

BIRMINGHAM SCHOOL OF CULTURAL STUDIES: AN OVERVIEW.

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ABSTRACT

Cultural Studies can be practically defined as a study of culture with the intention to understand a society and its politics. Cultural Studies has flourished as an important branch of knowledge and has widened its scope by formulating new branches of knowledge by incorporating itself with other branches of knowledges. It has become multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary in nature. As an important branch of knowledge it is decisive to study in detail about various aspects of cultural Studies. This research paper is an attempt to explain the history, theory and practice of Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Birmingham School of cultural studies is a major component of cultural studies these days. A better understanding of cultural studies can be made only with a detailed analysis of Birmingham School.

Keyword: *Cultural Studies, Birmingham school, Literary Criticism, Literary Theory, Cultural Studies Theory.*

INTRODUCTION-

Birmingham School of cultural studies is a major component of cultural studies these days. The journey begins with CCCS (Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies) which was established around 1964 as a postgraduate research institute by Richard Hoggart. The early goal of the Birmingham School was to contest the cultural elitism of literary theory as well as the positivism of British Sociology. Richard Hoggart was appointed as the first head of CCCS (Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies) in 1964. He writes about the different features of this new field of inquiry, "one is roughly historical and philosophical; another is, yet again roughly, sociological, the third, which will be the most important – is the literary critical" (Hoggart 255). The primary approach of the center was the reconceptualization of popular culture as a site of resistance and negotiation for marginalized and disempowered groups.

From an early stage the Centre in Birmingham tried to develop other forms of work, and of necessity - given the already mentioned levels of the work in hand- the primacy of the unexplored 'contemporary', and the project to democratize various forms of academic knowledge. Its working groups (usually of six to ten members) began as forums for the discussion of individual thesis projects in the related areas of cultural studies, of which media studies has been of longest standing, followed by that of work/ fieldwork/ ethnographies of work. Weekly sessions would typically alternate between exploration of a central text and individual presentations of work-in-progress, some of which were later put together in the typescript form of working-papers with a view to sharing issues and problems as they were appearing in the projects. These groups were, and are, the working mainstay of the unit.

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The school recognized the importance of the culture for maintaining the political order in the modern society. They borrowed this idea from the book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) by Matthew Arnold. The ideas of Formalists like F. R. Leavis also influenced the school. Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) tried to locate and understand Leavis' dissent. The 'non-aligned' grouping of independent researchers, loosely linked (as in the New Left case) to political and cultural groups, working generally through educational forms, though by no means always those of the state had an indirect influence on the school. In addition, a wide range of cultural 'inquiry' could be found in the working practice of political groupings and of teams dealing with particular situations and problems. Raymond Williams wrote *Culture and Society* (1958) which addressed the complexity of modern British culture.

British cultural studies was primarily influenced by many great thinkers. French theorist Louis Althusser's Structural-Marxism and writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci were important among them. Gramsci, a leader in the Communist Party of Italy, was imprisoned by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. In jail he wrote *The Prison Notebooks* (1948), in which he aimed to comprehend how the elite in a society fight to preserve control over society through cultural institutions. Constructing on the works of Marx and Lenin, he claimed that the ruling elites tend to forge a form of hegemony or domination through ideas and culture that induce a form of consent of the governed. Importantly, this hegemonic rule is always open and contested by counter-hegemonic forces; thus there is a constant struggle over ideas and cultural institutions. This complexity of ideas later became a critical building block for CCCS and cultural studies more broadly, and turned CCCS scholars towards mass media and popular culture as critical sites to study both domination and resistance.

In 1968, Stuart Hall took over from Hoggart as the director of CCCS. Under the directorship of Stuart Hall, the school applied Louis Althusser's ideology and subjectivity to study various subcultural groups within English society. Althusser was useful for the school to decipher the issues like why did members of the working class vote for conservative politics? In the long term Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatus¹ proved to be a pessimistic view about the possibility of resistance from the part of the subject and this condition gave way to Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony which has been originally introduced in 1920s in the work of Birmingham school. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony² was developed in the context of the rise of Mussolini. The question why working class Italians were in support of fascism was discussed at large in this context. In Early 1980s in Britain witnessed same puzzle of working class support for Thatcherism which was similar to the support that fascism received in Italy. They attempt to understand the way a special recognition was given to the resistance offered by various subcultural groups' against hegemonic power of the dominant ideology. Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977), for example, was a multi-dimensional study about the attitudes and behaviors of working class teenage boys. This study explores the way the working class youth establish a subculture and tend to consolidate values and attitudes that contradict values and attitudes promoted by the dominant culture. The subculture cultivates them and rewards the attitude of mistrust towards the authority. What Willis finds is not particularly surprising for what was distinctive about Willis studies was that he saw the anti-authoritarian attitudes and behaviors of these working class youth as part of an ensemble of successful strategies for establishing class solidarity and poor coping with a social order designed to exploit these young people in their adult lives. Willis acknowledged the obvious irony that the same set of resistance practices and social coping strategies more or less ensured that these young men would not advance up the socio-economic status in the hierarchy. Angela McRobbie in 1980s analyzed the acculturation process of working class teenage girls along with the lines established by Willis Dick Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) and theorized critical attention to youth culture in the regime of industrial production. Social subjectivity was predicated on the adult male workers' productive capacity. The social subjectivities of women and children were constituted in relation to that of the adult male worker. Teenagers were not productive workers hence they were not social subjects and certainly not social agents. But they did become agents and consumers after World War II.

British scholars such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, and Angela McRobbie contributed to the growth of British cultural studies. The school emerged in the shadows of the rising New Left in Britain in the postwar 1950s. Many of the founders and leaders of the New Left became founding members of the CCCS, including Hoggart, literary theorist Raymond Williams, historian E. P. Thompson, and the second director of CCCS, Stuart Hall. There were thus very sturdy influences between the work on culture and some new forms of politics. Both witnessed the 'mass' circulation of media images and languages as the false representation of groups and classes to themselves - but also as a site of refusals, of values not shared, and as one site of a politics adequate to conflicts in the spheres of reproduction and consumption.

Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), and E.P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1964) are considered as important works in British cultural studies. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977), and the co-authored work by Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging the State and Law and Order* (1978) are also important contributions in this field. A singular approach to multiple subjects including gender and race were also famous in the school. Angela McRobbie, Dorothy Hobson, and other women associated with the CCCS developed the Women's Studies Group within the Centre, and together they published the journal "Women Take" around 1978.

British cultural studies was very much interested in power structures communicated through popular culture. For them, popular culture was communal and self-made. Once the hegemony is conveyed and established through popular culture, masses remain unaware about their subordination. Hoggart, Richard in his book *The Uses of Literacy* (1990), explains the nature of this subordination as:

Inhibited now from ensuring the 'degradation' of the masses economically . . . competitive commerce . . . becomes a new and stronger form of subjection; this subjection promises to be stronger than the old because the chains of cultural subordination are both easier to wear and harder to strike away than those of economic subordination (Hoggart 243–244).

A dominant subject in the Birmingham School was the theory of hegemony. Hegemony has an importance in cultural studies because an observation that over again pop culture converses the domination in cultural framework was prevailing in the academia. This framework, defines that dominant power structure, who is in supremacy, what the laws are, who to follow, what is deliberated 'good behavior' et cetera. According to Raymond Williams, an analysis of the general rules in the society tells its real nature. He states.

to an emphasis which, from studying particular meanings and values, seeks not so much to compare these, as a way of establishing a scale, but by studying their modes of change to discover certain general 'laws' or 'trends', by which social and cultural development as a whole can be better understood (Williams 32–33).

Williams also emphasizes on the study of popular culture and ordinary culture. For him everything that has dominated for a period of time cannot be called as popular culture. In order to differentiate between ordinary and popular cultures, Williams recommends analysis of the whole culture itself.

We need to distinguish three levels of culture, even in its most general definition. There is the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place. There is the recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts: the culture of a period. There is also, as the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures, the culture of the selective tradition (Williams 37).

He criticizes the damaging and false identification of 'popular culture' (commercial newspapers, magazines, entertainments, etc.) with 'working-class culture':

In fact the main source of this 'popular culture' lies outside the working class altogether, for it is instituted, financed and operated by the commercial bourgeoisie, and remains typically capitalist in its methods of production and distribution. That working-class people form perhaps a majority of the consumers of this material . . . does not, as a fact, justify this facile identification (Williams 425).

Cultural hegemony emerges indirectly in all carriers of popular culture: literature, movies, songs, soap operas, game shows, billboards, newspapers, commercials etc. So even without knowing it, we are constantly being programmed with rules and truths that benefits the status quo. Raymond Williams states:

The analysis of Sunday newspapers and crime stories and romances is . . . familiar, but, when you have come yourself from their apparent public, when you recognize in yourself the ties that still bind, you cannot be satisfied with the older formula: enlightened minority, degraded mass. You know how bad most 'popular culture' is, but you know also that the irruption of the 'swinish multitude', which Burke had prophesied would trample down light and learning, is the coming to relative power and relative justice of your own people, whom you could not if you tried desert (Williams 1957: 424–425).

Though there was consensus regarding the general treatment towards popular culture, radicals like E.P. Thompson came forward. He was against the generalization regarding the term popular culture. As he explains in a famous passage from the *Preface to The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may

have been backward looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties (Thompson 12).

As the study of popular culture went popular in British cultural studies, a conflict in the terms 'popular culture' and 'popular art' took place. The necessity to recognize within popular culture a distinct category they call 'popular art' has occurred. Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel explained that popular art is not art that has attempted and failed to be 'real' art, but art that operates within the confines of the popular. In their book *The Popular Arts* (1964) they offered a new definition for popular art.

While retaining much in common with folk art, it became an individual art, existing within a literate commercial culture. Certain 'folk' elements were carried through, even though the artist replaced the anonymous folk artist, and the 'style' was that of the performer rather than a communal style. The relationships here are more complex – the art is no longer simply created by the people from below – yet the interaction, by way of the conventions of presentation and feeling, re-establishes the rapport. Although this art is no longer directly the product of the 'way of life' of an 'organic community', and is not 'made by the people', it is still, in a manner not applicable to the high arts, a popular art, for the people (Hall and Whannel 59).

According to their argument good popular culture ('popular art') is able to reestablish the relationship between performer and audience that was lost with the advent of industrialization and urbanization. They explain:

With the advent of industrialization and urbanization popular art . . . is essentially a conventional art which re-states, in an intense form, values and attitudes already known; which measures and reaffirms, but brings to this something of the surprise of art as well as the shock of recognition. Such art has in common with folk art the genuine contact between audience and performer: but it differs from folk art in that it is an individualized art, the art of the known performer. The audience as community has come to depend on the performer's skills, and on the force of a personal style, to articulate its common values and interpret its experiences (Hall and Whannel 66).

Another important thinker in British school, John Fiske introduced a very different approach. He sees the value of popular culture in its universal appeal. According to Fiske if many people respond to a certain music album, it is an indicator of its cultural quality. In other words popularity is in synchronization with the dominant social reality. Fiske actually sees popularity as an indicator of quality. John Fiske is generally seen as the epitome of the uncritical drift into cultural populism. "The capitalist culture industries produce only an apparent variety of products whose variety is finally illusory for they all promote the same capitalist ideology" (Fiske, 309). In his analysis of the term popular culture, he establishes that circulation is crucial to its popularity and popular turns to be cultural later. He states:

The workings of the financial economy cannot account adequately for all cultural factors, but it still needs to be taken into account in any investigation. . . . But the cultural commodity cannot be adequately described in financial terms only: the circulation that is crucial to its popularity occurs in the parallel economy – the cultural (Fiske 311).

He associates the ability to create popularity with the power of audiences as producers in the cultural economy. He states that the power to make popular is vested in the hands of people. As the power of the audience, he contends,

Derives from the fact that meanings do not circulate in the cultural economy in the same way that wealth does in the financial. They are harder to possess (and thus to exclude others from possessing), they are harder to control because the production of meaning and pleasure is not the same as the production of the cultural commodity, or of other goods, for in the cultural economy the role of consumer does not exist as the end point of a linear economic transaction. Meanings and pleasures circulate within it without any real distinction between producers and consumers (Fiske 313).

Birmingham turned to be a conservative university and has lost its nerve with regard to cultural studies and sociology in the beginning of 21st century. Leftovers of cultural studies are being buried somewhere in European languages, while sociology is to be 'mainstreamed'. This sociology will not be open to the 'cultural turn', instead restricted to a perceived 'scientific'. University of Birmingham's long-term suspicion of both cultural studies and

sociology, and an unexpectedly bad RAEⁱⁱⁱ score, led to an end to experimentation and innovation. In 2002, senior management at the University of Birmingham proposed to shut down the CCCS. The history of CCCS and the history of British school of cultural studies cannot be separated. With the rise of various new schools of cultural studies like Toronto school and American school, though British school is no more the contemporary face of cultural studies, yet the credit to bring the issues in public debate still lies with it only.

ⁱIdeological state apparatus is a term developed by the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser to denote institutions such as education, the churches, family, media, trade unions, and law, which were formally outside state control but which served to transmit the values of the state, to interpellate those individuals affected by them, and to maintain order in a society, above all to reproduce capitalist relations of production. In contemporary capitalist societies education has replaced the Church as the principal ideological state apparatus. Among Marxists, the term is contrasted with the so-called 'repressive state apparatus' of the armed forces and police, and is allotted a major role in securing compliance within developed capitalist societies.

ⁱⁱHegemony comes from the Greek term hegemon which means "leader." It is the dominance or leadership of one social group or nation over others.

ⁱⁱⁱThe Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was an exercise undertaken approximately every 5 years on behalf of the four UK higher education funding councils (HEFCE, SHEFC, HEFCW, DELNI) to evaluate the quality of research undertaken by British higher education institutions.

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