

Re-reading Class, Re-reading Cultural Studies, Re-reading Tradition: Neo-Marxist Nostalgia and the Remorselessly Vanishing Pasts

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Introduction

In this presentation, I address the turbulent relationship that British cultural studies scholars have with the concepts of “class” and “tradition” and the problematic social epistemological status of these key terms within the cultural studies literature. I maintain, in part, that these concepts have been deployed within a center-periphery thesis and a field-bound ethnographic framework by cultural studies scholars pursuing a sub-cultural studies approach. Within this framework, “Britishness” has been the silent organizing principle defining metropolitan working class traditions and forms of cultural resistance. British cultural studies proponents have therefore pursued the study of class and culture as a localized, nation-bound set of interests. This has placed cultural studies in tension with postcolonial subjectivities often reduced, as they have been in the classic works of Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labor* (1981) and Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), to the metonymic “Pakis” and “Jamaicans.” I write against the grain of the textual production of the working class within cultural studies scholarship insisting that recent films—such as *The Full Monty*, *Billy Eliot*, and *Bend It Like Beckham* and the literary works of George Orwell, George Lamming, and Kazuo Ishiguro—offer a more complex story of class identities in the age of globalization and transnationalism.

In what follows, then, I address these concerns ultimately pointing to the specter of globalization and the way it challenges the relevance and insightfulness of the post-war cultural Marxism of British cultural studies. First I grapple theoretically with the serviceable tradition that cultural studies draws on to authenticate and center the metropolitan working class in the discussion of class relations, understood transhistorically and universally. I point to the incommensurability of this approach with the contextual reality of present-day post-industrial society and the profoundly limiting framework of nationalism which undergirds the British cultural studies subcultural approach to class. I argue further that this ethnocentric approach to class in British cultural studies scholarship cuts at right angles to the postcolonial subjectivities and the presence of the third world in the metropolitan working class. Second, I go on to call sharp attention to the nation-bound language and claims that attend the discussion of the working class specifically in the writings of the great post-war cultural Marxists such as E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Paul Willis among others. Thirdly, I examine examples culled from popular film culture to show the complexity of the characterization of the working class that is found in contemporary film and paradoxically absent in the sociological writing of cultural studies. Fourth, complementing this I draw as well on the literature of George Orwell, particularly his essay “Shooting an Elephant” (1946/1981). In this essay, Orwell offers a complex portrayal of a British working class police officer operating on secondment overseas in the then colony of Burma. I conclude this presentation, by drawing the outlines of the new global context that has precipitated a crisis of language in the neo-Marxist scholarly efforts to grasp the central dynamics of contemporary societies. The latter has led to a depreciation of the value and insightfulness of neo-Marxist analysis in our time. Old metaphors associated with class,

economy, state (“production,” “reproduction,” “resistance,” “the labor/capital contradiction”) are now all worn down by the transformations of the past decades in which the saturation of economic and political practices in aesthetic mediations has proceeded full scale (Naomi Klein, 2001). Let us first now consider the problem of class and tradition as they are conjoined in cultural studies.

The Problem of Class, The Problem of Tradition

Billy Eliot's Dad: Ballet????

Billy Eliot: What's wrong with ballet?

Billy Eliot's Dad: What's wrong with ballet????

Billy Eliot: It is perfectly normal...

Billy Eliot's Dad: Perfectly normal???...For girls, not for lads, Billy...Lads do football, or boxing or wrestling....Not Frigging Ballet!

Billy Eliot: What lads do?..Wrestling?...I don't see what's wrong with...

Billy Eliot's Dad: Yes you do!!!

Billy Eliot: No, I don't!!!

Billy Eliot's Dad: Yes you bloody do!!!....Who you think I am?

Billy Eliot: What are you trying to say dad.....

“Then he said, ‘On my travels I visited an Indian tribe known as the Hopi. I could not understand them, but in their company they had an old European man, Spanish, I think, though he spoke English to us. He said he had been captured by the tribe and now lived as one of them. I offered him passage home but he laughed in my face. I asked if their language had some similarity to Spanish and he laughed again and said, fantastically, that their language has no grammar in the way we recognize it. Most bizarre of all, they have no tenses for past, present and future. They do not sense time in that way. For them, time is one. The old man said it was impossible to learn their language without learning their world. I asked him how long it had taken him and he said that question had no meaning.’

“After this we continued in silence.” - Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 1989

“No olvides que lo que llamamos hoy realidad fue imaginación ayer...” (Do not forget that what we call today reality was merely imagination yesterday)- José Saramago, *El hombre duplicado*, 2002

Introduction

This presentation examines the status of tradition and the past within cultural Marxism as a way of clearing a path to the future. It looks particularly at the work of historical recuperation within Marxist cultural humanism and its tendencies towards the universalization of the particular. A sharp light of attention is focused on British Cultural Studies and its anxiety of influence. One is reminded here of the definition of culture and cultural studies advanced by John Fiske in his essay “British Cultural Studies and Television.” “Cultural studies,” says Fiske, “is concerned with the generation and circulation of meanings in industrial societies (the study of non-industrial societies may require a different theoretical base...)” (Fiske, 1987, p.254). Cultural Studies’ search for the vanishing point, the origins of consciousness and general mythologization

and valorization of the industrial working class subject is trestled/nestled within a peculiar narrative and play of national endowment, affiliation, and ethnic and localist distinctiveness in its founding arguments and concerns. Of course, similar arguments could be made about the nationalist canalization of tradition and the localist focus of the urban sociological ethnographies coming out of the Chicago School inspired by Park and his students, right down to Becker and the deviance research that influenced cultural studies proponents' path breaking ethnographies as Michael Burawoy has argued. (See Burawoy et al., 2003).

This valorization of the traditions of the industrial working class has had several consequences (beyond the mistaking of spitballs for revolution) not always adequately accessed or diagnosed to date—one being the disavowal of particularism no different in structure and tone than what could be found in the patterned variables and structural functionalism over all in the work of mainstream social scientists such as Talcott Parsons. Of course, an integral feature of the reverence for working class traditions is the methodological overlay of field-bound ethnographic rules and the visual culture documentary impulses that flow from Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe Brown, and Margaret Meade and monumentalist classical anthropology into the critical sciences in education and elsewhere, paralleling the rise of visual culture as a whole in silent and sound film, television and radio broadcasting and the like. As an aside, it is to be remembered that in the 1920s and 30s it was naturalistic ethnographic research not quantitative survey analysis that was the dominant research paradigm in the social sciences. The dominance of survey/market research would come later when Paul Lazarsfeld crossed the open seas of the Atlantic from Austria and joined Merton at Columbia University in New York. But that is a matter for another time.

The persistent assignment of particularism and atavism to the vast wastes of the third world begins with Karl Marx himself as well as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim in their particular staged-model of historical evolution of human societies and it continues in contemporary thinking in the attribution of the same scarlet letter to the new social movements and the rejection of identity politics in the writings of Marxist scholars such as Tod Gitlin (See Gitlin's "The Rise of Identity Politics: An Examination and Critique," in M. Berube and C. Nelson (1995) *Higher Education Under Fire*, pp. 305-325). This presentation bucks this trend, restoring a corrective valence to the whole enterprise of the analysis of culture. It reads all of this against the problematization of tradition and the past in recent films on the working class subject such *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *The Full Monty* (1997) as well as George Orwell's discourse on tradition, class, and power in his essay, "Shooting An Elephant" (1936). Here, in the latter, the ear-holed working class subject now operates on colonial secondment overseas. In reading back and forth between Birmingham and Burma a new light is shed on recombinant particularism (*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack!*). To understand British cultural studies is in part to understand that Mathew Arnold's project still survives in the hearts and minds of men at home, and even overseas in the empire, as C. LR. James argues in *Beyond a Boundary*.

Demystifying the Demystifiers

A central task of this presentation then is to demystify the demystifiers on the problem of tradition and particularism which the classical sociologists had assured us would diminish with the advance of capitalism. The tendency to shunt particularism off to the periphery is therefore

consistent with this core form of thinking. The ethnographic impulse that underlies cultural Marxism fuses action and interpretation, experience and text, worlding the world from the metropolitan center into its visible hierarchies of class and culture. Standing at the center of this panopticon, the whole social field spreads out before the Marxist observer like a vast unscrolling map. This cartographer of the modern world, measures and weighs its social distinctions with the finality of a puritan and with the fervor of what Rey Chow calls “the protestant ethnic.” In the cultural Marxist’s elective epiphany, the third world subject would virtually perish (*There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*). But in this disavowal, particularism returned like a plague of innocence. Read on its own terms as a quest for scientificity, cultural Marxism, divines class from the entrails of the social present and past, and ethnicity disappears. Read against the grain as a reluctant form of autobiography, the root book of cultural Marxism reveals its protagonist dressed in his solipsistic bright suit of ethnic privilege. And here, by this strategy, ethnic particularism appears. It is this deep bodied ethnocentrism, paradoxically attached to the generalizations and trans-historical statements about the industrial working class and human societies associated with the theorizing of critical social scientists that Horace Miner satirizes in his classic essay “Body Ritual among the Nacirema.” (Nacirema spelled backwards, of course, is American). Here, Miner talks about the mouth rites of the Nacirema, in the process exposing the classic norms underlying the cultural description that constituted the leitmotif of culturalist scholars writing about others:

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about the care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures. (Miner, 1956. See essay in *American Anthropologist* 58 pp, 503-7).

The everyday practice of brushing the teeth is elevated to the realm of magic. The magician, the social observer and his besotted humanism, are defamiliarized here. And, the anthropological gaze of the West upon the third world subject is turned back on power for an evanescent moment full of illumination.

When we look, too, at the writings and founding motives of cultural studies, we find a similar hidden subject within the text that attaches itself to the working class and hides its own anxieties and its professional updraft. When we look at the work of Hoggart, or Williams or Thompson, or later Willis and Hebdige, we find an ethnographic Marxism alloyed to a visceral nationalism, an ethnic particularism and wish fulfillment which it denies. How else can we read the intellectual history of Williams’ *Culture and Society* but as a formidable and unrelenting recuperation of the Leavisian moral sensibility and purpose of British cultural form--the dream of the whole way of life as the encoding and decoding of national ethos in the British industrial novel and literary works? Burke, Cobbett, Southey, Owen, Bentham, Coleridge, Carlyle, Gaskell, Disraeli, Dickens, Arnold, Ruskin, Richards, Leavis, Orwell. If ever there was an assertion of national canon, a court of appeal, the breaking out of particular cultural sensibility linked to national distinctiveness, this was one. How else is one to read the *Uses of Literacy* with its characteristic mourning of the lost of the English working class way of life--its rampant nostalgia for a translucent past then in imminent dissolution? How else are we to read the brilliant E.P.

Thompson...who at the end of *The Making of the English Working Class* makes the disclaimer that he was not competent to speak of any other working class than the English... not even the Scots or the Welsh? How else are we to read Willis and his lads of Hammertown Boys who reduce the postcolonial other to the metonymic Pakis and Jamaicans? This great cauterizing reflex, this severe backward glance was born in fact in the context of a general crisis of the relevance or irrelevance (depending on your ideological persuasion) of Western Marxism as the Soviets marched into Hungary in the 50s and Later Czechoslovakia in the 60s (Dworkin]. In this rude awakening from methodological slumber, British Marxist historians would disconnect from the work of international socialism, the CP, and found its own distinctive theories of the origin of the British working class, the revival of working class radical traditions (see Dennis Dworkin's *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain* [1997]). This working class construct, for the subcultural theorists of resistance at Birmingham, was defined around a militancy of style, distinctive accoutrements and dress, argot and the like. This characteristically muscular construct, as Angela McRobbie would note, folded the working class into a singular, homogenous structure, powerful against its class adversaries, its semiotic chora set against the "ear holes" and contemptuous and disdainful of the periphery. The power within this framework almost operated like a blunt instrument that was applied onto the working classes and applied, in turn, like the clubbed foot of an elephant by the working class against its ethnic rivals and late comers from the third world; Sisyphus pushing against his enemies, all costermongers pushing rotten apples as V.S. Naipaul would say of the donned dwellers of Oxbridge.

In its radical ethnocentrism, cultural Marxism closed off the white working class from its racially minoritized other orientalizing the latter whether they were from Asia or the Caribbean as metonymic attachments---the Pakis or the Jamaicans. A deadly consequence of this is that the working class subject and the nature of power were not presented in a sufficiently complex or nuanced way. Indeed, it would be left to the filmic culture and the literary culture to present more complicated views of class power and class subjects. I am talking here about films such as *Educating Rita*, *The Full Monty*, *Billy Elliot*, *Sammy and Rosy Get Laid*, and *My Beautiful Laundrette*. In the literary world, Wilson Harris's *Carnival*, Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, George Lamming's *The Immigrants* and *Water with Berries*, V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and *Half A Life*. It is both in *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot* that we see the working class, the foot soldiers of modernity as Willis calls them metamorphosing in the transitional light of globalization, and the tragic programs of deindustrialization and postfordism—transforming the labor market and labor process from hard to soft, from materiality to immateriality, from the decaying manufacture of the metropole to the export processing zones overseas in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, from hard industry to flexible information, from the working class cast in the center of history to the mass appearance of the proletarianized, tempt working cognitariat (Charles Jencks, *What is Postmodern?*).

Tradition now hangs like a proverbial dead weight upon the new working class subject as Billy of *Billy Elliot* chooses a future in the Royal Ballet, in dance, rather than in the Victorian role of male provider of the coalmines and the deunionizing labor of North Durham. And in the end, when his late comer dad comes to his performance, he gets to see his son leap, soar, literally and metaphorically out of the terms of existence that fashioned his life. There is no possibility of return to the past, just the flatlining of traditions and ephemeral revision of hierarchy of cultural

distance. In a somewhat different way, but with similar intensity of the uprooting of the past and tradition, the six unemployed steel workers of *The Full Monty* form a male striptease act, literally defrocking and leaving nothing but their Poulantzian number plates on their back. The Full Monties of Sheffield literally search for, and then abandon, their iron-mongering past in the decayed industrial rubble of the once thriving, manufacturing city of Sheffield--shelving their overalls and dungarees for the regular beat as male strippers. Billy's brother has a "business" but his boss is Paki, so is Johnny's boss in *My Beautiful Launderette* with whom he desperately falls in wonderful gay love. The world of change is driven by consumer durables, and the logic of mobile privatization that made Hoggart so uncomfortable has followed a relentless line to the disembedding of the lads (all is left is resentment as Lois Weis so effectively underscores in *The Working Class Without Work* and *The Unknown City* [with Michelle Fine]) and the incursions and the blowback of Empire, cell phones or mobiles, smart TVs and remotes, the musical language of hip hop or Banghra or dance hall now course through and mark the new constantly disembedding territory of the Hammertown boys--- a flower, an orchid, a rhizome blooms viscously in defiance of the grim reaper of urban space.

Against this, Orwell presents the working class ear hole or lower middle class actor divided to the vein (as Derek Walcott notes in *Catawys*), conflicted to the bone. As Uma Kothari has told us, many of the colonial bureaucrats who went out to the colonies were often of working class or "earholed backgrounds, sponsored up to the public school, Eton or Harrow or whatever and deployed to the imperial periphery with all their hang ups. Read against this phalanx of national assertion George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" presents a picture of the lower middle class subject operating overseas, confronting the periphery inhabitant on his native soil, in a different light...more internally divided, more complexly linked to England and Empire, more uncertain about self and role in the elaboration of Britishness. The ethnographic lens now puts the Western actor under the microscope. And, Orwell portrays the everyday negotiation of class and power in the Imperial outpost of Burma through the mediation of modernizing energies and subaltern subversions ("the weapons of the weak"), the anticipation of the waning of Empire and the dubiousness of civilizing missions abroad. The story of "Shooting an Elephant" draws on Orwell's experience as a colonial officer (which some critics consider an essay) and it concerns the angst of an environmentally conscious, uncertain British police officer who is egged on by a crowd of natives to shoot a rogue elephant. The narrator/police officer does not want to shoot the elephant, but he feels compelled to by the Burmese agro-proletarians and peasants, before whom he does not wish to appear indecisive or cowardly. The situation and events that Orwell describes underscore the hostility between the administrators of the British Empire and their "native" subjects but at another level it is a deep examination of power. And, it foregrounds what the anthropologist, James Scott, calls the "weapons of the weak." Here the native is not the butt of Paki jokes for the lads or the source of black cultural economy of symbols for the Punks:

In Moulmein (says the police officer narrator) I was hated by a large number of people... As a police officer, I was an obvious target and I was bated whenever it was safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves....But at that moment I glanced around at the crowd that had followed me, It was

an immense crowd, two thousand at least and growing every minute... I looked at the yellow faces above the garish clothes—faces all happy and excited over the bit of fun, all certain the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me like a conjurer was about to perform a trick... And then I realized I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And, it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle, in my hands, I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East, Here I was, the white man with a gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seeming the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet. (Orwell, 1946/1981, pp. 148, 152).

The imminent death of the elephant is the death of tradition, an imperial tradition which is on the wane as in *Billy Elliot*, Billy's Alzheimers grandma stands in her dream-like silence as the scrambled riddle of past attachments, past associations and feeling.

Conclusion

What I am pointing towards then is the rise of networked society in which traditions, affiliations, "cultures," subcultural or not, are now disembedded from the moorings of the final property of any group. I am pointing to the fact that there has been a flattening out of cultures and traditions integrated into global expansion of markets and flexible models of production of capital pursuing new sites of value in ever-increasing alienated contexts. We have reached a stage in this new millennium where the old "conflict" versus "consensus" metaphors, "your traditions versus mine," do not seem to apply. Instead of models based on conflict and resistance, increasingly social groups are being defined by overwhelming patterns of transnational hybridities, new forms of association and affiliation that seem to flash on the surface of life rather than to plunge deeper down into some neoMarxist substructure. This new model of power could be called "integration." It does not have a negative pole. It is what Foucault describes as a "productive" not "repressive" model of power. It articulates difference into ever-more extensive systems of association, flatlining the edges of culture into a pastiche of marketable identities, tastes, neuroses and needs processed through the universalization of the enterprise ethic. It lays traditions down side by side, layering them in ever new ephemeral patterns and intensities—whole elements and associations given in one place can be now instantaneously found in another. Paul Willis's nationally and geographically inscribed Lads are now being replaced by Jenny Kelly's Afro-Canadian youth who are patching together their identities from the surfeit of signs and symbols crossing the border in the electronic relays of US television, popular music and cyber culture (Kelly, in press). Post-apartheid South African youth now assign more value to markers of taste---Levis and Gap jeans, Nikes or Adidas, rap or rave---than ancestry and place in their elaboration of the new criteria of ethnic affiliation. All these developments are turning the old materialism versus idealism debate on its head. It is the frenetic application of forms of existence, forms of life, the dynamic circulation of and strategic deployment of style, the application of social aesthetics that now govern political rationalities and corporate mobilization in our times. The new representational technologies are the new centers of public instruction providing the forum for the work of the imagination of the great masses of the people to order their pasts and present and plot their futures. They are creating instant traditions and nostalgias of

the present in which our pasts are dis-embedded and separated out as abstract value into new semiotics systems and techniques of persuasions, new forms of ecumenical clothing that quote Che, Mao, Fidel and Marx, and revolution in the publicity of dish-washing liquid. Who now owns the terms that define the authentic traditions of radicalism that inform our works? Who now has final purchase on the terms “revolution,” “democracy,” “participation,” and “empowerment?” The massive work of textual production is blooming in a crucible of opposites--socially extended projects producing the cultural citizen in the new international division of labor, in which the state may not be a first or the final referent. Naomi Klein reminds us ultimately of this radical disembedding. Spadina Avenue, the garment district of Toronto of the 1930s is now in post-industrial limbo and a center of a masquerading consumerist heaven. Its transformation to its new millennial identity of warehouse flowering apartments, Sugar Mounting, retro candy, edible jewelry, and dispensing of London Fog coats owe its genesis to the cruel juxtaposition with Jakarta and the flight of its garment industry to Indonesia. And while there is not much need for overcoats on the equator, “increasingly,” according to Klein, “Canadians get through their cold winters not with clothing manufactured by the tenacious seamstresses on Spadina Avenue but by young Asian women working in hot climates ... In 1997, Canada imported \$11.7 million of its anoraks and ski jackets from Indonesia...” (Klein, 2000, p. xvi).

I have concluded, here, then by pointing to the outlines of the new global context that has precipitated a crisis of language in neoMarxist scholarly efforts to grasp the central dynamics of contemporary societies, bearing on the question of “tradition” and the centering term “culture.” The latter developments have led to a depreciation of the value and insightfulness of neoMarxist analysis in our time—old metaphors associated with class, economy, state (“production,” “reproduction,” “resistance,” “the labor/capital contradiction,”) are all worn down by the transformations of the past decades in which the saturation of economic and political practices in aesthetic mediations has proceeded full scale (Naomi Klein [2000] *No Logo*). The scale and referent for most all of these organizing terms of analysis had been set and bounded at the nation, defined in the localist anthropological/ethnographic terms of “traditions,” “ritual,” “culture” understood on the localizing plain of community, nation, society.... The new circumstances associated with post-fordist capital, the new international division of labor, movement and migration and the amplification of images and the work of the imagination of the great masses of the people, the great masses of our times, driven forward by computerization, the internet, popular culture etc have cut open particular traditions spilling the entrails of so much fluttering fish around the world. New working units for understanding modern life are needed. Maybe not, the nation, not the state, not society but the “Globus,” the “Global City,” ultimately the “Globe,” may be the new unit of analysis, the new referent, nodes and networks of affiliation where traditions are attenuated, even as the public sphere and the life world have become more susceptible to re-feudalization, sectarianism, and fundamentalism.

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