1990; Jenkins 1992). Further, some aca-fans apply their expertise to the media texts produced by other fans, for example, sexually explicit novels, short stories, or images created by fans and depicting their favorite characters (Penley 1991; Gillilan 1998). These aca-fans celebrate their fan groups as well as fandom in general while recognizing that American society and mainstream media have long ridiculed fans (Dwyer 2011). This raises issues regarding aca-fans' ability to discern and report on fan behaviors that are distasteful or that could foster negative stereotypes of fans (Dwyer 2011)—a problem inherent in such emic research whether the fan-scholars are reading texts or producing insider accounts (Meehan 2000). Regardless, fan-scholars find much to celebrate about mediated culture and the fans who organize their lives around their favorite texts.

Although celebratory cultural studies was the dominant form of cultural research in the US, it was not the only form of cultural research. On the left, we have a tradition of ideological critique, which was enhanced by the immigration of some members of the Frankfurt School prior to World War II. The result was an approach recognizing that commercial media incorporated dominant ideology and that such products were manufactured by the cultural industries (Horkeheimer and Adorno, 1977/1993).

This critical approach to cultural studies was exemplified by Donald Lazere's collection *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives* (Lazere 1987). Typical of the selections was Peter Biskind's analysis of *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan 1954), which contextualized Kazan's film in terms of the director's personal choices and auteurism, the Cold War and McCarthyism, Hollywood's post-war aesthetic, and economic constraints in terms of the power structures and ideological strictures of US capitalism in the 1950s. Within that context, Biskind showed how the film's characters, relationships, and narrative supported the emerging ideology of post-war imperialism (Biskind 1975/1987).

In both the US and UK, reaction to such critiques often charged that ideological critics treated audiences as cultural dupes, as people incapable of both perceiving their own best interests and resisting dominant ideology by reading against the grain (Hall 1981). Implicitly, the charge suggested that ideological critics were elitist: *they* could escape dominant ideology but not ordinary people. Combined with the valorization of the audience as always active, celebratory cultural scholars effectively sought evidence in mediated texts or in fan activities to demonstrate that average people typically ignored the most obvious reading and actively engaged the text, teasing out its hidden, progressive nuances.

The result was a deluge of studies that took media texts obviously glorifying militarism, sexism, racism, imperialism, or economic exploitation and, by reading against the grain, discovered that the text could be anti-militarist, anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-exploitation (Budd et. al. 1990; Rapping 1994; Stabile 1995). Such readings were characterized as subversive because they demonstrated that readers could resist the dominant meaning of the text and thereby derived pleasure through such resistance (Radway 1984; Brown 1994). Often, these readings by academics were treated as if they were the readings

that most people actually made and from which people took pleasure. Despite audience studies questioning this claim (Seiter 1994) and despite the tendency for fan subcultures to operate within the cultural boundaries of their preferred texts (Jenkins 1992), subversive readings remain common. As critical cultural scholars have noted, such readings grant autonomy to audiences, overlook the manifest content of mediated messages, confuse viewing with political action, and ignore media economics (Budd et. al. 1990; Rapping 1994; Stabile 1995, 2006).

Having briefly sketched celebratory and critical cultural studies in the US, we now come to our main concern: what is to be done to revitalize *critical* cultural studies? Given our discussion thus far, I have four suggestions that I will first list and then briefly sketch one by one.

First, redefine culture in materialist terms.

Second, recognize the difference between culture that people create together through social interaction and cultural products manufactured by corporations within industrial and legal constraints.

Third, a corollary: individual media products must be understood in their political economic contexts.

Fourth, abandon the metaphor of text and close reading.

I will spend more time discussing the problem of redefinition because it provides a foundation for the other three suggestions. But I will provide you with some comments on each of the other three suggestions as well.

First, redefine culture in materialist terms.

In contemporary cultural studies, ‘culture as a whole way of life’ has come to mean that individuals select elements from a wide array of options to create their lifestyle. Pick an identity or two; link up with a few subcultural groups; purchase the necessary media products, consumer goods, telecommunications services and—voilà!—you have a whole way of life!

Clearly, this was *not* what Williams or Boas meant. Each was keenly aware of social structure, relations of production, and how symbolic systems can naturalize exploitation. As I reflected on this, I was reminded of Marx’s observation in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852):

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please. They do not choose the circumstances for themselves, but have to work upon circumstances as they find them, have to fashion the material handed down by the past. The legacy of dead generations weighs down like a nightmare on the brains of the living.²

Here Marx recognizes human agency but also structuration: we make our own history but we do so in terms of the historical parameters that we have inherited from the generations preceding us. To me, this seems very close to how Williams and Boas understood culture. And so, to move us towards a materialist understanding of culture, I offer the following paraphrase of Marx's observation:

Human beings make our own culture, but not just as we please. We do not choose the circumstances for ourselves, but have to work upon circumstances as we find them, have to fashion today's culture from the material handed down by the past. The legacy of dead generations weighs down like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

Here is my interpretation of that rephrasing.

People collectively make today's culture. To do that, we use our particular cultural heritage and we may draw upon other cultural heritages that have been in historical or contemporary contact with our own culture. Our cultural production may be constrained or facilitated by the particular social, economic, or political structures in which we live. We exercise agency within the terms set by structuration. Our cultural work is creative but it is also rule-governed.

From this understanding, it should be clear that different circumstances for cultural production should be identified so that we can contextualize different forms of cultural production and their specific constraints and facilitations. That is what I mean in my second suggestion: recognize the difference between culture that we make together and cultural products that are manufactured by corporations within industrial and legal constraints. Once we make that differentiation, we are poised to identify—or create—theories and methods that address cultural creation and socio-historical processes on one hand *or* cultural products, industrial processes, and legal systems on the other hand.

That leads us to a corollary expressed in my third suggestion: individual media products must be understood within their political and economic contexts. In terms of a media product's political context, we need to understand the ways in which the state has built legal, regulatory, and policy supports for the media industries. In the US context, these supports include laws governing intellectual property and taxation as well as policies regarding commercialization, exports, and media conglomeration. In terms of the US economic context, important considerations include corporate structure, the role of advertisers, and reliance on external sources for financing production—all of which shape media content. Of course, these are just a few relevant constraints.

And finally, my fourth suggestion: abandon the metaphor of the text and close reading. The metaphor has two drawbacks. First, it focuses scholarly attention on textual elements in media products like narratives and characters. But the metaphor overlooks non-textual elements like sound effects, music, moving images, and screen sizes that make films, television

programs, and DVDs different from books. The metaphor also overlooks the particularities that make books and movies different from television programs, DVDs, recorded music, computer games, and any other medium that depends on some combination of visuals, movement of images, movement of cameras, spoken word, singing, music, special effects, etc. To be critical cultural scholars, we need to analyze all of the elements that a company has assembled in order to produce the media product.

As we abandon the metaphor of the text, so too should we abandon the metaphor of close reading. Reading requires paying attention to the object being read but social research indicates that people don't always pay attention to radio, television, and even films in movie theaters. Further, in households, individuals sometimes use television, radio, recorded music, audio books, and other media as 'noise' or 'company' when a person is alone. When everybody's home, the mixture of multiple media can produce a chaotic mediascape that is always present but rarely attended to. In short, we need critical social research to trace ways that people relate—or don't relate—to media playing in their houses and surrounding them in stores, elevators, streets, and so on.

I humbly submit these four suggestions for your consideration. In closing, I wish to thank Yun Lai and Wu Changchang for translating my presentation. I also thank Yun Lai for reading the translation and thereby being my co-presenter. Thank you for your kind attention. I look forward to our discussion.

Notes

1. Fudan University also invited Graham Murdock, Dan Schiller, and Colin Sparks to address these issues.
2. The quotation comprises the second paragraph in Section I.

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