



History,
the New Left,
and the
Origins
of Cultural
Studies

Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain

Dennis Dworkin

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X

POST-CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS

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CULTURAL MARXISM IN POSTWAR BRITAIN

History, the New Left, and the Origins
of Cultural Studies

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Introduction

In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, a collection of papers given at a 1983 conference, the editors, Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson, argue that Marxism is at the center of an explosive trend in the social sciences and the humanities that cuts across traditional boundaries and takes “the entire field of cultural practices” as its subject. The editors suggest that Marxism is ideally suited for this task because it

has long been at least implicitly involved in breaking down the barriers between these domains, making each of necessity a site of interpretative activity—by politicizing interpretative and cultural practices, by looking at the economic determinations of cultural production, by radically historicizing our understanding of signifying practices—from political discourses to art, from beliefs to social practices, from the discourse of psychology to the discourse of economics—and, of course, by continuing to revise and enlarge a body of theory with multidisciplinary implications.¹

Their volume begins with a series of essays grouped under the title, “Rethinking the Crisis in Marxism,” suggesting that “the renaissance of activity” is likewise going through a “crisis of definition.” Overall, the book captures the excitement, enthusiasm, and commitment that more than one generation of historians, literary critics, art historians, philosophers, and cultural theorists had come to feel about an unorthodox and critical tradition of Marxist theory as it developed over several decades.

This book, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, is a historical account of the creation and development of one part of this unorthodox and critical Marxism: the British tradition of cultural Marxism from the mid-1940s until the late 1970s, from the founding of the Welfare State to Margaret Thatcher’s transformation of it. I focus on the contributions of scholars and writers working in the field of history and cultural studies. The work of the British Marxist historians needs little introduction. Rodney Hilton’s writings on the medieval peasantry; Christopher Hill’s work on the

seventeenth-century English revolution; E. P. Thompson's contributions to understanding eighteenth-century popular culture and the early working class; Eric Hobsbawm's many articles and books on labor history, preindustrial rebellion, and world capitalist development; and Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones's work on the nineteenth century have been synonymous with the new social history and the history of the dominated classes. In various ways they have played major roles in creating a "history from below." Sally Alexander's writings on working-class women in the Industrial Revolution, Catherine Hall's work on the middle classes during that period, Sheila Rowbotham's numerous projects on the history of women, and Barbara Taylor's recovery of the feminist dimension of utopian socialism have been equally powerful voices in constituting a new socialist feminist history. They have been important not only in recovering the role of women in history, but they have made contributions to reconceiving more generally the relationship between men and women by focusing on the gendered nature of class and the relationship between production and reproduction, work and family.

Equally important as the historians' contributions has been the achievement of British cultural studies scholars, whose influence worldwide (especially in North America) has produced what an Australian practitioner, Meaghan Morris, has described as an "unprecedented international boom."² Pioneered by Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall, and extended by Hazel Carby, Paul Gilroy, Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, and Paul Willis, among others, cultural studies has advanced critical understanding of the media, youth subcultures, literary production, the contemporary working class, the cultural construction of race and gender, popular culture, and the nature of ideology. It is distinguished by its simultaneous respect for the potentially subversive culture of dominated and marginalized classes and groups and an acute awareness of the ideological forces in society containing them. Interdisciplinary and theoretically eclectic, cultural studies has supplanted the traditional dichotomy between high and low culture, so prevalent in discussions about the mass media, with an enlarged concept of the cultural terrain.

I am neither the first to critically examine historians such as Hobsbawm, Thompson, and Hill or cultural theorists such as Hall and Williams, nor am I alone in recognizing the importance of British Marxist history and cultural studies for social and cultural

theory and the new left environment associated with them. Indeed, by now, a sizable literature concerned with components of both disciplines has developed. But most writers have either attempted to publicize and explain the contributions of Marxist history and cultural studies, or they have put forth critical interpretations or defenses—frequently political in nature—from a position interior to those disciplines.³ My account is the first intellectual history to study British cultural Marxism conceived as a coherent intellectual tradition, not limited to one discipline or one figure within it. With the death of two of the giants in this tradition—Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams—such an effort seems especially worthwhile.

I view British cultural Marxism in terms of a constructive but by no means harmonious dialogue and debate between, and within, the disciplines of history and cultural studies. At issue has been the relationship between culture and society, structure and agency, experience and ideology, and theory and practice. It is my contention that this cultural Marxist tradition cannot be viewed in isolation; it must be seen in the context of the crisis of the British Left, a crisis virtually coterminous with the postwar era. While the depths of this crisis became apparent in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Thatcher revolution, its contours began to take shape during the long Conservative rule of the 1950s. I do not argue that all of the works to be discussed were written explicitly in response to the crisis of socialism and the British Left, although this was certainly true in many cases. Rather, I suggest that much can be learned about British cultural Marxist history and cultural studies if they are viewed from this perspective.

British cultural Marxism grew out of an effort to create a socialist understanding of Britain which took into consideration postwar transformations that seemed to undermine traditional Marxist assumptions about the working class and that questioned the traditional Left's exclusive reliance on political and economic categories. Cultural Marxists were, above all, concerned with redefining the relationship between structure and agency, for it was the agency of traditional socialism, the industrial working class, that was being called into question. They attempted to identify the contours of the postwar terrain, to redefine social struggle, and to articulate new forms of resistance appropriate to a democratic and socialist politics in an advanced capitalist society. At the heart of this project was "culture." It signified both the terrain on which such a politics

was to be reconceived and the recognition that this terrain was a site of political struggle. In this regard, British cultural Marxism distanced itself from the mainstream Marxist tradition—especially in its Stalinist, mechanistic, and economistic guise. Stuart Hall has characterized the relationship between Marxist theory and cultural studies as “working within shouting distance of Marxism, working on Marxism, working against Marxism, working with it, working to try to develop Marxism.”⁴ The same could be said of the more general relationship between Marxism and British cultural Marxism.

Possibly a more detailed picture can be drawn of British cultural Marxism by comparing and contrasting it with another Marxist-inspired tradition that has influenced contemporary discussions of culture—the Frankfurt School. Founded in the aftermath of World War I and shaped by the experience of the Russian Revolution and fascism, the Frankfurt School likewise represented a philosophical alternative to Marxist economism and Leninist vanguardism. Frankfurt School Marxists emphasized the cultural and ideological dimensions of social life; they characteristically attempted to grasp society as a “totality,” and they were concerned with the disappearance of the revolutionary subject in advanced capitalist societies. Like Antonio Gramsci, they advocated a revolution against Marx’s *Capital*, in other words, opposition to the simplistic belief that capitalist collapse and proletarian triumph were guaranteed by the laws of Marxist economics.⁵

Like the Frankfurt School, the British tradition was founded on a rejection of economism; it stressed the autonomy of culture and ideology in social life, and it was shaped by the failure of revolutionary movements in the advanced capitalist West. But the differences between the British cultural Marxists and Frankfurt School traditions are as striking as the similarities. First, while both recognized that that culture played a critical role in securing the masses’ acquiescence to the dominant ideology and the status quo, they had very different attitudes toward modern culture. The Frankfurt School tended to see contemporary culture as the debased mass entertainments of the culture industry. It was a culture that encouraged the masses to think as passive consumers, undermined their autonomy and independence of judgment, and induced them to acquiesce to dominant social relations. The British cultural Marxist tradition, on the other hand, saw culture as more contradictory. Cultural studies regarded popular culture as potentially subversive,

but, equally important, theorists attempted to understand mass cultural consumption from the point of view of the consumers rather than the producers; they concluded that the people's response was frequently creative and varied. The same held true for the historians, although they were primarily concerned with earlier historical periods. Taken as a whole, the historians' work treated the cultural domain as an arena of contestation between dominant and subservient classes over values and meanings—culture as a “whole way of struggle.” And their work on earlier historical periods implied that this fight was no less visible in the twentieth century. Given this distinctive cultural Marxist attitude toward culture, it is understandable why historians universally embraced Antonio Gramsci, whose concept of hegemonic struggle paralleled and enriched their own.

Second, significant differences existed between the Frankfurt School and the cultural Marxist approaches to politics. While generalizations are difficult, the Frankfurt School believed that in a historical epoch when theory and practice stubbornly refused to come together, critical thought itself was a form of revolutionary practice. As Herbert Marcuse said of Lucien Goldmann, they were radical intellectuals who did not have the least qualm about not being workers and who thought that intellect by nature was revolutionary.⁶ The majority agreed with Lenin that workers left to themselves could never achieve anything but trade union consciousness, but they rejected his concept of the vanguard party because it justified the suppression of dissent. Some even refused on principle to join radical parties.

Unlike the Frankfurt School, which tended to remain aloof from working-class politics, especially after the 1920s, intellectuals in the British tradition continuously struggled with the relationship between theory and practice. They have never had an unproblematic association with working-class and radical movements, but they tended to view their intellectual work as in some way contributing to those movements. Marxist historical and cultural theory in Britain was produced by several generations of intellectuals in the context of the most radical causes and movements of the last sixty years: the Popular Front of the thirties and forties, the New Left movement and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) of the late fifties and early sixties, the countercultural and student politics of 1968, and the feminist and antiracist politics of the 1970s. Cultural Marxists used their skills as intellectuals to articulate the

experience and goals of dominated classes and groups, and they tried to understand the forces in society constraining the working class. A vigorous strain of populism has always been present in cultural Marxist theory and politics.

Undoubtedly many reasons can help explain why British Marxist intellectual culture has assumed such a distinct pattern, but two stand out. The British tradition of workers' and adult education, notably the Workers' Educational Association, provided a unique opportunity for intellectuals and working people to communicate, and this environment played a major role in creating cultural studies and shaping Marxist historical approaches.⁷ Some of the tradition's major texts—Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, and Williams's *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*—were products of the adult education setting. The new feminist history was a product of this milieu as well. In addition, because of the gradual expansion of educational opportunities, many British cultural Marxists (though certainly not a majority) were from working-class backgrounds and attended universities on scholarships. Hoggart and Williams are undoubtedly the best-known of these figures, but they were by no means alone.

Another major distinction between the two traditions was that the majority of Frankfurt School theorists were philosophers, nurtured in Hegelianism, while British Marxists with the greatest influence have been historians and literary and cultural theorists. It has been common to attribute this difference in approach to the antitheoretical and empirical bent of the English, and indeed this assertion contains some truth.⁸ But it needs qualification. Although British historians were specialists who generally wrote about specific historical periods, they were no less concerned with understanding the social totality than the philosophers of the European tradition. Indeed, they originally conceived of their work as a collective project aimed at understanding the trajectory of modern British society and history. (See discussion in chapter 1.)

Furthermore, during the sixties and seventies British Marxists engaged in a critical dialogue with advocates of European traditions of literary, philosophical, and social theory, and this dialogue left an indelible imprint on British cultural Marxism's development—a process that was simultaneous with Britain achieving membership in the European Community. Many intellectuals were attracted to

these traditions and other forms of theory precisely because they represented alternatives to what they saw as the stifling effects of the English empirical idiom. But many of them also used these ideas to extend and renew, rather than negate, the English tradition. By the end of the 1970s it was still true that much of the most creative work of British Marxists was historical in nature, even if outside the historical discipline proper, but it was by no means antitheoretical.

My account of British cultural Marxism in this book is a critical history of ideas. On the one hand, I have tried to carefully reconstruct the historical development of this tradition. Because it has been so closely related to politics, I have necessarily viewed theoretical developments and major texts as inseparable from this context. This approach has often meant describing the major protagonists in relationship to radical political movements and debates. On the other hand, I am interested in this tradition's contributions to cultural and historical theory, to Left-wing intellectual debates, and to efforts at understanding contemporary society, and I have thus attempted to evaluate their achievement critically. Sometimes I have done this by re-creating theoretical debates that have arisen in response to major works at the time they appeared; at other points I have put forward my own critiques and evaluations. Here, I have often engaged in detailed textual analyses of many of the principal texts, sometimes analyzing at length those which by this point will be familiar to many readers. I have followed this course for two reasons: because it seems essential to achieving the goal of viewing this tradition as a whole, and because I hope that my account will be read by a wider audience than those already thoroughly acquainted with the major texts of the tradition that is being re-created. I do not see myself as being a disciple of any particular tendency in British cultural Marxism, but it will undoubtedly become clear that I have the most sympathy for the later approaches of the cultural studies tradition as developed by Stuart Hall and others.

This book is organized into three chronological parts. The first part (chapter 1) describes the growth of Marxist historiography in the context of the Popular Front and the Cold War; it concentrates on the Communist Party's Historians' Group that proved to be so important to the development of Marxist historical scholarship and was responsible for an embryonic version of cultural Marxism. In

the second part (chapters 2 and 3) I focus on the pivotal role of the New Left of the late fifties and early sixties in creating cultural Marxist theory. Its socialist-humanist philosophy and commitment to cultural politics based on postwar changes inspired the original agenda of cultural studies and contributed to shifts in Marxist historical approaches. The third section comprises three chapters, but its divisions are somewhat artificial. I examine the achievement of the 1970s in separate chapters on cultural studies (chapter 4), history (chapter 5), and a final one (chapter 6) on the passionate and heated debate between the two disciplines over Althusserian Marxism, the centerpiece being E. P. Thompson's wholesale condemnation of it in "The Poverty of Theory" (1978). I begin this section (chapter 4) with a discussion of the social, political, intellectual, and cultural context—what for abbreviation's sake might be described as the legacy of "1968." What I have attempted is not a full-scale study of this historical moment or the wider Marxist intellectual culture that in important ways was produced by it, although I recognize such an effort is highly desirable. My goal is the more limited one of situating the cultural Marxist tradition of the 1970s.

Two final observations about method are in order. First, I am aware that there are advantages and disadvantages to undertaking a historical project that is so contemporary. Clearly, I cannot evaluate the long-term significance of British cultural Marxism with the same assurance that would be possible a hundred years from now. Nor have I been able to use some of the documents usually available to historians who study the more distant past. But I have had access to correspondence, minutes of meetings, unpublished papers, internal memorandums, and a tape recording of a debate between E. P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, and the historian Richard Johnson over "The Poverty of Theory." I hope that what I cannot achieve in terms of the long glance backward will be compensated for by the immediacy of my analysis. In addition, after the collapse of Soviet communism and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, it is possible to argue that the post-World War II epoch is over and that the investigation of this period by historians is now overdue.

Second, although I interviewed more than thirty of the protagonists of this study from various backgrounds and generations, this book is not an oral history. My use of interviews has been uneven and unsystematic, in part because, as is so often the case, what I imagined I would write turned out to considerably differ from what I did write. As an interviewer, I was mostly concerned with

reconstructing the earlier phase of this study. But I have always seen the principal sources of this book as written ones. As it turned out, the interviews mostly—I hope—saved me from innumerable mistakes I would have made had I never met those whom I have written about. Experience, as many in this study have realized, has its limits, but it has no substitute.

ONE Lost Rights

A pivotal moment in the creation of a Marxist tradition of historical scholarship in Great Britain was the launching of the Communist Party Historians' Group in 1946. The core of the Group came from the radical student generation of the 1930s and early 1940s. They became Communists in large measure because of the movement's prominent role in the Popular Front against fascism. The group included Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Eric Hobsbawm, Victor Kiernan, George Rudé, John Saville, and Dorothy and Edward Thompson (though Edward Thompson played only a marginal role). It was also shaped by Communist scholars of an older generation who were not professional historians per se but were devoted historical materialists,¹ most importantly the economist Maurice Dobb and the Marx scholar Dona Torr.

The Group's practice bore the imprint of two political moments. On the one hand, it conceived of itself as spearheading a Popular Front, a broad coalition of progressive historians combating reactionary tendencies in historiography. Its thinking was simultaneously constrained by the sectarianism already present in the 1930s but accentuated by the Cold War's polarization of intellectual and political discourse. The Group's members were relatively open-minded, considering that they were loyal Communist militants in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In spite of crippling illusions about Stalin's regime and the nature of their own party, they openly debated Marxist theory, critically examined numerous historical issues central to the study of British history, and, in conjunction with a few sympathetic non-Marxist historians, they launched the social history journal *Past and Present*. While the Group's worldview was steeped in Marxist dogma, it shared the same objectivist and empiricist assumptions about the nature of historical knowledge as did other professional historians. Such allegiances, however, were not easy to reconcile and led to internal conflicts.

In retrospect, the significance of the Historians' Group was as a