

# EXPLORING 'CULTURE PERSPECTIVE': BIRMINGHAM CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

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## Özet

*Bu makale, on dokuzuncu yüzyılda kurumsallaşmaya başlayan sosyal bilim disiplinlerinin görmezden geldiği varsayılan alanları "kültür"ü merkeze alarak incelemeyi hedefleyen ve bugün bünyesinde farklı araştırma geleneklerini bardındırmaya başlayan "Kültürel Çalışmalar" alanının entellektüel kaynaklarına yönelik metateorik bir sorgulama girişiminin ürünüdür. Bu çerçevede makale, Kültürel Çalışmalar alanına önemli katkılarda bulunan Birmingham Çağdaş Kültürel Çalışmalar Merkezi'ni ve onun temsil ettiği "kültür perspektifi"ni irdelemekte, İngiliz Kültürel Çalışmalar geleneği olarak bilinen yaklaşım içerisinde söz konusu Merkez'in rolünü, bu merkezin "Batı Marksizmi" ile ilişkisini ele almakta ve böylelikle entellektüel bir hareketin politik kaynakları ile olan ilişkisinin tarihsel ve toplumsal koşullarını tartışmaya açmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kültürel Çalışmalar, Kültür Perspektifi, Birmingham Çağdaş Kültürel Araştırmalar Merkezi, Batı Marksizmi, Yeni Sol.

## Abstract

*This article is a product of a metatheoretical questioning about intellectual origins of "Cultural Studies" aiming to explore some neglected areas by classical social science disciplines of 19<sup>th</sup> century over "culture" in the 20<sup>th</sup>. The article deals with the 'culture perspective' that is represented in the body of Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies which is one of the most influential intellectual*

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*traditions in the area of Cultural Studies, its relations with the Western Marxism, its role and position within the tradition of English Cultural Studies, and political demands and motivations behind an intellectual movement under certain historical and social conditions.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Studies, Culture perspective, Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Western Marxism, New Left.*

Since its first appearance as a practical field, which has an immense effect upon social science practices, Cultural Studies has been through some institutionalization and a variety of embodiment in different cultural geographies. Cultural Studies has been becoming an object of academic interest and gradually institutionalized research field in Turkey as well. It will be of great help to discuss theoretical origins of Cultural Studies, which has been represented in different universities, in regard to the ability to discuss already introduced and upcoming studies in the field. The 'culture perspective' that is represented in the body of Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies had a direct influence on the build up of Cultural Studies in Turkey. In this paper, it is aimed to put forward the 'culture perspective' of Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and depict the political imagining fed this perspective.

It is also aimed to depict the bonds between Marxism and Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and point out the possibility of reading English Cultural Studies approach as an intellectual movement which appeared upon a political demand under certain historical, social and political conditions. It is attempted to analyze the main approaches within the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the social and political context established them and their relationship between Western Marxism on account of a political concern.

The impossibility of introducing Cultural Studies as a project with its main tracks and coining an extensive definition for it has been underlined several times (Nelson, et al., 1992: 2 and Hall, 1990: 11). Despite certain difficulties, it has been attempted to define Cultural Studies as a research field and its tracks. There are attempts to define Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary, beyond disciplines or even anti-disciplines field in which culture is handled on a wide anthropological ground as well as a narrower humanistic concept. In the research field of Cultural Studies, modern industrial society has been analyzed through an interpretative and critical methodology contrary to traditional anthropology; however, there it is rejected to regard culture as 'high culture' and focused on the necessity to deal with cultural production in its relationship to other cultural products, historical and social

structures.

Cultural Studies deals with art, beliefs, institutions and communicative practices of a society in a holistic way and devotes itself to their study. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 4-5) On the other hand, Cultural Studies has its roots in the discord around the concept of culture in mid-1950s. (Hall, 1981: 19) First works in English Cultural Studies are Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961) in which he institutionalizes the relationship between culture and society, Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958) in which he first focuses on the language, beliefs, family structure, relationship between genders and entertainment styles of English working class and then the place of existing cultures in the popular American culture in England and E.P.Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) in which he discusses English working class.

Upon the establishment of Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham (CCCS) in 1964, these works were reevaluated within an institutional settlement. Its first director was Hoggart and S. Hall took over in 1969. Among many other projects, publishing the magazine *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, and other compilation and edition works brought about the works *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (1976) and *Policing Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). These works and their successors are the turning point in contextual Cultural Studies that is an outcome of a shared effort. Besides, English Cultural Studies organized seminars in the fields of ideology and popular culture in collaboration with Open University and reorganized the magazines *New Formation*, *Cultural Studies* and *Screen*. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 9)

These works take culture out of its traditional make-up, handle text in context, imagine the culture within social practices and historical processes and do not center one culture but count other cultures in the analyses. (Hall, 1980: 20) As Schulman stated, when considering the origins of a relatively new movement, the basic question is “under certain momentum, which intellectual and political factors have accelerated its evolution?” The intellectual development that culminates in cultural studies has come out through the contributions of aforementioned works.

However, there should more than a mere chain of works behind a political and intellectual movement. The development of New Left in England during 1950s can be seen as the most significant accelerating factor in the evolution of Cultural Studies. The concern regarding the existing social situation and need to come up with explanations lies behind the Cultural Studies approaches. It is necessary to discuss the ground on which New Left raises, and its productions with their significant meanings and uses to Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies shares basic concerns with New Left

movement as well as belonging to a common social context.

New Left appears as a political movement that is innately socialist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, supports nationalization of large-scale industries and aims to obviate privatization of education and economy. There are certain attempts to enrich social and cultural lives of working class and achieve nuclear disarmament behind this movement. (Schulman, 1998: 5) In 1950s, there were two obstacles before the struggle for socialism, cold war and the rise in the ratio of prevailing wealth in society. 'Keynesian capitalism' averted mass unemployment and caused an improvement in the conditions of working class. (Anderson, 1965: 4) Especially Cold War was the biggest threat risk before the success of socialism in Europe. The anti-communist attitude created by the USA during that period imprinted a severe 'communist world' threat on its public as well as West European countries – even on the ones which had communist parties. (Hobsbawm, 1994)

Cold War enabled the spread of negative image of socialism through the capitalist attempts that put political situation in Soviet Union forward and identified socialism with its negative connotations. (Anderson, 1965: 4) Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which started in 1960s, had essential contributions to the organizational attempts of radical socialist ideology in post-war England. Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament became a protest movement providing new blood to English politics, signifying the rebellion of working and lower – middle class youth against the countries that legalized hydrogen bomb. (Anderson, 1965: 10-11)

During this new period, which started with the help of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, New Left began to be viewed as a more persuasive, reliable and applicable movement. (Schulman, 1998: 5) Marxist intellectuals were again driven to desperation when the activism following the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament impelled English working class to create their own intimate and cooperative institutions instead of rising as a political power. Taking this atmosphere into account, Anderson views New Left as the last capitalism critique positioned itself in current politics. (Anderson, 1965: 15)

New Left reached a peak in the years 1957 and 1960. During this period New Left contained certain unique characteristics of working class movement within itself. First editor of magazine New Left Review S. Hall played an important role in the critical discussion of working class culture and publishing of the works by important figures such as R. Williams and E.P. Thompson. However, New Left failed to produce a consistent and lucid political discourse and drew down itself. Left was denied the ground, which provides the categories and concepts to be employed to analyze its society and create the atmosphere for its transformation. Cultural Studies

acted on the ground created by New Left when determining the topics to be discussed and involvements in actual domain to which these topics correspond. The perspective began to be developed in New Left Review on culture was brought up in Cultural Studies. The developing perspectives on popular culture, sports, comedy, jazz, popular music and panel plays in New Left Review were placed in the center of Cultural Studies.

Changes in the aftermath of war and their damage to the position of working class in its involvement with historical development were explained on institutional grounds by the ones who claimed to transform and revolutionize the current reality. On the other hand, new ways of involvement were being discussed. Moreover, several questions were formulated in Cultural Studies in order to be able to comprehend the changes in the class relationships and cultures and predict new power tendencies. (Hall, 1980: 17)

Cultural Studies was bringing new topics forward and producing new perspectives from the 'inside' in such a Marxist institutionalization atmosphere adopting an approach to view Marxism's ability to contain explicit questions and alternatives. (Hall, 1992: 279) Even though designers of Cultural Studies project were after an intellectual intervention, they had a 'programme' in which the social subjects to be relied on in the case of transforming the existent was considered. They viewed themselves as not mere intellectuals after academic stuff but active participants/interveners in political activities. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 5)

Theories of Cultural Studies has emerged from the aim to face concrete and real social and political problems. The role of intellectual in influencing and guiding social changes has always been discussed in Cultural Studies. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 6) Owing to the political and intellectual inheritance, which is called Western Marxism by Perry Anderson, Cultural Studies has continued its studies. Even though Cultural Studies movement could not write its manifesto and struggled to host different intellectual preferences, it is possible to mention a shared concern guiding its studies. Cultural Studies project has built up a relationship with tradition which deals with culture, ideology and 'superstructure' issues when its reductionist superstructure –substructure dialectic was not able to answer certain questions. It has tried to reckon with the intellectual body, which constitutes basic moments of Western Marxism such as Lukacs, Goldmann, Benjamin, Sartre and the Frankfurt School, and also revise the current problems within the given conceptual framework. Western Marxism refers to a complicated understanding which is against the vulgar reductionism represented by Second and Third International and tackles with culture, ideology and superstructures. (Hall, 1980: 25)

Unlike traditional nineteenth century Marxism identified with class struggle, Western Marxism developed its identity as part of distrust in the traditional 'subject' and its relationship with super structural forms in which the solutions for current problems were sought after. Main questions underlying Western Marxism were formulated with regard to the status of working class, motives behind the emergence of fascism and conditions to reach liberating dimension of reason. Western Marxism made a conscious decision to remain silent in the important fields of historical materialism traditions such as analyses of economic movement codes, political actors of and strategies required to demolish the bourgeois state due to predicaments of its historical atmosphere. (Anderson, 1976)

However, this should not mean that Western Marxism was devoid of an ideal to transform the existing social atmosphere. Many traditional judgments regarding the theological dimensions of development and revolutionary position of proletariat were being revised and discussed in detail. (Bronner, 1993: 5-6) As stated by Perry Anderson, none of the leading Marxist intellectuals of the West had ever attempted to surrender to the status quo or veneer it up even during the worst years of Cold War. (Anderson, 1983)

Cultural Studies allied with a Marxism, which had been redefined and reinterpreted since the beginning of 1960s, within the first few years of its appearance. There was a solid consensus between Marx's emphasis on the class struggle and Center's emphasis on the popular culture that was regarded as the reflection of tacit struggle of working class to express itself. (Schulman, 1998: 3) Cultural Studies attempted to perceive its social and cultural atmosphere depending upon a political engagement. The owners of this effort saw the theoretical effort in Cultural Studies as a tool for ideological struggle themselves. (Slack, Whitt, 1992: 571) Cultural Studies has always been a research field derived from political conjuncture and questions.

The theoretical perspective in Cultural Studies and intellectuals' political demands cannot be grasped without dealing with the political, social and cultural changes in the post war world. The one and only objective of Cultural Studies is to understand current social and cultural transformations. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 15) The rapid social, political and cultural changes in post war Europe caused severe problems in Western social organizations. Especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in almost all Western industrial societies there was a cultural and political turmoil. (Berger, 1993: 40) Those who aimed to understand social changes and direct them were faced with tough questions. Some intellectuals who aimed to understand this transformation and get involved with them gathered around, with a shared concern, to build up a common ideological ground. Cultural Studies bloomed in the aftermath of this intellectual production. Its goals to be achieved and needs to be faced during this

period were historically determined. It is quite hard to process this theoretical ground out of its context. (Turner, 1992: 640 and 650)

Cultural Studies was built up on the grounds to comprehend post-war English society, which on the one hand was dealing with the turmoil of recently over war and on the other hand going through a period of change and development. Beside to the revival of capitalist production, the establishment of welfare state and the emergence of cold war period (Hall, 1980: 16-17) the change in the mindset due to appearance of political pluralism, mixed economy and division of power among center and periphery (Smith, 1991:10) organized economic, political and cultural powers in accordance with these new relations and created a fresh new social equilibrium.

Cultural Studies mainly improved as an attempt to make sense of the post war society and culture which was immensely shaped by industrialization, modernization, urbanization, rapid growth of mass communication, residual commercialization of cultural life, fall of western colonial system and birth of new imperialist forms, global economy, spread of mass culture, new ideological and economic forms motivating migration, nationalism and rebirth of racial and religious feud. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 4-5)

There were questions posed particularly to understand new cultural developments, their consequences with regard to traditional class struggle, class formation and culture, new cultural power and tendencies and on-going historical processes. These questions were first seriously handled within New Left. The intellectual turnout on this ground had the biggest part in conceptualization of cultural debates. It also defined the ground on which Cultural Studies raises, its objectives and agenda carrying with a tension between intellectual and political agenda. (Hall, 1980: 17) Intellectuals working on Cultural Studies project were well aware of and concerned about the fact that capitalist countries of the time had become to conceive an artificial model created by 'the American dream'. (Hall, 1980: 20)

The literary works, which provided basis to Western Marxism, were being translated through New Left Review Books and Merlin Press. Discovering richness of Western Marxism made it possible for Cultural Studies to have an alternative conceptual ground around its unique problems. Those fundamental literary works of Western Marxism resumed the cultural debate around classical ideology problems. These works symbolized a comeback to an agenda set by culture and ideology within which temporal and historical conditions of culture and ideology were argued. While Marxist substructure-superstructure metaphor was being revised, validity issue of media studies, historical analyses, disputes over the methods of ideological analyses and theoretical perspectives were being reexamined. (Hall, 1980: 25)



Though Cultural Studies closely attended several issues discussed in New Left, dispute over predicaments of New Left moved Cultural Studies to a more complex Marxism. (Hall, 1980: 25) In order to avoid potential ambiguity, Cultural Studies referred to other 'disciplines', however, these disciplines were transformed into a functional tool for cultural analyses starting from their 'uniqueness' attitude. It formed bonds with sociology through references to different traditions within itself other than conceptual framework built on the concept of system. (Hall, 1980: 20) Cultural Studies was designed as an interdisciplinary attempt (Schulman, 1998: 1 and Hall, 1980: 15) or forced to be so. (Steedman, 1992: 621) Though this interdisciplinary attitude led to some trouble, it was quite functional while assuming the role of intellectual intervener. Since this attitude is accompanied with an abstinence from strict methodology, these intellectuals had the chance to melt different political attitudes and intellectual works in the same pot. This effort, which identifies Cultural Studies, attempted to reconstruct the existing knowledge around new questions. During that process any sort of prescription for theoretical hiatus was avoided and it was aimed to have a pure intellectual involvement. (Hall: 1980: 15)

Literary criticism, social anthropology and social history were the first ones explored by Cultural Studies. When announcing Center's manifesto Hoggart claimed that its major interest was in then considered to be neglected fields such as popular culture and mass media. (Hall, 1980: 21 and 39). Center for Cultural Studies incorporated different bodies of research during the debates over Marxism, semiotics and several sociological and ethnographic traditions. Racism, hegemony and Thatcherism were thoroughly discussed with a new interest towards Gramsci along with the notion subculture and media studies. Thusly, Cultural Studies repressed previous humanistic judgments and deconstructivist extremities of post-structuralism.

However this progress was held by feminism and subjectivity, politics, gender and sexual desire were brought into question. Cultural Studies recently developed an interest in the ground on which identity defines, experience and positions itself under the influence of race, ethnicity and post colonialism studies and HIV epidemics. Along with these studies, Cultural Studies continued to present significant works on popular culture policies. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 9 and Hall, 1980: 39) Concentration of such works gave the false impression that popular culture is the only question of Cultural Studies. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 11) Reinterpretation of Gramsci in the light of race and gender studies in the late 1970s led Center to review popular culture and class-based assumptions.

Cultural Studies started to work on class-consciousness and culture using empirical even autobiographical methods in time and in S. Hall's chairmanship a



theoretically complicated and concise methodological diversity was revealed. As a Marxist project, Center maintained its interest in 'live experience' by combining it with ethnography. (Schulman, 1998: 4) Owners of works that constitute Cultural Studies tradition tried to reckon with the on-going process putting culture in the center of research. Since they had thought it was not quite possible to understand historical changes, past and now without well-established conceptualization of 'culture', culture was tackled seriously. (Hall, 1981: 20) Culture was regarded as both a life style (its ideas, attitudes, practices, institutions and power system) and commercial goods for all cultural levels (artistic forms, texts, general principles) and even more. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 4-5)

As Hall stated, the contradiction is indeed between two issues, which are both embraced by Cultural Studies. First one is the sphere, where real practices, customs, language and representation of any given specific society in the history, appear and the other one is opposite forms of common sense that is shaped in popular life and contributes to formation of it. (Hall, 1986: 26) In other words, in Cultural Studies culture has been dealt with as values and images through which social groups and classes reciprocate to given historical conditions and relations. And also, it has been treated as tradition and practices that embody these images. (Hall, 1981: 26) In cultural Studies, the meaning of culture has been extended from texts and representations to real practices, belief systems and institutions. (Hall, 1980: 23) Culture is characteristic forms of humane energy and organizational patterns which distinguishes itself among all social practices. So, how to conduct a cultural analysis? Cultural analysis should focus on typical patterns and their relationship among themselves as well as the ways they are experienced and explained highlighting the question 'how'. Its purpose should be grasping the connection between the practices and patterns. Johnson suggests that Cultural Studies is both an intellectual and political tradition, which means Cultural Studies, has dual articulation. Culture is both an object of academic research and a sphere in which political criticism and intervention occur. Though Cultural Studies has never been only about political positioning, but reconstruction of society can also be observed in Cultural Studies. At this point, where working class culture and history is revised and synthesized with progressive traditions in western intellectual history, it is sensible to mention this fact. The most essential question of Cultural Studies is the notion radical, social and cultural change and its practicality issues.

The ones positioned themselves in Cultural Studies do not consider 'cultural studies' as a mere chronicle of cultural change; instead they perceive it as an involvement with this change. (Nelson, et al., 1992: 4) In this context, Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies highly contributed to the development of Cultural Studies as a research field. Moreover, it focused on the necessity to handle

popular culture within its relationship patterns, regard it not as a passive situation but as dynamic field and consider culture as a political element. This interpretation of culture has greatly influenced sociological and anthropological studies especially after 1990s.

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