

Introduction

In the past it was frequently the business of great English men of letters to apply themselves to the definition of culture. Today, as the twentieth century comes to an end (and we no longer believe in great English men of letters) academics tend to spend more time struggling with notes towards a definition of Cultural Studies, that once-peripheral category which threatens to become a mainstay of the humanities. It is certainly a subject which, as Susan Bassnett has argued, should remain as flexible and accommodating as possible, an amorphous hybrid which can incorporate a range of disparate literary, historical or sociological enquiries. But at the same time, as teachers or practitioners in the Cultural Studies field have recognised, there is a need for something more definite in outline, particularly in view of the suspicion with which this new discipline - like English Literature or Media Studies in their early days - is sometimes regarded. We need to establish the legitimacy of Cultural Studies by marking out its academic territory and securing at least some of its theoretical premises.

It was with this in mind that Romanian, British and Irish academics met for the first Contemporary Texts and Cultural Contexts' winter seminar, organised by the British Council and held in Sinaia in February 1995. The seminar had no single focus but, as its title suggests, was concerned with the ways in which we situate or relocate the texts of modern culture so as to understand and, in many cases, revise their patterns of signification. In the wake of multiple, competing theories from deconstruction to new historicism, how do we reintegrate the text - the poem, the screenplay, the postcard - within the historical or social contingency which it mediates? How do the contexts of canon and curriculum influence our readings? And how, finally, can we effect the transition from literary to cultural studies without any sacrifice of academic integrity?

These were the questions with which we began the seminar, and many more emerged during the two and half days of discussion which followed. Looking back, I would isolate two issues in particular as central to current developments in Cultural Studies in Romania, the first of which relates to the question of power. I think it is true to say that the hangover of the Marxist ideology / hegemony paradigm was problematic for many students working in this subject, not least because it proposes simplification or reduction in too many areas which call for complexity. And while the discipline remains indebted to the pioneering work of Raymond Williams, it became evident from several papers and discussions during the seminar that the theoretical points of reference for Cultural Studies lie increasingly in the more pertinent, expansive and in essence more productive constructions of power offered by Foucault, de Certeau and Bourdieu - seminal thinkers who have given us room to manoeuvre, as it were, within the constraints

of discourse. Following their lead we can begin to break down limiting theoretical monoliths and to refigure in turn the concept of 'mass' society, the troubled intersections of culture, taste and value, the evolution of the popular, the cultural practices of authority and legitimacy, and the patterns of capital and commodification.

The second issue which we confront at every turn is that of identity. In re-situating identity as a key concept we have been led back not only to the 'community of the text' but also to the community which, as traced so influentially by Benedict Anderson, can be 'imagined' within and across the boundaries of the nation. Similarly we have begun to explore the community which, through gender, ethnicity, political or religious dissent, is constructed in marginalised or minority terms. Romania's sustained interest in Irish and Scottish culture is partly a result of the work of our academic contacts in those countries but, in addition, it manifests a will to recover values and meaning from the edges of canonical cultural activity. And if it is at these edges that cultural dynamics become most revealing, then it is equally within the Cultural Studies remit to explore the collapsed centre, as the concept of Englishness continues to offer opportunities for re-readings of the imperial and post-colonial condition in a wide variety of semiotic or cultural forms.

It is the responsibility of lecturers in British (and how hard that label now has to work!) Cultural Studies to confront all of the above and more. In Romania however, we have the advantage of students who will bring a great deal to the subject, not only because of their strong background in European critical theory but also because of their ingrained sensitivity to the codified workings of language. Indeed, the historical, political and geographical narratives in which the country itself is situated are lessons in the constant play of cultural meaning, the complexity of representations, the malleability of images and the return of the repressed. For these reasons alone, it seems particularly appropriate that Romania in its current phase of change should open its schools and universities to an academic discipline which is also in transition.

The papers which follow confirm for me two things: first, the value of coming together to present, discuss and exchange material, and secondly, the significance of research work that is carried out by numerous individuals over and above the heavy demands of teaching and administrative commitments, and in the interests of sustained imaginative, creative and critical inquiry. I am very grateful to all the contributors, including our guest lecturer, Eamonn Hughes from Queen's University in Belfast. Above all, I must thank Doina Cmeciu and her team in Bacău, who took on the task of collecting and editing these proceedings, and who have founded what will be, I am sure, a leading journal of its kind.

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