

**CULTURAL STUDIES:
ARCHAEOLOGIES,
GENEALOGIES, DISCONTENTS**

Eduard Vlad teaches at Ovidius University, Constanta. In addition to a series of scholarly articles in his fields of expertise (literary and cultural studies, American studies, identity theories and literary texts, cultural globalization), he has written a number of volumes dealing with issues in the same fields. These are: *Larkin: The Glory and the Gloom* (1997), *Romantic Myths, Alternative Stories* (2004), *American Literature: Responses to the Po-Mo Void* (2004), *Ironic Apocalypses: The World According to Vonnegut* (2004), *Authorship and Identity in Contemporary Fiction* (2005), *Journeys out of the Self* (2005), *Perspective critice asupra globalizării culturale* (2010), *Dicționar polemic de cultură americană* (2012). *Literary Selves and Grand Narratives in the First American Century* (2016) and *Early British Gothic and Its Travelling Companions* are co-authored with Florian Andrei Vlad.

EDUARD VLAD

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EDITURA UNIVERSITARĂ
București, 2018

Colecția FILOLOGIE

Referenți științifici: Prof.univ.dr. Rodica Mihăilă, Universitatea din București
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Prof.univ.dr. Adina Ciugureanu, Universitatea Ovidius
din Constanța

Redactor: Gheorghe Iovan
Tehnoredactor: Ameluța Vișan
Coperta: Monica Balaban

Editură recunoscută de Consiliul Național al Cercetării Științifice (C.N.C.S.) și
inclusă de Consiliul Național de Atestare a Titlurilor, Diplomelor și
Certificatelor Universitare (C.N.A.T.D.C.U.) în categoria editurilor de prestigiu
recunoscut.

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

VLAD, EDUARD

Cultural Studies : Archaeologies, Genealogies, Discontents / Eduard Vlad.
- București : Editura Universitară, 2018
Conține bibliografie
ISBN 978-606-28-0753-5

902
929

DOI: (Digital Object Identifier): 10.5682/9786062807535

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Editura Universitară
Editor: Vasile Muscalu
B-dul. N. Bălcescu nr. 27-33, Sector 1, București
Tel.: 021 – 315.32.47 / 319.67.27
www.editurauniversitara.ro
e-mail: redactia@editurauniversitara.ro

Distribuție: tel.: 021-315.32.47 / 319.67.27 / 0744 EDITOR / 07217 CARTE
comenzi@editurauniversitara.ro
O.P. 15, C.P. 35, București
www.editurauniversitara.ro

PREFACE AND APOLOGIES

What follows is not what was initially planned. I plead guilty from the very beginning. As a result of a course on what I called ‘Archaeologies of Cultural Studies’ in the PhD program run in the Graduate School for the Humanities at Ovidius University, Constanta, I thought of mapping out a comprehensive account of contemporary developments in literary and cultural studies. The idea was to complete an already sketched outline of significant cultural epistemes from the past, containing important ideas, concepts, statements (the combined work of archaeology and episteme acknowledging an important reference to Michel Foucault) that is of use for a better understanding of what is happening today in the groves of Academe, an outline that was used in the above-mentioned PhD school course. Completing it meant, obviously, focusing on the present.

The undertaking was meant to start from the relatively ‘near past’ of the so-called American Culture Wars of the 1980s, from debates about the importance and relevance of canonical culture and of the anti-canonical orientations of what Harold Bloom called, two decades ago, the School of Resentment, after a description of slightly earlier developments in Britain in the late 1950s, the 1960s, and the early 1970s. Initially, the ‘discontents’ of the title (the word here is obviously indebted to Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*) was, in the account of the contemporary scene, meant to refer to those who oppose some aspects of cultural populism, the

debate between the elitists (the discontents) and the mainstream advocates of contemporary cultural studies positions. The 'discontented' positions of elitists, as briefly described in the first section of this volume, deplore and oppose culture being brought down to earth from the elevated shelves of canonical excellence. However, in the book as a whole, the discontentment is also associated with the critical attitude of a considerable number of thinkers opposing established, traditional views on what authority structures consider to be the culture that serves their interests. In this particular sense, almost anyone included in any of the three sections of the volume is a 'discontent,' whose critical ideas become part and parcel of the story of the rise and development of critical cultural discourses, mainly from the dawn of Modernity, then the heyday of the Enlightenment, culminating in the more or less contemporary age.

Gradually, I came to realize that what was initially designed to provide a short historical outline of what may be called a long history of cultural studies (cultural studies in a very loose, pre-institutional sense) was turning into a text of its own, and that the main part of the initial project would require a much vaster arena, even if the time slot it would concentrate on consists of a couple of decades only. This would have meant from what is now history (the impact of the so-called second wave in British Cultural Studies, for which wave Stuart Hall represents an emblematic figure) to the bewildering variety of cultural, communication and media studies in the US, which has brought new twists in these interdisciplinary fields, as well as in Britain, the 'mother' of the first institutionalized form, the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies in the mid 1960s.

It so happened that the preliminary outline (the long history of Cultural Studies or cultural studies) is inevitably incomplete, relying on some basic sources (Surber's, as well as Browitt and Milner's accounts featuring prominently in the delineation of the general framework), giving less weight or even leaving out equally important introductions and outlines. It refers to some seminal theoretical sources by the prominent figures of this long history, while omitting others. All this exposes my mistakes and preferences, as well as a determination to complete this preliminary work, the sketchy historical outline, before focusing on the description of the panoramic and dramatic contemporary culturescape.

Considering the vastness of this contemporary intellectual picture, as well as the importance of the issues that it deals with (not only *canonical vs anti-canonical* culture in a clear-cut opposition, but more insidious and ambivalent aspects of contemporary *multiculturalism*, *representational politics*, *gender* and *trans gender studies*, *ethnicity* and *migration* as key aspects of group and national identity, the current volume will stop short of dealing with them at length, leaving the field to be investigated in a following book. However, some of these issues will be outlined and briefly discussed in the third section of the volume, the first containing the preliminary discussion of culture and cultural studies, as well as the debate between cultural elitism and cultural populism, while the middle section is focusing on a selection of significant voices and directions which played a part in the gradual development of what would be called, one day, cultural studies or Cultural Studies.

While attempting to make significant connections between and among important figures, texts, and approaches which have contributed to the development of cultural studies in a broader or stricter sense, the current undertaking has

avoided hierarchies and taxonomies as much as possible, thus observing the anti-hegemonic, anti-establishment approach of more revolutionary forms of cultural studies, even if, in the opinion of that particular person writing these lines, tree-like hierarchies and classifications, structuralist dichotomies are sometimes more useful than rhizomatic, hidden, elusive roots crawling underground, avoiding the light of day. Neither will there be any attempt in what is to follow to prove that everything, including gravity, is culturally constructed.

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I. PRELIMINARIES

I.1. Culture: individual endeavor, collective survival

Science and technology have been making faster and faster progress since the Industrial Revolution, but significantly bringing about more and more dramatic changes since the beginning of the post-industrial age, driven by information and communication technology. This progress and these changes are considerably affecting our ways of life, for better and/or worse. *Our way of life* is one of the several definitions of our culture, including, but not exclusively identical with, culture as a record of intellectual and artistic excellence. Being cultured or cultivated has usually defined an individual having acquired sufficient knowledge in the humanities and/or the social sciences, displaying good aesthetic taste and discrimination to philosophize on key existential issues. Such a person is seen as a member of the intellectual élite, usually valuing high culture and looking down on popular culture. In the contemporary world, culture keeps changing, encompassing more and more in its realm and blurring the boundaries between the so-called high culture and popular and mass culture.

It has become necessary for everyone, including those aspiring to membership in a certain elite group, to understand the mechanisms and the changing faces of contemporary culture in order to adapt to a very challenging and puzzling world. Understanding culture is no longer to be seen *only* as an individual's endeavor to rise in the social world, but *also* as a collective effort to make the world function better, to become aware of the challenges of the present as well as of the future,

while, at the same time, preserving the good heritage of the past.

People all over the world have to learn to adapt to the changes that affect their ways of life. The progress of science and technology is inevitable, both causing problems for humankind's survival and, at the same time, making life easier for more and more people. However, the main concern in what follows is not the survival of humankind through science, but, in a general sense, human survival *in spite of* science, extreme rationality and rationalization. This has to do with the explorations of culture, its mechanisms, its major players.

Before evoking some definitions of culture that will be of use in what lies ahead, let us mention some of the general features of humankind's adaptation and survival that we are all likely to take for granted. It is worth stressing that these three general features of adaptation and survival work in all fields of human knowledge, including the humanities in particular, the social sciences in general:

1. inheriting the knowledge of previous generations (traditional meaning of culture as cultural heritage);

2. dealing creatively and critically with this heritage, rather than taking it for granted (the *critique* of received knowledge);

3. dealing creatively and critically with the present and its challenges (learning as adaptation to an ever changing environment) in order to improve the prospects for the future.

What follows takes all these three features into account to understand the cultural world as a whole, but also, more specifically, dealing with the traditions, concepts, key issues and dilemmas of what has come to be called the field and the practice of Cultural Studies, closely linked to Cultural Theory or Theory. Whether one is more interested in American Studies or in Literary Studies, given their interdisciplinary character, given the former's official inclusion in Romania within a field

called Cultural Studies, it is useful for everyone to study the relationships between and among these fields, the implications of the core concepts (Culture, Ideology, Hegemony, Power, Subjectivity), as well as the various traditions having contributed to this relatively new area and mode of cultural enquiry. This, it is worth stressing from the very beginning, is *not* the apparently serene and peaceful *Culture Studies*, but has witnessed, because of its involved, even militant, positions, controversies and *culture wars*, especially in America, as it will be seen.

I.2. Cultural Studies/ cultural studies: what do we mean by it/ them?

Cultural Studies *are* or Cultural Studies *is*? This is obviously the preliminary question which is the easiest to answer. Although *literary studies* have long been seen as plural, basically including history, theory and criticism under their conceptual umbrella, the tendency is to see both *literary studies* and *cultural studies* as a whole. Even more than literary studies (or Literary studies), Cultural Studies (or cultural studies) *is*, having tried to define itself as a distinct field of investigation or like a distinct way of dealing with culture, a very elusive and protean object of study. This distinctiveness, involving object of study and manner of investigation, is illusory and will have to be addressed before long.

From the very beginning of their 'Introduction: The Questions of Method in Cultural Studies,' Schwoch and White, as their title show, raise the problem of method, the looseness that the new avowedly interdisciplinary field has been charged with:

At various points in time, different traditional fields and disciplines have influenced cultural studies. For the most part, this influence, while important, does not seem to have brought about any obvious cohesion or unification to cultural studies.

Many scholars celebrate and endorse the free-wheeling and extremely open nature of this area of intellectual pursuit, while others point to this openness as a sign of the relative intellectual weakness of cultural studies (1).

The above-mentioned editors of *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies* (and authors of the equally above-mentioned 'Introduction: ...' to that 2006 volume) will go on to distinguish between a scrutiny of the methodologies of the new field and distinct theories of cultural studies. Their aim is to examine methodologies conducive to a coherent and unitary theory of cultural studies, an enterprise which, for many practitioners, might look like an elusive pursuit. They will soon admit that the field resorts in its empirical investigations to a vast array of sometimes contradictory theories. What is special about cultural studies, though, is identifying and highlighting cultural objects that had been neglected in the past (such as the popular or the cultural impact of ordinary, everyday life). Cultural studies, from the outset, as it will be seen, avoided settling into established frameworks, disciplinary boundaries, final solutions.

Whether cultural studies or Cultural Studies *is* or *are* is obviously easier to negotiate and then decide upon than the problem of method or methodological framework, which can be shared with the various fields the new kind of inquiry takes issue with.

Legitimate questions like, *what does Cultural Studies mean?* are more difficult to answer, though, thus indicating a fundamental question about language in general, about what language *is* and *does*. Many people take it for granted that language, basically through its vocabulary, faithfully represents the abstract and concrete worlds in which language users live. To assume that language is transparent and that we can see the real world through its faithful mediation is naïve. Theorists like Jacques Derrida (his *différance* or the permanent deferral of

meaning of a linguistic unit) have drawn attention to the elusiveness of words, which escape our attempts at precise definition like a fish slipping through the clumsy fingers of a human's groping hands. Derrida's position is an extreme approach that real people in real worlds do not need to adopt, though.

What do culture, literature, literary studies, American studies mean? are questions in which the basic concepts are impossible to pinpoint with any precision without the preliminary attempt at sketching a minimal and necessary background or context. If this is true of words floating in a world of texts, basically cut off from the concrete world in which communicators live, then we need other questions to consider, such as *How to speak about culture and Cultural Studies, under what circumstances, with whom, why, and with what goals in mind?* People in the real world do not use floating signifiers, but engage in interaction to get things done. In this interaction words and whole utterances are clarified in the process of collaborative problem solving, in the process of doing things together. The words' meanings are no longer elusive or ambiguous. The words' meanings are those meanings we ... mean, in particular contexts, to achieve particular goals.

One should bear in mind that such words as *culture* and *literature*, like many others, have a long history, having changed their meaning as people and societies have changed across the ages. Cultural Studies has, in its specific, specialized sense, a relatively short history (it was institutionalized in 1964), a centuries-old history in its broader sense (any critical discussion of culture from Antiquity up to now). They are not to be dealt with in terms of the simplistic question, 'what does it mean'? We will therefore have to clarify the contexts in which preoccupations with what came to be called *culture* appeared, developed in the real world of permanent social

change, making connections between and among important individual voices, schools, approaches, movements.

In his *Keywords* (1976, 1983) Raymond Williams finds the word *culture* one of the most difficult words to define, largely because of its long history (87). Etymologically, Williams traces the word to the Latin verb *coleo - colere*, which had several distinct meanings, such as *to inhabit* (from which we have now *colonist* (settler), *to cultivate* (agriculture), *to worship* (a religious *cult*).

In a previous book, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Williams had recorded four meanings of the word *culture*. Three of them refer to attributes of a group or society: the *state of intellectual development* of a whole society; *the arts*; the *whole way of life* of a group or people (an anthropological definition). The remaining one refers to *an individual's habit of mind* (Williams, 1963, p. 16).

What follows is written by someone interested in American studies for people interested in ... American studies. It is also the product of someone who started in the fields of literary studies 'pure and simple' (history of literature, theory of literature, literary criticism) at a time when many people, like the author himself, associated the broad concept of Marxism with the terrible things that were happening in the so-called Communist countries of the Eastern bloc.

An aversion to those who professed to follow in the footsteps of the important 19th century philosopher and social critic, theorists, militants and political leaders associated with positions of power in what would prove to be a bankrupt system of authoritarian government, amounted to something that many non-Communists had to deal with. This aversion has to be overcome by all intellectuals, irrespective of the area of the political spectrum they are, deliberately or unwittingly, associated with. This has to be undertaken in order to understand present developments in the related, contiguous,

overlapping fields of the human sciences and social sciences, in the first place. Such developments have to do with what came to be called the important paradigm shift of *the cultural turn* in the 1980s or with the institutionalization of Cultural Studies a little earlier (the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1964).

As already mentioned, American studies is an interdisciplinary area seen as falling within the field of investigation of Cultural Studies. The main concern in what is to follow is to define Cultural Studies and its main concepts, as well as other fields and disciplines in relation to which it defines itself by being significantly different or with which its preoccupations overlap. Thus, comparing and contrasting Cultural Studies with cultural theory (Theory) and with literary studies are among the first steps to be considered. The contextual background and the various sites of definition and contestation are meant to lead to a better understanding of the position of American Studies in relation to Cultural Studies and related fields of investigation, such as literary studies.

Like any piece of scholarly writing, in addition to a survey of seminal theoretical sources in the examined fields, this volume engages in a complex conversation. The attending set of complex conversation situations has to do with the inevitably Bakhtinian, dialogic nature of any form of human communication. It has to do with authority figures in the remote and immediate past, as well as with contemporary experts and individuals interested in what the current text is concerned with: the elusive realm of culture and its mechanisms, attitudes to it, approaches to it. So, once again, it is not what culture means but what it does, how it does it, how it is used by various people to do things, issues that will shed light on culture, power, and Cultural Studies.

Culture, like many other key concepts, such as those referring to aspects of identity (race, ethnicity, gender), became

an important topic when what it is all about became problematic, when people no longer took for granted what they had considered a 'natural' part of their existence. Such critical moments, and the accompanying paradigm shifts, may be associated with sudden and dramatic cultural changes. Some were occasioned by the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in the British Empire, in what would become the *culture and civilization* debate. Others had to do with the rise of a new and powerful nation defining its identity in new terms: developments from the American War of Independence at the end of the 18th century to the American countercultural age of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the ensuing Culture Wars in intellectual circles there. Thus, in the last few decades of the 20th century, American exceptionalism as a defining feature of American identity began to be challenged by multiculturalist approaches to race, ethnicity, gender.

What does Cultural Studies mean? In an age of dramatic reassessments, of new ways of seeing things, of cultural relativism, of a lack of a distinct authority center which says what is true and what is false, the question should be asked differently: what do you/ what does he/ what do they mean by Cultural Studies *now, here or there?* What did *they* mean by Cultural Studies *then and there?* Why did they engage in doing that? Once again, let us forget simplistic questions like *what does this word mean?* followed by the impatient gesture of reaching for the dictionary with its infallible, final answers. Let us see things in action and human interaction, all this set in distinct contemporary or historical contexts, in which people use words to get things done, in pragmatic or materialist fashion.

For the time being, let us consider some brief statements and attempts at simplifying the definition of culture and of the special ways of engaging with it. Jeff Browitt and