

# SOME POSSIBILITIES AND IMPASSES OF CULTURAL STUDIES

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**Abstract:** This essay aims to approach some possibilities and impasses of cultural studies, considering the recent changes in the world order with reflexes on the daily routine of ordinary citizens everywhere. The focus of cultural studies has changed from the deconstruction of the old immanent literary theories through some new topics such as the search for cultural identities, postmodernism, the process of globalization, and the question of spaces, among others. Similarly, the issue of fixed concepts about a host of ideas, including the proper status of cultural studies, is also at stake.

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■ **T**he field of Cultural Studies has been introduced in the update intellectual panorama as interdisciplinary studies of culture, which, for many people, stand for a Marxist's heritage. However, for many others, it would be just one more dissatisfied theoretical segment with the humanistic disciplines in the Western academic world. It is known that the work of the English literary critic Raymond Williams is the first landmark of Cultural Studies. In *Culture and Society* (1958) and *Marxism and Literature* (1971), Williams exhibits his strong opposition to the Eliotian and immanent theories, which were in vogue until a recent past.

Raymond Williams was one of the first important critics to formulate concepts presenting culture as a system of communication, which produces and reproduces meanings and values that perform important roles in the life of the individual and collectives as well. The works *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), by Richard Hoggart, *Culture and Society* (1958), by Raymond Williams, and *The Making of The English Working-Class* (1959), by E. P. Thompson set up the beginning of the history of the Cultural Studies.

In *Culture and Society* (1958), a new look to literary and cultural history is advanced. According to it, culture is a basic category that interweaves literary and social analysis. In his approach to *The Long Revolution* (1962), Williams shows his pessimism in relation to the development of the popular culture under mass media influence given the cultural impact that these elements cause in society.

Williams (1971) sets his position against the elitist and conservative vision developed by critics like F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot. Therefore, he provides arguments that enquire the processes of literary and cultural productions, which is inexorably linked to social history. Still in *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams demonstrates how relevant the role of the intellectual is in the established political order and in the formation of public opinion.

In the 1960s, some theoreticians assembled to inaugurate Cultural Studies as a project of opposition and resistance to the Eliotian ideology. In the breast of the C.C.C.S. (Contemporary Center for Cultural Studies), founded at Birmingham University in England, is the conviction that all human beings have equal rights to be included and share the cultural consume process.

Raymond Williams enlarged the English conception of high culture, helping us to figure out how the means of production, circulation and distribution of the cultural goods and practices work. After explaining the conceptions of society and economy from a historical perspective, he turns to the concept of culture, stressing that

*Yet "culture", meanwhile, underwent yet another development. This is specifically difficult to trace but is centrally important, since it led to "culture" as a social-indeed specifically anthropological and sociological-concept. The tension and interaction between this developing sense and other sense of "inner" process and "the arts" remain evident and important (Williams, 1971, p. 15-16).*

Nevertheless, during the 1960s and early 1970s, the bases of cultural scenario were shaken. Those shakes forced the humanistic areas to strike up a dialogue with the new agenda proposed by the emerging political and cultural order in the Western capitalist societies. Among the new set of ideas, I quote Feminism as a social practice and critical theory. It is also important to underscore the

demands of the New Left such as the nuclear disarmament, the protection of the environment, the rights of the minorities, the civil rights, the counterculture and a host of other themes and requests have been at stake. Indeed, they represent a radical shift in the paradigms of society and critical theory, reflecting on the Cultural Studies' agenda.

One of the remarkable changes that occurred in the 1960s was the attempt to create a new cultural and educational institution. According to Raymond Williams, that new institution was the Open University whose aim was to provide "an open-access democratic culture of an educational kind" (Williams, 1986, p. 172). The new perspective from that attempt resulted, on the one hand, in avoiding the traditional syllabus and, on the other hand, to set stage for new disciplines whose content would emerge in contact with daily situations and the experiences of the common people.

However, a remarkable conflict is taking place in the field of Cultural Studies as some theoreticians are claiming for studies based on the text, while others prefer to deal with more current topics like cultural identity, postmodernism, globalization, migration, gender, and the struggle for space in the urban areas. The paradox here lies in the possibility of the studies about text bring back the approaches based upon the immanent theories, which Cultural Studies always opposed to.

Those who advocate the necessity of emphasizing the question of language and the discursive constructions recognize that this kind of investigation leads towards some formalism or even structuralism. Those tendencies are making the intellectual dialogue to prosper aiming the advance of Cultural Studies, despite the awakening of some opposing voices as that one of Richard Johnson who stresses his views in *What is cultural studies anyway?* (2000).

The study of the text, in accordance with the immanent theories, takes into account that literature is a textual production whose frame and content could be apprehended by some linguistic or formalist devices. Yet the concept of literature is rather tenuous, once its modern conception began to circulate in the eighteenth century and developed in the nineteenth century. It is a fact that the emergence of a new cultural order from the 1960s onwards brought new perspectives to the study of literature and culture by and large. Among the new set of ideas is the enlargement of the concept of literature and literary theory, resulting in a view of literature as a phenomenon linked to history, society and economy, and this judgment was proficiently developed by critics like Raymond Williams (1971).

The vogue of Cultural Studies succeeds Structuralism in the postmodern history and one of the premises it deconstructs is that culture is made up just of high-quality works of art. Instead, it must be seen as the way we live and construct meanings as it is pointed out by Brazilian scholar Maria Elisa Cevalco (1998). Under such conception, there is room, in the study of literature, for "minor" works, i.e., those that are not regarded as canonical. By the same token, the approaches based upon some theoretical tools from outside the literary arena are also welcomed.

The question of the validity of using a formalist literary theory or some theoretical tools from Social Sciences will depend on the object in focus. The theoretical corpus should not antecede the work to be approached, but the contrary, i.e., it is the object of study that must delimits the theory to be used. Thus, as a

preliminary conclusion about the relationship between Cultural Studies and the study of the text, Terry Eagleton's (1998, p. 185) words are evoked, stressing that

*Within all of the varied activity, the study of what is currently termed "literature" will have its place. But it should not be taken as an a priori assumption that what is currently termed "literature" will always and everywhere be the most important focus of attention. Such dogmatism has no place in the field of cultural studies.*

The members of C.C.C.S. started to investigate the so-called "live cultures", in other words, the study of the daily social activities such as chats, sports and religious practices, which never had the status of subject or academic discipline. The ethnocentric methodology confers support for the studies developed by, among others, Stuart Hall (2003). From the ideological point of view, the group of C.C.C.S. followed a Marxist orientation supported by the works of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, and French scholar Louis Althusser. Then, many attempts to theorize were carried about taking the notion of hegemony as a central point. To summarize, the role of the ideological apparatus of the state, the ideological functions of the mass media, besides their repercussion in the daily life of modern societies were also taken into consideration.

Hall's (2003) production has achieved great impact in this multicultural age, as he was one of the first scholars to realize that the giants of the mass media would require agglutination of power, capital and control of the system. He also outlined that such vehicles would impose and circulate the general picture of perception, and they would turn their private conceptions into the bases for the public view.

Although he had brought to light many important works such as *Religious Cults and Social Movements in Jamaica* (1985), it is in the field of cultural identities that Stuart Hall's theories have produced a remarkable result. Besides the essay "Culture, Identity and Diaspora" (1990), included in an anthology organized by J. Ruthford, his booklet *The Question of Cultural Identity* (1992) could not pass without a mention as it focuses on the formation and displacement of the cultural identities, which move, chronologically, from the Enlightenment through the postmodern era. Hall (2003) shows that, during the Enlightenment, the Western individual constructed his cultural identity as fixed and stable centered on himself, considering that the enlightened philosophy did not regard the women's identity. That comfortable position was displaced by the expansion of the cities and the constant changes in the way of life in the urban areas, where technology and ideology are more influential, allowing the individual to interact with the social world around him/her.

This kind of operation represents a step further in the process of construction of identity, showing that each great shift in the world order corresponds to an equal impact in the formation of individual and collective identities, which achieve their highlight in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The cultural identities are moving faster and with greater intensity since the 1960s with the advent of Postmodernism, generating the fragmentation, which is the main feature of the contemporary individual.

Returning to the question of concepts, the last decades have presented some difficulties that became a challenge for postmodern scholars. The proper conception of Postmodernism has been at stake. Since the second half of the 1950s, when it was firstly named by Irving Howe and Harry Levin, that the researchers

are attempting to answer the following question: what is Postmodernism? The same applies to the concept of Cultural Studies, which lacks a precise definition, despite being an area of interdisciplinary studies of culture. In addition, it is exactly for being opened that both allow for new reflections and debates about their own status quo.

Starting by Postmodernism, its nomenclature is attributed to some writers from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Notwithstanding, the theories about it were only developed from the mid-1970s onwards when the debates about it raised another important question: can Postmodernism be seen as the representation of the objects and practices of the contemporary culture? In spite of presenting a lot of possible answers, one may cite the formulation of American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson who points out in the very beginning of his essay titled *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) that

*The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the "crisis" of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. The case for its existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or coupure, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s (Jameson, 1991, p. 1).*

Such debate reached its peak in the 1990s, when many lectures and publications were carried out, putting Cultural Studies at the center of the debates in the cultural arena. The meeting that came about at Urbana-Champaign in the United States in the beginning of that decade resulted in the publication of an anthology entitled *Cultural Studies* (1995), organized by Cary Nelson.

Yet it is still necessary to ask: what do "Cultural Studies" mean? The answer is not easy, and since its beginning that many attempts to conceptualize them have been made, besides the efforts to turn them into an academic discipline or a theory. All the same, it remains opened. To what concern the theoretical and methodological *corpora*, there is a current that defends the study of culture as a whole and placed in its material context. The supporters of this trend are ready to search for a kind of analysis whose epistemological bases may be found in the works of Raymond Williams (1971).

Indeed, the targets of Cultural Studies are varied. The current age of globalization is itself one more field of investigation and a new topic to overflow the multicultural agenda. This complexity gets deeper, taking into consideration that the new post-cold war world order does not find out a specific shape or a new pattern. This gap has been fulfilled by the economic power, which turns, as Karl Marx predicted, high and popular cultures into goods in circulation; they are now seen as cultural products and just the market can establish the rules concerning the production, distribution, and marketing whose interference appears even in some cultural and artistic pursuits. These issues draw the attention of Fredric Jameson (1971) who thinks the globalized world under the historic materialistic approach, which carries on being one of the possible tracks for Cultural Studies in the future.

The scenario of these globalized days, in which speculative capitals move like the winds, and the actions of resistance groups against the Western targets are

getting harsher, led Jameson to formulate his critical positions in *Culture and Finance Capital* (2001), which displays his borrowings from Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1993).

In the field of culture, there is a strong tendency to think that the process of globalization is shaping a standard of the world culture founded on the displacement of the local cultures whose spaces would be occupied by American media, shopping, music, food, etc. Although it would be a common place to state that such a process is an outcome of the economic and political domination, it is urgent to record that the local industries have been squeezed by the disloyal competition with the American and Chinese industries.

Migrations and immigrations are other topics of great magnitude that have occupied the agenda of Cultural Studies. From ancient times through the update multicultural era, hordes of human beings have experienced Diaspora, and each displacement causes the motion of the culture, which is carried by the individual or groups in movement. On the other hand, the growth of the metropolises in the twentieth century and twenty-first century has purveyed an urban way of life everywhere and have turned the question of space into a vital issue in the public policy as well as in the social representations through the arts and literature. However, since the 1960s, with the emergence of the postmodern era in the main Western societies, that a design of a new cultural map became necessary and its representation has been put as a challenge for the current artists and critics.

It is known that the institution government is under attack everywhere and the low attendance of the voters in the most elections held in the so-called democratic states is clear evidence of such a decline. One of the reasons for that discredit lies in the inefficiency of the governments to provide people with a plausible public policy in many areas, including the one related to the occupation of spaces. The social spaces are conceived as plane surfaces, some extensions whose limits are uncertain and that cannot be determined. The dichotomy high-low is substituted by another conception: center-periphery. The center stands for the dominant position from where the power and rules of the system come, whereas only the social marginal groups have the capacity of purveying the supplies in the periphery.

But the development of a study about space, even a very concise one like this, turns necessary to define the metaphoric use of the words "book" and "junk space". The former was proposed by Gayatri C. Spivak with the argument that "Everyone reads life and the world like a book" (Spivak, 1988, p. 95). The latter is a Rem Koolhaas's contribution (2002), which means a new view of history from the residues human beings have left on the planet.

Taking into account the book as a metaphor for life and the world, it depicts the experience of migration as essential to figure out how the marginal spaces in the metropolises are "destined" to groups considered peripherals in the new environment. This is the reason why the Western metropolises developed their "China Town" or "Jamaica Town" in order to provide space for the other, in other words, to put them in "their right place" of periphery, which is a euphemistic expression denoting segregation. That social space is organized as a siege around the center, a threat the system puts up with in case it cannot get definitely rid of it.



Thus, in accordance with Homi K. Bhabha, it can be considered that Fredric Jameson goes beyond the centralization in the state in his approach on the current materialist dialectic and points towards the theorization of “uncharted spaces of cityscape” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 214). In doing so, Jameson creates a kind of allegory based upon what Bhabha calls “media images and its vernacular visions” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 214). Given this perspective, Jameson envisions the emergence of an international culture in-between the time-space zone or the passage from modernity through postmodernity, which brings, as a consequence, “the transnational attenuation of ‘local’ space”, still using Bhabha’s words (1994, p. 216).

The struggle for space causes a displacement that goes from the demographic pluralism through the borderline of cultural translation. This cultural translation, it is important to argue, has been caused by the great migrations produced by the post-colonial realities, generating the increasing of the mixed populations in the Western societies. Still, the issue of space in the urban areas has drawn the attention of many scholars and, at least, two kinds of perspectives have been at stake: one is related to the way we “read” the city and the other is centered on the way we think the future of the city.

The reading of the city brought light in our views over Walt Whitman’s Brooklyn and John Dos Passos’ Manhattan, given the way they represent the spaces in their respective works *Leaves of Grass* (1865) and *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). Moreover, the future of the city has demanded a broader perspective in which the theoreticians are mobilizing interdisciplinary academic disciplines in order to design what is to come.

Rem Koolhaas points out in *Great Leap Forward* (2003, p. 2) that

[...] in 2025 the number of city-dwellers could reach 5 billion individuals...of the 33 megalopolises predicted in 2025, 27 will be located in the least developed countries, including 19 in Asia... Tokyo will be the only rich city to figure in the list of the largest cities.

Thus, it is neither necessary to be an engineer nor an architect to understand that there will be great struggles for space in the urban areas around the globe. Consequently, it is important to stress that these struggles will not last to be represented in the arts, from Architecture through Poetry.

In the field of Cultural Studies, it is Fredric Jameson (2003) who makes a kind of Janus movement as he searches, on the one side, for the archaeology of the city to show us how Walter Benjamin based his theory of history on the 19<sup>th</sup> Century arcade in its moment of decay. On the other side, Jameson (2003) tries to project a life after the mall, which is also living its decline. As he correctly analyzes, the mall took the place and function of downtown, which is no longer a place of free speech. Jameson (2003) also argues that the transformation of the form is redesigning the cities and their histories. Therefore, the mall in crisis is giving place to the construction of airports, museums and, finally, into the city itself.

One more time our reflection faces Koolhaas’ contribution (2003) as his conception of “junk space” is really paramount. He addresses to a new view of history, considering that his view goes beyond the standardization. The space-junk emerges from the debris of the former constructions and soon became a virus

that Jameson sees spreading and proliferating throughout the macrocosm, as the following passage shows:

*Angular-geometric remnants invading starry infinities, real space edited for smooth transmission in virtual space, crucial hinge in an infernal feedback loop...the vastness of junkspace extended to the edges of the Big Bang (Koolhaas, 2003, p. 6).*

## CONCLUSIONS

The first conclusion that these arguments allow for is the perpetual renovation that the junk space operates. What was once regarded as noble is restored, reshaped to give place to the junk space. Therefore, all originals disappear and even history is swallowed by this process. In his reasoning about Koolhaas' theory, Jameson attempts to bring junk space to historical frame as he regards that the end of history is again at stake in this postmodern orgy of forms and formlessness. In such attempt, he brings back the Marxist conception of commodification in order to explain the fetishism represented by the images we see in the shopping and other junk spaces, transforming the postmodern experiments into "an immense accumulation of spectacles" as Koolhaas says (2003, p. 9).

This paper will address the proposition stressed in the beginning about what is to come in the literary and cultural studies by arguing that it is rather difficult to point just one way. Just the same, the social experience in course in some second-hand book shops in Copacabana – Rio de Janeiro, for instance, can provide us with some hope. Some groups of readers and writers have been formed among young people without any academic link. In those groups, they exchange their writings, set up debates and try to promote new forms of publication. It can be argued that this non-institutionalization of literary and cultural practices tends to proliferate especially in this time when the official investments in arts and humanities are scarce everywhere.

Finally, since its emergence, from the end of the 1950s through this current multicultural era, that the field of Cultural Studies has passed by constant changes and critical evaluations, projecting great intellectuals like Raymond Williams (1971), Stuart Hall (2003), Elisa Cevalco (1998), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), Terry Eagleton (1996) and Fredric Jameson (1991), to quote only the most famous. Cultural Studies, as an area of study, also projects itself to the future as an interdisciplinary area of investigations whose scope ranges from the approaches on the live cultures through the search for cultural identity, migration, globalization, human sexuality, the deconstruction of the literary canon and the studies about the city and its future, showing that Cultural Studies are here to stay.

## ALGUMAS POSSIBILIDADES E IMPASSES DOS ESTUDOS CULTURAIS

**Resumo:** Este ensaio tem por meta evidenciar algumas possibilidades e impasses dos estudos culturais, considerando as recentes mudanças na ordem mundial e seus reflexos na vida cotidiana das pessoas comuns em toda parte. O foco dos estudos culturais se desloca da desconstrução das velhas teorias literárias imanentistas para alguns novos tópicos, como a busca das identidades culturais, o pós-modernismo, o processo de globalização e a questão dos espaços,



entre outros. De igual modo, a questão dos conceitos fixos sobre várias ideias, incluindo o próprio *status* dos estudos culturais, está na ordem do dia.

**Palavras-chave:** Sociedade. Texto. Espaço. Estudos. Cultura.

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