

Introduction to cultural studies

In short, cultural studies is about language, power and the people. Cultural studies is a field involving multiple disciplines concerning diverse subjects. By examining social institutions, scholars of cultural studies are trying to capture the distinct movements, values and habits of people living together within a society.

Eight Key Concepts

Cultural studies is mainly concerned with eight key concepts namely: signifying practices, representation, materialism and non-reductionism, articulation, power, popular culture, texts and readers, subjectivity and identity. Writers are constantly in debate about how to deploy these key concepts and which is the most significant one. The theories from which the concepts are drawn from will be discussed after briefly introducing each of the concepts.

1. Culture and signifying practices are focusing on the production of meaning in order to make sense of the world. Here the importance of language becomes apparent as language is a way to produce signs and hence, meaning.
2. Representation refers to the construction of meanings through several means such as images or sounds. However, meanings are connected to specific social contexts and are therefore understood differently according to distinct circumstances.
3. Materialism and non-reductionism are two interrelated concepts in cultural studies. Materialism is tied to the production of cultural meanings. At this point several questions arise such as who controls the production, how is it distributed and how does that affect the cultural environment. Hence, as already mentioned before, cultural meanings are related to a specific context with its own particularities. Such meanings cannot be reduced what is described as non-reductionism.
4. Articulation describes the relation of several elements in cultural studies. Hence, certain subjects are constructed through other subjects which are context dependent.
5. Power stands central in cultural studies as it highly influences, generates and determines social relationships.
6. Popular culture includes the concept of power generated through ideology and consent which results in hegemony. Ideology invisibly maintains power by presenting certain norms and values as universal truths. If a large group of people consents to a certain structure in society, hegemony is created which reproduces certain meanings and practices as forms of power over the subordinated group.

7. Texts and readers are culturally constructed such as sounds, images or practices and can generate power through produced ideology and hegemony. Hence, as people consume such cultural texts, they create meanings which again depends on the environment and context the people are currently in.
8. Subjectivity is related to identity as subjectivity refers to the person itself, whereas identity refers to how it feels to be such a person. Hence, we humans are not essential, existing subjects but are influenced by our surroundings and are constructed through it. This argument is also described as anti-essentialism.

Marxism and Capitalism

According to German philosopher, economist and socialist Marx social formations are based on the division of the production mode which is strongly related to power and conflict. The mode of production however changed over time from an ancient mode in the beginning to a feudal mode in the Middle Ages and a capitalist mode today. In the mid nineteenth century during the rise of industrialism, Marx analysed the theory of increasing capitalism and came to the conclusion that the means of production such as machines, factories and corporations are increasingly privately owned by the upper class, also known as bourgeoisie. On the contrary, the proletariat (working class) does not own property but rather needs to sell its labour to the bourgeoisie in order to survive. Hence, Marx argues that the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat and turns the labour of the proletariat to its property from which it extracts value for production.

Here, it becomes apparent that capitalism according to the Marxist theory leads to class divisions. By the commodification of goods, which is the process by which goods or skills are turned into consumable objects, capitalism becomes a profit-driven system.

Critics of Marxism indicate that Marx does not take human agency into account but rather regards history as independent from human action. Cultural studies contested the economic determinism demonstrated by Marxism and emphasizes the importance of culture.

Structuralism

On the contrary, structuralism which developed in Europe in the early 1900s, indicates that meanings are created within fixed structures and independently from any given person. Hence, human actions are regarded as a product of the societal structures and hence as passive objects rather than active subjects. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1875-1913) criticised the anti-humanist concept of structuralism by arguing that meaning can only be generated through reference

which is the relation between signs. He states that language can be considered as a sign system consisting of signifiers which are the medium and the significations which ascribe meanings. Hence, culture can be compared to the structure of a language as it can be explained and read through signs.

Poststructuralism

The concept of poststructuralism was introduced in the mid twentieth century by French and continental philosophers and critical theorists. The theory indicates the dynamic of meanings which are continuously in process. Meanings are therefore a result of the combination of diverse texts which is also known as 'intertextuality'.

Deconstruction

French philosopher Derrida focused on the deconstruction of language and hence, its structure in the 1960s.. He argues unlike Saussure that meanings of signs are not fixed but signs can rather be interpreted in different ways and generate multiple meanings. Therefore, Derrida suggests the notion of difference which indicates that meanings can continuously be supplemented and change. In this manner, Derrida deconstructs fixed binary oppositions such as nature vs. culture or speech vs. writing. The world is full of texts and signs their meanings depends on how they are represented and put in practice.

Similarly, French postmodernist philosopher Foucault criticizes the structuralist view of language as an autonomous system. He rather focuses on the consequences of discourses which are influenced and determined by material and historical conditions. He argues that language produces knowledge which ascribes meaning to material objects and social practices. Moreover, he argues that ruling discourses in society generate power which is apparent in all social formations. Hence, individuals are the product of historical embedded discourses nobody can resist.

Five Problems in Cultural Studies

A first problem which appears in cultural studies is the one of language and material. Whereas Marxism considers culture to be related to the material mode of production and hence argues that the material determines culture, structuralism regards culture as signification and part of an autonomous language system.

A second problem is the textual character of culture. Culture can be read as texts which produce meanings. However, textual determinism can lead to the distinction between texts and the acting subject which are in fact intertwined.

A third problem poses the location of culture. Culture is located as it is limited by nationality, ethnicity or space. With the rise of globalisation however, the locality of culture got challenged. Increasing movement and communication facilities together with trans-local processes allowed distinct cultures to mix and hence, culture became less locally bounded and rather a hybrid form in the global space.

A fourth issue is the limit of rationality. Cultural studies uses rationality in order to explain culture. However, rational thinking is likely to control and dominate emotions and affection which play within culture as well and make culture a matter of perspective and non-universal.

A fifth problem is the issue of truth. Cultural studies increasingly rejected the notion of one universal truth. Truth is rather subjective and determined by independent interpretations. However, truth evolves through discourses which are constrained to specific cultures.

Culture as a Way of Life

As culture involves meanings based on norms and values, some scholars argue that its construction is ideological. Hence, whether high aesthetic culture or ordinary culture, both create and impose an ideology. It is therefore important to remain critical and judge the relativity of cultural values.

However, according to Welsh critic Raymond Williams culture is an outcome of an interplay between humans and the context they live in. As meaning is generated and lived jointly by humans engaging with texts and practices in everyday life, culture becomes a lived experience. People become active and creative consumers by selecting commodities and signs to produce meanings. However, culture is bound to a certain socially constructed context and hence, becomes as Williams describes it: a whole way of life. In the mid-nineteenth century, British cultural critic Arnold claimed that culture represents a form of human civilization as it contributes to moral perfection and the social good. He introduced the term of high culture referring to the aesthetics of culture.

Popular Culture

Williams introduced a new understanding of culture, namely ordinary culture which is lived in daily life. Hence, culture is influenced by the tradition of common meanings and creativity generated by individuals. With the values and norms of everyday life, culture gets continuously reproduced and changed. The anthropological approach to focus on values, norms and symbolic goods in everyday life, legitimized popular culture as a way to make sense of the world. This understanding of culture which is also known as culturalism is mainly related to the British academic Hoggart, American bishop Thompson and

Williams. All three scholars stress that culture is ordinary and hence people actively construct meanings. However, the Hoggart, Thompson and Williams differ from each other.

Hoggart focuses on the lived culture of the working class using memories from his childhood. Hence, he considers working-class culture as a form of nostalgia and introduced the culture lived by ordinary people as an important aspect of cultural studies. Thompson like Hoggart studies the culture of the working-class and like Williams perceives culture as lived and ordinary. However, he is more concerned with the socio-economic aspect of culture such as class. According to Thompson class is the outcome of social relations and experience and hence produced by people. Hence, the working-class consists of people which bring themselves into existence by being active and creative. Williams as already mentioned above, contributed with the most long enduring legacy to cultural studies. He argues that the theory of culture refers to the study of relations between elements of a whole way of life. Moreover, he distinguishes between three levels of culture, namely:

1. The lived culture which is determined by time and place and accessible to the ones living in time and place.
2. The recorded culture which is the culture of the period including most everyday facts.
3. The culture of selective tradition which connects the first two levels of culture.

William suggests this cultural analysis in order to demonstrate the shared values and outlooks of a culture. Additionally, he emphasizes once more that culture must be understood through representations and practices of the ordinary daily life. such representations and practices exist in context of material conditions which Williams also calls cultural materialism. Hence, culture is understood in terms of institutions and their cultural products; modes of production; forms of culture and their generated meanings; reproduction of meanings in time and space; and the organization of meanings. Overall, Williams regards culture as the outcome of generated meanings by ordinary people; a lived experience; and a process in which all people are engaged in texts and practices.

Mass culture

The standardization of culture into mass culture opened a new chapter for cultural studies, namely popular culture. Mass culture is also described to be part of capitalism as it is commodified in order to be consumed which makes it manipulative. Moreover, it is considered inauthentic as it is no longer produced by people and unsatisfying as it is simple to consume.

In order to describe mass culture, the two German philosophers, sociologists and critical theorists Adorno and Horkheimer introduced the notion of culture as an industry which produces cultural product in the mid twentieth century. They argue that there is no more diversity in cultural products but they are standardized and represent an illusion. Similarly, the Frankfurt School has a negative perspective of popular culture and describes it as inferior. The School emphasizes the importance of criticism of the people consuming cultural products as the meanings are always generated by the ones producing culture. This is what Jamaican cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall describes as the political argument of popular culture. It is not only a struggle over meaning but also a struggle over power structures.

Popular culture is in many cases regarded as unauthentic mass culture in contrast to authentic folk culture. However, in a capitalist society no such authentic culture exists anymore. This makes popular culture as legitimate as authentic culture in the modern world.

Hegemony

Italian Marxist theoretician and politician Gramsci however, was able to apply a more practical approach towards ideology. In order to describe the maintenance and reproduction of dominant meanings, he introduced the notion of 'hegemony' in the early twentieth century. Class division is thus an outcome of historically imbedded power relations which are reached by force and consent of the subordinated group. Ideology becomes a lived experience in which common sense of the people forms the foundation. As common sense and hence hegemony is continuously reproduced and renegotiated, discourses and practices within society are changing and can therefore be challenged by counter-hegemonic forces of subordinate groups. This is likely to lead to an ideological struggle within civil society.

Critics about Gramsci's concept of hegemony argue that in the contemporary world it becomes difficult to talk about a common culture. Rather culture becomes increasingly fragmented due to developments such as migration, gender politics or diverse lifestyles. Hence, the hegemonic authority becomes increasingly challenged and one should rather talk about hegemony in the sense of diverse and discursively constructed subjects which shape hegemonic and counter-hegemonic blocs. Similar to hegemony, ideology should no longer be determined by the issue of class division but rather by gender, ethnicity or race. In this regards, all groups within society have their own ideology with which they can legitimize their actions and make sense of the world.

Culture as a Language

Language plays a major role in cultural studies as it communicates cultural meaning and ascribes it objects which creates knowledge and understanding.

Semiotics

The study of signs was developed by Swiss linguist and semiotician Saussure in the beginning of the twentieth century and explains culture through meanings produced by language. He refers thus to the importance of structure rather than performance which reflects the idea of structuralism. As already mentioned in the introduction of the book, Saussure argues that a sign system consists of the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the medium and the signified ascribe meanings to the medium. The relation between the two is not fixed but rather arbitrary and creates meaning along the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis. The former is the combination of signs in order to form a sentence, whereas the latter adds the meaningful significance. As the making of meanings through the signifier and signified along these axes is unfixed, meanings are depending on the cultural and historical context they are created in. The use of context dependent meanings is also known as 'cultural code'. The codes are organized in sequences which generate meaning according to the cultural convention the codes are embedded in.

Semiotics in Popular Culture

French semiotician Roland Barthes elaborated on the theory of Saussure and introduced the notion of denotation and connotation in the mid twentieth century. Denotation is the literal meaning of a sign which is understood by the whole culture. Connotation refers to connecting signifiers to signified and therefore generates multiple meanings according to cultural codes. If connotations become natural they become myths claiming a universal truth which is related to the concept of ideology. Hence, according to Barthes the signifier and the signified do not only create denotations but also connotations through which they produce mythological meanings and ideologies.

An example of denotation and connotation can be demonstrated by the cover of a French magazine called 'Paris Match' which shows a black French soldier saluting to the French flag. On a denotative level, the image would merely what one sees. On a connotative level, the image however can be read through cultural codes and ideologies which leads to the interpretation of French African colonies still serving the great empire of France. This example demonstrates that myths and ideologies naturalize interpretations and world views and make them seem to be universal truths. Moreover, the example supports the idea of Saussure and Barthes that signs create cultural texts which can be read literally or interpretively.

Other scholars such as Russian linguist Voloshinov argue however that signs generate multiple, negotiable meanings which depend on the cultural and historical background of the reader. In his later work also Barthes supports this idea and expresses it with signs to be polysemic. This refers to the above mentioned concept of poststructuralism which contests meanings generated within a certain structure and stating that meaning is rather continuously changing and negotiated.

Deconstruction of Meaning

As mentioned above under the title poststructuralism, Derrida had a great influence with his argument of signs generating meaning through difference. Hence, signs are everywhere and never determined by the structure but autonomous and dynamic. Moreover, Derrida criticizes the idea of logocentrism which refers to universal logical meanings and phonocentrism which determines meaning through sounds and speech rather than through writing. The latter would imply that truth and meaning can be created without representation. However, Derrida argues that truth and meaning only exists through representation and phonocentrism is therefore misleading. The importance of writing becomes apparent by the importance of texts in culture in order to create meaning. Moreover, speech is a part of writing to which otherwise on meaning can be ascribed.

Post-Marxism

The introduced theory of post-Marxism is based on Marxist writings and developed during the 1960s. Political theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe criticize the reductionist attitude of Marxism which explains class divisions by economic terms. They argue that class differences in society are rather the outcome of historically specific discourses and multiple subject positions. Hence, the social is created out of the aggregation of differences. This so called articulation can connect diverse discourses under certain historical circumstances and create unity. In this sense, unities in social life such as identities or nations become discursive and temporary constructions as their development depends on the specific context they are generated in.

Evolution and Culture

Culture too is a product of the ancestors which adapted to the environment. In this process language played a major role as it serves as a foundation for any form of culture. Behaviour of humans cannot be explained by genetics but rather by adaptations and the environmental input which influences such adaptation. The human brain serves as a mechanism to perform tasks and adapt to certain circumstances. However, this adaptation only sustains in a specific environment

and needs to adapt anew as soon as the environment changes again. Hence, the evolved psychological mechanism is able to take up certain information and transform it in a way which serves to solve a problem and adapt to a new situation. In this manner also culture gets transmitted from one person to another by observing, interacting and adapting.

Cultural studies is concerned with the issue that human beings from distinct cultures distance from each other while forgetting that we are the same species. Moreover, cultures share some universal characteristics such as signs, languages, relations, emotions, rituals, birth death and food.

The concept of Globalization

The process of globalization can be described as the compression of the world which refers to modern institutions, and as the increasing consciousness of the world in regard to cultural terms. According to British sociologist Giddens, the modern globalized world is marked by the capitalist economy, a global information system, the nation-state and the global military order. Modernity, he argues originates in Western Europe with institutions holding the power spreading across the globe. This is however a rather Eurocentric and temporal perspective denying the global modernities in regard to spatial and relational terms. An example is Japan which did not follow the linear development of tradition – modernity – postmodernity but is still the largest investor worldwide. Hence, Japan developed its own modernity.

Global economics

Despite the argument of the increasing importance of culture, most of the global processes are economic, more specifically the financial sector. Global financial markets is more and more interconnected constituting a world economy. By the emergence of transnational companies and new technologies to fasten the transfer of information, economic activities became interrelated and interdependent on a global scale in the disorganized era of capitalism.

Global culture

With the rise of globalization, social relations become increasingly reaching beyond borders. Hence, culture becomes more and more translocal. Signs and commodities are more diverse and accessible through new forms such as television, shopping centres or radios. By the diversification of cultural signifiers and the movement of people and electronic communication, cultural elements are increasingly mixed. Indian socio-cultural anthropologist Appadurai introduced five different disjunctive flows:

1. Ethnoscapes which is the movement of ethnic groups
2. Technoscapes which is the dynamic of technology.
3. Financescapes which refers to financial transactions.
4. Mediascapes which describes the movements of media images.
5. Ideoscapes which refers to ideological conflicts.

However, these flows shaping the global world are happening in a fractured and disconnected manner. At this point, it is important to note that globalization did not bring a linear set of global cultural flows but rather uncertainty, contingency and chaos. Hence, globalization does not lead to cultural homogenization but evokes the importance to emphasize diversity and fragmentation which is likely to lead to nationalist, neo-fascist politics and fundamentalism.

Cultural homogenization

Some scholars argue that through globalization cultures lose their autonomy and increasingly become the same. This is also described as cultural imperialism which involves the taking over of one culture over another. It is also considered to be the outcome of global capitalism which is often related to westernization as it exports western commodities and values and modernity. A first attempt to spread the Western ideas across the world was during the time of colonialism in which military dominance, cultural ascendancy and economic dependency was introduced in order to maintain colonial control. In the beginning of the twentieth-century however independence movements which succeeded the colonial domination. Most of the countries' economies covered already a subordinate role in the world economy by then. However, today global flows are no longer a one-way traffic from North to South and West to East but also vice versa and can therefore not be defined as domination only. Moreover, the processes of fragmentation and hybridity are as strong as homogenization and hence imply that globalization has various effects on the world.

Hybridity

Hybridity is a concept describing the cultural mixing which leads to new forms of identities. However, one can distinguish structural hybridization which refers to sites of hybridity such as border zones, and cultural hybridization which refers to cultural responses such as assimilation, separation or blurring boundaries.

Critics of hybridity argue that it would assume to mix separate and homogenous cultural spheres. However, cultures are already hybrid themselves as they consist of diversities such as class, gender, age, etc. Therefore, the concept of hybridity rather serves to indicate the formation of new identities and cultural forms.

An example of the development of hybrid forms are migrants from South Asia which primarily immigrated into Britain as temporary workers. However, after a certain time they started to settle down and build houses, established businesses and created families. After the first generation of Asians was born in Britain, ethnic boundaries started to become blurred as they got mixed with other ethnic groups in schools, at leisure sites and through watching television in a different language than their mother tongue. Hence, young British Asians created hybrid cultural forms. By being part of such a hybrid form, one identifies with elements from various cultures which result in multiple identities.

Media imperialism

It is often argued that media communicates the capitalistic system and manipulates its audience by imposing a certain ideology which is also known media and cultural imperialism. Despite the US exports the most television programs across the world, regional markets are increasing based on a shared language, history and culture. Additionally, the heterogeneous audience creates global disjunctures and new global connections. Hence, as already mentioned before, the global television becomes localized.

An example of a global television form is the soap opera of which the narrative is produced and viewed in several countries around the world. This is mainly due to its universal form of open-ended narratives; the main topic of personal relations; and the use of an international style developed in Hollywood. However, despite the global character of soap operas, many of them keep their local settings, language and story-telling.

Digital Media

Besides mass media we increasingly make use of digital media and find ourselves in the middle of a digital revolution which has a significant impact on our world. Through digital media, more information is organized electronically which enables to process it at a great speed over long distances. Digital technology mainly involves computers and its services as well as digital equipment such as USB sticks, cameras or mp3 players. However, despite the rise of the digital media, conventional mass media such as television remain present in the leisure time. Moreover, mainly young people engage with the digital media and less older people. It is also important to note that the use of digital media is not equally shared across the globe as it is determined by the distribution of wealth. Hence, the majority of the world population remains unconnected due to not having enough money, available access or sufficient knowledge.