

Why cultural studies?

Christophe Premat (Department of Romance studies and Classics)

An interdisciplinary approach?

- Some objections addressed to cultural studies: too general, too ideological? A platform for the “new” left?
- Equivalent to critical thinking promoted by Higher Education institutions?
- Similar to the *Kulturwissenschaft* or the *études culturelles*?
- Or the renewal of **critical studies**?
- Are cultural studies normative or are they threatened by neopositivistic waves?

A remake of the battle between the humanities and the natural sciences?

- "The situation of the anthropological disciplines (or 'human sciences') is assuredly the most **problematic** in all these regards. It is difficult to say whether it is publicly perceived as such since, on the one hand, '**crisis**' has been, from the time they appeared, their permanent state and since, one periodically hears it improperly being proclaimed, as a result of some real or alleged progress in **one or another of these disciplines**, that the key to all anthropological problems has finally been found (as has successively been the case with economics, psychoanalysis, and linguistics)"

(Castoriadis, 2018, p. 242)

The impossible localization of cultural studies

- Field?
- Discipline?
- Academic tribe?
- Interdisciplinary collaboration?
- Diversity of branches (cultural theory, cultural anthropology, semiotics, discourse analysis, comparative literature, etc...)
- We can ignore the question of **classifying** the disciplines to embrace an **epistemology of the imaginary** (cultural patterns, cultural objects)
(Castoriadis, 1987)

Plan

- 1) Transgressing the borders of disciplines
- 2) The *nexus* between three important intellectual traditions
- 3) Investigating, experiencing and localizing cultures

1) Transgressing the borders of disciplines

- Spivak defends the positioning of "**area studies**" for interdisciplinary purposes and not for foreign affairs (Spivak, 2003, p. 8)
- "The real '**other**' of Cultural Studies is not Area Studies but the civilization courses offered by the European national language departments, generally scorned by **Comparative Literature**" (Spivak, 2003, p. 8)

1) Transgressing the borders

- Discussions in Second Language Acquisition around the notion of cultural competency (ethnological goal) (Lussier, 2011)
- Cultural studies with the impulsion of postcolonial studies focus on the dissemination of three main categories, gender, race and class.
- Pioneer work. Richard Hoggart, *the Uses of Literacy* (1957) / Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957)

Structuralist answers

- Emergence of cultural studies in Britain in the beginning of 1950s
- Challenging the structuralist tradition with Lévi-Strauss and the structure of myths
- "1. Myths, like the rest of language, is made up of **constituent units**. 2. These constituent units presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels, namely, **phonemes, morphemes**, and **semantemes**, but they, nevertheless, differ from the latter in the same way as they themselves differ from morphemes, and these from phonemes; they belong to a higher order, a more complex one. For this reason, we will call them ***gross constituent units***" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, p. 431).

The mythemes

- "How shall we proceed in order to identify and isolate these gross constituent units or **mythemes**? We know that they cannot be found among phonemes, morphemes, or sememes, but only on a higher level; otherwise myth would become confused with any other kind of speech" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 211)

Imaginaries and archetypes

- Lévi-Strauss proposed a new classification to identify the mindset of people. Comparative literature can be used to detect these mythemes, these strong representations and traces of imaginaries (parenthood, Self/Other)
- Imaginaries / mythologies / beliefs
- Northrop Frye and his work on archetypes

Mythopoetics

- “The poet is certainly a mythmaker. That is his business, because all poetry is mythopoetic, and I would say that the poet is working for religion but, of course, not necessarily for *a* religion” (Frye, O’Grady & O’Grady, 2008, pp. 202-203)
- Work on all kinds of art to seize the mythological dimension. The idea is not to capture an *eidos* but a narrative (*mythos* / *logos*)

Self-creation

- "Before Greece and outside the Greco-Western tradition, societies are instituted on a principle of strict closure: our view of the world is the only meaningful one, the 'others' are bizarre, inferior, perverse, evil or unfaithful" (Castoriadis, 1983, p. 80)
- Radical horizontal ontology. Idea of self-creation (the society is a self-instituting imaginary) (Castoriadis, 1987)

Race, gender, class

- Social imaginaries. Always important to reread the cultural production to analyze the characteristics of these imaginaries
- Race, gender, class. Categories which also are useful to analyze power relations. Cultural studies: how power is embedded in institutions.
- Frantz Fanon and the decolonization as a will to break the mindset

Decolonizing the mind

- “Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new men” (Fanon, 2004, p. 2). Decolonizing: de-linking process, destabilishing significations, patterns. Decolonizing: killing myths?

Breaking hegemonic narratives

- Idea of having a new perspective on discourses and narratives
- Breaking the hegemony of specific discourses (Gramsci)
- A question of infinite perspectives (p. 82)
Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533)



Locality of culture

- “I am attempting to write of the Western nation as an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the **locality** of culture. This locality is more *around* temporality than *about* historicity: a form of living that is more complex than ‘community’; more symbolic than ‘society’; more connotative than ‘country’; less patriotic than *patrie*; more rhetorical than the reason of State; more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centred than the citizen; more collective than ‘the subject’; more psychic than civility; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications that can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism” (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 200-201)

Cultural studies and postcolonial studies

- Relation between cultural studies and postcolonial studies
- Fanon (1952)/ Saïd (1978)/ Anderson (2016)
Bhabha (1994)
- Work on imagined communities, dominating narratives and discourses
- Several traditions converge and contribute to the spread of cultural studies

2) The *nexus* between three important intellectual traditions

- Frankfurt school (Institute for Social Research, 1929)
- The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1964) University of Birmingham founded by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart. The Centre closed in 2002.
- Analysis of discourses, modes of communications and ideologies

Three schools

- Frankfurt school – Critical theory (philosophy, history of ideas, sociology)
- Critic of Western civilization
- Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979). Adorno, Horkheimer
- Three generations of thinkers. Herbert Marcuse / Jürgen Habermas (1929-) / Axel Honneth (1949-)
- Marcuse. Use of psychoanalysis to explain the development of drives (*Eros / Thanatos*). Link between fascism and capitalism.

The French theory

- The French theory – French postmodern thinkers (Lyotard, Foucault, Kristeva, Deleuze, Derrida, Baudrillard)
- Cusset, 2008. *French theory: how Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. transformed the intellectual life of the United States*
- These three intellectual traditions gave a new breath to cultural studies

***Kultur* (Culture / Civilization)**

- Honneth, the notion of social recognition with the master/slave dialectics (Honneth, 1995)
- Critic of "civilization" (word *Kultur* in German). It reminds us of the period *Kulturkritik* at the end of the 19th century.
- Rejection of metanarratives and ultimate truths

Regression / resurgence of archaic tendencies

- « In any case, postmodernism would seem to mean that one was 'modernist' and that after modernism there was still something. Thus one is still caught in a linear meaning of things. There is linearity which is after all postmodern. For me postmodernism would be something of a **regression**, a retroversion of history. There is, rather, a return towards the past. There is no beyond in the sense of the future but rather a curvature towards... » (Baudrillard, Gane 1993, p. 22).

3) Investigating, experiencing and localizing cultures

- Most of the Postmodern French thinkers come from a context where Marxism was important (Postmodern theories gained more and more visibility after the Cold war).
- Many critics perceive the success of these Postmodern thinkers as a form of resurgence of a cultural Marxism. Derrida, *The Specters of Marx*. The revenants are here and they are still haunting the world. (Derrida, 1994).

Science or ideology?

- Resurgence, repetition of something?
- Cf Marx, the history always have a form of repetition in a comical way. Do we have an acceleration of modernity in a postmodern era?
- Did we transform cultural studies in essays on civilizations? Do we have the resurgence of ideological thoughts?

Hauntology (ghosts, specters)

- « What is a ghost? What is the effectivity or the presence of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there, between the thing itself and its **simulacrum**, an opposition that holds up? **Repetition and first time**, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time, makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the **end of history**. Let us call it a **hauntology**. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the 'to be', assuming that it is a matter of Being in the 'to be or not to be', but nothing is less certain » (Derrida, 1994, p. 10). Recycling imaginaries?

DissemiNation

- Localizing "cultures" / "subcultures" – dissemiNation (Bhabha, 1994). Multiplicity of narratives. dissemiNation of myths
- Production of alternative myths
- Subaltern studies / Feminist and postfeminist studies
- Inflation of fields that are in the proximity of cultural studies (genealogy of the interdisciplinary recompositions)

Social sciences / Natural sciences

- Cultural Studies, imposture?
- Some scientists denounced the use of an imposture for these thinkers.

(Alan Sokal in 1996). Sokal had published a fake article to see if the journal had reviewed his article with the help of external peer-reviewers.

Reactions of the hard sciences against postmodernism which is seen as an ideological residuum.

Semiotics

- The importance of Julia Kristeva in semiotics
- Questioning of science and ideology. She really analyzed the constitution of a scientific discourse based on an axiomatization (elaboration of a specific model). The semiotics brings a self-critical perspective in the language that we use when we refer to a model. The ideological perspective: the worldview that supports the first axioms. Every scientific model affects the language.
- Studies in semiotics, literature, linguistics and psychoanalysis

Cultural turn in the 1960s

- She was born in Bulgaria in 1941 and came with a fellowship in Paris at the age of 25 years old
- She knew French and had a solid background in Marxist theories and the study of Russian formalists (Bakhtine, Propp...) as well as some other streams (the **semiotician school of Tartu** in the sixties). She defended a PhD in 1974 on *La Révolution du langage poétique*. Strong influence of psychoanalysis (role of the body in human sciences) and semiotics. Genderig literary texts (genotext/phenotext). Phenotext: the way the text appears in its materiality. Genotext= analysis of how the signifying text was produced.

Cultural creation

- She theorized the notion of abjection (abjection: rejection of something). Abjection (disorder, against fixed identities). *Powers of Horror*
- Experiencing cultures: experiencing the dynamics of relations (love/hate/indifference)
- Glissant (1997) relations, creolization, hybridity and creation. Caribbean thinkers and writers have a specific insight on what cultures are

Heimlich / Unheimlich

- “Culture is *heimlich*, with its disciplinary generalizations, its mimetic narratives, its homologous empty time, its seriality, its progress, its customs and coherence. But cultural authority is also *unheimlich*, for to be distinctive, signficatory, influential and identifiable, it has to be **translated, disseminated, differentiated, interdisciplinary, intertextual, international, inter-racial**” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 195)
- Questions of mimetic narratives / cultural powers. No death for this perspective (Spivak, 2003). The administrative organization surrounding cultural studies is less important

Conclusions

- Critical theory = the analysis of discourses and narratives embedded in cultural productions
- Attention paid to the "Other" in these utterances
- Contributions of three important schools (Frankfurt / Birmingham / French theory)
- Co-development of Feminist and Postcolonial Studies
- Consecration of three frameworks (class, gender, ethnicity)

Towards a science of culture(s)?

- No sacralization of fluidity (Bauman, 2000).
Deconstruction is not destruction.
- **Science of cultures** (no deterministic claim on what culture scientists do)
- Investigating social imaginaries (cultural resources). Cultural resources : literary texts, myths, discourses, movies, pieces of art, habits, behaviours, ideologies, etc.

References 1

- Anderson, B. (2016). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Baudrillard, J., Gane (ed.), M. (1993). *Baudrillard live, selected interviews*. London: Routledge.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1990). *Nation and narration*. London: Routledge.
- **Bhabha, H. K. (1994).** *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.

References 2

- Castoriadis, C. (1983). The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 9, n°2, 79-115.
- Castoriadis, C. (1987). *The imaginary institution of society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Castoriadis, C. (2018). *Crossroads in the labyrinth. Volume 1*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service.
- Chalard-Fillaudeau, A. (2015). *Les études culturelles*. Vincennes: Presses universitaires de Vincennes.

References 3

- Cusset, F. (2008). *French theory: how Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the intellectual life of the United States*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated from French by Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge.
- **Fanon, F.** (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

References 4

- **Frye, N.**, O'Grady, J. & O'Grady, J. (2008). *Interviews with Northrop Frye*. University of Toronto Press.
- Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- **Hall, S.** & Morley, D. (2019). *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*. Duke University Press.
- Honneth, A. (1995). *The Struggle for Recognition*. Transl. Joel Anderson. Cambridge: Polity Press.

References 5

- **Kristeva, J.** (1982). *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1955). The Structural Study of Myth. *The Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 68, n°70, 428-444.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.

References 6

- Lussier, D. (2011). Language, Thought and Cultures: Links to Intercultural Communicative Competence. In *Canadian and International Education Journal*. Ghosh and Lussier (Eds) September, Vol. 40, no 2: 34-61.
- **Saïd**, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- **Spivak**, G. C. (2003). *Death of a discipline*. Columbia University Press, New York