Cultural studies: two paradigms

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In serious, critical intellectual work, there are no 'absolute beginnings' and few unbroken continuities. Neither the endless unwinding of 'tradition', so beloved on the History of Ideas, nor the absolutism of the 'epistemological rupture', punctuating Thought into its 'false' and 'correct' parts, once favoured by the Althusserians, will do. What we find, instead, is an untidy but characteristic unevenness of development. What is important are the significant breaks—where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes. Changes in a problematic do significantly transform the nature of the questions asked, the forms in which they are proposed, and the manner in which they can be adequately answered. Such shifts in perspective reflect, not only the results of an internal intellectual labour, but the manner in which real historical developments and transformations are appropriated in thought, and provide Thought, not with its guarantee of 'correctness' but with its fundamental orientations, its conditions of existence. It is because of this complex articulation between thinking and historical reality, reflected in the social categories of thought, and the continuous dialectic between 'knowledge' and 'power', that the breaks are worth recording.

Cultural Studies, as a distinctive problematic, emerges from one such moment, in the mid-1950s. It was certainly not the first time that its characteristic questions had been put on the table. Quite the contrary. The two books which helped to stake out the new terrain—Hoggart’s Uses of Literacy and Williams’s Culture And Society—were both, in different ways, works (in part) of recovery. Hoggart’s book took its reference from the ‘cultural debate’, long sustained in the arguments around ‘mass society’ and in the tradition of work identified with Leavis and Scrutiny. Culture And Society reconstructed a long tradition which Williams defined as consisting, in sum, of 'a record of a number of important and continuing reactions to ... changes in our social, economic and political life' and offering 'a special kind of map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored' (p. 16). The books looked, at first, simply like updating of these earlier concerns, with reference to the post-war world. Retrospectively, their 'breaks' with the traditions of thinking in which they were situated seem as important, if not more so, than their continuity with them. The Uses of Literacy did set out—much in the spirit of 'practical criticism'—to 'read' working class culture for the values and meanings embodied in its patterns and arrangements: as if they were certain kinds of 'texts'. But the application of this method to a living culture, and the rejection of the terms of the 'cultural debate' (polarized around the high/low culture distinction) was a thorough-going departure. Culture and Society—

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in one and the same movement—constituted a tradition (the ‘culture-and-society’ tradition), defined its ‘unity’ (not in terms of common positions but in its characteristic concerns and the idiom of its inquiry), itself made a distinctive modern contribution to it—and wrote its epitaph. The Williams book which succeeded it—The Long Revolution—clearly indicated that the ‘culture-and-society’ mode of reflection could only be completed and developed by moving somewhere else—to a significantly different kind of analysis. The very difficulty of some of the writing in The Long Revolution—with its attempt to ‘theorize’ on the back of a tradition resolutely empirical and particularist in its idiom of thought, the experiential ‘thickness’ of its concepts, and the generalizing movement of argument in it—stems, in part, from this determination to move on (Williams’s work, right through to the most recent Politics And Letters, is exemplary precisely in its sustained developmentalism). The ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ parts of The Long Revolution both arise from its status as a work ‘of the break’. The same could be said of E. P. Thompson’s Making Of The English Working Class, which belongs decisively to this ‘moment’, even though, chronologically it appeared somewhat later. It, too, had been ‘thought’ within certain distinctive historical traditions: English marxist historiography, Economic and ‘Labour’ History. But in its foregrounding of the questions of culture, consciousness and experience, and its accent on agency, it also made a decisive break: with a certain kind of technological evolutionism, with a reductive economism and an organizational determinism. Between them, these three books constituted the caesura out of which—among other things—‘Cultural Studies’ emerged.

They were, of course, seminal and formative texts. They were not, in any sense, ‘text-books’ for the founding of a new academic sub-discipline: nothing could have been farther from their intrinsic impulse. Whether historical or contemporary in focus, they were, themselves, focused by, organized through and constituted responses to, the immediate pressures of the time and society in which they were written. They not only took ‘culture’ seriously—as a dimension without which historical transformations, past and present, simply could not adequately be thought. They were, themselves, ‘cultural’ in the Culture And Society sense. They forced on their readers’ attention the proposition that ‘concentrated in the word culture are questions directly raised by the great historical changes which the changes in industry, democracy and class, in their own way, represent, and to which the changes in art are a closely related response’ (p. 16). This was a question for the 1960s and 70s, as well as the 1860s and 70s. And this is perhaps the point to note that this line of thinking was roughly coterminous with what has been called the ‘agenda’ of the early New Left, to which these writers, in one sense or another, belonged, and whose texts these were. This connection placed the ‘politics of intellectual work’ squarely at the centre of Cultural Studies from the beginning—a concern from which, fortunately, it has never been, and can never be, freed. In a deep sense, the ‘setting of accounts’ in Culture And Society, the first part of The Long Revolution, Hoggart’s densely particular, concrete study of some aspects of working-class culture and Thompson’s historical reconstruction of the formation of a class culture and popular traditions in the 1790–1830 period formed, between them, the break, and defined the space from which a new area of study and practice opened. In terms of intellectual bearings and emphases, this was—if ever such a thing can be found—Cultural Studies moment of ‘re-founding’. The institutionalization of Cultural Studies—first, in the Centre at Birmingham, and then in courses and publications from a variety of sources and places—with its characteristic gains and losses, belongs to the 1960s and later.
‘Culture’ was the site of the convergence. But what definitions of this core concept emerged from this body of work? And, since this line of thinking has decisively shaped Cultural Studies, and represents the most formative indigenous or ‘native’ tradition, around what space was its concerns and concepts unified? The fact is that no single, unproblematic definition of ‘culture’ is to be found here. The concept remains a complex one—a site of convergent interests, rather than a logically or conceptually clarified idea. This ‘richness’ is an area of continuing tension and difficulty in the field. It might be useful, therefore, briefly to resume the characteristic stresses and emphases through which the concept has arrived at its present state of (in)-determinacy. (The characterizations which follow are, necessarily crude and over-simplified, synthesizing rather than carefully analytic). Two main problematics only are discussed.

Two rather different ways of conceptualizing ‘culture’ can be drawn out of the many suggestive formulations in Raymond Williams’s Long Revolution. The first relates ‘culture’ to the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences. This definition takes up the earlier stress on ‘ideas’, but subjects it to a thorough reworking. The conception of ‘culture’ is itself democratized and socialized. It no longer consists of the sum of the ‘best that has been thought and said’, regarded as the summits of an achieved civilization—that ideal of perfection to which, in earlier usage, all aspired. Even ‘art’—assigned in the earlier framework a privileged position, as touchstone of the highest values of civilization—is now redefined as only one, special, form of a general social process: the giving and taking of meanings, and the slow development of ‘common’ meanings—a common culture: ‘culture’, in this special sense, ‘is ordinary’ (to borrow the title of one of Williams’s earliest attempts to make his general position more widely accessible). If even the highest, most refined of descriptions offered in works of literature are also ‘part of the general process which creates conventions and institutions, through which the meanings that are valued by the community are shared and made active’ (p. 55), then there is no way in which this process can be hived off or distinguished or set apart from the other practices of the historical process: ‘Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change’ (p. 55). Accordingly, there is no way in which the communication of descriptions, understood in this way, can be set aside and compared externally with other things. ‘If the art is part of society, there is no solid whole, outside it, to which, by the form of our question, we concede priority. The art is there, as an activity, with the production, the trading, the politics, the raising of families. To study the relations adequately we must study them actively, seeing all activities as particular and contemporary forms of human energy’.

If this first emphasis takes up and re-works the connotation of the term ‘culture’ with the domain of ‘ideas’, the second emphasis is more deliberately anthropological, and emphasizes that aspect of ‘culture’ which refers to social practices. It is from this second emphasis that the somewhat simplified definition—‘culture is a whole way of life’—has been rather too neatly abstracted. Williams did relate this aspect of the concept to the more ‘documentary’—that is, descriptive, even ethnographic—usage of the term. But the earlier definition seems to me the more central one, into which ‘way of life’ is integrated. The important point in the argument rests on the active and indissoluble relationships between elements or social practices normally separated
out. It is in this context that the ‘theory of culture’ is defined as ‘the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life’. ‘Culture’ is not a practice; nor is it simply the descriptive sum of the ‘mores and folkways’ of societies—as it tended to become in certain kinds of anthropology. It is threaded through all social practices, and is the sum of their inter-relationship. The question of what, then, is studied, and how, resolves itself. The ‘culture’ is those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves—in ‘unexpected identities and correspondences’ as well as in ‘discontinuities of an unexpected kind’ (p. 63)—within or underlying all social practices. The analysis of culture is, then, ‘the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships’. It begins with ‘the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind’. One will discover them, not in the art, production, trading, politics, the raising of families, treated as separate activities, but through ‘studying a general organization in a particular example’ (p. 61). Analytically, one must study ‘the relationships between these patterns’. The purpose of the analysis is to grasp how the interactions between all these practices and patterns are lived and experienced as a whole, in any particular period. This is its ‘structure of feeling’.

It is easier to see what Williams was getting at, and why he was pushed along this path, if we understand what were the problems he addressed, and what pitfalls he was trying to avoid. This is particularly necessary because The Long Revolution (like many of Williams’s work) carries on a submerged, almost ‘silent’ dialogue with alternative positions, which are not always as clearly identified as one would wish. There is a clear engagement with the ‘idealist’ and ‘civilizing’ definitions of culture—both the equation of ‘culture’ with ideas, in the idealist tradition; and the assimilation of culture to an ideal, prevalent in the elitist terms of the ‘cultural debate’. But there is also a more extended engagement with certain kinds of Marxism, against which Williams’s definitions are consciously pitched. He is arguing against the literal operations of the base/superstructure metaphor, which in classical Marxism ascribed the domain of ideas and of meanings to the ‘superstructures’, themselves conceived as merely reflective of and determined in some simple fashion by ‘the base’; without a social effectivity of their own. That is to say, his argument is constructed against a vulgar materialism and an economic determinism. He offers, instead, a radical interactionism: in effect, the interaction of all practices in and with one another, skirting the problem of determinacy. The distinctions between practices is overcome by seeing them all as variant forms of praxis—of a general human activity and energy. The underlying patterns which distinguish the complex of practices in any specific society at any specific time are the characteristic ‘forms of its organization’ which underlie them all, and which can therefore be traced in each.

There have been several, radical revisions of this early position: and each has contributed much to the redefinition of what Cultural Studies is and should be. We have acknowledged already the exemplary nature of Williams’s project, in constantly rethinking and revising older arguments—in going on thinking. Nevertheless, one is struck by a marked line of continuity through these seminal revisions. One such moment is the occasion of his recognition of Lucien Goldmann’s work, and through him, of the array of marxist thinkers who had given particular attention to super-structural forms and whose work began, for the first time, to appear in English translation in the mid-1960s. The contrast between the alternative marxist traditions which sustained writers like Goldman and Lukacs, as compared with Williams’s isolated position and the impoverished Marxist tradition he had to draw on, is sharply
delineated. But the points of convergence—both what they are against, and what they are about—are identified in ways which are not altogether out of line with his earlier arguments. Here is the negative, which he sees as linking his work to Goldmann's: 'I came to believe that I had to give up, or at least to leave aside, what I knew as the Marxist tradition: to attempt to develop a theory of social totality; to see the study of culture as the study of relations between elements in a whole way of life; to find ways of studying structure... which could stay in touch with and illuminate particular art works and forms, but also forms and relations of more general social life; to replace the formula of base and superstructure with the more active idea of a field of mutually if also unevenly determining forces' (NLR 67, May–June 1971). And here is the positive—the point where the convergence is marked between Williams's 'structure of feeling' and Goldmann's 'genetic structuralism': 'I found in my own work that I had to develop the idea of a structure of feeling... But then I found Goldmann beginning... from a concept of structure which contained, in itself, a relation between social and literary facts. This relation, he insisted, was not a matter of content, but of mental structures: “categories which simultaneously organize the empirical consciousness of a particular social group, and the imaginative world created by the writer”'. By definition, these structures are not individually but collectively created. The stress there on the interactivity of practices and on the underlying totalities, and the homologies between them, is characteristic and significant. 'A correspondence of content between a writer and his world is less significant than this correspondence of organization, of structure'.

A second such 'moment' is the point where Williams really takes on board E. P. Thompson's critique of The Long Revolution (cf. the review in NLR 9 and 10)—that no 'whole way of life' is without its dimension of struggle and confrontation between opposed ways of life—and attempts to rethink the key issues of determination and domination via Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony'. This essay ('Base and Superstructure', NLR 82, 1973) is a seminal one, especially in its elaboration of dominant, residual and emergent cultural practices, and its return to the problematic of determinacy as 'limits and pressures'. None the less, the earlier emphases recur, with force: 'we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws'. And, 'no mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts human practice, human energy, human intention'. And this note is carried forward—indeed, it is radically accentuated—in Williams's most sustained and succinct recent statement of his position: the masterly condensations of Marxism And Literature. Against the structuralist emphasis on the specificity and 'autonomy' of practices, and their analytic separation of societies into their discrete instances, Williams's stress is on 'constitutive activity' in general, on 'sensuous human activity, as practice', from Marx's first 'thesis' on Feuerbach; on different practices conceived as a 'whole indissoluble practice'; on totality. 'Thus, contrary to one development in Marxism, it is not “the base” and “the superstructure” that need to be studied, but specific and indissoluble real processes, within which the decisive relationship, from a Marxist point of view, is that expressed by the complex idea of “determination”' (M & L, pp. 30–31, 82).

At one level, Williams's and Thompson's work can only be said to converge around the terms of the same problematic through the operation of a violent and schematically dichotomous theorization. The organizing terrain of Thompson's work—classes as relations, popular struggle, and historical forms of consciousness, class cultures in
their historical particularity—is foreign to the more reflective and ‘generalizing’ mode
in which Williams typically works. And the dialogue between them begins with a very
sharp encounter. The review of The Long Revolution, which Thompson undertook,
took Williams sharply to task for the evolutionary way in which culture as a ‘whole
way of life’ had been conceptualized; for his tendency to absorb conflicts between class
cultures into the terms of an extended ‘conversation’; for his impersonal tone—
avove the contending classes, as it were; and for the imperializing sweep of his con-
cept of ‘culture’ (which, heterogeneously, swept everything into its orbit because it
was the study of the interrelationships between the forms of energy and organi-
zation underlying all practices. But wasn’t this—Thompson asked—where History
came in?) Progressively, we can see how Williams has persistently rethought the
terms of his original paradigm to take these criticisms into account—though this is
accomplished (as it so frequently is in Williams) obliquely: via a particular appro-
riation of Gramsci, rather than in a more direct modification.

Thompson also operates with a more ‘classical’ distinction than Williams, between
‘social being’ and ‘social consciousness’ (the terms he infinitely prefers, from Marx,
to the more fashionable ‘base and superstructure’). Thus, where Williams insists on
the absorption of all practices into the totality of ‘real, indissoluble practice’, Thompson
does deploy an older distinction between what is ‘culture’ and what is ‘not culture’.
‘Any theory of culture must include the concept of the dialectical interaction between
culture and something that is not culture’. Yet the definition of culture is not, after
all, so far removed from Williams’s: ‘We must suppose the raw material of life
experience to be at one pole, and all the infinitely complex human disciplines and
systems, articulate and inarticulate, formalized in institutions or dispersed in the
least formal ways, which “handle”, transmit or distort this raw material to be at the other’. 
Similarly, with respect to the commonality of ‘practice’ which underlies all the distinc-
t practices: ‘It is the active process—which is at the same time the process
through which men make their history—that I am insisting upon’ (NLR 9, p. 33,
1961). And the two positions come close together around—again—certain distinctive
negatives and positives. Negatively, against the ‘base/superstructure’ metaphor, and
a reductionist or ‘economistic’ definition of determinacy. On the first: ‘The dialectical
intercourse between social being and social consciousness—or between “culture” and
“not culture”—is at the heart of any comprehension of the historical process within
the Marxist tradition … The tradition inherits a dialectic that is right, but the particular mechanical metaphor through which it is expressed is wrong. This metaphor
from constructional engineering … must in any case be inadequate to describe the
flux of conflict, the dialectic of a changing social process … All the metaphors which
are commonly offered have a tendency to lead the mind into schematic modes and
away from the interaction of being-consciousness’. And on ‘reductionism’: ‘Reduc-
tionism is a lapse in historical logic by which political or cultural events are
“explained” in terms of the class affiliations of the actors … But the mediation
between “interest” and “belief” was not through Nairn’s “complex of superstructures”
but through the people themselves’ (‘Peculiarities of the English’, Socialist Register,
1965, pp. 351–352). And, more positively—a simple statement which may be taken
as defining virtually the whole of Thompson’s historical work, from The Making
to Whigs And Hunters, The Poverty of Theory and beyond—“capitalist society was
founded upon forms of exploitation which are simultaneously economic, moral and
cultural. Take up the essential defining productive relationship … and turn it
round, and it reveals itself now in one aspect (wage-labour), now in another (an
acquisitive ethos), and now in another (the alienation of such intellectual faculties as are not required by the worker in his productive role)’ (Ibid., p. 356).

Here, then, despite the many significant differences, is the outline of one significant line of thinking in Cultural Studies—some would say, *the* dominant paradigm. It stands opposed to the residual and merely-reflective rôle assigned to ‘the cultural’. In its different ways, it conceptualizes culture as interwoven with all social practices; and those practices, in turn, as a common form of human activity: sensuous human praxis, the activity through which men and women make history. It is opposed to the base-superstructure way of formulating the relationship between ideal and material forces, especially where the ‘base’ is defined as the determination by ‘the economic’ in any simple sense. It prefers the wider formulation—the dialectic between social being and social consciousness: neither separable into its distinct poles (in some alternative formulations, the dialectic between ‘culture’ and ‘non-culture’). It defines ‘culture’ as both the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to the conditions of existence; and as the lived traditions and practices through which those ‘understandings’ are expressed and in which they are embodied. Williams brings together these two aspects—definitions and ways of life—around the concept of ‘culture’ itself. Thompson brings the two elements—consciousness and conditions—around the concept of ‘experience’. Both positions entail certain difficult fluctuations around these key terms. Williams so totally absorbs ‘definitions of experience’ into our ‘ways of living’, and both into an indissoluble real material practice-in-general, as to obviate any distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘not-culture’. Thompson sometimes uses ‘experience’ in the more usual sense of consciousness, as the collective ways in which men ‘handle, transmit or distort’ their given conditions, the raw materials of life; sometimes as the domain of the ‘lived’, the mid-term between ‘conditions’ and ‘culture’; and sometimes as the objective conditions themselves—against which particular modes of consciousness are counterposed. But, whatever the terms, both positions tend to read structures of relations in terms of how they are ‘lived’ and ‘experienced’. Williams’ ‘structure of feeling’—with its deliberate condensation of apparently incompatible elements—is characteristic. But the same is true of Thompson, despite his far fuller historical grasp of the ‘given-ness’ or structuredness of the relations and conditions into which men and women necessarily and involuntarily enter, and his clearer attention to the determinancy of productive and exploitative relations under capitalism. This is a consequence of giving culture-consciousness and experience so pivotal a place in the analysis. The *experiential pull* in this paradigm, and the emphasis on the creative and on historical agency, constitutes the two key elements in the *humanism* of the position outlined. Each, consequently accords ‘experience’ an authenticating position in any cultural analysis. It is, ultimately, where and how people experience their conditions of life, define them and respond to them, which, for Thompson defines why every mode of production is also a culture, and every struggle between classes is always also a struggle between cultural modalities; and which, for Williams, is what a ‘cultural analysis’, in the final instance, should deliver. In ‘experience’, all the different practices intersect; within ‘culture’ the different practices interact—even if on an uneven and mutually determining basis. This sense of cultural totality—*of the whole* historical process—over-rides any effort to keep the instances and elements distinct. Their real interconnection, under given historical conditions, must be matched by a totalizing movement ‘in thought’, in the analysis. It establishes for both the strongest
protocols against any form of analytic abstraction which distinguishes practices, or which sets out to test the 'actual historical movement' in all its intertwined complexity and particularity by any more sustained logical or analytical operation. These positions, especially in their more concrete historical rendering (The Making, The Country And The City) are the very opposite of a Hegelian search for underlying Essences. Yet, in their tendency to reduce practices to praxis and to find common and homologous 'forms' underlying the most apparently differentiated areas, their movement is 'essentialising'. They have a particular way of understanding the totality—though it is with a small 't', concrete and historically determinate, uneven in its correspondences. They understand it 'expressively'. And since they constantly inflect the more traditional analysis towards the experiential level, or read the other structures and relations downwards from the vantage point of how they are 'lived', they are properly (even if not adequately or fully) characterized as 'culturalist' in their emphasis: even when all the caveats and qualifications against a too rapid 'dichotomous theorizing' have been entered. (Cf. for 'culturalism', Richard Johnson's two seminal articles on the operation of the paradigm: in 'Histories of Culture/ Theories of Ideology', Ideology And Cultural Production, eds M. Barrett, P. Corrigan et al., Croom Helm, 1979; and 'Three Problematics' in Working Class Culture: Clarke, Critcher and Johnson, Hutchinsons and CCCS, 1979. For the dangers in 'dichotomous theorizing', cf. the Introduction, 'Representation and Cultural Production', to Barrett, Corrigan et al.)

The 'culturalist' strand in Cultural Studies was interrupted by the arrival on the intellectual scene of the 'structuralisms'. These, possibly more varied than the 'culturalisms', nevertheless shared certain positions and orientations in common which makes their designation under a single title not altogether misleading. It has been remarked that whereas the 'culturalist' paradigm can be defined without requiring a conceptual reference to the term 'ideology' (the word, of course, does appear: but it is not a key concept), the 'structuralist' interventions have been largely articulated around the concept of 'ideology': in keeping with its more impeccable Marxist lineage, 'culture' does not figure so prominently. Whilst this may be true of the Marxist structuralists, it is at best less than half the truth about the structuralist enterprise as such. But it is now a common error to condense the latter exclusively around the impact of Althusser and all that has followed in the wake of his interventions—where 'ideology' has played a seminal, but modulated rôle: and to omit the significance of Levi-Strauss. Yet, in strict historical terms, it was Levi-Strauss, and the early semiotics, which made the first break. And though the Marxist structuralisms have superseded the latter, they owed, and continue to owe, an immense theoretical debt (often fended off or down-graded into footnotes, in the search for a retrospective orthodoxy) to his work. It was Levi-Strauss's structuralism which, in its appropriation of the linguistic paradigm, after Saussure, offered the promise to the 'human sciences of culture' of a paradigm capable of rendering them scientific and rigorous in a thoroughly new way. And when, in Althusser's work, the more classical Marxist themes were recovered, it remained the case that Marx was 'read'—and reconstituted—through the terms of the linguistic paradigm. In Reading Capital, for example, the case is made that the mode of production—to coin a phrase—could best be understood as if 'structured like a language' (through the selective combination of invariant elements). The a-historical and synchronic stress, against the historical emphases of 'culturalism', derived from a similar source. So did a preoccupation with 'the social', sui generis—used not adjectivally but substantively: a