

# Cultural Studies – There and Here

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to offer a new approach of the so-called Cultural Studies from an East-European perspective. Political and ideological problematizing – including and especially those identified at the level of the nation – rest upon different realities in Eastern Europe and in Western Europe or North America. Drawing this parallel, the author insists on the major distinction between difference conceived as value per se and value understood as difference.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Turn, French Theory, alterity, politicizing, national paradigm, globalization, neoliberalism, neo-Marxism, anti-capitalism*

In the following pages, I will not go out on a limb to define the syntagm ‘Cultural Studies’, since even its British founders were themselves reluctant to take on such an enterprise, and since the eclecticism of this disciplinary conglomerate is irreducible. Yet some of its dimensions call for a measuring up from our particular historical juncture and cultural space.

... Significant changes occurred in the field of literary studies and in the humanities generally by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. This decisive transformation bears the generic name of the Cultural Turn. With all their differences, the French structuralism of the 1960s-1970s and the close reading of the New American Criticism of the 1950s-1960s share a common concern with the specificity of literary language and of literature as text. French Poststructuralism – applied to literature especially in the American academe (‘French Theory’) brought an openness towards contexts and other research fields, but preserved the language-based theory, which even deconstructionism did nothing more than push to its limits.

From the moment that the question of language ceases to interest and to be important for literary studies, we can talk about their transformation into cultural criticism and theory. I cannot dwell upon the historical (political and economic) circumstances that facilitated this turn from literary to cultural. What seems important to me is the return to an *extrinsic* approach to literature, an approach that ignores the specificity of literary discourse as opposed to other types of discourse. Peter Burke rightfully noticed in *Cultural Turn* a return to the period prior to the specialization and institutionalization of literary studies. And this return seems to presuppose a dismissal of the acquisitions gained through a long and complex process of specialization.

There are more than a few merits of this new perspective established by Cultural Studies, if only one thought of the introduction of new research subjects such as technoculture, the media, the Internet etc. or of the diversification of critical attention--hitherto centered exclusively on the literary—to the other arts as well (film, theatre, the fine arts, video etc.) and to their relation with literature. Another decisive contribution of Cultural Studies consists in focusing attention on *alterity*, coming in different guises, especially national, sexual or other kinds of minorities. Never and nowhere was *the Other* more visible than in Cultural Studies representations, nor was the question of recognition *more* acutely raised (even with the paradoxical overturns in the case of certain feminist theories). Likewise, one has to applaud the ‘return of the author’—in fact, the return to the author—after his having been peremptorily proclaimed dead. I am not claiming exclusivity for Cultural Studies, but it is obvious that they have energetically cultivated an interest in biography, autobiography and, generally, confessional literature.

### **Strong point – politicization**

More than other disciplines, Cultural Studies have pursued Foucault’s ideas and suggestions regarding the relations between *Knowledge* and *Power* and made a founding principle out of placing culture on the field of power relationships. In England and in the States as well, this principle was not only a theoretical practice, but in fact it became the practice itself, the cultural and artistic actions, in taking various political stands.

In East European countries and especially in Romania, things did not reach so far, due to the situation prior to 1990, when the (unofficial) cultural actants tenaciously strove to separate or even distance themselves as far as possible from the field of (totalitarian) power and from its encroachments. In Romania and in the other countries of the Communist East the intellectuals’ and artists’ engagement was not entirely absent, but it was rather directed at gaining and preserving a certain cultural autonomy from political power.

At this point it is probably better to stop for a moment in order to answer a conceivable Occidental perplexity regarding what appears as a concurrence between commitment and the autonomy. In West-European and American practice, the autonomy of literature and political commitment are incompatible. Nevertheless, the paradox is rapidly solved if we consider the totally different contexts. While in a democratic society that runs by the rule of law, commitment to a position against the powers that be is available at little to no risk, and it may also draw with it literature (whose autonomy becomes less important), whereas in a totalitarian society the only possible risk free commitment was to defend the autonomy, specificity and excellence of literature against political and ideological pressure. Hence a certain hesitation – that can be noticed even among those who do Cultural Studies in our country – to assign culture to the field of power. In fact, it is one thing to assume that cultural relations are power relations and another to directly

connect culture to Power. Cultural Studies consider both approaches are stages in the same process.

Beyond the hypothesis, that has been turned into a thesis, of the political power's involvement in social and cultural life as a whole, most of the applications produced over the years, from Steven Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) or D. A. Miller's detective investigations of Victorian writers (*The Novel and the Police*, 1988) and up to the most recent studies of the same persuasion both in the United States and in Romania, seem to us as no more than exaggerations. The starting point is valid and promising, the angles of the approaches are often new, the research proposed does not lack the demonstrative coherence, but the efficiency of the exercise of Power over literary texts is without a doubt overrated. The very fact that literature has found escape routes in the middle of the totalitarian age should prompt us to be methodologically more prudent.

In fact, the strong point of Cultural Studies is *politicization* – the politicization of all cultural relations and all cultural forms (including literature, the arts, criticism, theory, humanistic and social disciplines). But there are stages, levels, and nuances to be determined. The object is of course to dispose of an idealistic historiography, not to ignore the political influence in the apparently free play of ideas, but to politicize the entire research field and to obsessively look for the political root of any work of art or cultural product, there is no doubt in my mind, constitutes an excess. Unfortunately, such excess are being practiced without problematization and have moved from realm of option to that of procedural habit.

Also, there is a pervasive militant drive in Cultural Studies that is quite remarkable—the perennial or at least cyclic Marxist impulse to ‘change the world’, but even here, on this plane, our attention has to discriminate between the means by which a novel or a poem can play a social-political role and the means by which an essay, an article, a field investigation or a political standpoint can attain this kind of efficiency. Literature is a discourse about the world, alongside other discourses about the world, it consists of rhetorical modes that are available to other discourses as well: the rhetorical turn in Cultural Studies has brought us enough compelling evidence in that respect. But literary discourse – unlike the other types – presupposes, among other things, a fictional pact that cannot be ignored. Literature and the arts in general have complicated rapports with the truth, that are oblique rather than direct. They spread their messages by means of this pact and, as a result, they cannot be read and used as testimonies, as documents unless they are hermeneutically filtered. It is no accident that Cultural Studies no longer heed to hermeneutics (or rather downright disregard it).

### **Difference as Value and Value as Difference**

Beyond their relative novelty and their promise for a makeover of the humanities, the importance of adapting Cultural Studies to the Romanian and the East-European space should lie in the critical reflexion related to their ideological concept and especially to the conditions of their applicability to our cultural space. The more so as we could benefit from a double temporal disparity: on the one hand, we are two or three decades

after the hatching of Cultural Studies in the United States and that allows us to critically examine their results obtained and to make our choices accordingly; on the other hand, here in Eastern Europe we could be seen – paradoxically form many – as forerunners: as early as the 1950s we started experiencing the effects of the ideologization and politicization within the rigid frame of state communism and are, therefore, warned about the excesses of applying cultural materialism and oversimplified sociologism to literature and the arts. We can even regard them with a certain irony which comes from historical experience: those who experienced the compact politicization of the cultural and social sphere under real communism cannot embrace as relevant novelty something that is to us more of a ‘*déjà-vu*’, approximate as it may be. After having tried for decades to defend the culture’s specific difference in the social context and literature’s particularity within the cultural itself, it is hard for us to ignore or disregard these particularities and their dilution with/in the social-political context, as many of the theorists and practitioners of Cultural Studies would have us do. As an ultimate form of Westernization, adoption of the Cultural Studies project (as such) includes the risk of a return to such perspectives and methodologies that disregard the intrinsic logic of each field.

Let me be clear about this: the autonomy of literature and culture can and should be contended and in this regard Cultural Studies bear the merit of having reopened the debate with new arguments. Nevertheless, far from being a step forward, denying *art’s specificity* means to slip back into a confusion of values. With this we come upon one of the most vulnerable points of contemporary cultural theory and practice. And I do not mean Cultural Studies only, but, unfortunately, a dominant tendency within literary and Cultural Studies as a whole. It is the propensity to discard value judgment or to strictly reduce it to an examination of contingencies.

Clearly, these days nobody may still believe in eternal and universal values, or in the possibility of rigorously objective evaluation. The mutability and diversity of values, their dependency on contexts can hardly be denied. But even here there are degrees and borderlines, and the literary and even cultural artifacts are different for their *value*, even if the act of evaluating depends itself on the receivers and their contexts. Though almost perfect contemporaries who have begun their career as writers of seafaring stories only to later devote themselves to Parisian life, Balzac and Eugène Sue have been and will always be appreciated differently by readers – not only by critics – by many criteria other than the thematic or ideological.

Cultural Studies emerged from a mobilization to defend, preserve, and promote cultural difference, be it ethnic, gender, or of social origin and status. Insistence on the value of cultural difference comes out from their program as the one federating principle. I am tempted to add a further nuance to this characterization by claiming that their overarching principle is *difference as value*. Difference – variously detected, described, and amassed – as a value *per se*.

But if any difference deserves to be considered, signaled, and recorded, it should also be weighed and evaluated. One starts by admitting that cultural and artistic works are generated in varying conditions, moments, and social-political contexts and cannot be fully understood outside their dependence and relations. But their specificity does not

stop there. They are posed to us and are asserted as values. For the specific difference of each such artifact a specific value is attributed or discovered. (This is a long discussion and I cannot pursue it without deviating from our theme.) Suffice it to say that the preoccupation with value – esthetic value in the case of literature and the arts—amounts to stimulating *creativity*. In other words, innovation and quality are thus nurtured. Creativity is not an exclusive feature of literature and the arts, of course, but in these domains it functions as a constitutive program. There is no literature and there is no art without creativity. We are thus moving from difference as an alternative value to value as difference. (This is more than word play.)

Such an assertion is anticipated and supported by common critical sense, but is not shared by the promoters of Cultural Studies. They shun value judgments instinctively and, quite often, as a matter of principle. For them creativity resides not in the result, but in the process of formation, not in the work of art, but in its social efficacy. Hence the indifference to esthetic evaluation and the branding as ‘conservative’ or ‘retrograde’ of anyone who still employs terms such as *value* or *quality*. In the absence of such yardsticks and of the esthetic criterion, all literary and artistic specificity is lost.

### The National Paradigm

But this is not the only specific trait that Cultural Studies tend to neglect (I cannot avoid such reductive generalizations in the face of the many varieties in the field). To identify this other oversight we have to admit the double and contradictory attitude of Cultural Studies towards globalization. Undoubtedly—history has verified it for us – globalization has stimulated the development of Cultural Studies. The way in which they became dominant in the United States within American Studies, and sometimes even replacing them, is quite revealing in itself. On the other hand, is not the process of globalization – with its undisputable coopting, assimilation, and in the end uniformity – contrary to the specifist approach of Cultural Studies? The homogenizing action of globalization – isn’t that directed against alterity?

Over and over we hear critics from within Cultural Studies speak against globalizing rationalization, record new specificities, reaffirming the cultural and political rights of a wronged community. Little known and even less acknowledged communities are conserved and celebrated. On the contrary, they criticize, undermine, or downright dismiss whatever belongs to the dominant cultures and groups, including their cultural heritage, their tradition. These dominant groups are unproblematically identified at the level of the *nation* and of generally national values. Globalization, which runs both directly and indirectly against the national state, is a contributing factor.

Like a distant yet persistent echo of the fascist ideology of the 1930s and the Nazi atrocities of the 1940s, the West tends to confuse the national with nationalism (with the commendable exception of recent American nationalism). The typical reaction of Western intellectuals is either to criticize or even reject all concerns of this nature, or to claim that we have entered a ‘postnational’ era. No doubt, Habermas’ theory operates with powerful and respectable arguments. And, yet, if one looks at the map of

Eastern Europe, one cannot help but notice, as so many times before, that although we may chronologically live in the same historical time, we are not, in point of fact, contemporaries.

First of all, Eastern Europe's wounds from fascism and Hitlerism have been augmented by those that come from Sovietization and communist totalitarianism. In this part of Europe, far from being an outdated question, the national is still very much alive and ardent. The wars in Yugoslavia, the recent conflicts in our Eastern neighborhood, together with the serious difficulties in European integration, the inequalities of the common labor market, and the social polarization all keep the national question topical in spite of European Union's some assistance and regionalization policies. The peoples of Eastern Europe cannot afford to think in planetary terms. For those who have to live in the margins, it has always been harder – if not impossible or simply utopian – to think at a continental scale.

What goes on in Ukraine these days is tragic evidence that the national question is not just residual, a relic of the past. And Ukraine has to be considered alongside its minorities, both Eastern and Western, which have witnessed their native languages officially banned (as a first move) by the first professedly European government.

To return to Cultural Studies, it is plain to see that they attack the national paradigm, promote the local and the regional, support the rights of minorities and foster their cultural products. The question that the more lucid intellectuals in the United States, such as professor Hillis Miller, have asked themselves is whether by celebrating and empowering cultural minorities we help reinforce something that we condemn in dominant nations, i.e. nationalism. This is a question worth asking by both Romanian and Hungarian intellectuals of the Carpathian arc, whether they are part of the Cultural Studies critical community or not, and irrespective of the political game and electoral aims.

### **The Informing Ideology**

One question that has not been tackled by the Romanian devotees of Cultural Studies is that the informing ideology of cultural criticism in the Britain, America, and the West is anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. This presupposes a resistance to the social and economic policies of corporate neoliberalism and a condemnation or at least a critique of American intervention in Asia (and elsewhere). As the American expert in Slavic literatures and Eastern Europe, Caryl Emerson, was already cautioning in 2004, the leading intellectuals in this region, dissidents who were supported by the west in the 1980s, have not embraced the attitude that (most of) their colleagues in the American academe expected from them after 1990:

Havel subscribed to the American-led invasion of Iraq. Michnik agreed to cooperate with the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration to fight terrorism and reconstruct the Middle East. Where was Kundera's Central European disgust at the great nations that came from his claims that history has always favored great armies?

As our information on intellectual debates in the neighboring countries is rather sketchy, I cannot tell which are the dominant tendencies in Poland, the Czech republic

or Bulgaria, but in Romania the prevailing intellectual bias is undoubtedly neoliberal, in favor of capitalism, of the minimal state in economic and even cultural matters – and of support for American foreign policy. And the devotees of Cultural Studies are no exception.

Therefore, Cultural Studies were adopted in Romania – and probably in the rest of Eastern Europe – together with their poststructuralism and postcolonialism, but without the anti-capitalism that is inscribed in their genetic code. There are, of course, historical reasons behind this position, but they do not make it less contradictory. Can one perform a cultural analysis and critique from within neoliberal thinking? This, I think, is the blind spot at least for the Romanian conception of Cultural Studies.

Cultural Studies are being practiced in this country free from ideological, political or moral problematizing, which presupposes a lack of definite options in these respects. But Cultural Studies are inconceivable without such involvement on the part of the researcher, without his/her commitment to social justice, at least in the manner that they have been practiced in Britain and America. Such a commitment is entirely lacking in the Romanian scholar. The communist experience, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ideologically incoherent politicianism in Romania today may *partially* explain and justify the reserve of the intellectuals who still treasure their moral and professional dignity.

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*Translated into English by Beatrice Mirela Ștefănescu*

## **Book Reviews**

