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Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies

Stuart Hall

When I first went to the University of Birmingham in 1964 to help Professor Richard Hoggart found the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, no such thing as cultural studies yet existed. Of course, the departments of languages, literature, history, and the fine arts in our faculties of arts were dedicated to the preservation of the cultural heritage; though they refused to name let alone to theorize or conceptualize culture, preferring it to, so to speak, seep through by a process of academic osmosis. Social sciences, on the other hand, dealt sometimes with what they were pleased to call the "cultural system"; but this was a pretty abstract thing, composed of networks of abstract norms and values. There was little of the concern that Richard Hoggart and I had in questions of culture. Our questions about culture—and I won't attempt to provide any kind of comprehensive definition of the term—were concerned with the changing ways of life of societies and groups and the networks of meanings that individuals and groups use to make sense of and to communicate with one another: what Raymond Williams once called whole ways of communicating, which are always whole ways of life; the dirty crossroads where popular culture intersects with the high arts; that place where power cuts across knowledge, or where cultural processes anticipate social change.

These were our concerns. The question was, where to study them? At that time we taught no anthropology at Birmingham and, besides, the English on whom we wished to turn our inquiring, ethnographic gaze had not yet learned to conceive of themselves as "the natives." I remember sitting in Richard Hoggart's room discussing what we should call ourselves. "Institute," he suggested. Well, that sounded

suitably grand and austere. But to be honest, the two of us, who constituted at that time the entire faculty and indeed, the students of the enterprise, could not find it in our hearts to take ourselves that seriously. Well, what about "Centre"? Yes, that had a more informal, rallying-point feel to it, and we settled for that. "Cultural Studies" came much more naturally. It was about as broad as we could make it; thereby we ensured that no department in either the humanities or social sciences who thought that they had already taken care of culture could fail to feel affronted by our presence. In this latter enterprise, at least, we succeeded.

Today cultural studies programs exist everywhere, especially in the United States—there's not a touch of envy about that—where they've come to provide a focal point for interdisciplinary studies and research, and for the development of critical theory. Each program, in each place, as is appropriate, joins together a different range of disciplines in adapting itself to the existing academic and intellectual environment. Cultural studies, wherever it exists, reflects the rapidly shifting ground of thought and knowledge, argument and debate about a society and about its own culture. It is an activity of intellectual self-reflection. It operates both inside and outside the academy. It represents something, indeed, of the weakening of the traditional boundaries among the disciplines and of the growth of forms of interdisciplinary research that don't easily fit, or can't be contained, within the confines of the existing divisions of knowledge. As such, it represents, inevitably, a point of disturbance, a place of necessary tension and change in at least two senses. First, cultural studies constitutes one of the points of tension and change at the frontiers of intellectual and academic life, pushing for new questions, new models, and new ways of study, testing the fine lines between intellectual rigor and social relevance. It is the sort of necessary irritant in the shell of academic life that one hopes will, sometime in the future, produce new pearls of wisdom.

But, secondly, in thrusting onto the attention of scholarly reflection and critical analysis the hurly-burly of a rapidly changing, discordant, and disorderly world, in insisting that academics sometimes attend to the practical life, where everyday social change exists out there, cultural studies tries in its small way to insist on what I want to call the vocation of the intellectual life. That is to say, cultural studies insists on the necessity to address the central, urgent, and disturbing questions of a society and a culture in the most rigorous intellectual way we have available. Such a vocation is, above all, in my view, one of the principal functions of a university, though university scholars are not always happy to be reminded of it.

Cultural studies was, therefore, in the first place precisely that. In the aftermath of World War II British society and culture were changing very rapidly and fundamentally. Cultural studies provided answers to the long process of Britain's decline as a world superpower. It also investigated the impact of modern mass consumption and modern mass society; the Americanization of our culture; the postwar expansion of the new means of mass communication; the birth of the youth cultures; the exposure of the settled habits and conventions and languages of an old class culture to the disturbing fluidity of new money and new social relationships;

the dilution of the United Kingdom's very homogeneous social population by the influx of peoples from the new Commonwealth, the Caribbean, and the Asian subcontinent especially, leading to the formation, at the very heart and center of British cultural life, of Britain's cities, of their social and political existence, of the new black British diasporas of permanent settlement. In this last aspect we could see the old imperial dream, which had been dealt with, so to speak, at arms length and overseas, at last coming home to roost, completing the triangle that had connected Africa, the metropolitan society, and the Caribbean over such a long time. The paradox was that this coming-home-to-roost of the old empire was happening at exactly the moment when Britain was trying to "cut the umbilical cord," and also at the moment when Britain was experiencing the cultural trauma, as yet in my view uncompleted and unrequited in English life, of the loss of an old imperial identity and role and the difficulty of discovering a new cultural and national identity.

Now, all those sociohistorical changes we could see were profoundly and to the roots transforming English culture: shifting the boundaries that had made the contours of daily existence familiar to people, setting up new disturbances, and letting loose those profound anxieties that always accompany radical social change. In short, a kind of cultural revolution was taking place in front of our eyes. And nobody, that we could see, was studying this revolution seriously. Nobody thought it worthwhile, let alone right and proper, to turn on this dramatically shifting, kaleidoscopic cultural terrain the search light of critical, analytic attention. Well, that was the vocation of cultural studies. That is what cultural studies in Britain was about. It is not my purpose to review its history nor, indeed, to comment on the role of the Centre for Cultural Studies, in which I worked for over fourteen years, in this enterprise. But I would insist on this starting point; I would insist on the tension characteristic in this work, which has marked my own intellectual development and my own intellectual work ever since. That is, the maximum mobilization of all the knowledge, thought, critical rigor, and conceptual theorization one can muster, turned into an act of critical reflection, which is not afraid to speak truth to conventional knowledge, and turned on the most important, most delicate, and invisible of objects: the cultural forms and practices of a society, its cultural life.

Perhaps readers will better understand what I've been saying if I take an example. The one I've chosen is the work I've been involved with in the area of race, culture, and communications. Now, someone from England trying to tell audiences in the United States about race is a little bit like carrying coals to Newcastle, if readers will forgive the simile. And, yet, one of the things that cultural studies has taught me is, indeed, the importance of historical specificity, of the specificity of each cultural configuration and pattern. There may undoubtedly be, and I think there are, general mechanisms in common across the globe that are associated with the practices of racism. But in each society, racism has a specific history that presents itself in specific, particular, and unique ways, and these specificities influence its dynamic and have real effects that differ from one society

to another. One thing that cultural studies has taught me is, indeed, not to speak of racism in the singular, but of *racisms* in the plural. Though readers today might find it hard to believe, in the early nineteen-sixties when cultural studies began there was apparently no visible, urgent question of race in contemporary English culture at all. Of course, the question of race had permeated the whole history of imperialism and the contacts established over five centuries between Britain and peoples of the world. The history of the rise of Britain as a commercial and global power could not have been told without encountering the fact of race. But it was very largely relegated to the past and those who studied it: those who studied the Atlantic slave trade; those who looked at the family fortunes that had made possible the growing revolution of the eighteenth century; and those who had been involved in studying the antislavery movement, or who were experts in colonial history and administration. It seemed to have no active purchase as a contemporary theme in understanding British twentieth-century culture, which has already been spoken of as "post-colonial." The ways in which the colonizing experience had, indeed, threaded itself through the imaginary of the whole culture, what one can only call racism as the cup of tea at the bottom of every English experience, as the unstirred spoonful of sugar in every English child's sweet tooth, as the threads of cotton that kept the cotton mills going, as the cup of cocoa that sweetened the dreams of every English child—these things had been somehow relegated to the past and suppressed as an active cultural question. The way in which the popular culture of English society—from advertising to the music halls, to pageantry, to celebration, to the diamond jubilees, to the heritage industry, to theatrical melodramas, and so forth—had been orchestrated around the theater, the spectacle of empire had been largely forgotten. The way in which English masculinity, itself, had proved itself, not simply on the playing fields of Eaton but in the foothills of Hyderabad or facing down the howling dervishes in the Sudan, or the very English drama of corruption and conscience nicely balanced against one another, continually reenacted face to face with the heart of darkness; well, these things had been effectively liquidated from the culture in an active way. They had been blown away by, what the Prime Minister, Harold MacMillian, was pleased to call, "the winds of change."

It was the great migrations of the fifties and sixties from the Caribbean and from the Asian continent and the formation of black communities at the heart of English experience that brought the theme of racism in a new form to life again. And when it emerged, though it assumed many of the forms we had come to understand by the term "the past," and from other societies, it had also acquired specifically different forms. In terms of the way in which the black experience was represented in the culture, in the media, it carried, of course, all the connotations that racism has had elsewhere: of an alien culture and peoples who are less civilized than the native ones; of a people who stand lower in the order of culture because they are somehow lower in the order of nature, defined by race, by color, and sometimes by genetic inheritance. But, in the new forms of racism that emerged in Britain in this period, and that have come to define the field in English culture since, these earlier forms

have been powerfully transformed by what people normally call a new form of "cultural racism." That is to say, the differences in culture, in ways of life, in systems of belief, in ethnic identity and tradition, now matter more than anything that can be traced to specifically genetic or biological forms of racism. And what one sees here is the fact, the existence of racism contracting new relationships with a particular form, a defensive and besieged form, of argument around not "who are the blacks?" but "who are the English?" This question went right to the heart and center of English culture.

And I can give readers an example of what I'm calling cultural racism. Two years ago the white parents of a school in Dewsbury in Yorkshire withdrew their children from a predominantly black state school. One reason they gave for doing so was that they wanted their children to have a Christian education. They then added that they were not, as it happens, Christian believers at all; they simply regarded Christianity as an essential part of the English cultural heritage. They regarded the Anglican Church as part of the English way of life, rather like roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

Now, how to study the many different ways in which these new manifestations of race, ethnicity, and racism were figured and represented in the mass media was one of the problems that confronted us in the Centre for Cultural Studies: how to bring to light the deeper historical traces of race in English culture. What were available to us were principally the models developed in communication studies elsewhere, borrowed from societies that had confronted these problems much earlier than we had. And cultural studies, as was appropriate then and now, devoured them. We were alerted to the nature of racial stereotyping, to the negative imagery of race and ethnicity in the mass media, to the absence of accounts of the black experience as a central part of the English story, to the repetition in the mass media of a very simplified and truncated way of representing black history, life, and culture. These provided us with certain methods of analysis and study that were of immense importance to us in the early phase. So, the point that I want to make comes across in the ways in which my own understanding of and work on the questions of race and racism have been subsequently transformed by developments within the field of cultural studies itself. I am only able to hint at this transformation here, but it is something that I want to do in order to return to my central point below.

I note a shift, for example, in the way in which we understand how the media construct and represent race. The earlier approach led us to ask questions about the accuracy of media representations. We wanted to know if the media were simply distorting, like a distorting mirror held up to a reality that existed outside of itself. But what cultural studies has helped me to understand is that the media play a part in the formation, in the constitution, of the things that they reflect. It is not that there is a world outside, "out there," which exists free of the discourses of representation. What is "out there" is, in part, constituted by how it is represented. The reality of race in any society is, to coin a phrase, "media-mediated." And distortions and simplifications of experience, which are certainly there, and above all, *absences*—

we had to develop a methodology that taught us to attend, not only to what people said about race but, in England the great society of the understatement, to what people could *not* say about race. It was the silences that told us something; it was what wasn't there. It was what was invisible, what couldn't be put into frame, what was apparently unsayable that we needed to attend to. If you want to ask, "what can content analysis teach you?" well, one of the questions you have to ask is, "what about the people who appear to have no content at all—who are just pure form, just pure, invisible form?" You can count lexical items if they're there; but you need a different approach if you really want, as it were, to read a society and its culture symptomatically.

And that is, indeed, what we had to try to begin to learn to do in face of the logics of racism, which worked, we were to discover, rather more like Freud's dreamwork than like anything else. We found that racism expresses itself through displacement, through denial, through the capacity to say two contradictory things at the same time, the surface imagery speaking of an unspeakable content, the repressed content of a culture. Every time I watch a popular television narrative, like "Hill Street Blues" or "Miami Vice," with its twinning and coupling of racial masculinities at the center of its story, I have to pinch myself to remind myself that these narratives are not a somewhat distorted reflection of the real state of race relations in American cities. These narratives function much more, as Claude Lévi-Strauss tells us, as myths do. They are myths that represent in narrative form the resolution of things that cannot be resolved in real life. What they tell us is about the "dream life" of a culture. But to gain a privileged access to the dream life of a culture, we had better know how to unlock the complex ways in which narrative plays across real life.

Once we look at any of these popular narratives which constantly, in the imagination of a society, construct the place, the identities, the experience, the histories of the different peoples who live within it, then we are instantly aware of the complexity of the nature of racism itself. Of course, one aspect of racism is, certainly, that it occupies a world of manichean opposites: them and us, primitive and civilized, light and dark, a black and white symbolic universe. But, once you have analyzed or identified this simple logic, it seems all too simple. You can fight it. But you can't spend a lifetime studying it; it is almost too obvious to spend any more time on. It is kind of a waste of time to add another book about a world that absolutely insists on dividing everything it says into good and bad. My conviction now would be completely different from the conclusion of one graduate student who had come to the Centre to study popular narratives of race. After two years, she said, "It's just so (forgive me) bloody obvious. There's nothing more to say. Once I've said it's a racist text what do chapter five, and chapter six, and chapter seven do, just say the same thing over again?" I would now give her very different advice from that which I gave her then.

Contrary to the superficial evidence, there is nothing simple about the structure and the dynamics of racism. My conviction now is that we are only at the beginning

of a proper understanding of its structures and mechanisms. And, that is the case because its apparent simplicities and rigidities are the things that are important, symptomatically, about it. It is racism's very rigidity that is the clue to its complexity. Its capacity to punctuate the universe into two great opposites masks something else; it masks the complexes of feelings and attitudes, beliefs and conceptions, that are always refusing to be so neatly stabilized and fixed. The great divisions of racism as a structure of knowledge and representation are also, it now seems to me, a deep system of defense. They are the outworks, the trenches, the defensive positions around something that refuses to be tamed and contained by this system of representation. All that symbolic and narrative energy and work is directed to secure us "over here" and them "over there," to fix each in its appointed species place. It is a way of marking how deeply our histories actually intertwine and interpenetrate; how necessary "the Other" is to our own sense of identity; how even the dominant, colonizing, imperializing power only knows who and what it is and can only experience the pleasure of its own power of domination in and through the construction of the Other. The two are the two sides of the same coin. And the Other is not *out there,* but *in here*. It is not outside, but inside.

This is the very profound insight of one of the most startling, staggering, important books in this field, Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks:* "The movement, the attitudes, the glances of the Other fix me here, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant, I demanded an explanation, nothing happened, I burst apart and now the fragments have been put together by another self." We can see in this quotation that in addition to the mechanisms of directed violence and aggression, which are characteristic of racial stereotyping, are those other things: the mechanisms of splitting, of projection, of defense, and of denial. We come to understand the attempt to suppress and control, through the symbolic economy of a culture, everything that is different; the danger, the threat, that difference represents; the attempt to refuse, to repress, to fix, to know everything about "the different" so that one can control it; the attempt to make what is different an object of the exercise of power; the attempt to symbolically expel it to the far side of the universe. And, then, we understand the surreptitious return where that which has been expelled keeps coming back home, to trouble the dreams of those who thought, a moment ago, that they were safe.

The violence, aggression, and hatred implicit in racist representation is not to be denied. But we understand very little, as yet, about its double-sided nature, its deep ambivalences. Just as so often in the cultures of the West the representation of women has appeared in its split form—the good/bad girl, the good and the bad mother, madonna and whore—so the representations of Blacks keep, at different times, exhibiting this split, double structure. Devoted, dependent, childlike, the Blacks are simultaneously unreliable, unpredictable, and undependable; capable of turning nasty or plotting treachery as soon as you turn your back. And despite being the object of an infinite benevolence, they are, inexplicably in a society predicated on freedom, given to escaping from us along the freedom trail. Or, in a society that

calls itself Christian, they are given to singing songs about the promised land. They just won't be where they ought to be.

And side by side with those representations is a discourse that cannot seem to represent nobility or natural dignity or physical grace without summoning up the black primitive. For example, in modern advertising, the tropics, which are in fact savaged by debt and ravaged by hunger and malnutrition, have become the privileged signifier of the erotic, of good times, of pleasure, of playing away. The period of nobility of any aging chief or of the natives' rhythmic force simultaneously express a nostalgia, a desire in civilized society for an innocence, an erotic power of the body that has been apparently lost to so-called civilized societies. At the same time, these images represent a fear at the heart of civilization itself of being overrun by the recurrence of a dark savagery.

This double syntax of racism—never one thing without the other—is something that we can associate with old images in the mass media; but the problem about the mass media is that old movies keep being made. And so, the old types and the doubleness and the old ambivalence keep turning up on tomorrow's television screen. Today's restless native hordes are still alive and well and living as guerrilla armies and freedom fighters in the Angolan or Namibian bush. Blacks are still the most frightening, as well as the most well-dressed, crooks and policemen in any New York cop series. They are the necessary fleet-footed, crazy-talking, hip undermen who connect Starsky and Hutch to the drug-saturated ghetto. How else would they know where to go? The scheming villains and their giant-sized bully boys of the adventure novel have spilled out into everything that now passes for what we call adventure. The sexually available, half-caste slave girl is still alive and kicking, smoldering away on some exotic television set or on the cover of some paperback, though she is, no doubt; simultaneously also the center of a very special covetous aspiration and admiration, in a sequined gown, supported by a white chorus line.

Primitivism, savagery, guile, unreliability are always just below the surface, just waiting to bite. They can still be identified in the faces of black political leaders or ghetto vigilantes around the world, cunningly plotting the overthrow of civilization. The old country (white version) is often the subject of the nostalgic documentaries on English television: prewar Malaysia, Sri Lanka, old Rhodesia, the South African veldt where hitherto reliable servants, as is only to be expected, plot treason in the outback and steal away to join ZAPU or the ANC in the bush. Tribal men in green khaki.

If you go to analyze racism today in its complex structures and dynamics, one question, one principle above all, emerges as a lesson for us. It is the fear—the terrifying, internal fear—of living with *difference*. This fear arises as the consequence of the fatal coupling of difference and power. And, in that sense, the work that cultural studies has to do is to mobilize everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihumane in their capacity to

live with difference. Cultural studies' message is a message for academics and intellectuals but, fortunately, for many other people as well. In that sense, I have tried to hold together in my own intellectual life, on one hand, the conviction and passion and the devotion to objective interpretation, to analysis, to rigorous analysis and understanding, to the passion to find out, and to the production of knowledge that we did not know before. But, on the other hand, I am convinced that no intellectual worth his or her salt, and no university that wants to hold up its head in the face of the twenty-first century, can afford to turn dispassionate eyes away from the problems of race and ethnicity that beset our world.

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