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Stuart Hall and the location of culture

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Stuart Hall is an intellectual who considers his intellectual practice inseparable from political activity. Throughout his work Stuart Hall's main occupation consists of searching for the position of the individual in the location created by the conjuncture of culture. He said elsewhere: "You have to position yourself somewhere in order to be able to say anything at all".

In his work cultural developments of the last century, especially the post WW2 radical intellectual and artistic cultures are theorised not only in terms of social and cultural upheavals of time, but also as a possibility for a constant change and shift to transformation. In order to systematise his view he coined the term: articulation. His theory of articulation is developed from articulating and combining at the same time. Double use of articulation (both speaking and linking) is central to his theorising. Articulation is based on the argument that the elaborated societies of capitalism required political struggles to be fought by bloc formation rather than by structurally determined class relations. In other words struggles are effective only in areas where articulating one thing with another is still possible. What he adopted from Marx in this sense is Marx of "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon" opposed to Marx of "The Communist Manifesto" and his hesitation in between defining the indeterminacy of events and determinacy of the revolution. "History happens twice", said Marx, "first time as a tragedy, second time as a

farce". This particular phrase allowed developing the theory of over determination by Althusser, which has influenced Stuart Hall in his turn. One of the crucial moments in his thinking is his focus on the crisis as the possibility for any change. The crisis is what allows individuals to make their choice. Because of this the responsibility of the intellectual is to create a crisis.¹

The crisis creates the possibility for dialogue. Adapted from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogical imagination as a challenge to the dialectic of the binary opposition, this principle is at the centre of Stuart Hall's theory of articulation. Stuart Hall understood this undefined, underdetermined space in culture as the basis of his theory and the location for the position of an individual. Because culture is operated by meaning given to it by the conjecture and context, it is always open to transformations. *The world has to be made to mean* and meaning is playing the role of social production, a practice. But one cannot think anymore of practice without understanding it in terms of symbolisation. Cultural Studies, the theoretical movement pioneered by Stuart Hall and his friends, is the study of symbolic forms and meaning, combined with the study of power.

Cultural Studies has been understood as a conjunctural practice as well as it is a theoretical discipline. It is more like a project than an academic discipline, which is positioned in the most active areas of social and cultural life. This conjuncture is the space that composes hybrid, as "in between" for Homi Bhabha, *pastiche* for Fredric Jameson, contrapuntal for Edward Said, tracking of nomadology for Deleuze and Guattari or distribution of sensible by Jacques Ranciere. But culture in their study is also understood in a particular context and for Stuart Hall the post-war,

postcolonial Britain is the context crucial this work. For Stuart Hall this context cannot be seen outside of culture: "You can no longer think primarily in terms of the economic and the material and then add cultural icing afterwards. You have to treat cultures formative of human life, human agency and of historical process."² As in Althusser's account of consciousness as ideology, Stuart Hall's account of culture is almost a substitute for ideology, which regulates popular consciousness. In this sense the cultural struggle is the struggle for policy. For Stuart Hall, culture is understood as a way of life-encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power-and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities etc. In Stuart Hall's words, culture means, "the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society" as well as "the contradictory forms of the "common sense" which have taken root inland helped to shape popular life".

With the Frankfurt School, the concept of culture acquired a new status as a critical tool and as an integral component of the new theoretical system. According to the Frankfurt School, culture's ideological function lies within the creation of uniform forms of life via Kulturindustrie not by expressing social differences, but in veiling them. From an early effort made by Stuart Hall alongside with Raymond Williams Birmingham School has transformed the idea of the critique of the culture industry, from one which was more concerned with the negative dialectics of current realities, to one as a possible site for the struggle as popular culture.³

The question of culture as a social production with links to language and symbolisation, is a notion introduced by Stuart Hall in order to show that individuals invent their own identities by their symbolic interrelation with their time. There is a shift from centre to margin, from the subject to identity politics. As these invented identities negotiate with one another, the transformations open up a new space or the third landscape of emerged positions. Where these positions have emerged is neither a new horizon, nor leaving behind of the past but in between spaces that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation. This in between space is the third landscape which enables other positions to emerge. For Stuart Hall any cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. Cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories. They are not something which already exist, transcending place, time, history, culture. They are just like everything else which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past, they are subject to the continuous payoff history, culture, power. Identity does, in fact, emerge from situations, which are spatial, yet not fixed on the map, in a constant state of moving. The question here is about the possibility of becoming the other, about being open to external influences, new social movements, and open to ourselves, as we are after all "*fantastically cod able encoding agents*".⁴ Decoding ourselves would mean transforming our vision from that of being to that of becoming. New emerging structures cannot be anticipated and instead of fixed identities we would face emerging structures, systems that are open to environments, that which is aware of the changing contexts and which strikes a balance between internal stability and openness to transformation. This transformation has partly emerged from the mixture, as opposed to essentialism and known as multiplicities.

Multiplicities are taking place in societies motivated by culture. Starting from the 1980s Stuart Hall's work became very influential for artists living in the UK and in the international art scene. It is also time Stuart Hall turned to contemporary art as a possible space of resistance and a new site for contestation, alongside with the media and cinema. One such possibility was connected to the emerging struggle of migrants from former colonies to find their voice in their new country and the former colonial dominant: the British Empire. Stuart Hall considered the conjuncture between artist's work concerning geopolitics, migrations, and conceptual developments and Cultural Studies an interesting one. He expressed his excitement "about the forms in which a lot that theorising takes in artistic practice". Stuart Hall finds the artistic work, "alternative production is theoretically informed by what happened in the 1980s-in photography, film, video, painting, and installation. It is an area where cultural politics has very deep roots and resonances; where a lot of issues are also issues about identity and representation". Considering the mutual influence between his own work and artistic practice Stuart Hall finds it particularly valuable, because his own work on ethnicity and race has been as much informed by the work of people who are actually producing creative work as by those who are theorising about it.⁵

His theoretical work became very influential and had a serious impact on developments of contemporary art. It is especially visible in the work of artists who consider discourse as an important element in their practice. The Black Audio Film collective, The Samoa Film and video workshop, Isaac Julien, Renee Green, and Sonia Boyce are just some names of art collectives and artists who recognise the influence of Stuart Hall's theory on their own practice. Historically important post-colonial classics, such

as films by Isaac Julien *Dreaming Rivers*, *Looking for Langston*, *The Attendant* as well as *Hands worth Songs*, a film by the Black audio Film Collective are remarkably influenced by Stuart Hall's theory. It is also true of a number of installations and other artworks produced in the last decade or so.

Through the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century Stuart Hall became involved in the art world even more closely. One of the most important projects of this time is creating a new institute which would supposedly support previously marginalised artists to find their vocation. The "institute for International Visual Arts" (inIVA) even managed to commission David Adjaye to build its own magnificent building thanks to the influence of Stuart Hall. Yet it is also the period of the decline of art and theory and the emergence of the epoch of managerialism. Stuart Hall is not so optimistic in the first decade of the 21st century's intellectual and artistic developments, because the cultural identities are today fixed; they are serving the increasing process of fundamentalism.⁶ Culture has become intrinsic to modern management. Stuart Hall suggests that "Culture can become everything. You can manipulate the symbols without altering the realities. Through language, dress or mode of behaviour, for example, they signal a new kind of egalitarianism, while in practice they make little dent of the underlying causes of inequality. Our times are defined bicultural democratisation."⁷ Yet there is always room for the search for the position driven by subjectivities. Because events are never fully determined and they are open to the crisis which leads to becoming and taking the position. The question of the position is back on the agenda again. But perhaps one needs to continue to resist "with the optimism of the will and pessimism of the intellect" like Stuart Hall often repeats by paraphrasing Antonio Gramsci.

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¹ Stuart Hall and Umberto Eco, “The role of intellectual is to produce crisis: a conversation”, Listener, May 16, 14-16

² Stuart Hall, Cultural Revolutions, New Statesman, 5 December 1997, p.24

³ Stuart Hall, Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular", in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, ed. by John Storey, Prentice Hall, 1994, pp.442-453

⁴ Stuart Hall, Encoding, decoding, in D.Graddel and O.Boyd Barret (eds), *Media Texts: Authors and Readers*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press and Multi-Lingual Matters.

⁵ Stuart Hall, Culture and Power, Radical Philosophy, (86) November/December, 1997, p.40

⁶ Zeigam Azizov and Rainer Winter, “Interview with Stuart Hall” , Journal *Studi Culturali*, 2/2017, August, Bologna, Italy

⁷ Stuart Hall, Cultural Revolutions, New Statesman, 5 December 1997, p.24