

**The Great Divide over Culture and Politics:
Cultural Studies and Semiotics of Culture.**

The idea behind the paper was to compare two different approaches to the study of culture: the British tradition originated by the Birmingham Centre and semiotics of culture formulated by Yuri Lotman. The two schools, of very different paradigms, underlying interests and goals, developed alongside and yet in relative disregard of each other. The comparison remains a valid project; its importance foregrounded by the political, ideological and social developments of the last two decades, which shook some of the foundations of both traditions and made the need to return to the basic premises more urgent. Yet, before a comprehensive analysis is offered, it is worth considering why cultural studies and semiotics of culture speak such different languages and why, nearly twenty years after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, there are hardly any signs of dialogue.¹ The question itself is vast, the reasons very complex and offering a short answer runs the risk of oversimplification and generalization. But one might say with some justification that the differences between the two projects stem from the different experiences and hence understanding of the issues crucial for cultural studies - the problems of politics, ideology and individual agency.

Cultural Studies has gradually moved from the periphery to the centre of academia. Always actively anti-disciplinary, it has, unavoidably, become a discipline – however heterogeneous and unorthodox it still wants to see itself as. Cultural studies, as John Hartley (2003, p. 3) put it, was a bit 1960s and ‘had some of the self-delusion of flower-power’. One of the hopes was that by radically opening up to the world ‘out there’, it would avoid codification, which had stalled other disciplines. How futile this hope has proved, Ien Ang (2005, p. 477) says she realizes when answering the question ‘what do you do?’ at the hairdresser’s, as the answer ‘I teach cultural studies’ tends to close the conversation for good. In a plethora of different answers as to where cultural studies should and would go next, one can see two major trends. The first advocates a return to its roots and proposes revitalizing the sense of mission and political ethos that accompanied what is often seen as an almost mythical birth of the project. The other questions the discipline’s most basic presumptions; interrogates the dimensions that have been overlooked, downplayed

¹ An important step in initiating a dialogue between the two disciplines was Schönle’s collection of essays *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, published in 2006.

or neglected. For its proponents, as Catherine Belsey (2003, p.19) put it, the main concern now 'is not about what cultural studies does, and does well, but about the areas it appears to leave out'. Arguably, in this process of claiming new territories, Lotman's semiotics of culture might prove useful.

On the other side of the Continent, in Eastern Europe, the study of culture which includes the everyday and the popular is still trying to find an appropriate language and institutional place. There is a strong need to renegotiate the positions between what is called "kulturoznawstwo", heavily influenced by semiotics, anthropology and sociology, and the whole know-how of the cultural studies of 'the triple-A axis of the Anglo-American-Australian region' (Hartley 2003, p.7), which does not seem to fit in the national contexts.

If one were to point to the area in which the differences between the two traditions are most striking, it would, in all probability, be politics. While cultural studies is openly a political project, semiotics of culture appears completely withdrawn from political fervour. The 'sense of political urgency' (McRobbie 1992, p.720), which for many proponents of cultural studies is the last tenet of its identity, in the writings of Lotman and his followers is nowhere to be found.² This disparity surfaces in many Western - Eastern European academic encounters. From the perspective of cultural studies, Eastern Europe appears immersed in the Hegelian absolutes and reluctant to acknowledge the hegemony of the capitalist world system. In turn, to many Eastern European scholars, the rhetoric of cultural studies seems excessively militant; its conceptualization of power and individual agency hovers between utopian and excessively pessimistic. The fact that, as Blaim (1998, p. 337) put it, it 'bears more than only a superficial affinity to communist newspeak [clearly] does not facilitate the reception'.

In fact, lack of engagement with current politics has been the most common criticism levelled at Lotman by western scholars and many share Kristeva's opinion of him as 'a generalizing theoretician' (1994, p. 376). In case of Lotman, as with many other intellectuals of the time, the reason behind the apparent withdrawal from political critique is quite simple - theorizing power explicitly in a communist regime was not possible. But 'tactical concerns for self-preservation' (Schönle 2006, p. 184) hardly account for the present and to understand why the sense of political urgency is slow to sip into the Eastern European discourse of culture, it is necessary to look in more detail at the historical, social and political environments in which both traditions originated.

² In fact, Lotman's later works, written after the collapse of communism, are unsurprisingly more political.

Cultural Studies in Britain developed when the very concept of the political was in crisis. Although the post-war consensus was gradually weakening, there was a general sense that the major socio-economic problems had been solved and political struggles finished. Britain was said to be a society where class had disappeared - the working class had become 'bourgeois' and the citizen had been replaced by the consumer. In this context, the project of cultural studies offered a new conceptualisation of where social and political struggle was taking place. In its own definition, the discipline was a mode of consciousness-raising. In the Soviet bloc in the 1960s, the role of politics and the individual experience of the political were strikingly different. The scale of the state intervention in individual life was incomparably greater and usually more gruesome. Politics, in the communist totalitarian or, to use a less contested term, authoritarian system, was anything but subtle. The dominant ideology was far from being an 'invisible veil over the eyes of the peoples', as it was, at the time, conceptualised in the West.

The difference becomes clear when we look at the Western- and Eastern-European experience of politics and ideology in terms of systems of signification. Capitalist ideological negotiations, as Stuart Hall put it, are characterised by the invisibility of signification. Propositions about the world are presented as neutral facts; media messages appear as natural so that certain representations of reality are recognized as obvious and commonsensical. Hall calls it 'the reality effect' (cited in Turner 1990, p. 188). In contrast, the communist system was characterised by an enormous gap between the word and reality. The relentless media propaganda about the success of socialist economy and eternal friendship of the 'voluntary' member states was immediately contradicted by the experience of the everyday. As opposed to the invisible signification of capitalism, communication in the communist bloc could be described as 'nonreferential signification' (Urban 2006, p. 123). It meant that, on the one hand, the 'official descriptions of the prevailing order lack[ed] the practical referents' and, on the other hand, the actual practices of the Communist party and the police state 'could not be named or discussed' (Urban 2006, p. 122). In effect, the production of reality, like in a deconstructionist's dream, constructed and immediately cancelled itself. The very scale and materiality of oppression ultimately rendered the whole project futile. In bleaker times, the official version of the real seemed overpowering; in more spirited contexts, it appeared as a mere parody of itself – but it was never subtle, let alone invisible. The strategy of wrenching signifiers free from signifieds meant that the incredulity towards metanarrative(s) and the 'postmodern repudiation of any predictive teleology' (Tishmaneanu 2000, p. 160) became an important part of the totalitarian and arguably also post-totalitarian mind. So, while

the project of cultural studies has been about demystifying the ideology in the everyday, such an undertaking in Eastern Europe would be rather pointless. In Poland, discussing the crudity of the ideological system was, and in a way still is, a national hobby.

The gap between the official definition of reality and the private experience of that reality, combined with radical suppression of the subject within the public sphere, affected the process of semiotization of the public/private division. In general, the construction of subjectivity testified to the individual experience of the split between the public self, embedded in the disciplinary discourses of power and the private self, consciously distancing itself from those structures; between what one said in public and thought in private, between the surface and hidden meaning.³ In effect, the private was seen as both a potential refuge from politics and as extremely politicized. Hence, paradoxical though it may look from the point of view of western theoreticians, public activity of Eastern European critical intellectuals was undertaken in the name of depoliticization of the everyday. Dissidents in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland (the three countries with the most similar experience of opposition) contrasted the ideocratic Soviet state with 'antipolitics', the non-Machiavellian political practice. Similarly illustrative of the difference between the two political and cultural systems is the semantic legacy of the notion of individualism - in the West denounced as the pillar of capitalist mythology, in Soviet-style socialism celebrated as a remedy for the oppression, stultification and uniformity enforced by collectivism and class solidarity. The corollary of it was the importance of the notion of an autonomous, moral, critical subject, which, as Kennedy (1994, p. 25) rightly observed is one of the 'most important fixtures of civil-society discourse, but at the same time one of the most problematic'. In contrast to the Foucauldian project, which foregrounds determinism inscribed in discourses of power and proposes the idea of the self as an effect of disciplinary structures, dissident identity politics focused on strategies of empowerment. It concentrated on the different ways an individual can wrest some degree of autonomy through the development of civil society.

Thus, as western critical theory was advancing the end of metaphysics of subjectivity, Eastern Europe was undergoing one of the most important transformations in its history. In less than a year, the system, which a few months before had appeared as solid and unchallengeable, collapsed in an almost surreal manner. Yet, unlike the events of 1968, which spurred the whole phase of intellectual and political activity, the revolutions of 1989 have not really affected critical thinking

³ Staniszkis (1979, pp. 178-80) compares the condition of an individual in a socialist state to a schizoid condition. She also discusses the forms of adaptation characteristic of different social classes.

in the West. Within the framework of cultural studies, Eastern Europe has remained a bit of a shadow land - neither the centre nor the periphery, neither the self nor the Other; though clearly different, it is, in a way, not different enough. As Tismaneanu (2000, p. 154) put it: 'The moral lesson of dissidents [...] was not fully grasped and therefore swiftly jettisoned; more than a critique of monopolistic Leninist regimes, the philosophy of civic emancipation advocated by Eastern Europe's critical intellectuals bore upon the fate of modernity and our understanding of the relationship between means and ends in the organisation of social space'. The events of 1989, he continues, should be seen first and foremost as 'the rebellion of the mind' testifying to 'the force of critical reason' (Tismaneanu 2000, p. 163). Indeed, while the notions of critical subject and civil society are often dismissed as remnants of the Enlightenment, they might, given the right context, offer some insight into the issues crucial for the contemporary debate in the West – the questions of oppression, resistance and the relationship between an individual and the state.

While these general remarks clearly fail to do justice to the complexity of the Eastern European construction of subjectivity, they are meant to serve as a framework for further analysis, which might assist in re-negotiating the position between western conceptualization of identity and Eastern European experiences. It is important that the idea of the 'death of the subject' is not accepted unreflectively but contextualized and measured against the region's own history. After all, as Iain Chambers (1996) aptly put it, when talking about the end of the world, we should always specify whose world we are talking about.

When discussing the differences in the experience of politics, ideology and individual agency on the two sides of the Iron Curtain, it is necessary to consider the complex relations of both traditions to Marxism and the whole set of premises that are associated with the right and the left. These relations are undoubtedly one of the main reasons why the dialogue between cultural studies and semiotics of culture has not really started. In Eastern Europe, the idea of Marxism as inherently liberating would naturally be difficult to accept. Eastern European intellectuals are manifestly sensitive to its authoritarian or, for that matter, utopian aspects, now reviewed by post-Marxists. Dissident thought grew out of strong reservations about ideology and the conventional dichotomies of the left and the right. In purely practical terms, it means that the use of much of cultural studies' canon becomes rather problematic. In contrast, in cultural studies, which developed by questioning a number of binary categories, those of the right and the left remain crucial for the process of self-definition. One might say that by redefining the political agenda from the class struggle to women's, race and sexual minorities issues, cultural studies could stay

within the same paradigm, framed by Marxism, whereas engaging in a dialogue with the historical, political and cultural situation in the communist bloc, especially with the events that led to the collapse of the system, would demand a radical redefinition of its most basic categories.

While I am focusing here on the questions of ideology and politics, similar contrasts can be seen in other areas that defined the two traditions at the start. Whereas Williams and Hoggart spoke on behalf of the marginalized working class, Eastern European intelligentsia faced persecution from the regime, which tried to create a new socialist, intellectual elite of working class origin. Cultural studies accordingly defined itself in opposition to Leavisism and turned to working class and popular culture as a way of resisting elitism and hegemony. In Eastern Europe, working class ethics was at the heart of the official propaganda. Elitism and intellectualism were not only undesired but also rather suspect. In effect, many highly respected artists were dissidents and the link between high art and political resistance has a long and strong tradition. Therefore, in the Eastern European context, Fiske's theory of high culture as promoting decontextualized, depoliticized readings and offering a sense of alienation between an individual and cultural production would not really be applicable.

Both schools, though not that distant geographically, have developed in very different political, historical, cultural and, most importantly, ideological environments and defined their paradigms accordingly. What brings them together is a commitment to heterogeneity and the belief in the role of periphery as a position to contest the hegemony of the centre. At the same time, both seem restricted by what they leave out and a solution might lie in a radical embrace of the other, especially now that the situation in both parts of Europe has changed dramatically. The revolutions of 1989 may have proved the 'force of critical reason' but they also brought in the more subtle forms of ideological intervention. As the shape of power has changed, so should the forms of resistance or, for that matter, of critical analysis and this is where the know-how of cultural studies may prove invaluable. In Britain, the catchwords that defined the political agenda in the 1960s have been incorporated in the dominant ideology. The notions of political correctness and multiculturalism, as Žižek pointed out, can be seen as a new form of fundamentalism. Thus, probably one of the most important and difficult tasks facing cultural studies would be confronting its own biases and hegemonic status. In the process, cultural semiotics' sensitivity to the diversity of codes and messages, regardless of their political and ideological roots, might prove useful. After all, if there is a common lesson learnt from the projects of the twentieth

century, it is that neither the right nor the left is inherently democratic and hegemony, as Lotman put it, is first and foremost a prerogative of the centre.

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