

“Attacking ‘Support Our Troops’: The Crisis of Cultural Studies in Confronting Militarism.”

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In his book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek analyzes a haunting discussion in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*: the dream of the dead father. Rather than a fear of the phantasmagoric, Žižek (1989, p. 134) explains that the dream is rooted in the mechanics of the symbolic, arguing: “because he does not know that he is dead, he continues to live—he must be reminded of his death or... [rather], he is still living because he has forgotten to die.” Žižek then draws out the social dimensions of his point by using the example of Napoleon. He argues (1989, p. 134): “when Napoleon lost for the first time and was consigned to Elba, he did not know that he was already dead, that his historical role was finished, and he had to be reminded of it through his second defeat at Waterloo.”

What Žižek tries to make clear in this discussion is that the failure to realize that one is already dead represents a crisis within the Symbolic order: a failure to recognize both historical necessity *and* contingency. Žižek’s point is of particular significance for trying to examine what Cultural Studies is now. Indeed, I would argue that Cultural Studies, the Cultural Studies we have known for over 20 years now, is already dead, we just don’t realize it yet. More precisely, the historical role of Cultural Studies has already passed, but we keep acting it out: Cultural Studies is in a paradigmatic crisis but does not seem to realize it. This paradigmatic crisis can best be described as the limitations of analytic critique.

The fundamental object of cultural studies--the contingency of social formations and the hegemonies at stake there in the production of meaning—has been analyzed to the point of exhaustion. In this respect, the history of cultural studies is of particular significance. Though any history is selective of necessity, and historical examinations of Cultural Studies at the Birmingham school can portray it as more coherent, organized and stable than it was experienced, nonetheless, the early work of the Birmingham school produced ground-breaking analyses. This work focused on the social structures that disseminated and maintained systems of inequity based on race, class, and gender at a specific historical juncture. Although work by

Hall, Hebdidge, and McRobbie analyzed specific subject matter, the effect of the scholarship was to clarify on a macro-level the operations of culture. As Stuart Hall (1990, p. 13) describes it, this scholarship served to illuminate “the manifest break-up of traditional culture, especially traditional class cultures...registering the impact of the new forms of affluence and consumer society on the very hierarchical and pyramidal structure of British society.”

When imported into the United States, however, cultural studies became mass produced. The U.S. academic market place, demanding as it does, differentiation, soon required a turn from macro-level analyses of culture, to micro analyses of the texts through which culture is disseminated. As cultural studies grew within the U.S. the micro analyses of texts became increasingly fetishized, esoteric, and only indirectly related to the operations of culture, and more specifically to the hegemonic struggles at stake in a hierarchical and inequitable society. In short, the scholarship of Cultural Studies within the U.S. has become an industry for its own sake, largely divorced of political practice, and out of touch with what Stuart Hall (1990, p. 18) describes as “the gap between theory and practice”. Indeed, Hall (1990, p. 18) seems to anticipate this gap when he writes that it

is not to be overcome by wishing to do so or by declaring that it has just happened. The gap between theory and practice is only overcome in developing a practice in its own right.... And the vocation of intellectuals is not simply to turn up at the right demonstrations at the right moment, but also to alienate that advantage which they have had out of the system, to take the whole system of knowledge itself and, in Benjamin's sense, attempt to put it at the service of some other project.

Hall's concept of the whole system of knowledge brings the issue out of moral pronouncements and back to the paradigmatic, and here the work of Fredric Jameson is particularly significant. For while the mass production of analytic critique has forced Cultural Studies in America into esoteric microanalyses of texts, the structural limits of analytic critique are such that it forecloses political practice to begin with. In his hallmark work, *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson (1981, p. 291) classifies analytic critique as a negative hermeneutics and argues:

Marxist analysis of culture...can no longer be content with its demystifying vocation to unmask and to demonstrate the ways in which a cultural artifact fulfills a specific ideological mission, in legitimating a given power structure, in perpetuating and reproducing the latter....It must not cease to practice this essentially hermeneutic function...but it must also seek through and beyond this...

Further, Jameson describes this going beyond as engaging a “positive hermeneutics” which can roughly be understood as moving towards praxis: as theorizing strategic possibilities for social transformation. Jameson’s argument makes ideological critique the foundation, but only the first step in putting knowledge at the service of a social project. It provides a basis for creating theoretical solutions and strategic planning—to find ways to actually engage in hegemonic struggle.

This essay attempts to model such an approach with respect to the hegemony of militarism in the U.S. The triumph of the hegemony of militarism in contemporary U.S. culture is nowhere more apparent than in both the containment of dissent and the manufacturing of consent for George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq. There was something very peculiar, and quite out of character, with the American media right before Bush invaded Iraq: they actually covered the enormous protests, both domestically and internationally, against the possible war. Even more peculiar was the way in which they covered the protests: holding back on their normal tendency to marginalize social protest. In city after city across America and throughout the world, hundreds of thousands were gathering in the street to make it known that the majority of people do NOT approve of the upcoming war—and the American media gave them a platform.

With such a scale of dissent, and positive media coverage, it would be difficult for anyone to have predicted that those protests would practically dry up over night when American soldiers invaded Iraq. With remarkable speed, dissent disappeared and the American media quickly moved into what has become their traditional role when the country is at war: propaganda. In addition to a shift in course by the mainstream media, dissent was also contained by a specific cultural practice: displaying magnet strips shaped and painted in the form of “yellow ribbons”



saying "Support Our Troops".

The most popular place of this display

was the back end of automobiles.

If no one could have predicted the speed with which dissent withered away, nearly anyone could have predicted that "Support Our Troops" would be the dominant cultural mantra used to silence dissent against the war. The reason is quite simple, the use of the slogan "Support Our Troops" was the dominant technique used to curb dissent in the first Gulf War.

The effectiveness of the slogan lies in its abilities to achieve several functions. Chief among these functions is to set the terms of the debate. The term "Support Our Troops" grew out in part from the power struggle in the American Congress over the means by which to oust the Iraqi Army from its occupation of Kuwait. The Democrats were in favor of diplomatic means enforced through economic sanctions. The Republicans and a Republican President, wanted to use military force. As a means for garnering public support, and strategically plotting for an election cycle, the Republicans consistently aligned themselves with the American military, and implied that Democrats were not: that indeed, Democrats lacked faith in the American military. Thus, when military force was applied, the rhetorical trap was sprung: support for military action was intimately tied to supporting the troops.

In addition, however, "Support Our Troops" was also tied to an implied history—albeit a fictitious one—of liberal excess. This history blames the debacle of the Vietnam War on American liberalism, seen (arguably) as the backbone of the "Anti-War" movement. In this

historical interpretation, the outrageousness of the “Anti-War” movement intimidated politicians, who in turn limited the military and their use of force in Vietnam. As a result, this history claims, America lost the war in Vietnam because the American military had to fight with one hand tied behind their back. Within this historical view, there are two major symbols of the outrageousness of the anti-war movement. The first is the image of Jane Fonda touring a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft battery. The other is anti-war protestors spitting on American veterans when they returned home, and calling them “baby-killers”. For conservatives and traditionalists, each of these events stand as symbols of unprosecuted acts of treason protected by the excesses of the U.S. constitution and its insistence on the sanctity of free speech. The problem with the latter event, however, is that it has subsequently been deconstructed as largely fictitious (Lembcke, 2000).

Fictitiousness notwithstanding, the phrase “Support Our Troops” circulated over and over to insist that this historical interpretation of Vietnam and the tragic lesson of hamstringing the military NEVER be repeated. The continual recirculation of the slogan “Support Our Troops” thus became the means to ensure that there would be no protest, no dissent, and ESPECIALLY no Anti-American liberalism. Drawing on the model of the Congressional power struggle, the slogan worked within popular culture to define the terms of the debate: either you were with the troops and thus had standing, or you were not supportive of the troops and were the equivalent of a traitor, and thus, had no standing to debate the war to begin with.

The effectiveness of this rhetorical strategy was then cemented with the speed of military success in Kuwait. The Persian Gulf War was over before the American Peace Movement could even begin to contest or successfully deconstruct the slogan. In what has to be a major failure of the American Peace Movement, however, it failed to anticipate that the strategy would be recycled, and had no counter strategy twelve years later when American military force was deployed again. The failure of the peace movement to anticipate and strategize against this signifying practice is not the fault of the peace movement alone. The work of Cultural Studies in any organized and sustained manner was distinctly lacking. From the First Gulf War to the invasion of Iraq there is a distinct lack of scholarship, especially within the field of Media Studies,

on militarism as a hegemonic process. What scholarship does exist—f or example examinations of the Vietnam War film genre—remain fairly locked in what Jameson describes as negative hermeneutics.

In order to confront “Support Our Troops” when it comes around again for the third time, Cultural Studies has to break out of its disciplined prohibition against the proscriptive and enter into what Jameson describes as the positive hermeneutic. It must engage in one of the fundamental but underutilized strategies of resistance: anticipating the actions of the other. Indeed, I would argue that the task of Cultural Studies now, is to begin anticipating OTHER strategies for consensus the next time around, but within the scope of this article, and to provide a more concrete example of positive hermeneutics, I focus here on the distinct possibility that “Support Our Troops” will be trotted out again.

The collective voice of the magnetic sticker campaign is of fundamental significance for considering the parameters of effective contestation. The sheer number of stickers gave image to a collective voice of consensus: a homefront army of support. In addition, the magnetic sticker campaign speaks explicitly in the affirmative: supporting the troops is a call to action—to do things that will provide the supply of consent. This image of a groundswell of support is significant not only for its consent, but for a position against dissent. The magnetic sticker campaign also carries an implicit threat of the collective: the threat of invisible retaliation for NOT supporting the troops. The massive amount of stickers surrounding the landscape made clear that while not everyone sporting a sticker would engage in retaliation against dissent, the violent ideologues who attach themselves to militarism and engage in such activity would be protected by the invisibility of large numbers.

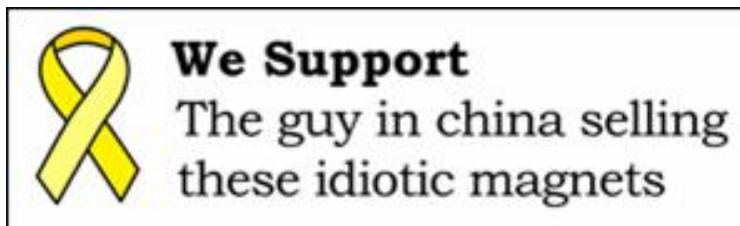
Only after a period of time—when the famous “Mission Accomplished” statement proved to be false could a number of “counter campaigns” more safely show on bumper stickers:
Support the Troops Impeach Bush



No More Blood for Oil,



and We Support the Guy In China Making these Idiotic Magnets,



are some of the responses that

surfaced post facto, and saw limited effectiveness. Part of the reason for this limited effectiveness is that it fit within an already established pattern of signifying exchange best described as tit-for-tat bumper sticker wars. When fundamentalist Christians came out with a "What Would Jesus Do?" campaign it was followed by a "Who Would Jesus Bomb" campaign. When school systems came out with a "My Child is an Honor Student at Such and Such School" it was followed by "My Child Beat Up Your Honor Student" stickers. While it is accurate to say

that “Tit-for-Tat” at least puts up resistance to the circulation of meaning, its actual effectiveness is marginal.

At least one of the reasons that counter campaigns lack effectiveness is that they do not speak in the affirmative. Within the context of contemporary American culture, the affirmative is associated with empowerment: it speaks of doing, of accomplishing and constructing. Speaking in the negative, on the other hand, is associated with undoing—with revolution, and thus disempowerment—not surprisingly for an established society built upon hierarchical power relationships.

The questionable effectiveness of the counter campaign thus points to the necessity of defining important parameters for constructing effective resistance to hegemonic power. At least one of those parameters is to be in the position of action not reaction. Anticipating, as it can, that “Support Our Troops” will be rolled out a third time, the peace movement should have a response ready and waiting for that moment PRIOR to military action: for that period of time, however small it might be, when the government starts building consent. That is the time to engage in a symbolic campaign as a means of anticipating and countering the actions of the other, rather than reacting after the fact.

Furthermore, analyzing the yellow ribbon campaign yields indications of other necessary parameters for effectiveness. Chief among these is, obviously, collective voice. No doubt, organizing the peace movement is like herding cats, but the time between now and then should be spent trying to agree on what the anticipated response is, so it is ready to roll when the moment arrives. In addition, the response should speak from the position of power, not from the margins. Since the peace movement is clearly on the margins it can not speak from a position of de facto and literal power, so it needs a figurative place of power. This need to speak from a position of power leads to another important consideration: using the associative power of symbols. If the hegemonic forces of militarism so reflexively trot out “Support Our Troops” for the next incursion, after it has been tarnished with its association with the Iraq War, then the peace movement should use that association against itself. Indeed, it may not be too late to start using that association NOW as a means for building consensus to end the war.

In using the symbol's association with a disastrous war based on fictions, an anticipated response could speak from a position of power: those that use and understand the symbol are in the position of knowledge, the place of those "in the know"—the collective that refuses to be hoodwinked. It is perhaps, more figurative power than actual power, but it still attempts to speak from that position and not the margins. Furthermore, speaking from a position of power is fundamental for another reason: it displaces the negative voice onto the activity of deconstruction and opposition.

Condensing all these parameters into a response, I came up with the following Symbols, "Support the Troops Again?" And "We Don't Get Fooled Again". Their mastery of graphic design is clearly lacking, but the essentials are there for a more sophisticated version:



In offering such a solution, I am quick to point out that engaging in positive hermeneutics is not a mandate for turning Cultural Studies practitioners into graphic designers, film-makers, or other artistic endeavors. Rather, its objective is to move practitioners from reaction to production of cultural solutions, of effective discourses of some kind. Indeed, my goal here is not to gain

acceptance and recognition for a “great” design, but just the opposite. By putting an actual solution out here in a public forum, I’m hoping to start debate. My goal is to have someone smarter than me DISAGREE with my analysis, and in so doing, inspire the intellect of someone else, who will come up with a better, more effective solution that would set off a chain reaction of solutions until somebody designs a solution that would actually be successful in contesting the hegemony of militarism. That is how we should work in Cultural Studies, now.

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