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# **The Marxist Legacy in Media and Cultural Studies: Implications for Africa**

**By Keyan G. Tomaselli**

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the lineage of British cultural studies in relation to its historical antecedents in Britain and Germany, and with regard to developments in the USA, South America and Africa. Cultural and media studies are contrasted with American administrative research and the 'mass society' thesis. Cultural studies seek emancipation; administrative research contributes to social control. The paper ends with a discussion of African cultural theorists and their application of Marxism in anti-colonial struggles on the continent. Some of the problems evident in such scholars and activists as Cabral, Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are examined. The paper argues that the history of cultural studies during the 20th Century is a history of the ideological mobilisation of the term 'culture'.

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# **L'héritage Marxiste dans les Domaines du Média et des Etudes Culturelles: Ses Implications à l'égard de l'Afrique**

**Par Keyan G. Tomaselli**

## **Résumé**

Dans cette communication, on discute la suite d'études britanniques dans le domaine de la culture. L'étude tient compte des antécédents historiques en Angleterre et en Allemagne, sans pour autant oublier les développements relatifs aux Etats Unis d'Amérique, en Amérique du Sud et, enfin, en Afrique. On s'efforce de faire une analyse contrastive entre les études du média et culturelles, et la recherche administrative en Amérique ainsi que la thèse de "La Société de Masse". Les études culturelles cherchent à établir l'émancipation; la recherche administrative contribue à la maîtrise des aspects sociaux. Cet exposé se termine avec une critique des théoriciens Africains dans la discipline de la culture, et une étude de l'application de leurs thèses Marxistes lors de la lutte anti-coloniale en Afrique. On y fait un examen bref des problèmes soulevés par les académiciens/ activistes tels Cabral, Fanon et Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

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## **Literary Value as a Site of Social Contestation**

Cultural studies initially arose from British literary debates around the 'high-low' culture dichotomy. Late 19th and early 20th Century scholars like Mathew Arnold, T.S Eliot and F.R Leavis responded to the political turbulence, moral disorder and social anarchy of the underclasses by attributing these to the breakdown of cultural values — 'the best thought and known in the world'.

Subsequent literature cleansed this once new tradition's political/cultural concern. They objectified culture as an object, an item found in a book, or on a stage, something disconnected from the political idea of a 'a centre of authority' (Arnold 1966). In South Africa, the champions of the New Criticism of the 1950s were 30 years later, defending it as 'traditional criticism' (Visser 1984). By suppressing the history of New Criticism, contemporary scholars present this approach as timeless and inevitable. Forgotten is the acrimonious struggle by which this method first obtained academic legitimisation. 'Traditional criticism', which now ranked certain kinds of literature as 'elite culture', focused "attention upon a personal relation to literature". The vital and necessary connection it once had with larger realities was severed, as was its capacity for cultural mobilisation (Vaughan 1984).

## **The 'Problem' of Culture**

For most people, culture is exemplified by 'doing', for example, 'going to the theatre'. This is a far cry from Edward Tylor's original anthropological definition: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1924). It is in the face of these and other definitions of the concept, that the content of 'culture' became a contested terrain.

The 1970s variant of cultural studies foregrounded structuralism. Structuralism holds that individuals live and experience

conditions in and through categories, classifications and frameworks of culture (Johnson 1979a). In contrast is culturalism which derives from different theoretical premises — no less concerned with questions of struggle, class, subordination and power.

Where structuralists argue that people make history, but under conditions not of their own making, culturalists aver that people are active agents in the making of their own history. Structuralism is pessimistic. It assumes that individuals are bearers of the structures that speak and place them. During apartheid, for example, the liberal English press regularly called for the resignation of the Minister of Police at times when the police had brutally suppressed popular uprisings. The assumption was that a more 'humane' incumbent would behave differently. This was unlikely, because the discourse of policing under apartheid endorsed violence as a structural response.

Culturalism is optimistic as people are said to be able to create emancipated social structures through communality of experience. The pessimistic evaluation of 'Bantu Education', for example, could not have envisaged the way in which school pupils after 1976 took the initiative in struggling for democratic education. Here, clearly, is an example of the culturalists' view of working class culture as 'a whole way of life' engaged in a dialectical struggle with opposed ways of life, despite the then seemingly indestructible structures of State and Economy.

Despite the acrimonious debate between the two approaches, like yin and yang, culturalism and structuralism needed each other and developed virtually to spite each other. Like squabbling twin siblings, they developed at more or less the same time, from the same Marxist imperative, in response to the same social processes. Richard Johnson's statement, however, expresses the problem with this relationship: "Neither structuralism nor culturalism will do!" (Johnson 1979a:54). I address the implications of Johnson's statement below.

Cultural studies examines 'reality' as a set of relations, as social constructions multiply mediated through language, the



media, sense perception and the hidden dimensions of consciousness. These processes are argued to intersect with, and arise out of, the relations of production. The referentialist approach which sees a concrete reality 'out-there' is rejected. Theoretical advance occurs in the disagreements, conflicts and interstices between conceptual frameworks and paradigms.

To understand the contemporary nature of cultural studies, it is first necessary to examine its historical imperatives.

## **The Genesis of Cultural Studies**

### *European Responses to Stalinism, Fascism and National Socialism*

The coincident rise of Nazism in Germany, Fascism in Italy, Spain and Portugal, and Stalinism in the Soviet Union provided a context for the germination in the mid-1950s of 'cultural studies'. The general field thus owes its genesis to the reactions of different scholars working in distinct historical conjunctures to particular political, social and economic conditions. These conditions were themselves the result of massive forces which reconstructed entire societies and their relation to other societies during the early 20th Century.

The most influential group to address the rise of authoritarianism as an explanation for the demise of democracy (whether in the Communist or Western senses) was the German Frankfurt School. The School offered explanations on why Marx's prediction of the proletarian revolution had failed in the West. It was equally dismayed at the repressive form of economic socialism that had developed in the Soviet Union.

The School found the answer to social subordination in the 'mass' influence of the 'culture industry'. By this they meant the then, modern mass media of print, radio, music and cinema. 'Consumed' on a large scale, this industry provided a centralised mechanism for socialisation. But at the same time, it created an illusion of individual freedom of choice. The one-dimensional

uncritical minds resulting from the commodification of art were thus harnessed to serve the very interests they believed they were opposing. 'Culture' was argued to emerge from the organisational basis of society: the bundle of ideas, mores, norms and artistic expressions which cohered into the "inheritance and practice of intelligence and art" (Held 1980). Monopoly capitalism and mass media made accessible the previously class-isolated oppositional bourgeois culture to mass society, thus depriving politics of the essential dialectic necessary to critical development and 'two-dimensional' man (Marcuse 1968:26-7). Political decisions became technical choices on how best to manage the prevailing system.

Many in the School offered extremely pessimistic accounts of mass society, though Walter Benjamin (1977) counter-argued that the new 'cultural' technologies — while repressive in application — could also provide the means for art to enter the domain of politics in a form in which it could be produced and appropriated by the masses. This optimism developed in three directions:

- Jürgen Habermas's (1974, 1979, 1984) theory of communication connected Marx's method of economic analysis with the Frankfurt School's reading of Freud to provide a theory able to account for class in relation to culture and communication;
- Benjamin's (1977) idea of the relationship between *avant garde* art and politics. Made possible by mechanical reproduction, this kind of art would provide a cutting edge for resistance;
- A later exhortation was the engagement of the mass media (proposed by Hans Enzensberger (1976) and a host of Third World cultural scholars and activists).

The Frankfurt School however argued that the revolutionary



potential facilitated by *avant garde* art could still be coopted by commercial interests (Slater 1977:141). The School's emphasis on negation and its lack of a theory of history constrained its ability to account for resistance and struggle. Though it accepted that people are capable of reason and praxis, including the shaping of history (if only under optimal conditions), the School's theorists presented only vague abstractions which concealed concrete starting points for action (James 1987).

Earlier than the Frankfurt School, but only published *after* World War II, was the Italian socialist theorist and activist, Antonio Gramsci (1971). Though incarcerated in Italy during the 1930s, Gramsci rekindled the embers of Western critical thought which was becoming sceptical of Eastern socialism. Gramsci explained the failure of the working class revolution in terms of 'hegemony', where the ruling classes are able to induce the masses to consent to their subordination. Whereas the 'critical theory' of the Frankfurt School as a whole endorsed the negative reading of the technological rationalisation of our social and moral lifeworld, Gramsci was the first theorist after V.I. Lenin to approach ideology from a positive and strategic point of view.

Many decades ahead of his time, Gramsci's influence on cultural studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s was seminal. I will return to Gramsci once I have completed connecting the threads of the earlier history of cultural studies.

## **The 'American Way'**

### *Voting Patterns, Public Opinion and Administrative Communication Studies*

In contrast to the Frankfurt School's historical materialist analysis of the 'culture industry' was the forceful influence that behaviourism and positivism exerted on communication studies in the United States after 1950. American adherents and members of the School who had relocated to America during the Second World War between the 1930s and 1960s, remained



marginal to the mainstream of USA communication research (Switzer 1985:57). This mainly took the form of communications 'effects' research which drew inspiration from Edward Shils and Talcott Parsons' structural-functionalist sociology, Pavlovian stimulus-response experiments and telecommunications modelling of electrical signals — the linear Communicator-Medium-Response (C-M-R) equation (Shannon and Weaver 1949).

Conceived in terms of 'administrative research' — the interpretation of results that support the status quo (Smyth and Van Dinh 1983) — thousands of descriptive, technicist and ahistorical studies assumed a static, pluralistic society held together by common norms and social consensus. The media were seen to reinforce the values and norms that contributed to the consensus. The pre-eminent question was how to deliver specific audiences to advertisers. Social context, then, was understood in terms of Gallup-type voting patterns and Nielsen audience ratings. This kind of research aids the centralisation of power and tends to mask democratic alternatives.

### **Mass Society Theory: 'Superior', 'Mediocre' and 'Brutal' Cultures**

Administrative research was itself a development of mass society theory dominant in America between the 1930s and late 1950s. Where the debate on 'culture and society' in Britain was between literary and cultural theorists, in the United States it was the domain of sociologists. The emphasis was on social organisation and where the Frankfurt School's reference to 'mass society' was negative, Shils (1957, 1962, 1968) enlisted a positive reading in support of the American liberal-pluralist position. By theorising mass society as a move from the periphery to the centre of social, political and cultural life, then — provided its polyglot nature remained — the theory was functional for liberal democracy. Shils' (1968:1) assumption was that following the First World War, large aggregations of people living over an extensive territory have been able to enter into relatively free and uncoerced



association, that the "new society is a mass society precisely in the sense that the mass of the population has become incorporated into society".

Shils (1968:133) wrote of three levels of culture reproduced by three corresponding ranks of intelligentsia: 'superior', 'mediocre' and 'brutal'. The fastest growing, he argued, is 'brutal' (eg. horse racing, boxing comics, gambling etc), followed by 'mediocre' (reproductive, operates in the genres of superior culture) cultures which for the first time in history infiltrated all levels of the new mass society. 'Superior' culture, previously the domain of academics, artists and musicians, has in universities now degenerated into 'mediocre' culture because says Shils, "the supply of high talent is limited ... as the numbers expand, modern societies are forced to admit many persons whose endowments are such as to permit only a mediocre performance in the creation and reproduction of cultural works". Briton Raymond Williams' (1961:289) Marxist critique of elite cultural theory, however, charged Shills-type reasoning as offering stereotypical view of the 'masses': "there are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses".

Some American theorists argued that high culture is a culture but that low or popular culture is a dangerous mass phenomenon. Herbert Gans (1974) in particular, took issue with this latter position, reintroducing the concept of conflict into the debate. What differentiates high culture from popular culture, he argues, is the struggle between groups over the allocation of resources and power. He redefined culture in terms of class taste and the educational attributes of their publics: 'high culture' is the domain of educated people; 'popular culture' of the poorly educated. Gans' egalitarian perspective offers two policy alternatives: first, 'cultural mobility' would provide every American with the economic and educational prerequisites for choosing high culture; and second, 'subcultural programming' would encourage all taste cultures, high and low).

Administrative research directed little effort into the study of messages, their content, context, or structure whether of 'high'



or 'popular culture' by either sociologists or media scholars. Attempts were made to include various kinds of feedback loops into the C-M-R model, but these efforts did little to relieve the essential determinism of administrative research. The result was that American communications analysis became little more than an adjunct to powerful vested interests. Through the American military, this approach permeated into a global ideology working with architects of foreign policy to ensure American hegemony over markets, resources and raw materials (Lerner and Schramm 1967; Schramm 1964).

Anyone, group or nation which located itself outside the 'consensus' was assumed to be 'deviant'. Thus 'deviancy' research became big business as well. It was, however, expected that such 'outsiders' — and particularly nations — would be inexorably absorbed into the cultural centre through the proselytisation of the 'democratic creed' according to the Gospel of American business (Guback 1969; Mosco and Herman 1979; Mosco 1983; Schiller 1983). Such was the ideological power of the C-M-R model, that even communications scientists were unable to account for 'deviant' or different readings of the same messages. This kind of research, though still dominant in communication and journalism departments worldwide, lacks explanatory power and cannot be absorbed into social theory.

In contrast, numerous American departments of cinema and literature have been at the forefront of introducing social theory and cultural studies into their courses. Journals such as *Wide Angle*, *Jump Cut*, *Journal of Inquiry and Cultural Critique* led the way. Few of the ideas developed in these journals and departments, however, found their way into communications, journalism or even television syllabi in United States universities.

Administrative research locates scientists as detached, objective observers. It locates them outside the object of study when, in fact, they are inexorably inside the network of relations being studied. Social scientists in search of a metaphor to explain human communication unproblematically adapted the C-M-R model from the Shannon and Weaver original which was never



intended to explain anything more than the conduction of signals through telephone wires. In this electric/electronic model, the researcher is outside the model. The reductive application of this transmission model to human communication, argues David Sless (1986:21), results in more and faster misunderstanding.

Sless' demolition of the C-M-R model applied to human communication is itself in need of a further corrective. While communications scholars and practitioners talk about the 'sharing', 'understanding' and 'transmission' of elements of information, they tend to conceal the conditions which give rise to communication in the first place. These are rooted in history and struggle. Communication "is nothing more, nor nothing less, than the articulation of the social relations between people" (Siegelau 1979:11). This definition implies that 'communication' is the struggle for the control of social and semantic meanings within social formations, between and within classes, political alliances and cultural groupings. 'Sharing', 'understanding' and the 'exchange of ideas' is the uppermost meaning used by the dominant classes in the word 'communication'.

The effect of this is to mask the nature of class exploitation. When P.W. Botha and his National Party government, for example, talked about 'negotiation' with black leaders, they really meant: 'how do we (the holders of power) compel *them* (the disempowered black leaders we have chosen) to accede to our wishes without *them* detecting the one-sided nature of what is agreed to'. In this use, 'misunderstanding' becomes a political tactic used by those in power over those in their power. The powerful are interpellated into their own practices as the definers of meaning. They don't see this semantic bias as deception or as unfair. Rather, through the work of ideology, they regard their perceptions as 'normal' and 'natural'. Thus, the government claimed that 'apartheid' was misunderstood by blacks and the world. The way to rectify this, the state argued, was to improve 'communication'. The Bureau for Information was thus set up to achieve this with regard to managing reporting about



'unrest' during the states of emergency declared after 1985.

A major element of the state's censorship strategy was the use between mid-1987 and 1989 of handbooks on content analysis published by American administrative researchers to 'scientifically prove' that certain 'alternative newspapers' are 'subversive'. Thus, content analysis, in conjunction with social research methods and certain writings on revolution, were mobilised by the National Party to convince white South Africans of the undemocratic nature of black (and increasingly, white) popular resistance to its policies.

### **Content Analysis: Skimming the Surface of Hidden Depths**

The first major theoretical shift in the American approach was the advent of content analysis which broke with the determinism of the C-M-R model. Instead of taking media messages for granted and as unproblematic reflections of social norms and values, content analysis examined messages as structured mediation of wider social norms and values (Gerbner et al, 1969). This perspective placed a greater emphasis on content in relation to underlying social processes. In an analysis of *Dallas*, for example, individual characters, the roles they enact and their interpersonal conflicts provide cultural indicators which reference hidden processes beyond the text itself. *Dallas*, in this approach, is not primarily about the way people live in Texas; rather, it reveals and legitimate struggles between competing social roles and values within capitalist societies. The wider, more abstract processes identified, however, were rarely examined in terms of the conflictual and contradictory nature of capitalism.

### **From Media Effects to Questions of Context**

While American scholars continued with their media-centric and linear models of communication, variously known as 'hypodermic', two-step and multiple-step flow, gatekeeping, uses and



gratifications, attitude and cognitive models, British and some European scholars inverted the American media-society equation to the society-media *relation*. Media institutions and messages were to be understood as intentional products which arose in history from social, political, economic and historical processes. These processes and productive forces provided the motive for specific kinds of technological developments, network designs, electrical and electronic configurations serving specific financial interests within ruling hegemonies.

The C-M-R model provided the ideological rationale for curtailing and preventing the sale of interactive communication technologies such as radio and television for home use. The one early exception was crystal radio receivers, later controlled through airwave licensing agreements imposed by broadcasting companies. In the case of almost every communication technology invention (except film and PCs) the military was involved and the apparatus invented in advance of conceptualisation of content (Williams 1974; Schiller 1983). The interrelationship between monopoly capitalism and military invention provided the key to post-hoc media content which was and is designed to endorse the West's aggressive military posture, to retain, if necessary, coercive control over external markets and resources, and to limit democratic feedback within the political system.

An understanding of media institutions, media-society relations and their social effects (rather than only psychological) required an analysis that explored beyond the text. Such analyses identified the text merely as one kind of relation embedded in a variety of other relations, interacting with each other. Where the C-M-R scholars argued that media content was a 'reflection' of reality, and content analysts drew attention to abstractions beyond the immediate appearance of the text, it was contemporary cultural studies which reconceptualised the content of media in terms of dynamic sets of internal systems of signs interacting with, and responding to, concrete conditions in society. Interpretation of these signs was now argued to depend on class position, class ideologies, and the nature of the encounter between individual viewers/readers/listeners and the me-



dium.

Preferred readings intended by the manufacturers/producers of media technologies and contents were not axiomatic. While generally it was argued that the media produce a dominant reality (Fiske and Hartley 1978) — that is, they produce apparently 'natural' recognitions (Hall 1981:132) — it also became clear that oppositional readings could not always be prevented. An example was the booklet on the African National Congress (ANC) published by the Bureau for Information (1986) which was intended to objectify the ANC as 'terrorists' and 'the enemy' at a time when the whole world, the majority of South Africans and the English-language press were calling for the unbanning of the Congress. The booklet was a 'sellout' amongst ANC sympathizers in Soweto (*Sunday Star*, June 15, 1986:6). The booklet reproduced the only legally published picture of Nelson Mandela in many decades. His representation as a young man to his subsequent generations was a tactical error as it humanised him to millions who had never seen or heard him, but who saw him as a symbol which galvanised popular resistance to apartheid.

Needless to say, the second printing of the Bureau's booklet a few months later, dropped the Mandela picture. Neither American behaviourism/positivism nor the Frankfurt School (with the possible exception of Habermas) could adequately explain the anomaly of oppositional decoding: how to account for struggle, domination and the moment of active resistance, even re-appropriation, in opposition to preferred readings. Contemporary cultural studies, a consciously *interdisciplinary* endeavour - inserted itself into this theoretical hiatus.

## **Cultural Studies and Struggle**

Prejudice against inter-disciplinary research is the very antithesis of Karl Marx's own project which was to unravel the totality of processes that gear and drive economy and society. That Marx only examined one aspect of domination, labour, does not mean that other sites of oppression do not exist. The 'creative partner-



ships' that developed in cultural studies offered significant conceptual connections not dealt with by Marx. For example, Richard Hoggart, founder of the Birmingham Centre, had a literary background and his book, *The Uses of Literacy* (1984), was a major paradigmatic break in the study of popular English literature. It owes more to the historiographically descriptive methods of socialist-humanist historians (or 'culturalists') such as Edward Thompson (1968) than it does to 'new' or 'traditional' literary criticism. For them, 'culture' replaced 'consciousness', was coupled to 'class', and argued to be a conformity in 'experience'. 'Culture' is the set of symbolic forms by which ordinary people codify their experience in everyday life.

Working in the same locus was Williams who married a specific 'totality' interpretation of historical materialism with analyses of literature, advertising, communication systems and television. While Williams draws on the methods of both social-humanist history and structuralism, the culturalism of Hoggart, Thompson and Hill lays greater emphasis on concrete studies of resistance among the underclasses than on theoretical elaboration. Except for Williams, ideology is not for them a major theme.

Because of his exclusion of ideology as a concept, Thompson in particular is unable to offer causal explanations that do not derive from experience. His method cannot examine individuals-through-time and assumes a pre-existing subject interacting with a social environment. Theoretical lacunae in this strand of cultural studies impedes explanation of the differing experiences of an otherwise coherent group of people. Neither can it explain why resistance to oppression so often failed. It is this pattern of historical defeat that led to the theorisation of ideology in the first place.

The first paradigmatic break within cultural studies itself occurred with the publication of the Birmingham Centre's *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Hall et al 1979). This study drew on the work of European social theorists and applied a media based analysis of mugging, through the employment of criminological concepts such as the



discourse of policing, ideologies of crime, methods of social control and theories of the state. The study moved concern away from the elaboration of culture from within texts and artifacts of a society to the *relationship between texts and their contexts*. This located cultural studies as a site of convergence for the analysis of culture from a number of very different perspectives, each deriving from earlier Marxist-derived theory.

The rediscovery of communication, culture and ideology, categories neglected in classical Marxism (de la Haye 1979), were to provide the joint thrust towards more adequate explanations which mobilised existing concepts in other disciplines, particularly the structuralist theory of ideology developed by Louis Althusser (1971a, 1971b). He too, sought to 'theorize' the defeat of the proletariat in Central Europe. However, like the Frankfurt School before him, Althusser tended to assign people as passive victims of class ideology, outside of a self-determining consciousness and discourses of resistance.

The importance of Althusser for cultural studies was his redefinition of the 'individual agent'. Where American communication scholars and sociologists considered the individual as a 'unitary field', Althusser argued that human consciousness is divided. In other words, the 'personality' of individuals is most appropriately thought of as a bundle of socially articulated 'I's'. The political question that arises is how to unify the variety of ideological 'I's under the sign of an over-arching identity. Of consideration here is the abolition of absolute meaning in language; and Jaques Lacan's (1968) argument that the production of meaning occurs unconsciously — that is, ideology is a discourse which produces multiple meanings which pre-exist the individual. The struggle of the individual between the socially constructed 'I's and the grid of significations that is ideology was developed further by contemporary cultural studies theorists who mobilised Gramsci's ideas on culture and ideology.

## **Cultural Studies: Culture and Ideology as Codes**

Cultural studies starts with society as its focus, branching out through various disciplines which deal with contexts into a study of media in the broadest sense (the 'texts' of, eg., press, publishing, broadcasting, cinema, advertising, speech, and various other patterns of communication, fashion and behaviour). Culture is understood as a web of interacting levels of meaning through which a particular social order is codified, communicated, explored, reproduced, experienced and struggled over. The legitimization of particular social orders as effected via language and the media acting in concert with other institutions of society (schools, the family, the church, business etc) identifies one element of the field. As such, cultural studies shifted media analysis from a mechanistic analysis of 'effects' to questions of context. Broadly, therefore, cultural theorists are concerned with power relations, the relationship between texts and their contexts, and the nature of and the encounter of individuals, groups and classes with these texts.

In addition to individual, group and class encounters with pre-existing social structures through texts, cultural studies is also concerned with the nature of textual production (oral, performative, print, video etc). Such production is understood to arise out of the social structures themselves — or their fissures — while at the same time resisting them, even seeking to overthrow them. 'Culture', previously a static, descriptive and functionalist concept in ethnography, early anthropology, sociology and literature, was infused by cultural studies with a dynamic property which for the first time was able to account for so-called 'deviant' 'cultures' and sub-cultural 'readings'.

Culture now provided a vehicle for the explanation of the active and deliberate production of counter-meanings by groups responding to structurally imposed political, economic and social conditions. Such groups, while mostly located within classes, often took on a trans-class profile with the establishment of political alliances drawing in a variety of classes and



class fractions. Resistance is the principle of historical change and thus pivotal in cultural analysis (including culturalism).

The work of Gramsci became central to cultural studies to explain the concept of resistance. His writing addressed lacunae inherited from economistic Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s. Two pitfalls common in socialist writing were addressed. First, economic reductionism (which reduces all social activity to movements in the economic base); and second, class reductionism (which collapses all social conflict to the capital versus labour contradiction).

Gramsci found the answer for the acquiescence of the masses to their subordination in the concept of 'organic' ideology in which he identified four levels: philosophy, religion, common sense and folklore. Philosophy is the most systematic form. Liberal humanism is in this sense the philosophy of the Western bourgeoisie. Philosophy, however, cannot penetrate the consciousness of ordinary people. Religion thus bridges the gap between a philosophical system and individuals.

Common sense represents the precipitated elements of philosophy that form the consciousness and ground for experience of ordinary people. These are the terms with which they experience and make sense of the world and a given social structure. Racial prejudice as a relatively unsystematic set of beliefs and practices also moves on this level. Popular folklore is the basket of contradictory beliefs collected from a variety of world views.

Leaders are termed 'organic intellectuals' by Gramsci. The intellectual function can be performed by anyone who deploys ideology in such a way as to win the consent of the people to the dominant intellectual-moral order. Ideology can thus be mobilised within and across classes for both domination and resistance. Gramsci's contribution, then, was to emphasize the positive formative aspect of ideology; he showed how ideology moves on different levels, from an academic plane of logical discrimination, to a largely emotional level of belief and superstition. He emphasised the political role of 'intellectual' institutions (like the media) in the winning of consent and the maintenance of

hegemony. His greatest contribution was the route he identified between the pessimism of structuralism and the optimism of culturalism.

By inserting semiotics/semiology into the debate, scholars like Stuart Hall and socio-linguists like Gunter Kress and V.I. Volosinov (1973) were able to explain how meaning emerges not as an absolute and fixed prior interpretation, but how it results from struggles in language, in media signs and codes in which all classes in the social formation are engaged. Thus the media (signs, codes and technology) provide an arena for class struggle.

### **The Arena of Class Conflict: The Struggle for the Sign**

Societies in conflict are marked by a struggle between different discourses. Ultimately, the struggle for meaning is predicated on the struggle for the sign (Volosinov 1973). Where governments try to rule through a balance of coercion and consent, the media become crucial in the job of ideological regulation, a remarkably under-analyzed area in Africa, where governments have attempted to capture the entire discursive field. "That is the reality" was, for example, the phrase most often used by President P.W. Botha in the National Party's 1986 election advertising campaign to try to retain the support of the white electorate and the international investment community. But previously incontestable meanings no longer persuaded apartheid's critics, or even its reluctant supporters like Thatcher and Reagan. Detractors on both sides of the ideological spectrum had penetrated the 'naturalness' of the code and deconstructed the common sense on which it was based. Meanings which had previously concealed their historical determinations and consciousness of struggle were cracked open by anti-apartheid media practitioners.

### **The Third World: Culture as Strategy**

Apart from the Birmingham strand of cultural studies, and parallel paradigms such as culturalism, Armand Mattelart and



a host of class-oriented media scholars working in Britain, Eastern Europe and South America drawing on historical materialist conceptions of history sought to explain the structural connections between culture and multinational 'cultural industries' (Murdock 1982; Mattelart and Siegelau 1979, 1983). They offered a strategic and dialectical reworking of the Frankfurt School. Unlike New Criticism and mass society theory, they argue that 'mass culture' is both a site of negation of popular culture — defined in opposition to 'mass' or hegemonic culture — and a site of mediation where class contradictions manifest themselves (Mattelart 1983:24).

Then there is the work of the mainly American and Western European scholars of the 'information society' who draw connections between 'mass culture', the political economy of telecommunications and electronics, and trans-national ownership. Information industries are seen more and more to dominate cultural production. They also ensure savings by fracturing the production process between Third World countries. These areas provide cheap labour and low cost raw materials. The comprador bourgeoisies collaborate with the metropolises in denationalising their own economies (Mosco 1979, 1983; Murphy 1983; Mattelart et al 1984). Technology and computers, far from liberating people as earlier American communications theorists argued, tend rather to reproduce asymmetrical relations of power (Mattelart 1983:19). Unfortunately, earlier work by other critics tends to lack an adequate understanding of ideology and the potential for resistance. The resulting economic analyses take an extremely deterministic C-M-R view of the communication process and see the transnationals as all-powerful. These studies tend to use the terms 'culture' and 'commodity' interchangeably, arguing that 'cultural dependence' is imposed and passively accepted by the colonised. These accounts of the 'products' (cinema, TV, music etc) of 'cultural industries' are unable to explain, let alone accept, that cultural forms can and are appropriated and transformed in all sorts of ways by the receivers of these messages. While the transnationals may be



dominant in the epoch of late capitalism, resistance remains the determining historical principle. The global power struggle will oscillate between protagonists and antagonists, but while Third World populations remain so brutally exploited, the struggle will continue unabated no matter how powerful transnational capitalist culture has become.

### **Racism, Imperialism and Domination: Africans Fight Back**

A seminal scholar appropriated by African revolutionaries for mobilising culture is Franz Fanon (1965). A Westernised West Indian and French citizen who worked as a psychiatrist for the French army in Algeria, Fanon's experiences allied him with Algerian politics and resistance. Fanon argues for "national cultures" rather than "African cultures". This imperative emerged from the nation-building attempts which underpinned the continent's independence movements of the 1960s.

Fanon argues that culture takes concrete shape around the struggle of the people, not around signs, poems or folklore. Culture is not for him a pre-determined model offered by the past. It is not a state of being, but a state of becoming.

Cape Verdian Amílcar Cabral (1983) offers a different emphasis of the term 'culture'. Like Fanon, he invests it with a strategic component in the offensive against imperialism and neo-colonialism. But Cabral's strategies differed in that he drew on cultural sites through which the colonised were able to mobilise the bulwark of traditional cultural forms and rituals to preserve their pre-colonial identities, traditions and dignity.

Cabral opposed the Portuguese and French forms of colonisation which attempted partial assimilation of the other into the metropolitan society. For Cabral, the intrusion of imperialism in Africa was to force its people to vacate their own histories for those of their European colonisers. The armed struggle was thus an exit from colonial and imperial history complemented by a re-entry into 'national' African histories. This attempt to theorize Marx within an African context neces-



sarily located Cabral as a cultural conservative who called for a return to pre-colonial social and cultural formations. In his role as a revolutionary within the liberation movement in Cape Verde, Cabral perhaps inappropriately came, then, to be named as a 'Marxist' by both his comrades and the ruling Portuguese.

Where Cabral identified sites of resistance in pre-modern traditions and identity, Fanon argues that black petty bourgeois politicians often call on the idea of nationalism and 'culture' to disguise their own opportunistic political agenda. Culture as a discursive romantic mobilising agent is common to both nationalist and popular struggles in Africa. In this way the strategies of these African interior bourgeoisies are similar to those offered by Cabral, though with different ends in mind. Their political articulations are also calling for a recuperation of a romantic past, as well as bygone 'traditional' values and some forever lost sense of community. Through culture, the colonised would remake their common sense humanity, diminished and distorted by the experience of domination. Despite the idealist and sometimes naive position taken by Fanon with regard to economic analysis, he remains an important founder of the growing body of theory on African resistance.

Cultural occupation rather than assimilation was the experience of the British colonised territories. This contrasts sharply with the early Dutch settlement of the Cape which followed basic assimilation policies. However, the subsequent South African Afrikaner rulers from 1948 on, who derived from the Dutch, took their cue from the British model of separation. They established 'princely states' based on the British Indian model. This is where the term 'Bantustan' came from. Afrikaner Nationalists developed discursive strategies to inhabit reconstructed indigenous cultures and discourses, aimed at encouraging cultural (or 'tribal') difference. They thereby forced idealised ideological content onto 'tribal' groups to sustain and even reconstruct tribal 'identities' and territories through apartheid.

Where Cabral identified sites of resistance in traditions and identity, the South African Afrikaner rulers coopted these same



sites to occupy indigenous cultures in an entirely different way. The South African case is remarkable, primarily because of the way it went about cultural occupation of 'tribal' consciousnesses after the 1948 apartheid victory because of the nature of the idealised contents it forced remnants onto groups to sustain and even reconstruct tribal 'identities' that were to be subservient to the white, or more specifically, Afrikaner rule. This Afrikaner identity, of course, also entailed the capture of economic power from English South Africans. One way of doing this was to create conditions for the ultra exploitation of initially black farm labour, and later, migrant mine labour. Tribal 'cultures' were enforced through the Bantu education system which, in the immortal words of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, "There is no place for (the Bantu) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour" (Senate Debates 1954). The black 'identity' fostered by Afrikaners was anti-assimilation and provided for only the work ethic and minimum levels of education to be transferred to blacks to enable them to labour in the agricultural and urban sectors of the economy during the first seventy years of this century. While Cabral offers much that is useful to struggle in South Africa, he cannot be applied unproblematically because of the way the Afrikaner hegemony appropriated 'culture'. Indeed, many of the strategies identified and advocated by Cabral were pre-empted by the South African rulers who turned the tactics of resistance described by Cabral to their advantage.

Cabral (1983) makes the fundamental point that ruling classes require a relatively accurate knowledge of the dominated object and of the historical reality within which it lives. Such knowledge is expressed in terms of comparison with the dominating subject and its historical reality. Much of the knowledge needed for effective subjugation came through the discipline of early anthropology. On an Africa-wide scale, Abiola Irele (1983:24) traces the contemporary alienated condition of what Paulin Hountondji (1983, 12) calls "ethnophilosophy" to the influence of Hegel:



Hegel's philosophy of history remains the most exalted statement of European self-affirmation in opposition to other races, the most elaborate rationalization of European ethnocentrism. It provided a powerful philosophical base for the chorus of denigration of the non-white races which accompanied and buoyed up the European colonial adventure all through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century ... it was left to the new discipline of anthropology to sustain the main theme under the guise of science. For it was no accident that it was precisely the period of greatest European colonial expansion that saw the development of anthropology as a constituted discipline devoted exclusively to the study of non-Western peoples, to whom were attached the labels 'savage', 'inferior', 'primitive' as qualifications to their full participation in a human essence.

Afrikaner cultural anthropologists not only projected their own racial ideologies onto the people they were supposedly studying, but also provided legitimation for grand apartheid as well. The key concept in *volkekunde* is that of 'ethnos'. The characteristics of this interpretation are:

- the idea of an ethnic unit, a product of common descent, becoming over time a 'genetic unit';
- this genetic unit contains psychic and cultural manifestations which differentiate 'units' from one another;
- a chief demarcating characteristic is language;
- ethnos is inexorably linked to its 'own' territory; and
- the aspiration to a common territory is seen to be a locus for self-expression. From this definition, it is a short step to the common sense that the 'natural' connection between culture/territory/language is God-given and the way things should be (Dunbar Moodie 1975).

Where cultures incorporate nationalisms and the fear of

cultural (therefore national, therefore physical) extinction, overt conflict is inevitable. Most Afrikaner written analyses of culture, whether Afrikaner or otherwise defined an 'us/them' relationship. 'Us' was the insiders (white) 'nationalism'; 'Them' is the (black) outsiders, rhetorically known as 'groups', 'peoples' 'self-governing communities' and 'own affairs' who lived in 'national', 'self-governing' and 'independent' states, 'homelands' and even 'city-states'. At the broader level, the 'us' were pitted against an evil and merciless enemy, the Communist 'them'.

Attempts by mainly Afrikaans speaking academics to establish a new object of inquiry, known as 'intercultural' or 'inter-group' communication/relations will remain barren while the implicit assumption places whites on the 'inside' and everybody else on the 'outside' (see Tomaselli 1991). This separatist assumption contradicts the mainstream of cultural research done elsewhere which is not concerned with how to 'administer' or control 'outsiders', 'groups' or 'genetic units', but which is geared to learning about other cultures and incorporating appropriate elements of those cultures into the observing culture or by drawing sub-cultural groups into a pluralist mass society. The repressive colonial cultural experiences of the Gikuyu in Kenya described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1987:11) are almost exactly the same as the indignities suffered by Afrikaners under Lord Milner's governorship of the Cape much earlier in 20th Century. But, where Afrikaners later themselves tried to construct African 'tribal' cultures as the negatives of their own, and engineer languages corresponding to these legislated 'tribal' sign communities, Ngugi (1987:16-18) describes the British strategy as one of devaluation and destruction of indigenous cultures and languages. It is not surprising, therefore, that spokespeople for both groups of British repressed - Afrikaners and Gikuyu — should carry their struggle into a language demand for writing in their respective vernaculars.



## **Closing Remarks**

If culture is the way people codify their experience and sets the parameters of their encounters with social, historical and material processes, it is not difficult to see why certain kinds of class and group responses prevail at certain times in specific contexts.

As the history of the various approaches that fall under the broad heading 'cultural studies' show, it is necessary for popular democratic movements to contest the terrain of culture, to re-appropriate its positive popular meaning, to exorcise immolating nationalisms. Contesting preferred meanings encoded in the texts/media of the ruling classes remains a fundamental engagement. This was the agenda behind the Birmingham project with regard to British life, as it is with regard to the Third World cultural workers. These theories, particularly cultural studies and the socialist-humanist historians, offer a strategic grid, a series of cautions and warning lights against economistic Marxism and the dangers of fascist/authoritarian co-options which result in the suppression of democracy and repression of the people. They provide ways of reorganising society, of dealing with contending nationalisms and of understanding the ideological motors of vested interests.

To return to my opening remarks, the history of the general field of cultural studies has paralleled instances of unbridled authoritarianism and national repression on scales seldom previously experienced. While the content of cultural studies has mainly dealt with the negative consequences of such repression, the field itself has imbued the victims of class, cultural and racial oppression with a positive integrity, with coherent images of themselves and with strategic directions in the development of democracy.

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