**Hegemony as Mythical Form:**

**The Re-Emergence of Cultural Studies**

by

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Stuart Hall proposes that articulations of thought are subject to historical reality reflecting the continuous dialectic between knowledge and power (Hall, 57). There are ruptures of signification in traditional modes of critical intellectual work that reorient a set of questions that concern ontology, epistemology and aesthetics, forging a new paradigm for fields of intellectual inquiry. In pioneering Cultural Studies, Raymond Williams, traces the emergence of “hegemony” as an active process that provides productive moments of rupture in the signifying practices of culture. Hegemony does not imply abuse (manipulation, corruption and betrayal) provided that culture has arranged a set of social practices that mediate the effects of resonation from the echo chamber (ie. the network of ideology and ideological systems operating through the articulation and formation of hegemony). Human energy and agency can enact social practices for culture which seek to override the dominant hegemony in moments of rupture (Williams, 110). These moments of rupture enunciate and are enunciated through a particular human energy and agency – this constitutes a powerful process of signification. Roland Barthes constructs his definition of “myth” through semiotics and in a manner that has uncanny architecture to that of Williams’s conception of hegemony. In fact, the signification processes that Barthes purport as defining myth have a quality which renders Williams’s concept of hegemony to that of myth through semiotic analysis. Hegemony and myth are networks of signification that couple culture and ideology, such that Cultural Studies must be oriented in a particular manner to properly address the idea of ‘culture’. Hall and Williams suggest that proper synthesis for the field of Cultural Studies is only possible once discarding historical determinism and decoupling culture and ideology through analysis of the operations of both in moments of rupture in the signification of these concepts and within their discourses.

Williams notes that Antonio Gramsci was the theorist to distinguish “hegemony” from “rule”. Rule is enacted through coercion by political forms, however, hegemony is enacted through complex interlocking of political, social and cultural forces (Williams, 108). Hegemony as a concept can be used to significantly parse and distinguish culture and ideology. Williams affirms that, “it is the fully articulate and systematic forms which are recognizable as ideology” (Williams, 109). That is to say, ideology is an abstraction from the formal system of hegemony. Yet, hegemony is the consolidated network of ideology and ideological systems (Williams, 110). An individual’s experience of society describes a tension between being part of culture and being part of hegemony. Hegemony hails itself to affirm, confirm and reaffirm its meanings and values. Hegemony has a structure based in dominance and subordination whereby the hailing process creates an echo chamber to be experienced for individuals in society. Hegemony is operating properly when that echo chamber facilitates the resonating of meanings and values for the individual. This resonation has the purpose to define culture through the ideological terms of the hegemonic formation. Despite this powerful mechanism of interpellation, hegemony does not imply abuse and a set of social practices in culture can mediate the resonation from the echo chamber. Williams claims that this set of social practices for culture constitutes an alternative hegemony representing the primacy of human energy and agency (Williams, 110). This mechanism of interpellation for hegemony through the operation of ideology is alluded to by Barthes when writing on myth – “myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message” (Barthes, 109).

Hegemonies have a dynamic relationship within society that refutes historical determinism while carefully considering certain Marxist fundamentals – the introspective reflection on material production is a conscious process. Thus, base/superstructure dialectics define stages in a process rather than levels in a structure or system (Williams, 113). Williams’s intervention on Marxist fundamentals provides the necessary groundwork for the new paradigm of Cultural Studies - pushing back on dogmatic practices of importing Marxist forms (Hall, 62). The Marxist organizational structure is based in the logic of construction engineering and constitutes a schematic mode for the mind that refutes modes of interaction inherent in being-consciousness. The historical logic of Marxist base/superstructure distinction is conceived by Williams as reductionist (Hall, 62). Hegemonies form through dynamic processes and in the way that hegemony hails itself through ideology, hegemonies hail each other, similarly.

That is to say, that alternative hegemonies form a dynamic relationship with dominant hegemonies. The dynamic pluralism of the hegemonic applies a pressure for culture to be distinctly formed and dynamic, but not independent, nor merely adaptive or incorporative of hegemony (Williams, 114). In fact, this dynamic relationship of culture and hegemony allows for ruptures in meaning that foster new paths and promote new processes of meaning-production. This characteristic of the relationship between culture and hegemony allows for works of art or texts to be open in their signifying forms. Williams writes, “hegemony is always an active process, but this does not mean that it is simply a complex of dominant features and elements. On the contrary, it is always a more or less adequate organization and interconnection of otherwise separated and even disparate meaning, values and practice, which it specifically incorporates in a significant culture and an effective social order” (Williams, 115). Taking from Barthes’s analysis of myth and applying it to Williams’s concept of hegemony - culture is the “language-object” and hegemony is the “metalanguage” which articulates culture (Barthes, 115). Culture is a discourse on meaning-production processes, but hegemony is a form to facilitate that discourse (Barthes, 117). The dynamic relationship of culture and hegemony constitutes duplicity of their signifier. This plurality of signification allows for multiple and varied readings of a sign – the necessary condition in semiotics to produce the moments of rupture. From these moments of rupture, Hall promotes an emergence of new fields in intellectual work which exhibit rigour in the logic of thinking and the logic of historical process (Hall, 72).

For Williams, culture is articulated meaningfully through traditions, institutions and formations. Hegemony facilitates the continuity of these processes in articulating culture, but this also implies ‘breaks’ (or ruptures) when the framework is not based in historical determinism (Williams, 115). The contemporary pressures and limits for tradition can stimulate ruptures or “vulnerabilities” in meaning-production for the hegemony which allow culture to begin expressing the subaltern (or alternative hegemonies). Culture is more than the sum of its institutions, and Williams asserts that, Althusserian ISA (Ideological State Apparatus) is overwrought as a concept because it implies that the hegemony is not dynamically constructed through a process of incorporation that works in both directions whereby culture articulates hegemony, and vice-versa (Williams, 118). ‘Self-identification’ (ie. Louis Althusser’s proposed interpellative meaning-production process) is only reflective of particular social practices (or “socializations”) but not constitutive of all socialization. That is to say, when interpellative processes of hegemony experience a break or rupture, hegemony is still articulated through culture and has meaning. Hegemony and culture are intricately intertwined through the skein of social practices. Barthes comments on myth, “(it) is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system” (Barthes, 114). This “second-order” applied to a reading of Williams would suggest that culture is a sign in the discourse of social practice, but it is a signifier in the discourse of hegemony (hegemony “catches” culture in Barthesian terms).

Barthes notes a problematic in the vigourous and robust dynamic relationship of myth and culture (or hegemony and culture, through Williams). For Barthes, everything can be articulated in language and is part of a discourse, therefore everything can be a myth (Barthes, 109). Yet, “history evaporates” according to Barthes, suggesting that hegemony/myth stimulates or encourages historical determinism as a framework for processes of meaning-production (Barthes, 117). For Williams and Hall, historical determinism produces epochal analysis which is not dynamic and therefore is antithetical to properly understanding culture. Williams writes, “the complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions – traditions, institutions, and formations – but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements” (Williams, 121). The operation of ideology in the process of hegemony/myth articulating culture “naturalizes” hegemony through a framework of historical determinism (Barthes, 129). Hegemony invokes that it is a *raison d’etre* for culture – or in Barthesian terms, the natural conjuring of ideology produces excessive justification for hegemony. Thus, the dynamic relationship of culture and hegemony/myth provides for productive moments of rupture in signification, but equally necessitates the proper operation of the dominant hegemony’s ideology in such a way that it is reproduced in culture, even when human energy’s sum of social practices have given rise to subaltern or alternative hegemonies through those moments of rupture. Simply put - ideology pervades hegemony and hegemony pervades culture when signifying practices in culture have the dynamic pluralism to provide productive moments of rupture.

Hall identifies a moment of rupture in the process of signification for the debate on culture that then allowed Cultural Studies to emerge. Hoggart, Williams and other pioneers in the field had been surveying the site of the rupture prior to Cultural Studies’s emergence, building a bridge across the chasm by which the roots of debate in Cultural Studies (ie. high/low culture in the ‘cultural debate’) provided a departure point and sufficient vantage for the endeavor to move forward with new sets of questions and concerns on culture (Hall, 57). The idiom of inquiry from the pioneers helped to guide the language of Cultural Studies while effectively writing an enduring epitaph for the rhetoric of old debates. That epitaph, etched through the impact of certain texts, such as E.P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*, marked the place of the rupture, as well as, the moment of the emergence of Cultural Studies (Hall, 58). The focus of similar seminal texts in the field was to put into question the epistemology of ‘culture’ and by doing so was introspectively crafting a discourse with Marxist roots. For this dynamic quality of emergence, Hall understands the process of “(re)signification” as more of a “re-emergence”, and thus a “re-founding” of Cultural Studies (Hall, 58). The field was then institutionalized in the Birmingham School. The Birmingham School’s approach to Cultural Studies has been the recognition of an epistemological richness of “culture” as a discourse rife with tension and difficulty – a complex site of convergent interests (Hall, 59).

One of the new definitions of culture was forwarded by Williams, who understood culture as “ordinary” – a democratic and social discursive formation. Cultural values emerge through a process of give-and-take for meaning-production, thus the process of communication is the process of community and is determined by a sharing of common meanings. This understanding underscores the dynamic signification practices of culture through complex relationships with hegemony and social practices enacted and enunciated by human energy. Tension in the offering, reception and comparison of new meaning (encoding, decoding and re-encoding, respectively through Hall’s semiotic conceptions) stimulate development in meaning-production processes for culture. Thus, hegemonic formations (and subaltern formations) in discourse are particular to forms of human energy. Williams remarks, “for new practice is not, of course, an isolated process. To the degree that it emerges, and especially to the degree that it is oppositional rather than alternative, the process of attempted incorporation significantly begins” (Williams, 124). The emergent, the residual and the dominant character of culture are not easily parsed but become visibly distinct through the sum of social practices (discursive skein).

Culture is a discursive skein for all social practices, foregrounding the sum of interrelationships within that formation. Thus, Cultural Studies becomes rooted in epistemology and resists an impulse to mark out ontology for ‘culture’ – the threads of the skein are a way of affirming that the ‘lines are blurred’. Discursively, the pattern of organization for culture emerges from forms of human energy which are as fluid as human identities with their surfeit of accompanying discontinuities and the unexpected (Hall, 60). Cultural Studies is set to task on analyzing the connections and interactions within the skein-like network of social practices that constitute culture discourse.

Williams’s pioneering brings a Structuralism sensibility to Cultural Studies, marking-out elements at odds with the field’s historical moment of re-emergence in a post-structuralist, postmodernist landscape fully entrenched in the turn to hermeneutics. Despite this consensus-building effort by Williams (and Thompson), Hall notes a sundering in the development of Cultural Studies whereby the structuralist sensibilities of the pioneers in the field have had an enduring effect on some new thinkers that seek to remediate the concepts from structuralist discourse on culture from the past. Hall identifies two strands – culturalism and structuralism – and these constitute an ironic pair of paradigms for Cultural Studies (Hall, 67). Hall is troubled further that thinkers in the re-emergent Cultural Studies appropriate ideas from Althusser and Levi-Strauss – relative rogues who broke from the rigidity of traditional Marxist conceptualization. This “poaching” underscores the dilemma of two paradigms in the re-emergent Cultural Studies. Hall sees the schism as a false dichotomy reflecting the old debates of Cultural Studies and he argues that through this schism, the ‘Ivory Tower’ becomes a “prison-house of thought” (Hall, 67). Yet, Williams and Barthes were effective in arguing the polysemous quality of ‘culture as semiosis’. This begs the question as to whether schisms in intellectual fields of study are simply ruptures in signification for the culture of intellectual work given the presence of hegemony/myth and its pervasive ideology in the discourse of such things.

Hall, understands a need to consolidate the field through focusing not on what can affirm the divisive nature of the debate, but what can be of mutual import to a holistic approach. For the structuralism strand in Cultural Studies, there is the relevant importation of Marxist affirmations of the consciousness of individuals on introspective reflection of the conditions of their state and status in the mechanism of material (re)production. Althusser understands these reflections to be unconscious, but the structuralism strand seeks to remediate the Marxist concept which Hall then finds optimistic and productive around the idea of human energy and agency in social practices (Hall, 67). The structuralism strand is also adept at producing schema that can parse specific social practices and analyze them through abstraction without losing sight of how these practices remain part of the whole network of social practices that constitute culture (Hall, 69).

The culturalism strand also has the advantage of not seeing culture as culture *proper* (ie. where ‘not-culture’ is constitutive of culture, and vice-versa). Hall claims that this conflation in culture *proper* is a major drawback to alternatives outside of the two paradigms (Foucauldian and Lacanian alternatives, in particular). The alternatives tend to conflate culture and ideology thus constituting culture as culture *proper*. The two strands of Cultural Studies need to consolidate their differences and marry their points of intersection into a holistic approach within the field. The greatest strength of the two strands is their tarrying of ideology and culture as strongly coupled but not mutually exclusive concepts (Hall, 72). This idea of coupling wards off a dependency on historical determinism and deflects thinkers from presumptions of “easy synthesis” (Hall, 72). A way is forged through the points of intersection of the two strands toward Williams’s primary concern for interrogation in the re-emergent field of Cultural Studies – “the complex relation of differentiated structures of feeling to differentiated classes” (Williams, 134).

Through a flair for poetics, Barthes remarks coyly, yet pointedly that, “a little formalism turns one away from History (…) a lot brings one back to it” (Barthes, 112). Barthes sees form as not a suppressor of meaning and that form only impoverishes meaning, putting it at a distance and holding it at one’s disposal (Barthes, 118). Within discourse of culture, this relationship with form speaks to Williams’s “structures of feeling” – a comprehensive description for the operations of human energy to produce social practices. However, these ‘structures of feeling’, facilitate the pervading of hegemony/myth within a discourse of culture – a complex process of signification. This signifying process produces three readings, according to Barthes (Barthes, 128). The empty signifier denotes an open form (I offer this as “preferred code” in Hall’s semiotic theory of communication), the full signifier denotes a clear parsing of meaning and form revealing a distortion or lack of equivalence (oppositional code) and the mythical signifier denotes meaning and form as conflated revealing ambiguous signification (negotiated code). Barthes affirms that a surfeit of connotations for a sign (true of the latter mode of reading – ie. negotiated code) can stimulate a resistance to the naturalization process of ideology within the meaning-production of hegemony/myth. Yet, hegemony/myth can render that ‘ambiguous sign’ into a ‘sign of ambiguity’ thus pervading ideology through the signifying practices of those polysemous signs (Barthes, 133). Again, Cultural Studies is faced with a dilemma based in semiotics - pluralism in signification for culture necessarily implies pervasive ideology through culture’s synergistic partner, hegemony/myth. For culture to be articulated openly in discourse and for intellectual work to have the possibility of renewal (or re-emergence), hegemony/myth must articulate culture through the operations of ideology.

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