

Why Cultural Studies

Christian Huck

As ancient forests and modern police stations burn in the USA, as the UK faces another winter of discontent, as Canada's first nations defend their land against oil pipelines, as Australia melts in the heat of a climate catastrophe and as Ireland fears for Trump's new tariffs, you may ask yourself: *culture*?¹ WTF? Why should you invest your time and energy in studying culture? Aren't there more important things these days than books and flicks, posts and reels? Shouldn't we care more for the real world rather than what people make of it?

Stuart Hall, one of the main thinkers of Cultural Studies, was facing a similar dilemma when he was confronted with a virus that caused havoc and anxiety in the 1980s and 1990s:

AIDS is one of the questions which urgently brings before us our marginality as critical intellectuals in making real effects in the world. [...] Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies? What is the point of the study of representations, if there is no response to the question of what you say to someone who wants to know if they should take a drug and if that means they'll die two days later or a few months earlier? At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything.²

Compared to nurses and doctors, to public health planners and to volunteers taking care of dying friends in the hospice, thinking about culture seems futile, if not a waste of time. "In one sense, the efficacy of poetry is nil — no lyric has ever stopped a tank", the Irish poet and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney once wrote in the face of the violent 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland.³ And if the efficacy of culture is nil, what then is the efficacy of the study, analysis and criticism of culture? Sub-zero?

But this is not the conclusion that Stuart Hall is coming to (and neither Seamus Heaney). It's not either-or, it is not either the real world or culture; instead, the two are inexorably intertwined:

In the end, I don't agree with the way in which this dilemma is often posed for us, for it is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just people dying out there. The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not? ⁴

Doing Cultural Studies means to tackle the problems of the real world, not in an immediate way, but in form of a detour, examining movies, streams, news reports and other forms of culture for their connection to the real world:

Unless we operate in this tension, we don't know what cultural studies can do, can't, can never do; but also, what it has to do, what it alone has a privileged capacity to do. It has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death. Those are the things cultural studies can address. ⁵

To study British and American cultures from a Cultural Studies perspective you will have to learn to understand how texts, images, films etc. from the Anglophone world are formed and how they work. But as much as we are interested in the structure and form of representations, Cultural Studies puts the focus on the "effects" of texts, as Hall emphasizes. Cultural Studies is interested in the "constitutive and political nature of representation", in the way that representations shape the world, in the way they influence how we perceive and act in the world.

Instead of seeing culture and reality (or culture and society, or culture and nature) as opposites, Cultural Studies looks at the relations between culture and what is not culture. As Raymond Williams, another central figure in Cultural Studies, highlighted, "the crucial theoretical invention that was made" by Cultural Studies was "the refusal to give priority to [...]"

the art or the society”.⁶ It is not a matter of whether art reflects life, or life follows art. The central question is instead: how do art and life interact; how do they interface? To answer the question, Williams developed a new understanding of culture, which will be presented in the next, second part of this introductory course. Here, we are more concerned with what Cultural Studies can do, and why it might be worth your time and energy.

For example: as soon as we talk and write about Covid (to move to a phenomenon closer to our current attention than AIDS), we give meaning to it, place it on our cultural map, trying to get a grip on what we are faced with.⁷ Covid is cultural, too, and not merely a biological entity, because we have constituted it as a meaningful object. We can sing and think about and imagine it. It is also cultural because it connects with a distinct set of social practices (like wearing masks or keeping social distance, for example) which seem to be at odds with our usual way of life (and are heavily disputed as a consequence). Covid is cultural because it is associated with certain kinds of people (old people, for example, or people with pre-existing conditions, but also people of specific ethnicities, people of specific income groups), and with certain places (ski-resorts, concert halls, care homes, night clubs). If our culture had not created such places, and if our culture had not segregated people in these ways, the effects of the virus would certainly have been different.

Covid is also cultural because it frequently appears in and is represented within our visual languages and media of communication. Indeed, the image of the coronavirus (small, agentic, disruptive) has become a sort of metaphor which stands for or represents the vulnerability of a distinctively late-modern, anthropocenic, unsustainable way of life. These meanings, practices, images and identities allow us to place, to situate, to decipher and to study Covid as a cultural artefact.⁸ (Which is not at all to say that Covid is somehow not real, or merely a cultural construction; it is real, and people are suffering, *still*.)

To adapt Stuart Hall’s phrase, the question of Covid “is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation”. There is not just one way for a society to deal with a virus, and cultural convictions (freedom, safety, self-responsibility, solidarity) were at the heart of the debate of how to react. While the virus exists as a biological agent, a society’s response to the virus is formed by the unwritten rules of the community as much as by its material restraints. However, within today’s cultures, there is never a full consensus on what these rules should be. Political

parties argued about the right course to take, companies demanded support, and sometimes members of the public took to the street to protest against the powers that be. Hall describes “the field of culture” as “a sort of constant battlefield”.⁹

There seem to be a lot of battlefields these days, new protests and riots appear in people’s feeds almost every single day, competing for attention with the horrors of a real war. It’s easy to lose track of what they are all about. While each of these events has its own specific context and its own specific trajectory, and while not every individual action within such events can be explained culturally, most of the action we see has its roots in a struggle about culture, asking pertinent questions like these:

Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be subordinated? What cultures shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden? Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten? What images of social life shall be projected and which shall be marginalized? What voices shall be heard and which be silenced? Who is representing whom and on what basis?¹⁰

A good example of such a struggle over culture, and of the actual battlefields that can ensue from this, is the case of the Robert E. Lee monument in Charlottesville, Virginia, which caused quite a storm on social media at the time. In August 2017, around twenty people were struck by a vehicle driven into a group of people protesting against a ‘Unite the Right’ rally, just a block away from the Lee monument; one of those struck by the car, 32-year-old Heather Heyer, died as a consequence. The driver of the car, who took part in the ‘Unite the Right’ rally earlier, was later to be convicted of murder.

How could it come to this? Six months before the clash of protesters and counter-protesters, the City Council of Charlottesville had voted in favor of removing the statue of Robert E. Lee, who had been a leading General in the Confederate Army, the military of the Southern States of the USA during the American Civil War in the 1860s. Charlottesville is no more than eighty miles away from the former capital of the Confederate States of America, Richmond, and thus in the heartland of the Old South.

In the early 1920s, a local benefactor who had worked as a stockbroker in Chicago and New York commissioned the statue and privately bought a

whole city block to provide a public setting for the monument. Most likely, Paul Goodloe McIntire, who was born in the South but earned his money in the North, was trying to revive a South which had been on the losing end of both the Civil War and the ensuing economic development of the Reconstruction Era. The statue of Lee was supposed to function as a reminder of former glory, and, especially in the form of a 26 feet high monument, as something to look up to, something to edify the public.

At least since 2012, opposition to the statue gathered force.¹¹ What was once devised as a sign of Southern heritage, now became a symbol for an ethnic divide that had not been properly addressed since. In 2016, in the wake of the BlackLivesMatter movement, a high-school student from Charlottesville started an online petition to remove the monument:

As a younger African American resident in this city, I am often exposed to different forms of racism that are embedded in the history of the south and particularly this city. My peers and I feel strongly about the removal of the statue because it makes us feel uncomfortable and it is very offensive.¹²

Charlottesville's Vice Mayor at the time, Wes Bellamy, took up the case and argued that the statue was part of the reason why some citizens avoided the park: "I've spoken with several different people who have said they have refused to step foot into that park because of what that statue and the name of that park represents".¹³

What *does* the statue represent, what do Confederate flags and monuments stand for? They signal different things to different people, as the *New York Times* reported: "Those who favored removal saw the symbols as monuments to white supremacy, but their opponents accused them of trying to erase history".¹⁴ For Bellamy and the petitioners, Lee is a symbol for the ongoing heritage of slavery, the fact that US citizens of color still have not achieved full equality, culturally, but also in economic terms. Rather than looking up to Lee as a role model, they feel looked down upon: "For me, it's hard because there are no statues in Charlottesville that depict African-American heroes. And so for that reason alone, black people have nothing to look up to in our public spaces. We are not represented".¹⁵ For those on the other side, the removal of the statue signals "the replacement of our people, our heritage and our culture".¹⁶ The exact historical role of Robert E. Lee during the Civil War, and his precise political opinions at the time, are of little importance in

this debate. What is at stake, instead, is the question of which image of social life shall be projected: what does the statue tell us about how Americans (in the South) want to live *now*?

A second petition tried to strike a compromise by suggesting to supplement the existing symbol with another:

Rather than tear down Lee's statue, this petition serves as a proposal to keep it and add a statue of another leader of modern times, the late Julian Bond. Bond was an honored professor at the University of Virginia for over 20 years and member of the Charlottesville community. He impacted our area and our nation in many ways and his recent passing in 2015 makes this decision both timely and appropriate. A memorial for Mr. Bond would serve as a unique contrast to whatever legacy General Lee left on racial tensions. [...] By converting Lee Park into Lee-Bond Park, or creating some other alternative, the City could send a clear message that history is not to be forgotten, but progress is to be celebrated.¹⁷

At least for those who fought *against* the removal of the statue, neither the idea of a compromise, nor the fact that a temporary injunction by a state court judge was blocking the removal, could halt their anger. The claim to protect 'our heritage and our culture' turned into a fight for privileges in the present when it became clear who exactly that 'we' was whose history and culture was apparently endangered. In fact, it was the "self-described 'pro-white' activist Jason Kessler" who organized the so-called 'Unite the Right' rally to protest against the removal in August 2017. He created a Facebook event in order to draw like-minded protesters to Charlottesville: "Kessler is affiliated with the alt-right movement that uses internet trolling tactics to argue against diversity and 'identity politics'".¹⁸ Somewhat ironically, he was nonetheless prepared to fight for his own identity.

What should become clear in this example is what Stuart Hall had called the "the constitutive and political nature of representation". The statue of Lee is not criticized for aesthetic reasons; the question is not whether it is beautiful or not. The question is rather: what kind of way of life does it stand for, whose culture does it represent? The statue, really, wouldn't matter much, if people did not see it as a symbol for a certain way of life. It does matter because not everyone feels welcome within this certain way

of life Lee is supposed to stand for. *Thus, the struggle over culture is by no means an escape from reality, but a contest over which reality we want to live in.*

The culture which Cultural Studies engages with is not a fixed set of norms and values, but something that is under constant negotiation, often in conflicting ways. Instead of describing British or American cultures as a given fact, Cultural Studies draws attention to instances of negotiation and struggle that reveal the contested production of culture. Such a model often favors the analysis of marginalized and suppressed cultures as it is here where it becomes apparent that dominant, canonical forms of culture do not present the only, ‘natural’ way of life. But at the same time, Cultural Studies is equally interested in the forces that try to keep dominant notions in place. In the United Kingdom, for example, the attack on statues of slave holders and other questionable figures prompted the “passing of the Police, Crimes and Sentencing Bill, which has increased the maximum penalty for criminal damage to a memorial from three months to ten years”.¹⁹

However, culture does not only matter because people see certain things in it, because they interpret it in certain ways. Culture, instead, often forms us before we actively engage in it; culture has a constitutive role in the organization of social forms whether it is represented in monuments or not. Thus, Cultural Studies looks beyond visible acts of exclusion and violence in order to understand, for example,

a much more fundamental, indirect violence in the long, and often literally inherited, maldistribution of health outcomes derived from the uneven geography of environmental devastation (here including both the large-scale environment of ecosystems, watersheds, etc. but also the small-scale environment of the human body and its microbiome).²⁰

Culture (among other factors) determines who is worthy of a good education and who is granted access to an efficient health system; culture (among other factors) determines who values nutritious food and who has to suffer most from environmental hazards, harmful warfare and dangerous workplaces. Today’s climate catastrophe only exacerbates long-standing inequalities, often hitting those the hardest that contributed the least to environmental destruction. The task of Cultural Studies is not only to criticize demeaning depictions, for example, but to show, in detail, how they are linked to material practices, how they are

written in the land, as Raymond Williams had it. It is the task of Cultural Studies to show, in detail, in how far a representation is not only stereotypical, distorting or otherwise in relation to a given reality, but how it really is *constitutive*, as Stuart Hall had it, of what it represents. We will come back to these terms and questions.

As you can see, Cultural Studies as we understand it, “insists on the necessity to address the central, urgent, and disturbing questions of a society and a culture”. In fact, for Cultural Studies, this is “one of the principal functions of a university”.²¹ We think it worthwhile to study culture because it contributes to understanding what is going on in the world we live in. And *you*?

1. Cf. Gilbert B. Rodman, *Why Cultural Studies?* Chichester: 2015, p. 4.
2. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies”, in: *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula Treichler, New York & London: 1992, 277–294, here p. 284–285.
3. Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, London: 1988, p. 107.
4. Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies”, p. 285.
5. Ibid.
6. Raymond Williams, “The Future of Cultural Studies”, *The Politics of Modernism. Against the New Conformists*, London & New York: 1989, 151–162, here p. 151–152.
7. Although, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), HIV/AIDS killed almost a million people in 2018, and about 35 million since the outbreak of the pandemic.
8. The last two paragraphs follow Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Anders Koed Madsen, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 2nd ed., Milton Keynes: 2013, p. 4.
9. Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’”, in: *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel, London: 1981, 227–240, here p. 233.
10. Glenn Jordan & Chris Weedon, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race, and the Postmodern World*, Oxford: 1995, p. 4.
11. “Monumental Disagreements: Memorials in America”, *Backstory*, broadcasted on May 24, 2013 (accessed 22 Sep 2020).
12. Zyahna Bryant, “Change the name of Lee Park and Remove the Statue”, *change.org*, posted c. 2016 (accessed 12 Oct 2020).
13. “Vice Mayor Wes Bellamy: Take Down Robert E. Lee Statue”, *NBC29*, <http://www.nbc29.com/story/31521671/vice-mayor-wes-bellamy-take-down-robert-e-lee-statue>, published March 20, 2016 (accessed 2 Oct 2020 on wayback.machine).
14. Jacey Fortin, “The Statue at the Center of Charlottesville’s Storm”, *The New York Times*, August 13, 2017 (accessed 8 Oct 2020).
15. Zyahna Bryant qtd. in Joel Gunter & Roland Hughes, “Charlottesville Remembered: ‘A battle for the Soul of America’”, *BBC*, published August 9, 2018 (accessed 8 Oct 2020).
16. Nathan Damigo qtd. in Garth Stapley, “‘This is a huge victory.’ Oakdale white supremacist revels after deadly Virginia clash”, *The Modesto Bee*, August 14, 2017 (accessed 8 Oct 2020).
17. Elliot Harding, “Keep Lee’s Statue, Add Julian Bond”, *change.org*, posted c. 2016 (accessed 29 Sep 2020).
18. Dara Lind, “Unite the Right, the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, explained”, *Vox*, August 14, 2017 (accessed 8 Oct 2020).
19. “Whose Memorials? with Baby Asante and Shawn Sobers”, May 31, 2022, *Stuart Hall Foundation* (accessed 20 Sep 2022).
20. Phil A. Neel, “Crowned Plague”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, July 2020, fn. 7 (accessed 10 Oct 2020).
21. Stuart Hall, “Race, Culture and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies”, *Rethinking Marxism: a Journal of Economics, Culture, and Society*, 5:1 (1992), 10–18, p. 11.

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