

Deconstructing Western Culture: Stuart Hall's Approach to Critical Theory

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Abstract. This article delves into the significant contributions of Stuart Hall to media and cultural studies through a Marxist lens, emphasizing his innovative approach to the concept of representation. Hall's integration of critical theory with media studies has provided deep insights into the dynamics of culture and power within society, highlighting the role of media in shaping and reflecting social identities and struggles. The paper critically examines Hall's interdisciplinary application of neo-Marxist theories, notably those of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, to analyze contemporary media landscapes. By exploring Hall's critique of authoritarian populism and his theories on cultural hegemony and ideological representation in media, the article sheds light on the lasting impact of his work on current media practices. The paper also assesses the practical implications of Hall's theories in understanding the mechanisms of inclusion and representation in media, suggesting their relevance in navigating the complexities of global media today.

Keywords: Stuart Hall, media studies, cultural studies, social theory, representation

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Social and Media Theory Now

Social theory is an essential component of media studies. Foundational works by Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, Manuel Castells, Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, Nick Couldry, and David Harvey have substantially influenced the development of the field (Hesmondhalgh, Toynbee, 2008). Social theory often serves as a methodological basis for media theory. For instance, many scholars draw on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere to analyse media and power configurations across various countries and regions (Habermas, 1989), while Fredric Jameson's notion of postmodernism is instrumental in exploring the complex relationship between media and society in the era of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991). Furthermore, relying solely on empirical data or big data analysis often falls short, as interpretation is crucial post-collection and processing. As noted by Dutch media scholar Geert Lovink, discussing the social boundaries within social media: "It is a crucial time for critical theory to reclaim lost territory and bring on exactly this: a shift from the quantitative to the qualitative, uncomputable impacts of this ubiquitous formatting of the social" (Lovink, 2016).

Similarly, to social theory, media theory requires continual re-evaluation and adaptation in the context of contemporary trends. This need arises from the necessity of accounting for new technological conditions that mediate communication. Such technological determinism complicates efforts to describe sociocultural trends. Consequently, certain concepts become outdated, and their use in scholarly work can be seen merely as an attempt to validate

the theory itself, as their heuristic potential for addressing current issues is minimized. It is worth noting, however, that media theory is not homogeneous and can be classified according to various characteristics. British sociologist Denis McQuail, in developing his own theory of mass communication, proposed dividing media theory into two distinct approaches based on the level of technological determinism: “media-oriented” and “socio-oriented” (McQuail, 2010).

One of the key social theorists whose work has influenced media studies is the Jamaican-British intellectual Stuart Hall. Stuart Henry McPhail Hall (1932–2014) – a Marxist sociologist and cultural theorist, founder of the influential *New Left Review*, and one of the founders of cultural studies – made a significant contribution to the development of cultural and media research. Hall’s most frequently cited ideas include the concepts of encoding/decoding, media representation, studies on identity and diaspora, criticism of authoritarian populism (Thatcherism), and analysis of cultural hegemony. In *Media Theory for A Level: The Essential Revision Guide* media researcher Mark Dixon mentions Hall’s concepts as key terms in media studies, specifically in the sections on representation and audience research (Dixon, 2019).

Working within the Marxist paradigm, Hall revitalized Marxist thought. For example, in cultural studies, he re-examined the relationship between the base and superstructure and rejected the concept of false consciousness, focusing instead on Antonio Gramsci’s ideas of hegemony and Louis Althusser’s ideology. This contribution proved to be highly valuable – the editors of the latest *Routledge Handbook of Marxism and Post-Marxism*, when categorizing leftist thinkers, placed Stuart Hall alongside figures like Angela Davis and Lise Vogel (Jefferess & Murphy, 2023).

The examination of the mechanism of representation is not limited solely to the academic community. In creative industries worldwide, increasing attention is being given to issues of inclusion and representation in content production, which underscores the significant potential of Hall’s theory. Companies such as Netflix, Disney, Amazon, and HBO not only create equal opportunities for employees but also promote fair representation of all minority groups in their projects. For instance, the leading American streaming service for films and series, Netflix, regularly publishes detailed reports on changes in the representation within its content (Netflix, 2022). By analyzing representation dynamics and tracking percentage changes for various groups, the company aims to underscore the importance of inclusion in media content creation.

This trend is not unique to Netflix but is also characteristic of other major distributors of series and films. Examples include popular contemporary series from 2022-2023 such as *Stranger Things* (2016-, Netflix), *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022-, Amazon Studios), *The Last of Us* (2023-, HBO Max), *The Witcher: Blood Origin* (2022, Netflix), *Euphoria* (2019-, Hulu & HBO Max), and *See* (2019-2022, Apple TV+). Each of these series has received varied and sometimes conflicting responses from audiences. Nevertheless, they all feature representation of individuals with disabilities as well as ethnic, age, gender, and other minority groups.

Simultaneously, the prestigious American film award, the Oscars, introduced a new set of rules for film submissions (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2020). According to these guidelines, if filmmakers wish to participate in the Best Picture category, they must meet at least two out of four specified criteria. One of these criteria requires the direct representation of minorities in the film, as well as a theme or narrative focused on minority social issues.

In the video game industry, as an integral part of modern visual art, representation also plays a crucial role. In story-driven games such as *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *Detroit: Become Human*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Life Is Strange*, and *Horizon Forbidden West*, developers incorporate inclusive standards, giving characters from various minority groups more agency in the game world and depicting them in a more positive light (Cote, 2020).

Current trends in implementing practices of representation in mass culture indicate the need for theoretical reflection on this phenomenon. It is essential to understand the logic of representation, the process of its realization, and its potential social implications. By using Stuart Hall's concept of representation, it becomes possible to accurately capture these trends.

Stuart Hall's Contribution to Critical Theory, Neo-Marxism, and Cultural Studies

To understand the Stuart Hall's media theory it is essential to grasp the specifics of his research perspective. In this part of the paper, we will not divide or categorise Hall's theoretical legacy. In particular, distinguishing between early and late Hall is unproductive for our purposes for several reasons. As mentioned earlier, due to the lack of comprehensive monographs, it is difficult to trace the evolution of Hall's thought. Hall himself acknowledged that he was difficult to fit into any theoretical framework: "I think it's just how I am – I never have been wholly anything [...] I may be closer to being wholly a Gramscian than anything else, but that is we have reinvented Gramsci" (Hall, 2018: 249).

Stuart Hall's project of developing and updating Marxism as a academic field was not cohesive, and his relationship with Marxism is complex. Stuart Hall was not an orthodox Marxist; he freely critiqued classical Marxist concepts, incorporated structuralist practices into his work, and drew on the ideas of neo-Marxists like Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Therefore, it is preferable to approach Hall's media theory by examining specific aspects of his research. To address our objectives, we will critically examine Hall's key texts on theoretical studies and then describe the main elements of his theory.

Before analyzing the texts themselves, it is essential to briefly characterize the fields in which Hall worked – critical theory, Marxist theory, and cultural studies. The most appropriate approach will be to succinctly identify Hall's place within each of these fields. Describing Stuart Hall's position within these three areas will provide a general understanding of the researcher and the unique aspects of his theoretical framework.

Throughout his career, Stuart Hall adhered to (Marxist) critical theory. However, the concept of critical theory is quite broad and can be used to refer to different schools of thought. It is necessary to specify Hall's relationship to critical theory. To define this term, we can refer to the definition given by British philosopher Peter Osborne. In his work *Philosophy After Theory: Transdisciplinarity and the New*, Osborne divides critical theory into two branches – French and German (Osborne, 2018).

Osborne notes that French philosophers working within critical theory adhered to an anti-Hegelian tradition, while German researchers (particularly the Frankfurt School) drew from a post-Hegelian tradition. As Osborne points out, German Marxist philosopher Max Horkheimer, in his book *Traditional and Critical Theory*, used the term 'critical theory' to designate what might be called a 'negative' turn in his concept of historical materialism as an interdisciplinary social theory (Horkheimer, 1972). Hall, by contrast, aligned himself with the anti-Hegelian tradition, emphasizing the ontological nature of his work. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to say that Hall fully aligned himself with French critical theory. For instance, he appreciated the anti-essentialist and discursive nature of the theory of French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, yet he also criticized Foucault for failing to explain the causality and interrelation of various antagonisms. Thus, based on Osborne's characterization of critical theory, Stuart Hall's theoretical legacy can be fully integrated within this field.

Describing the relationship to Marxism within the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, Colin Sparks highlights a distinctive feature of Stuart Hall's work: "At this early stage in his career, Hall identified marxism as an obsolete and reductivist system of thought [...] it was necessary to go beyond its limitations in order to understand contemporary culture" (Sparks, 1996: 78). Considering Hall's contributions to revitalizing Marxist theory, it should be noted that Hall did not consider himself a theorist in the traditional sense:

I have a strategic relation to theory. I don't regard myself as a theorist in the sense that that is my work. I am interested always in going on theorizing about the world, about the concrete, but I am not interested in the production of theory as an object in its own right. And therefore I use theory in strategic ways. I am not afraid to borrow this idea and try to match it up with this idea borrowed from another paradigm (Hall, 2018: 250-251).

Indeed, many of Hall's works combine theoretical analysis with empirical research and critique of the current political moment. In other words, it was always important for Hall to respond to social challenges in a timely manner and to influence the political discourse directly. Theory, in this case, served merely as a tool to achieve specific goals. This pragmatic approach to theory became a central point of contention between Hall and Perry Anderson. When Hall, due to his workload, stepped down as editor-in-chief of *New Left Review*, Perry Anderson took over. However, contrary to Hall's vision of the journal as a practice-oriented publication focused on addressing working-class issues and advancing political agendas, Anderson concentrated on theoretical aspects of Marxist thought and established Western Marxism as a standalone tradition.

Throughout his career, Hall critically examined the existing political discourse. The political aspect of Hall's theory is evident not only in his works directly related to current events (for example, the article *The Cuban Crisis: Trial Run or Steps Towards Peace?* (Hall, 2017) but also in his studies on the interaction between media and society. Without a doubt, his critique of authoritarian populism is a significant part of Stuart Hall's theoretical legacy. The rise of neoliberal ideology in the 1980s was a challenge for the left, necessitating an alternative approach to contemporary issues that could validate leftist ideology. In the collection *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* Hall not only highlighted the problematic aspects of Margaret Thatcher's policies but also provided a theoretical basis for rethinking left-wing political theory (Hall, 1988).

The central Marxist concepts that Hall adopts for his research are ideology, as developed by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and hegemony, from the work of Italian philosopher and political thinker Antonio Gramsci. Stuart Hall cannot be described as a strict Althusserian, although Althusser had a significant influence on Hall's theory.

The primary concept Stuart Hall borrowed from Louis Althusser is the notion of the decentralization of the subject, which suggests that the subject has the ability to influence existing discourse (Hall, 2016). Althusser's innovative idea lies in his combination of agency and structure (Althusser, 2006), a connection that can be observed in Hall's encoding/decoding model. Additionally, Hall rejected Marx and Engels' concept of false consciousness, favoring Althusser's understanding of ideology. It is through ideology (ideas, myths, representations) that social practices are reproduced, and decoding these practices enables us to reveal the socio-political aspects of a specific historical period.

Another important influence in Hall's media theory is the work of Antonio Gramsci. Hall agrees that in advanced capitalist Western countries, the ruling class sustains its position by reproducing established power relations through ideology and culture, thereby legitimizing its rule. The starting point for applying the theory of hegemony was the neoliberal policies of Margaret Thatcher, about which I mentioned earlier. Perry Anderson (2022) notes that Stuart Hall effectively used the concept of hegemony to describe ongoing political changes and even predicted the electoral defeat of the social democrats. In his later works, Hall used the concept of hegemony to explain the diminishing need for class categories, replacing them with Gramsci's notion of a bloc. It is worth noting that, for Hall, it was important not just to integrate Gramsci's theory into the existing context but to "think about our problems in a Gramscian way" (Hall, 1998: 161–173). Overall, Hall's reliance on Antonio Gramsci's concept allowed him to establish the importance of studying cultural practices, positioning culture within the realm of the political. Hall employed the concept of hegemony not only as a tool for analyzing authoritarian populism but also for investigating issues of race and ethnicity (Hall, 1996).

The founders of cultural studies are considered to be Raymond Williams, Edward Palmer Thompson, and Richard Hoggart. The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was formally established at the institutional

level at the University of Birmingham in 1964. Stuart Hall joined a little later, initially as an assistant. Hall was significantly younger than his colleagues, which influenced his unique approach to Marxist analysis. The timeline of cultural studies as an active academic field can be defined either by its institutional development or by its theoretical legacy (Turner, 1990: 33–68). It should be noted that this chronology is not the only valid one, as researchers have various interpretations of the discipline's temporal boundaries.

The origins of cultural studies can be traced back slightly earlier, to 1958, when Hall joined the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the invitation of Richard Hoggart (Davies, 1991: 323–344). In just over twenty years, this group of British left-wing intellectuals transformed from a marginal collective into a prominent scholarly field, and their theoretical legacy became an important research paradigm in Western academia, opening new opportunities for interdisciplinary studies in modern social sciences. The end of the cultural studies project can be dated to 1990, when Stuart Hall delivered a lecture at the conference *Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future*. In 1992, he published an article with the equally symbolic title *Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies*. In this article, Hall retrospectively traced the key moments in the development of cultural studies and described its influence on academic research (Hall, 2019). Thus, Hall symbolically declared the project complete. To understand the specifics of Stuart Hall's theoretical framework, it is essential to briefly outline the core principles of cultural studies.

Describing the field of cultural studies, contemporary American mass culture scholar and direct student of Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, has made a significant contribution to preserving and maintaining the relevance of cultural studies theory. In his book *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, he offers various definitions of cultural studies (Grossberg, 2010: 7–55). Summarizing Grossberg's ideas, several key aspects of the cultural studies paradigm can be highlighted. First, the goal of cultural studies is to describe how everyday practices of individuals (experience) are articulated through culture. Social activity also serves as an indicator of how certain power relations are enacted through the economy, society, culture, and political authority. Second, based on interpreting an individual's life experience, it is important to attempt to change the current unequal power disposition and identify possible solutions to existing issues. In other words, it is crucial to explore opportunities for resistance and opposition to repressive power structures. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, cultural studies encompass various theoretical approaches and schools of thought.

Although the development of cultural studies as a field of research is closely linked with Marxist theory, it would be incorrect to define cultural studies solely as a collection of Marxist theoretical practices. In fact, the Birmingham scholars did not so much use classical Marxist theory as they restructured it to fit the modern context, altering or even discarding key aspects of Marx's thought. For instance, Richard Hoggart did not associate his research with Marxism. In his work *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart (1998) addresses issues related to Marxist concerns to some extent, but he hardly engaged directly with Marxist theory. Nevertheless, Hoggart's texts were crucial in the fields

of literary studies and mass media for the establishment of cultural studies, a field that examines the relationship between mass culture and society. Unlike other left-wing scholars working within the cultural studies paradigm, Stuart Hall sought to break from the classical Marxist tradition by actively employing the concepts of ideology and hegemony. British literary criticism traditionally confined researchers to the study of literature alone. Connecting culture and society required a different approach, and the adapted Marxist theory provided a means to link these two domains.

Here, a brief digression is warranted to describe the cultural studies paradigm in comparison with another, equally popular perspective used in media studies – political economy. Although some researchers attempt to find common ground between cultural studies and political economy, combining both approaches for media analysis, it is essential to distinguish the specific theoretical foundations of each category (Garnham, 1998). These two research paradigms are among the most commonly employed in media studies. Cultural studies originally emerged as a critique of existing scientific approaches, so even when merging political-economic analysis with cultural studies theory, this distinction should be acknowledged. By updating classical Marxist concepts, the Birmingham scholars introduced new terms to distance themselves from orthodox theory, which is rooted in economic analysis.

Even though the intent to revise Marxist theory is also present in political economy, both fields define the significance of culture and economy differently. For political economy, the primary factor driving social change remains the economy (the base), whereas for cultural studies, culture (the superstructure) is more central. In media studies, this distinction is crucial because the research focus shifts depending on the approach chosen. Lawrence Grossberg explains the division between these disciplines as follows: “In fact, cultural studies did not reject political economy’s interest in capitalism. It rejected this political economy; it rejected both its description of the economy and its vision of the place of the economic in cultural and political analyses” (Grossberg, 1995: 80).

When examining the points of intersection between these two disciplines, it is worth noting that both are part of critical theory and aim to revise Marxist theory. For example, critical theorist and sociologist Christian Fuchs, in *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, outlines the concept of critical theory and explains the need to update Karl Marx’s work. He identifies the components of critical theory as follows: critical ethics, critiques of domination and exploitation, dialectics, activism and political practice, ideology critique, and political economy critique (Fuchs, 2014). Fuchs asserts that Marx’s theory remains relevant in contemporary research and merely requires adaptation to the modern context, as all the fundamental characteristics of capital (and even some aspects of communication) were already described in Marx’s works.

Even within the discipline of cultural studies, there were researchers who incorporated economic analysis into their work. Unlike the writings of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, Hall rarely addressed the economic aspects of social relations. As Hall himself admitted when describing the origins of cultural studies:

They are all economists. I am a student of literature. So I was always more interested in cultural questions. I was interested in politics, but not as a thing to study. I was not in economics, which was the master discipline. Even if you were a historian, what you had to know about was economics. Of course, because the question that was at issue was the question of development. I wasn't that. I was always more interested in cultural questions (Hall, 2018: 243).

Hall's project within the discipline of cultural studies opened new research possibilities. Although Hall declared cultural studies a completed project in his 1992 article, *Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies* contemporary cultural theorists, sociologists, and political scientists actively use the theoretical apparatus developed by the Birmingham scholars.

Key Milestones and Concepts in Stuart Hall's Theoretical Legacy

The first important essay in which Hall brings Marxism into a contemporary context is *A Sense of Classlessness* (2017). In this article, Hall outlines significant social changes in postwar Britain. One of these changes is accelerated urbanization, which contributes to the development of large urban centers. For instance, London becomes a major metropolis, accumulating cultural and economic flows. Hall observes that not only is the physical environment changing, but also the social habits and behaviors of individuals. Economic growth boosts purchasing power, and technologies that become accessible to the general public are rapidly spreading. The labor process becomes increasingly automated, and the organization of work is being restructured.

All these trends indicate that the proletariat is changing. It becomes increasingly difficult to build a collective class identity as the line between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie blurs and the role of the middle class grows. As a result, due to the lack of class consciousness, workers lose the political potential needed to address issues of exploitation.

Hall also critiques the widespread use of the term "mass" to describe the audience of contemporary culture and media. According to Hall, this term effectively replaces the category of class. The problem is that the category of "masses" does not imply any substantive meaning, thereby minimizing the potential for political unification.

After the publication of his article, Stuart Hall faced criticism from orthodox Marxists. Edward Thompson and Raphael Samuel denied that the sense of class identity was disappearing. Each researcher presented arguments affirming the relevance of the class category and the existence of class consciousness. Hall responded to this critique. He cautiously acknowledged his more esteemed colleagues' points but did not abandon the potential for revising Marxist theory: "In other words, my piece was an admittedly impressionistic excursion into the field of working class psychology, and only more tentatively a discussion of the facts of class power in contemporary life. I was trying to deal with some of the causes of apathy, and tried to avoid sounding as if I believed it to be a good thing" (Hall, 1959: 50).

A Sense of Classlessness was Hall's first theoretical work in which he laid the foundation for key aspects of his media theory. Despite weak arguments and a superficial analysis of the social context, the text contains elements

that would remain relevant to Hall throughout his career. At the same time, criticism from Marxist intellectuals helped Stuart Hall establish himself as an independent researcher. On the one hand, in this article, Hall clearly demonstrated his commitment to Marxism as a research lens. Hall continued working within the critical paradigm, drawing on various Marxist concepts for his research. On the other hand, Hall already began to address the theoretical contradictions within Marxist theory.

In 1977, Hall (2021) wrote *Rethinking the «Base and Superstructure» Metaphor*. One of the main premises in his reflections on Marxist theory was the argument that capitalist production constantly transforms, altering the existing context. Consequently, there are no fixed concepts that can fully describe social change. The methodological tools of a Marxist researcher must therefore be adapted to the present moment. Rejecting a dogmatic view of Marxism, Hall criticized the direct interpretation of social change through the “logic of capital,” as he believed this understanding narrowed research perspectives and reduced analysis solely to the political-economic dimension.

In developing his media theory, Hall also focused exclusively on the cultural factors of social relations. When studying audiences and the impact of media content on recipients, Stuart Hall chose not to consider economic factors. Stuart Hall was able to theoretically establish cultural studies as a distinct research paradigm. In his 1980 work *Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms*, Hall (2019: 47–70) identified key characteristics of cultural studies. On one hand, by comparing cultural studies with poststructuralism, Hall defined essential theoretical concepts and described the strengths and weaknesses of both paradigms. In doing so, he positioned the theoretical “cultural” paradigm within the broader field of sociocultural studies. On the other hand, he traced the origins of the discipline chronologically and highlighted its key authors, thereby articulating it as a self-sufficient paradigm. To thoroughly understand the specifics of the concepts of representation and encoding/decoding, it is essential to examine this article. Additionally, it is important to identify the relationship between Stuart Hall’s theory and other research traditions.

Texts such as Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1998) and Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society* (1960) were foundational works that established the theoretical basis for cultural studies. In his effort to identify the core values of the working class, Richard Hoggart employed literary criticism methods, using mass culture as his research object. Hoggart’s approach helped dissolve the division between “high” and “low” culture, which proved productive for subsequent cultural research. Similarly, in *The Long Revolution* (2011), Raymond Williams sought to separate himself from the classical Marxist tradition, creating an independent approach to studying cultural practices.

Hoggart and Williams were not the only researchers developing the cultural studies paradigm. For example, Edward Palmer Thompson, working in the tradition of classical Marxist historiography, emphasized individual agency in his work *The Making of the English Working Class* (2013). This approach expanded the understanding of historical processes, as class activity was viewed as a collection of independent practices. Although *The Making of the*

English Working Class was written later, the book ideologically aligns with the core texts of cultural studies.

According to Stuart Hall, in *The Uses of Literacy, Culture and Society*, and *The Making of the English Working Class*, the researchers defined a shared field of sociocultural studies that required a new methodology to address its issues. It could be added that, although Hall does not mention his own work, the previously discussed 1958 article *A Sense of Classlessness* also fits both chronologically and ideologically within the foundational works of cultural studies.

The concept of culture became an increasingly important factor in analyzing social relations, requiring some definition. Comparing all three books, it becomes clear that the New Left movement in postwar Britain shared a common goal – restructuring Marxism to address contemporary issues. However, each researcher developed their own approach, and therefore, cultural studies did not have a unified methodology or research structure. What united these theorists were common principles, motivations, interests, and theoretical categories.

The category of culture itself lacked a single definition, as each author attributed their own meaning to it. This lack of consensus created ambiguity and significantly complicated work within the cultural studies paradigm. Hall, referring to Raymond Williams, proposed two definitions of «culture.» First, culture as ordinariness – “culture is ordinary”. This broad understanding includes all social aspects, as well as the creation and reproduction of particular meanings through cultural objects. Second, culture as the result of social practices that manifest through certain patterns. Williams’ concept of a “structure of feeling” represents an attempt to interpret social activity.

For both the theorists of the Frankfurt School and the representatives of cultural studies, studies of mass culture played an essential role in describing the transformation of capitalist relations. However, whereas Theodor Adorno (2001) and Max Horkheimer viewed mass culture with disdain, criticizing it for its commercial nature, the Birmingham scholars understood culture to encompass all cultural practices, avoiding a purely aesthetic assessment.

Indeed, Raymond Williams’ ideas are a vital part of cultural studies theory. On one hand, Williams opposed the division of culture into “high” and “low”. His thesis that “culture is ordinary” eliminates the need to assess the quality of a cultural object, as all cultural artifacts are considered equally important. On the other hand, Williams advocated for abandoning the Marxist categories of base and superstructure. Studies confined to these concepts, he argued, limited the potential of cultural studies, as culture remained subordinate to economic factors.

Raymond Williams’ influence on Stuart Hall’s theory was substantial. Not only did Hall fully embrace these ideas and incorporate them into his own work, but he also, like Williams, continually re-evaluated Marxist theory, applying it to cultural studies. In *Rethinking the Base and Superstructure*, Hall examines Marxist theory itself, and in his later research, this approach would extend to media and cultural theory as well (Hall, 2021).

Hall concludes his analysis of Williams' and Thompson's works by identifying the key characteristics of the cultural studies approach. First, the concept of culture is fundamental, regardless of the research field. Culture is the core of any social activity where the values of individuals within a given society are articulated. Studying cultural practices, in turn, involves identifying social issues. Second, abandoning the strict categories of base and superstructure eliminates the deterministic view of social change and, consequently, the necessity of economic or political-economic analysis. Third, experience is a significant category in cultural studies. For example, Williams' concept of the "structure of feeling" implies the transmission of experience through communicative processes. Thus, studying social processes through culture is an attempt to capture the current experience of a particular social group. This aspect, in essence, distinguishes cultural studies from other research paradigms. The concept of experience cannot be analyzed through strictly analytical categories; it requires an interpretative approach or, as Hall writes, an "expressive" exploration. This also signals a shift towards empirical material. Various cultural objects, such as films, books, visual arts, and video games, become symbolic units containing the experiences of individuals.

Stuart Hall also describes structuralism as the second paradigm in cultural studies. In the structuralist approach, the key concept that replaces the category of culture is ideology. As discussed above, through the concept of ideology, Hall was able to establish the significance of cultural studies and integrate the concept into the media studies paradigm. It is essential to clarify the relationship between Stuart Hall's media theory and structuralism. Hall (2019: 47–70) accepts the structuralist position that the subject is constrained by existing power dispositions that people make history based on conditions not of their own. This thesis underscores the critical nature of Hall's media theory. Power relations are reproduced through certain structures, and uncovering these structures is crucial for empowering the subject. Examining social relations through structural categories elevates the research to a level of abstraction, thus enhancing the importance of theory in addressing research objectives.

Stuart Hall decisively separates political economy from cultural studies. In his view, using political economy theory inevitably reduces analysis to economic factors as determinants of social relations. Consequently, the categories of base and superstructure retain their original significance, thereby minimizing the importance of the concepts of hegemony and ideology. Within political economy research, the scholar's task is to identify the "logic", whereas in the paradigms of cultural studies and structuralism, the goal is to uncover the "structure".

Summarizing the article *Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms*, the following key points emerge. First, Stuart Hall adopts essential ideas from Birmingham School researchers regarding the influence of culture on social change. Second, Hall identifies the structuralist paradigm as equal to cultural studies, highlighting the influence of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci on his methodological framework. Thus, the concepts of ideology and cultural hegemony became significant for Hall. Hall's incorporation of structuralist concepts suggests that the foundations of his media theory differ from those of

his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. However, what truly makes Hall a post-Marxist scholar is his approach to the signified. Unlike his predecessors, for Hall, the signifier is fluid, with a meaning that can never be fully fixed. This is why media becomes a kind of battleground for meaning, with representation playing a crucial role in this struggle.

Representation in Media

Stuart Hall was not the first to attempt to conceptualize the phenomenon of representation. Before and after Hall, numerous works in various fields have addressed this topic. Notable examples include Roland Barthes' (1973) *Mythologies*, Paul Gilroy's (2002) *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, and bell hooks' (2014) *Ain't I a Woman?*, among others. These texts can be explicitly situated within the study of representation in media. However, Hall engaged directly with media, attributing critical importance to mass media. Media theorist Mark Dixon described Hall's contribution as follows: "Hall, too, shone a critical light on media's ability to manufacture and reinforce social inequalities through stereotyping practices and, more importantly, he articulated an understanding of how those representations might be subverted and resisted" (Dixon, 2019: 60). In developing the concept of representation, Stuart Hall drew on a range of approaches, and his works are largely descriptive. Consequently, Hall's concept of representation does not present a clear methodology. Nonetheless, the foundational principles of his theory can be applied to the study of media representation.

In the article *The Work of Representation*, part of the 1997 collection *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall (1997) descriptively examines the fundamental concepts and theoretical directions important for understanding the concept of representation. Analyzing this text, it is difficult to pinpoint specific positions unique to Stuart Hall. Nevertheless, the work is crucial for a foundational understanding of the concept of representation and for further study of Hall's other works.

Stuart Hall defines representation as follows: "Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people [...] representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things" (Hall, 1997: 15). This understanding of representation implies that there is no fixed meaning of an object; everything is defined through social interactions. Therefore, the meaning of the same object can change over time. This idea is central to Hall's concept of representation.

Stuart Hall describes two systems of representation. The first system is based on the idea that all objects (people, material objects, events, etc.) relate to our mental representation of them. Without this, it is impossible to assign meaning to objects or interpret them. Even abstract or imaginary objects can be conceptualized. A lack of personal experience does not affect the ability to

have a representation. For example, an individual can describe concepts like “love”, “angels”, or “mermaids”, even though they lack real referents.

Hall refers to representation as a system because the mechanism of representation consists of various interrelated concepts that can be categorized and divided into groups. To illustrate this point, Hall provides an example of a bird and an airplane. On one hand, both objects share the characteristic of flying, linking them together. On the other hand, an airplane is a human-made object, whereas a bird is an animal. This conceptual map (the first system) is specific to each individual, as people may perceive relationships between objects differently. However, individuals have a more or less shared understanding of objects, shaped through communication. Cultural factors also influence this understanding, as culture partly determines our perceptions of objects.

The second system represents language, which is integral to the process of meaning-making. Language is necessary to “translate” our thoughts into words and then communicate them to others. Hall uses the term “language” in its broadest sense: words, sounds, images. Therefore, all kinds of cultural objects fall into this category: fashion, film, advertising, video games, news, music, etc. In this way, the first system assigns meaning to objects through a chain of concepts, constructing a conceptual map, while the second system represents these concepts and ideas through language. This unity of systems constitutes the process of representation.

Representation is a complex and heterogeneous process. Even in defining a visual object, challenges may arise because the same image can be interpreted in multiple ways. The definition of an object is not fixed; it can change depending on sociocultural conventions. Meaning is not inherent in the objects themselves but is constructed through “signifying practices” – practices that give objects meaning. Therefore, there is no single true interpretation. In this aspect of his theory, Hall’s work reflects the influence of the social constructivist paradigm, which he adopts as foundational.

Stuart Hall explains that there are three approaches to analyzing how representation works through language. The reflective approach suggests that an object’s meaning is inherent in the object itself. The intentional approach contradicts the previous one. In this approach, the individual (the author of the message) plays a central role, articulating the object through communication, meaning that the structure and rules of language entirely depend on the author’s intentions. The third approach – the constructionist approach rejects the previous two. Supporters of this approach believe that meaning is not derived from the objects themselves and is not determined by the author. Instead, meaning is constructed through social practices and systems of representation. Social actors create meanings for further communication with each other. This understanding grants substantial importance to the social realm while not denying the existence of the material world. Moreover, signs can have a material form: sound as part of a musical work, paint and canvas for creating a painting, or digital infrastructure transmitting images through television.

Stuart Hall describes different theoretical paradigms central to studies of representation – semiotics and discourse theory. The first paradigm focuses on

how meanings are reproduced through language. Key researchers in this field include Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and French philosopher and literary critic Roland Barthes. The main concepts in semiotics are sign, myth, signified, and signifier.

At the core of discourse theory is the understanding of how discursive practices produce knowledge. Hall illustrates this with the theory of French philosopher Michel Foucault, for whom the interconnection of knowledge/power plays a key role in analyzing discursive spaces. Hall also references the work *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* by post-Marxist scholar Ernesto Laclau (1990), who argues that physical objects exist but do not have fixed meanings. Meaning is determined through discursive practices, so knowledge defines power relations within the existing discourse. Stuart Hall emphasizes that both paradigms are essential for studies of representation, with neither dominating the other.

Hall combines the concepts of encoding/decoding and representation. The encoding process is necessary to convey information about an object to another individual, who in turn decodes the received meaning. It is through codes that the entire process of representation is mediated. Hall complicates the concept of encoding/decoding, asserting that meaning is not constant, and thus the codes themselves can change.

Hall considered representation in other aspects as well. In his 1989 essay *Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation*, he analyzed the importance of representation in the emergence of new Caribbean cinema (Hall, 1989). This work is significant in postcolonial studies and in studies of identity and diaspora. Hall argues that identity is a construct produced through discursive practices. He introduces a key idea: the subject who speaks is not identical to the one being spoken about. Hall states, "Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, 1989: 68).

Stuart Hall identifies two different understandings of cultural identity. First, cultural identity can be seen as a collective historical experience of a particular social group. This kind of cultural identity serves as a unifying truth for an entire people. Therefore, for Caribbean cinema to establish its own identity, it is first necessary to understand what constitutes "Caribbeanness" and then reflect that at the cinematic level. Moreover, in the postcolonial movement, this understanding of cultural identity gained popularity as it provides a mechanism of self-awareness for further political struggle.

Second, cultural identity can be viewed through the lens of the past, present, and future. This perspective sees identity not as something unified and fixed but rather as a collection of contradictory elements of individuals' historical experiences. This definition contrasts with the first, as it denies a singular postcolonial narrative. Thus, it is essential to understand that the mechanism of representation is crucial within studies of collective identity, which can also be productive in media studies.

At the same time, it is necessary to conceptualize different approaches to studying representation. To do this, it is necessary to return to the collection *Representation* and analyze Hall's (1997) article *The Spectacle of the "Other"*. Hall examines the features of visual representation, analyzing various empirical materials. He emphasizes the importance of theory, arguing that representation is a complex concept that touches on the feelings, fears, and emotions of recipients, and a simple sensual analysis is insufficient. At the same time, the foundation for analyzing representation includes three main categories: race, gender, and sexuality.

Hall outlines four models for analyzing representation. First, an essential component of representation is the aspect of difference. Through differences and oppositions, meaning is articulated within the message itself. For example, binary categories like day/night, feminine/masculine, and white/Black, due to their categorical nature, clearly reflect the encoded meaning. Second, the process of meaning production is created through the category of "the Other." Since words form meaning through dialogue, speakers hold the power to infuse words with their own significance. Consequently, meanings are not fixed and may change, leading to a struggle over meaning. Here, Stuart Hall references the semiotics theory of cultural theorist and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin.

Third, signification occurs through the classification of objects, where differences also play an important role. Symbolic boundaries within classification provide clarity in defining meanings. Fourth, there is the psychoanalytic understanding of signification. According to Freud, the definition of objects and the self is facilitated by the category of "the Other."

Stuart Hall argues that it is not necessary to choose only one of these four models for analyzing representation. Each understanding of difference belongs to different research fields: linguistic, social, cultural, and psychoanalytic. However, for all fields, the concepts of "difference" and "the Other" are equally significant (Hall, 1997).

The mechanism of representation is closely connected to the logic of naturalization. By depicting an object, representation can work to sustain and reproduce established binary oppositions within society. Consequently, meanings remain fixed, and the ideology being conveyed becomes associated with the object. Naturalization also contributes to the perpetuation of various stereotypes. The meaning of an object becomes fixed and is later associated with a singular interpretation by individuals. The existence of stereotypes limits the emergence of other meanings, thus representing the object solely within the bounds of one interpretation. Through stereotyping, power relations are established, and inequality is formed.

To explain the issue of identity, Stuart Hall uses the example of Orientalism, where European identity was constructed for a long time in opposition to the East. In discussing Orientalism, Hall references the work of American literary critic Edward Said (1978). Western hegemony over the East was maintained through the representation of Eastern culture as the "Other". Hall notes, "Said's reflections on Orientalism are closely tied to Foucault's concept of power/knowledge: discourse is reproduced through various practices of representation (science, exhibitions, literature, painting, etc.), and the notion

of race as the Other (Orientalism) is deeply embedded in operations of power (imperialism)” (Hall, 1997). Indeed, the construction of both collective and individual identity largely depends on the process of representation. This idea has been further developed by many postcolonial scholars.

An important category in representation is fetishization. In the realm of representation, fetishism functions uniquely. When fetishism is involved, the represented real object is supplemented by fantasy. The object is endowed with unreal properties that cannot be narrated or shown. This category is linked to Sigmund Freud’s concept of disavowal.

Stuart Hall raises significant questions regarding the application of the representation mechanism: can the dominant mode of representation be challenged or changed? What counter-strategies exist that could undermine the process of representation? Can negative representations of racial identity be replaced with positive ones? What theoretical foundations should underpin such an approach? Hall argues that there is no definitive answer to these questions:

You won’t expect correct answers to my questions, for there are none. They are a matter of interpretation and judgement. I pose them [...] to suggest how and why attempting to dismantle or subvert a racialized regime of representation is an extremely difficult exercise, about which – like so much else in representation – there can be no absolute guarantees (Hall, 1997: 263).

Hall again emphasizes that meanings can never be permanently fixed.

Nevertheless, Hall argues that to change a stereotype, it is not necessary to replace one extreme with another. For example, characters should not be divided into heroes and villains based on skin color. Such practices simply reestablish a binary opposition, albeit in a reversed form. Moreover, this type of representation is unlikely to resonate with a general audience and therefore will not have the intended impact. It is essential for viewers to be able to identify with a character regardless of skin color.

Conclusion

I examined Stuart Hall’s theory across three key areas: critical theory, Marxist social theory, and cultural studies, and analysed his major theoretical works. Within critical theory, Hall’s works are interdisciplinary in nature, articulating a critical stance towards capitalism. In Marxist theory, Hall primarily draws on the ideas of neo-Marxist thinkers – Antonio Gramsci (the concept of hegemony) and Louis Althusser (the concepts of ideology and the decentring of the subject). It is worth noting that this specific approach to Marxist analysis leads some scholars to categorize Hall within post-Marxist research. Working within the cultural studies paradigm, Hall also draws on Raymond Williams, Edward Palmer Thompson, and Richard Hoggart’s insights into cultural aspects. Thus, Stuart Hall’s theoretical framework encompasses diverse scholarly traditions, particularly Marxism and structuralism.

Analysing the interconnections within Hall’s theoretical framework enables a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of representation. The findings of this research can be utilized in interdisciplinary fields such as

cultural studies, cinema studies, media studies, and social theory. Additionally, applying the concept of representation can help in examining issues related to identity, inequality, and discrimination. Moreover, using Stuart Hall's media theory can assist in media project development, enabling creators to better anticipate risks associated with oppositional or incorrect decoding. Furthermore, incorporating the concept of representation into educational curricula can enhance media literacy among students.

Thus, Stuart Hall's project can be continued, provided that his theory is skilfully adapted to the rapidly changing social landscape. Even if one chooses not to apply Hall's theoretical frameworks directly to media studies, his approach to examining social phenomena remains highly relevant. Hall viewed social theory primarily as an action, a means of engaging with and describing society and culture. It was precisely this flexible attitude toward theory, and his willingness to avoid rigid adherence to dogma, that allowed him to insightfully and concisely "capture" many of the key trends of his time. I would venture to suggest that adapting Hall's approach to the analysis of contemporary media could reveal new dimensions of the socio-technical world, offering fresh insights into the complex interplay between society and technology.

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Деконструкция западной культуры: подход Стюарта Холла к критической теории

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Аннотация. Эта статья исследует значительный вклад Стюарта Холла в медиа и культурные исследования через призму марксизма, подчеркивая его новаторский подход к понятию репрезентации. Интеграция Холлом критической теории с медиаисследованиями обеспечила глубокое понимание динамики культуры и власти в обществе, выделяя роль медиа в формировании и отражении социальных идентичностей и борьбы. Статья критически рассматривает междисциплинарное применение Холлом неомарксистских теорий — в частности, теорий Антонио Грамши и Луи Альтюссера — для анализа современных медиа-ландшафтов. Исследуя критику Холлом авторитарного популизма и его теорию о культурной гегемонии и идеологической репрезентации в медиа, статья освещает длительное влияние его работы на современные медиа-практики. В статье также оцениваются практические последствия теорий Холла для понимания механизмов включения и репрезентации в медиа, предлагая их актуальность для навигации в сложностях глобальных медиа сегодня.

Ключевые слова: Стюарт Холл, исследования медиа, культурология, социальная теория, репрезентация

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