

Cultural Identity and Ideology

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For many of today's social theorists and cultural critics, questions of identity are a central concern. In this paper I examine one highly influential strand of theorising about identity, associated primarily with the discipline of Cultural Studies. Here, whilst identity is certainly a key focus, it is also one which some have begun to question. Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding, for instance, editors of a recent collection of essays on the state of the discipline, comment that: 'If, indeed, cultural studies is in transition, its current stage of evolution is much preoccupied with questions of collective identity'. Yet as they go on to caution:

The embrace of identity, and its excavation from the bedrock of personal history, adds perhaps another mile or two to cultural studies' movement away from its own intellectual 'roots', roots once firmly planted in the social and material, not the self-actualising, world.[1]

If this is correct, the pairing of 'cultural identity and ideology' might seem an odd one, yoking together the new preoccupation with the old. In fact, however, there is a certain continuity between the contemporary discussion of identity and past work in Cultural Studies, which took theorising and analysing ideology as its central concern.

To recount the entire history of Cultural Studies is clearly well beyond the scope of this paper, but it is nonetheless important to gain some sense of the theoretical antecedents of today's discussion. I would therefore like to focus on the work of Stuart Hall, who has been a central figure in British Cultural Studies for 40 years, and widely influential as an international representative of the discipline. Such a focus is, I think, amply justified not just by the way that Hall's career – as the first editor of *New Left Review*, Director of Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and, until recently, Professor of Sociology at the Open University – has placed him at the centre of the intellectual and institutional development of the discipline, but also because his work has often synthesised and developed some of the most important themes and evolving concerns of Cultural Studies. As Terry Eagleton says, if Stuart Hall did not exist, one might feel obliged to invent him, such is his exemplary quality.[2]

The key move which Hall makes – in common with many other theorists – is one derived from structuralism: explaining ideology, politics and culture as working 'like a language'. The main criticism this has drawn, suggested in Ferguson and Golding's comments above, is that a too narrow focus on the discursive has obscured consideration of the material and social determinants of culture. I wish to argue, in relation to work on both ideology and identity, however, that the underlying problem is actually a weak conception of agency. Indeed, examining the problematic character of agency in the 'discursive' approach helps to explain why identity should have come to be seen as such an interesting topic for cultural criticism in the first place.

To begin with, I wish to set out the sorts of claims made by Cultural Studies about why identity is an important issue today, and examine some of the criticisms which have been made of this perspective.

Cultural Identity and its Critics

The issue of identity demands to be taken seriously. As Paul Gilroy claims:

We live in a world where identity matters. It matters both as a concept, theoretically, and as a contested fact of contemporary political life. The word itself has acquired a huge contemporary resonance, inside and outside the academic world.[\[3\]](#)

The idea that identity is important because it is contested or in crisis is commonly invoked. As Kobena Mercer remarks: 'identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty'.[\[4\]](#) Beyond the general sense of 'identity in crisis', it is possible to discern two ways in which the importance of identity is explained. Firstly, academic debates about identity are said to key into and explain broad processes of political and cultural change which have problematised traditional understandings of identity. David Morley and Kevin Robins, for example, make this kind of argument in relation to 'globalisation':

Is not the very category of identity itself problematical? Is it at all possible, in global times, to regain a coherent and integral sense of identity? Continuity and historicity of identity are challenged by the immediacy and intensity of global cultural confrontations.[\[5\]](#)

Comfortable assumptions about identity, a sense of coherence and integrity, are said to be problematised by global cultural changes. As Ferguson and Golding point out, questions of identity – and its corollary, difference – are also raised in relation to numerous other topics and debates: 'feminism, ethnicity, sexual orientation, Eurocentrism, the diasporic, the post-colonial and the post-national'.[\[6\]](#)

If identity raises key questions in relation to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity in Western societies, it is also often seen as important in explaining the post-communist political landscape in the East. These are 'large-scale political upheavals', as Kathryn Woodward comments, which have 'given rise to the assertion of new national and ethnic identities and the search for lost identities':

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR in 1989 created significant repercussions in the field of political struggles and affiliations. Communism was no longer there as a point of reference in the definition of political positions. Earlier forms of ethnic, religious and national identification have re-emerged in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to fill the void.[\[7\]](#)

The break-up of established identities and affiliations, the re-emergence of old identities, and the forging of new identities, are frequently seen not just as defining features of post-communist societies, but as among the driving forces of change –

particularly in the context of supposedly 'ethnic' wars and conflicts, such as those in the former Yugoslavia.[\[8\]](#)

Yet if, as Gilroy says, identity is not merely of scholarly interest, there is nevertheless a strong sense, in much writing on identity and difference, of a definite political and theoretical agenda. This constitutes a second reason for the claimed importance of identity. As Cornel West elaborates:

Distinctive features of the new cultural politics of difference are to trash the monolithic and homogenous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific, and particular; and to historicise, contextualise, and pluralise by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting, and changing.[\[9\]](#)

It is not simply that identity is thought to have been problematised by various political and cultural shifts, it is also the express purpose of many theorists of identity to 'trash' one set of ideas and celebrate another. Although Cultural Studies can claim a certain sensitivity to changes, which it seeks to explain in terms of a crisis of identity, my interest here is primarily in how this academic 'cultural politics' has arisen and developed.

The key idea at the heart of this theoretical agenda is that, as Hall puts it, 'Identities are...constituted within, not outside representation'.[\[10\]](#) There is no pre-existing 'essential self' which is then represented or expressed; rather, subjectivity and identity are 'constructed within discourse'. There is no 'unitary' subject, 'identical to itself across time', but rather identity is always unstable, fragmented and contingent, since it is dependent on the exclusion of that which is 'Other'. It should be noted that this perspective, which is informed by post-structuralist theory, and which constitutes the predominant strand of thought about identity in Cultural Studies, is different from, and sees itself as largely opposed to, what is conventionally thought of as 'identity politics'. As Edward Said writes:

Identity as such is about as boring a subject as one can imagine. Nothing seems less interesting than the narcissistic self-study that today passes in many places for identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmations of roots, cultural pride, drum-beating nationalism and so on. We have to defend peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated because they are considered inferior, but that is very different from aggrandising a past invented for present reasons.[\[11\]](#)

Whilst expressing themselves in more measured terms, others have reached a similar conclusion. Hall, for example, acknowledges the recovery and celebration of 'roots' as having played a valuable strategic role:

We should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails. "Hidden histories" have played a critical role in the emergence of many of the most important social movements of our time – feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist.[\[12\]](#)

However, Hall's own intervention in the debate about identity is to recast the terms in which identity is understood: not as a hidden essence to be uncovered, but as an active process of representation or discursive construction. It is for the same reason that West prefers to write of the 'cultural politics of difference', rather than identity politics.

It is precisely the importance attached to processes of discursive construction which has attracted most criticism, although other points of disagreement have also been raised. Judith Butler, whose own work on gender identity shares much in common with Hall's position on race and ethnicity, lists a number of common complaints:

...that the cultural focus of left politics has abandoned the materialist project of Marxism, that it fails to address questions of economic equity and redistribution, that it fails as well to situate culture in terms of a systematic understanding of social and economic modes of production; that the cultural focus of left politics has splintered the Left into identitarian sects, that we have lost a set of common ideals and goals, a sense of a common history, a common set of values, a common language and even an objective and universal mode of rationality; that the cultural focus of left politics substitutes a self-centred and trivial form of politics that focuses on transient events, practices and objects rather than offering a more robust, serious and comprehensive vision of the systematic interrelatedness of social and economic conditions.[13]

It is interesting to note that, because of the explicitly political concerns of much academic writing on identity, the objections enumerated by Butler all relate to a discussion of the proper focus of left-wing politics. Perhaps the key point raised in this respect is that the preoccupation with identity has led to a politically debilitating fragmentation.[14] Theoretically, it is possible to discern three criticisms.

The first is that writing on identity often entails a celebration of particularism. In contrast, some critics have attempted to reconcile a focus on identity with a more universalist outlook. Jorge Larrain, for example, concurs with Hall's anti-essentialist understanding of cultural identity, but wishes to marry this with a notion of universalist values which he derives from Jürgen Habermas. The sort of universalist project he has in mind is one in which nation states, recognising the 'constructedness' of identity, determine to forge a national identity which involves 'integration and tolerance of differences'. [15] There is clearly an impulse to defend universalism, but the actual defence offered is unfortunately rather weak. Larrain himself, indeed, remains sceptical of Habermas's own somewhat implausible examples of how this tolerant universalism might work: the European Community and the contemporary German state. A more successful defence of universalism – and a more thoroughgoing critique of particularist approaches to race and identity – is that advanced by Kenan Malik. As he points out, there is a relationship between a universalist outlook and one which retains some conception of a human essence:

Without such a common essence, equality would be a meaningless concept. If humanity did not form a single category...then equality between different human individuals and groups would be...meaningless.[16]

The particularist celebration of identity and difference leads to a lowering of horizons: from the demand for equality, to what Malik characterises as ‘the right to be different’.

A second criticism is that the anti-humanist theoretical tradition of Cultural Studies lacks a clear sense of agency. Butler’s comments above also relate this to the lack of a universalist perspective: instead of unity there is fragmentation; in place of agency and change there is a static ‘identitarianism’. However, whilst some critics have worried about the dissolution of the subject entailed in post-structuralist writing on identity, the defence of subjectivity and agency has also often tended to take a rather weak form. Douglas Kellner, for example, attempts to refute ‘postmodern claims concerning the complete dissolution of the subject’, but feels obliged to admit the force of the anti-humanist critique, acknowledging that:

...it is an open question as to whether one wants to keep using the category of the subject in cultural theory and elsewhere. The concept of the subject has been shown to be socially constructed and the notion of an unified, coherent and essential subject illusory.[\[17\]](#)

As I have indicated, it is the weak conception of agency, expressed here in terms of the crisis of the subject, which is the key underlying problem in writing on identity, and which also renders a universalist outlook problematic. To anticipate: the theoretical tradition in which difference is celebrated, identity and subjectivity seen to be in crisis, is one which takes the weakness or absence of agency – specifically, working-class agency – as its starting point. Scepticism about the ‘universal class’ of Marxism as an agency for historical change is precisely what gives rise to the emphasis on identity and difference in the first place. Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that this is a perspective which is opposed to universalism. This is perhaps why Larrain’s projected defence of universalism is rather tentative, and why, despite a searching critique of Althusserian work on ideology, he agrees with the anti-essentialist view of identity which derives from it: he shares Hall’s scepticism about the universal class, describing Marx’s outlook as Eurocentric and ideological in this respect.[\[18\]](#)

The third criticism is the one identified already, repeated again in Butler’s summary: that a focus on the discursive tends to obscure social determination. This tendency is also criticised by Greg Philo and David Miller, who describe work on cultural identity as one of a number of ‘dead ends’ in Media and Cultural Studies and social science.[\[19\]](#) In particular, they highlight a tendency in the work of Hall and others in this field to slip between two apparently contradictory positions. On one hand there is the view that our sense of ourselves is constructed by, or is an ‘effect of’, discourse: ‘discourse “speaks” through us’. Such deterministic explanations, as they note, ‘tend to lack any sense of agency’. Yet on the other hand, there is also often an emphasis on the active role that people play in constructing identities: ‘that is, identities are not determined by socioeconomic forces, but are “creatively” put together’. This, Philo and Miller argue, is the problem: identity-construction is understood as free-floating and arbitrary, and there is a lack of any sense of determination. The underlying problem in both positions is ‘a tendency to slip into cultural and epistemological relativism and therefore...an inability to analyse or discuss the real natural, material and historical circumstances in which identities are forged’. It is assumed that the question of identity is an important one, but what is seen to be lacking is an ‘empirical account of how people actually construct their

sense of self in real social relationships in the context of competing forces and interests’.

Whilst the critique advanced by Philo and Miller and others is important, I will argue that the problem needs to be understood slightly differently. There is, as discussed below, a similar slippage in earlier work on ideology. There too, a deterministic view often seems to slide into one in which ideology is treated as a free-floating sphere. In fact, however, the contradiction is more apparent than real. The difficulty is actually not a lack of determinism but a surfeit of it: the, at best, weak sense of agency is again the underlying problem. Furthermore, it is by no means obvious that ‘identity’ is the central and significant issue that it claims to be. Whilst it is true that much writing on identity is, as Philo and Miller charge, ‘speculative’ and tends to lack strong empirical support, the framework in which identity has developed as a focus for critical attention is one which is predicated on the weakness of subjectivity and agency. To clarify this I now wish to look in more detail at the work of Stuart Hall.

Stuart Hall and the ‘Cultural Turn’

It is possible to discern a series of theoretical breaks and continuities in Hall’s work, ranging from the thought of the early New Left, through the influence of structuralism and Althusserian Marxism, to the espousal of Gramsci and the theory of post-Fordism. Hall’s work has been prolific and wide-ranging, its critical positions often both eclectic and subtly nuanced, so it is not feasible to do full justice to it here. What I would like to attempt to do, however, is to sketch out some key themes for the present discussion, which have been important both in the development of the discipline of Cultural Studies and in recent debates about identity. This overview indicates that the problems noted with current thinking about cultural identity are not simply recent difficulties, caused, perhaps, by the pernicious influence of post-modernism, but have deeper roots.

The intellectuals of the early New Left, who saw themselves as forging a new ‘third way’ between social-democracy and Stalinism in the late 1950s, opened a dialogue between Marxism and cultural criticism which had long-lasting effects on the trajectory of Cultural Studies.^[20] For the purposes of the present discussion, there are two aspects of New Left thought which are significant. The first is an interest in, and concern about, the ways in which traditional working-class identifications were becoming eroded. Stuart Hall wrote in *Universities and Left Review* in 1958 of the new ‘sense of classlessness’ which characterised Britain in the ‘affluent’ ‘fifties. In part, this was explained as being a result of socio-economic changes which had resulted in a shift towards ‘consumerism’. As Hall put it: ‘Capitalism as a social system is now based upon consumption’. At the same time, however, this was also an argument about the ‘changing patterns of life, attitudes and values’ which were part of this consumerism, and an argument against ‘vulgar-Marxist’ determinism. ^[21]

A second important theme in the thought of the New Left is the deconstruction of what Raymond Williams calls ‘the *selective* tradition: that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as “*the* tradition”, “*the* significant past”’.^[22] In terms of literature, for instance, Hall asks:

Why is it that the text, the many texts, the many signifying practices which are present in any social formation have yielded, as the

administered curriculum of literary studies, these ten books up to the top; then these twenty books, with a question mark above them; then those fifty books which we know about but which we only need to read very quickly; and then those hundreds of thousands of texts nobody ever reads? That hierarchy itself, which constitutes the selective tradition in literary studies, becomes the first object to be interrogated.[23]

What is being questioned here is the pretension to universality of a particular (élite, national, Western) culture. In relation to history, a similar theme is present in the work of other New Left writers, notably Edward Thompson and Raphael Samuel. Typical strategies for deconstructing this false universalism have been to treat as a text worthy of critical attention *any* 'signifying practice', and to recover, celebrate and validate other, alternative traditions, identities and histories. This is perhaps why Hall is still prepared to acknowledge the worth of recovering 'hidden histories'.

Both of these themes have been important ones for Cultural Studies,[24] and both have been carried forward, as discussed below, into Hall's later work. Whilst it is clear how the distrust of universals and corresponding celebration of a multiplicity of alternative identities informs recent writing on cultural identity, it is useful also to recall that this has been accompanied, from the first, by a sense that established working-class 'identity' is weakening and disappearing and by a growing loss of confidence in the 'universal class' as an agency of social change. To appreciate this last factor, however, it is necessary to examine the way in which Hall broke from other New Left writers. For Thompson, there was a great emphasis on humanism and agency. Indeed, he defined his project in these terms:

...a return to man; from abstractions and scholastic formulations to real men; from deceptions and myths to honest history; and so the positive content of this revolt may be described as 'socialist humanism'.[25]

Whilst Thompson dismissed Louis Althusser's view of history as a 'process without a subject' as mere fatalism, and argued that questions about ideology were 'more usefully resolved by historical and cultural analysis than by theoretical pronouncements',[26] Hall, for a time, embraced Althusserian Marxism and its resolute anti-humanism.

Curiously, Althusserian anti-humanism was apparently motivated by a desire to escape economic-determinism, yet at the same time it was also pitched against humanism precisely because of the latter's insufficient emphasis on determination. Althusser objected to humanism because it perpetrated a 'surreptitious practice' of 'underhand reduction'. He argued that in humanist versions of Marxism:

...the relations of production, political and ideological social relations, have been reduced to historicised "human relations", i.e., to inter-human, inter-subjective relations.[27]

On the one hand, here, Althusser is arguing against sociological conceptions of multiple, inter-subjective determinations, in which no one factor is prioritised.[28] For this reason, Althusser is keen to retain the notion of determination by the economic. Yet, at the same time, the main thrust of his argument is against the reductionism which such determination is thought to imply, so the complexity of multiple determinations

must somehow be re-introduced. This is accomplished via the notions of 'over-determination' and the 'relative autonomy' of ideology, and by deferring economic determination to a 'last instance which never comes'.[\[29\]](#)

Althusser adopts an anti-humanist position because he sees humanism as implying reductionism. Yet if 'social relations' are not 'human relations', one is at a loss to think what they are. Althusser suggests that whilst human beings may be the 'actors' of history in the theatrical sense, 'the real stage-directors' are the relations of production (understood as non-human, objectified 'structures').[\[30\]](#) Paradoxically, this fatalistic, deterministic view of history constituted part of the appeal of Althusser's 'anti-deterministic', 'anti-reductionist' outlook. Hence, when Hall weighs up the relative merits of the 'culturalist' approach of Williams and Thompson versus the structuralist paradigm of Althusser, he judges that the strength of the latter is its emphasis on 'determinate conditions', and argues that:

...unless the dialectic really can be held, in any particular analysis, between both halves of the proposition – that "men make history...on the basis of conditions which are not of their making" – the result will inevitably be a naïve humanism, with its necessary consequence: a voluntaristic and populist political practice.[\[31\]](#)

Hall sees structuralism as restoring the proper importance of the second half of this proposition and preventing it from being 'overridden' by the first, but it is rather difficult to see how understanding history as 'a process without a subject' can really be said to 'hold both halves' of this dialectic. Far from deflating an overly optimistic, rampantly voluntaristic tendency, Hall's comments actually reflected a generalised pessimism. André Gorz was bidding 'Farewell to the Working Class', Eric Hobsbawm declaring 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', and within a few years Hall himself was to sign the death certificate of 'Socialist Man'.[\[32\]](#) It was in this context that the earlier New Left emphasis on agency looked like 'a simple heroic affirmation' which had lost its credibility.

Yet if anti-humanism implied a deterministic repudiation of agency, a second significant feature of Althusserian thought was its decidedly anti-determinist treatment of ideology. A central question of Hall's work on ideology is how to theorise ideology in a 'non-reductive' way. He argues that, although ideology may 'depend' on the 'real relations' of society, since it is not reducible to the latter it therefore constitutes a separate 'level of the social formation', and is thus only comprehensible through a study of its own internal dynamics and 'mechanisms'.[\[33\]](#) The paradigm which Hall develops in discussing ideology is one of representation: the real relationships of society are re-presented as something which they are not through the 'mechanisms' of the ideological 'level'. This rests on a linguistic analogy by which Hall and Althusser explain ideology: just as language is a system of signification or representation, so, it is suggested, is ideology. Just as, for structuralism, language 'enables things to mean', refracting the world through the prism of the system of signification, so ideology performs this function of endowing phenomena with significance. This 'anti-determinist' view of ideology can sit quite happily alongside a determinist anti-humanism, since all 'levels of the social formation' are understood as non-human 'structures'.

Whilst the specifically Althusserian theoretical vocabulary has largely fallen out of favour, the basic structuralist move^[34] of explaining ideology and culture as working 'like a language' continues to be significant. Certainly it has been of lasting importance for Hall's work. In a 1985 interview, for example, he said that:

If I had to put my finger on the one thing which constitutes the theoretical revolution of our time, I think it lies in that metaphor – it's gone in a thousand different directions but it has also reorganised our theoretical universe. It is not only the discovery of the importance of the discursive, and the utility of a particular kind of analysis; it is also the metaphorically generated capacity to re-conceptualise other kinds of practices as operating, in some important ways, like a language.^[35]

More recently, Hall has argued that 'a major conceptual revolution is in the making in the human and social sciences'. This revolution, which he calls the 'cultural turn', was initiated by adopting the same structuralist metaphor.^[36] In order to appreciate the significance of the 'cultural turn' for the discussion of identity, it is necessary to examine another important aspect of Hall's work: his influential interpretation of the thought of Antonio Gramsci. Again it is possible to discern both a continuity and a rupture with previous positions. Hall's Gramscian writing returned to a more explicit interest in identity, echoing some of the earlier concerns of the New Left.^[37] It also constituted a development of his theorising of ideology.

In contrast to Althusser, Hall's Gramscian writing attempts to restore some notion of agency. In the interview cited above, for example, Hall went on to say:

It's just not possible to make history without subjects in quite that absolute way. The discursive perspective has required us to think about reintroducing, reintegrating the subjective dimension in a non-holistic, non-unitary way.^[38]

In his Gramscian work, the structuralist-inspired move of viewing ideology as a system of representation is preserved, but understood in an apparently more dynamic (and politically optimistic) fashion. Hall's analysis of 'Thatcherism' as a 'hegemonic project' exemplified this understanding of the 'discursive perspective'. The political project of the British government under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, Hall argued, could not be understood as representing the interests of a unitary ruling class in any simple way: it was not the 'expression' of objective class interests.^[39] Rather, such projects need to be constructed, in an active sense, always striving to win and sustain consent. This, for Hall, explained how the Thatcherites in the Conservative Party had managed to cohere popular support by constructing a 'new common sense' around which people's subjectivities were articulated. The corollary of this was that an oppositional, counter-hegemonic project ought to do the same, but on a different political basis. This again indicates a loss of confidence in universals. What was needed, after the death of 'that single, singular subject we used to call Socialist Man', was a counter-hegemonic project capable of uniting a plurality of identities and interests, without obliterating 'real differences'.^[40]

Similarly, in an echo of earlier New Left concerns about the *embourgeoisement* of the 'affluent worker', Hall's analysis of the 'New Times' of the late 1980s also proposed that

a transition from 'Fordist' to 'post-Fordist' production methods was associated with a new, more pluralist, political and cultural era. As Hall puts it: 'The individual subject has become more important, as collective social subjects – like that of class or nation or ethnic group – become more segmented and "pluralised"'. Hall explains this in the following terms:

This "return of the subjective" aspect suggests that we cannot settle for a language in which to describe "new times" which respects the old distinction between the objective and subjective aspect of change. "New times" are both "out there", changing our conditions of life, and "in here", working on us. In part, it is *us* who are being "re-made". But...the conventional culture and discourses of the Left, with its stress on "objective conditions", "impersonal structures" and processes that work "behind men's (*sic*) backs", have disabled us from confronting the subjective dimension in politics in any very coherent way. [41]

This seems quite a contrast with Hall's earlier praise for structuralist Marxism's emphasis on 'determinate conditions', as against the 'heroic' view of agency implied in the 'culturalist' perspective. However, there is less of a contradiction than might at first appear. Hall's notion of the 'subjective dimension' refers to the ways in which circumstances 'objectively' change the subject: there is little conception of the subject changing circumstances. Instead, it is the New Times which actively 'work on us'.

The interesting feature of this analysis is how it deals with the problem of determinism. Wary, of course, of lapsing into economic-determinism, Hall repudiates it, but in a somewhat inconsistent and unconvincing manner. He writes that the New Times idea is 'an attempt to capture, within the confines of a single metaphor, a number of different facets of social change, none of which has any necessary connection with the other'. To deny any 'necessary connection' between the various phenomena covered by the New Times label, however, immediately calls into question the rationale for bringing them together 'within the confines of a single metaphor' in the first place. Hall therefore entertains a second possibility: that rather than understanding post-Fordism in an economic-determinist fashion:

...it could just as easily be taken in the opposite way – as signalling the *constitutive* role which social and cultural relations play in relation to any economic system. Post-Fordism as I understand it is not committed to any prior determining position for the economy. But it does insist...that shifts of this order in economic life must be taken seriously in any analysis of our present circumstances. [42]

Here, Hall pulls back from endorsing the 'opposite' of economic-determinism – which would, presumably, be an approach which attributed causal primacy to non-economic 'social and cultural relations' – though hinting at the possibility of such an option. Instead, he suggests that there is some role for economic, social and cultural factors, whilst dodging the issue of determination. Later in the same essay, he comes on to discuss the 'more *cultural* character of "new times"', for which "Postmodernism" is the preferred term'. Given his earlier remarks, it might be expected that Hall would frame such a discussion in terms of the 'constitutive role' of cultural factors. Instead, he suggests that 'the changing cultural dynamic we are trying to characterise is clearly

connected with the revolutionary energy of modern capital', apparently contradicting his earlier argument that no such 'necessary connection' exists. In giving examples of how such connections might be understood, Hall first suggests that 'new technologies...require new ways of thinking'; and then, conversely, that in looking at the methods of 'post-Fordist production', one 'can see mirrored there wider processes of cultural diversity and differentiation, related to the multiplication of social worlds and social "logics" typical of modern life in the West'. These vicissitudes in Hall's argument suggest that he is unsure how to avoid, on the one hand, the kind of vulgar determinism against which he has so often polemicised, and on the other, the perspective of those he calls 'extreme discourse theorists and culturalists'.[\[43\]](#)

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe stand, perhaps, as examples of just such 'extreme discourse theorists', but their work has nevertheless had some considerable influence on Hall's thought. In particular, Hall takes on board their notion of ideology as a field of class-neutral elements, within which there is a struggle to articulate such elements to different 'hegemonic principles'. In a 1981 essay, for example, Mouffe argues that ideology is:

...a battle field where the principle classes struggle for the appropriation of the fundamental ideological elements of their society in order to articulate them to their discourse.[\[44\]](#)

For Hall, this is analogous to the structuralist point that ideology exists in language, and language is a field of variable meaning-production, rather than a set of fixed meanings.[\[45\]](#) However, if it is the case, as Mouffe argues, that hegemony is the 'establishment of an articulating principle of diverse ideological elements', it is far from obvious why such principles should belong to classes. The logic of the argument is drawn out further in Mouffe's joint 1985 work with Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where the identification of classes as the principal political actors is discarded as 'classism'. Instead, they argue that 'the logic of hegemony, as a logic of articulation and contingency, has come to determine the very identity of the hegemonic subjects'.[\[46\]](#) Hall has tried to distance himself from some of the arguments of Laclau and Mouffe, though somewhat inconsistently.[\[47\]](#) In any case, their work expresses a similar dynamic to that of Hall's own: the wish to celebrate a plurality of alternative 'identities' is founded upon a scepticism about the 'universal class' as agency of social change.

Hall's notion of 'Marxism without guarantees', which derived from his view of ideology, also informs his Gramscian writing and recent work on identity where a similar 'politics without guarantees' is invoked.[\[48\]](#) What underwrites these positions is, in effect, the 'cultural turn': the linguistic or discursive metaphor whereby ideology, political representation and cultural identity are understood by analogy with the structuralist view of language. Whilst this entails the problem that ideology, politics and culture tend to be cut free from their social and material roots, there is also a tendency towards a deterministic viewpoint. This apparent paradox will now be explored in relation to, first, ideology, and then identity.

Mystifying Ideology

In elaborating his view of ideology, Hall cites the passage in *Capital* where Marx contrasts the exploitative relationships of the 'hidden abode of production' with the sphere of market exchange, describing the latter as 'a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham'. In quoting from this passage, Hall interjects his own parenthetical clarifications, as follows:

"Freedom because both buyer and seller of a commodity...are [i.e. appear to be] constrained by their own free will....Equality because each enters [appears to enter] into relation with the other as with a simple owner of commodities....Property because each disposes [appears to dispose] only of what is his own....And Bentham because each looks [appears to look] only to himself".

Hall's gloss on this is that:

It is crucial to the whole force of this ironic passage that the discourses both of everyday life and of high political, economic or legal theory arise from, not the ideological relation of the market exchange only, but (to put it clumsily but necessarily) from the way the real relations of production are *made to appear* in the form of the ideological or 'imaginary' relations of market exchange.[\[49\]](#)

Far from elucidating the passage, the unhappy effect of Hall's exposition is to turn the sense of it on its head. Marx's point was not that market relations have to be 'made to appear' as something that they are not by means of special 'ideological work', but that the real appearance of market exchange as an Eden of freedom and equality itself spontaneously conceals the underlying, exploitative nature of the relations of production.[\[50\]](#)

There are three problems which follow from the basic structuralist move of viewing ideology as operating 'like a language'. First, the falseness of ideology is seen to derive not from the character of social relationships themselves, as in Marx's version, but from the mechanisms of the 'ideological level'. As Hall puts it: 'ideological categories are developed, generated and transformed according to their own laws of development and evolution'.[\[51\]](#) This follows the structuralist view of language in which meaning does not depend on the 'referent' but on the interrelationships between the elements of a self-contained system. Whatever the merits of this as a theory of linguistics, its effect when applied to ideology is to mystify it. Ideas seem to take on a life of their own, no matter how many reservations one might have concerning the 'last instance' of economic determination.

Secondly, this argument implies a relativist perspective. The structuralist-inspired view of ideology can accommodate the notion of 'appearance', but cannot countenance the concept of 'essence', thought to imply essentialism. The anti-essentialist position is akin to Saussure's view of language as 'a system of difference in which there are no positive terms'. Just as meaning derives from differences between terms in the system of signification, so too the way that social reality is 'made to appear' is the result of ideological mechanisms. Logically, there can be no truth claims in such an argument,

and indeed Hall frequently derides 'classical' Marxism for just this reason.^[52] One cannot oppose ideology with a claim to 'true', or 'scientific' knowledge: there are just different ways of representing 'reality'. In political terms this translates into the notion that particular ideas – such as nationalism^[53] – are neutral: there are just different ways of mounting hegemonic projects of political 'representation'.

Thirdly, in this anti-humanist perspective ideology appears to dominate us, since it is made non-social. Human beings are not the source of meaning; rather, it is produced by systems of representation. Human products – language, culture, ideas – seem to stand as a power above us. This seems to make sense if our starting point is the individual, confronted by the ideas and culture of society, but is less than adequate as an explanation as soon as we ask about the social origins of these ideas, where they come from in the first place. Such questions inevitably present problems for a perspective inspired by Saussure's ahistorical, synchronic approach to language. This explains the apparent 'lapses' into determinism noted above. For Althusser, a deterministic view of history, in which people are the actors carrying out the stage directions of non-human structures, can sit alongside stout denunciations of determinism with no sense of contradiction. More broadly, the view of ideology as an independent and free-floating sphere is but a mirror image of the determinism which it opposes: ideology and culture construct and, in Althusser's terminology, 'interpellate' us.^[54]

Although, in the structuralist perspective, ideology is cut free from its social and material origins, the problem is not simply a 'lack of determinism'. Rather, the problem is that the unity of being and consciousness, which was emphasised by writers such as Thompson, is ruptured. If social consciousness is not understood as existing in unity with social being, its relationship to the latter becomes an external, contemplative one. In this scenario, agency becomes highly problematic, since it is difficult to conceive of human consciousness as a factor in historical change. Hence, in Hall's 'anti-determinist' analyses, the objective constraints on change and agency are emphasised time and again. Whether it is consumerism, Ideological State Apparatuses, Thatcherism, or post-Fordism, there always appears to be some objective force moulding our consciousness, shaping our sense of ourselves and frustrating any counter-attempts at social transformation.

The Limits of 'Identity'

The structuralist approach criticised above in relation to ideology is also evident in recent work on identity. Morley and Robins, for example, take Saussure's view that 'within the realm of language, there are only differences, with no positive terms', and argue that 'this same principle should be applied in the analysis of cultural identities'.^[55] Identity has no essence; it only has meaning by virtue of that which is excluded as different or Other. Similarly, Hall argues that 'race' should be understood not as referring to some genetic essence, but as a 'floating signifier', whose meaning is never fixed.^[56] As an anti-essentialist position, this at least carries the insight that the categories of race or gender are not natural ones, given by biology. Instead, it is discourse which is emphasised as constitutive of identities. The conception of ideology as an independent, free-floating sphere finds here its counterpart in the discursive field of identity construction. The relativist approach which, whilst retaining the concept of appearance, abandons the concept of essence, not only becomes logically untenable in declaring the impossibility of truth claims, it also considerably weakens the critique it

seeks to make. According to this view, there is no 'truth' which can be uncovered about ideological claims concerning 'race' or gender, no social and historical essence which gives rise to these false appearances. Rather, there are merely different ways of 'articulating' identities.

Although it may be tempting to criticise such an approach on the grounds that it lacks any sense of determination, again the main underlying problem is its weak conception of agency. Just as with ideology, the discursive processes of identity-construction seem to stand as a power over us. As Hall explains, for example:

I use "identity" to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to "interpellate", speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be "spoken".^[57]

Wary of adopting a perspective in which 'discursive subject positions become *a priori* categories which individuals seem to occupy in an unproblematic fashion', Hall wishes to supplement the discursive aspect of identity creation with a theory of the psychic processes involved. In both aspects of his sense of 'identity', however, we are 'constructed' and 'interpellated' by forces beyond our control.

Arguably, the particularist celebration of identity entails this kind of scepticism about agency since it developed, as indicated above, from a loss of confidence in the 'universal class'. Frank Furedi suggests that, in their rejection of universalism, the New Left 'unconsciously...copied the methods and arguments of the conservative reaction to the Enlightenment'.^[58] The celebration of alternative identities and traditions, he argues, leads to a conservative outlook in which agency becomes problematic:

There is of course nothing wrong with the critical representation of the history of ordinary people, but when history becomes used for identity creation it strengthens the passive side of men and women. Identity is the passive by-product of history....It does not matter whether this past is radical or conservative. In both cases it is the past that is *active* and men and women, the grateful recipients of identities, are *passive*.^[59]

As against 'identity', Furedi proposes we think in terms of consciousness: not the passive gift of history, but the product of 'interaction and experience'. This humanist viewpoint implies a different way of thinking about subjectivity – as oriented towards agency, rather than 'identity'.

At first glance, this critique may seem wide of the mark when applied to more recent work on identity. As indicated earlier, it is often pitched, at least implicitly, against the celebration of roots. Indeed, it often appears that writers go out of their way to emphasise that identity creation is a fluid and active process. Hall, for example, says that:

Cultural identity...is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which

already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.[60]

Similarly, Morley and Robins hope to 'develop a dynamic view of identity, focusing on the ability of social groups continually to recompose and redefine their boundaries'.[61] It would not, therefore, be fair to say that there is no conception of agency at all in this perspective. The problem is rather that it is seen as so narrowly circumscribed. This is so in two senses. Firstly, it sometimes appears that activity, agency and creativity are the preserve of the élite few, whilst the majority remain passive. Hall, for instance, argues that the challenge is to seize the means of 'making new human subjects and shove them in the direction of a new culture'.[62] In this scenario, agency is abrogated to the Gramscian intellectuals who devise 'counter-hegemonic projects'. The rest of us are the raw material to be shoved hither and thither. In similar vein, Homi Bhabha argues that: "The people" always exist as a multiple form of identification, waiting to be created and constructed'.[63] Secondly, even when agency and creativity are seen as more generalised qualities, they are understood in a highly restricted fashion. In Hall's analysis of post-Fordism, for example, there is a conception of agency, but one centred around the act of consumption:

...in the modern world, objects are also signs, and we relate to the world of things in both an instrumental and a symbolic mode. In a world tyrannised by scarcity, men and women nevertheless express in their practical lives not only what they need for material existence but some sense of their symbolic place in the world, of who they are, their identities.[64]

The diversity of lifestyle choices under post-Fordism is said to 'allow the individual some space in which to reassert a measure of choice and control over everyday life and to "play" with its more expressive dimensions'.[65] In plain terms, this means shopping. Shopping is the sphere in which agency is exercised. This is a narrow conception indeed.

Against this background, to criticise such an approach for a lack of determinism rather misses the point. In fact, writers on identity do, from time to time, recognise the limitations of viewing discourse as a free-floating sphere. Echoing Hall's dismissal of 'extreme discourse theorists', Morley and Robins warn, for instance, of the need for 'caution in the face of recent tendencies perhaps to over-privilege cultural forms and modes of integration above their political or economic counterparts'.[66] Yet such sensible warnings have the effect of restricting the sphere of agency even further. In Media Studies, there has been a parallel discussion about 'active audiences': the ability of media consumers creatively to make their own meanings from texts. This approach, which has found its apogee in the work of John Fiske, has been much criticised.[67] Accordingly, Morley and Robins say that:

We must balance an acceptance that audiences are in certain respects active in their choice, consumption and interpretation of media texts, with a recognition of how that activity is framed and limited, in its different modalities and varieties, by the dynamics of cultural power.[68]

In a perspective in which 'agency' is confined to shopping or watching television, such sober assessments of the frames and limits of these activities result in an even narrower conception of subjectivity. Similarly, Jonathan Rutherford argues that the discursive perspective 'must also address the non-discursive factors of class formation and the logic of capital which play a powerful restraining role in determining where and how far anyone moves'.^[69] The call for more sense of objective determination serves merely to impose still further limits on agency.

Deconstructing the false universalism of the 'selective tradition' has led to a distrust of all universals. In particular, it has been associated with a scepticism about the 'universal class' as an agency of historical change, and a felt need to celebrate a plurality of fluid identities as against the unified 'Socialist Man'. The rationale for the emphasis on identity thus entails not only a relativist espousal of particularism, but also an anti-humanist conception of subjectivity and agency as, at best, highly limited. These problems are not to be remedied by an infusion of determinism – emphasising the limits on 'active audience' readings or discursive 'identity construction'. The problem lies in the limited fashion in which the sphere for 'activity' and agency is understood in the first place. For Paul Gilroy, 'Principally, identity provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity is formed'. Subjectivity is 'fragile', and appears to be formed largely by forces outside our control. Gilroy does argue that 'people do make their own identities but not in circumstances of their own choosing and from resources they inherit that will always be incomplete'.^[70] Yet 'making your own identity' is something of a scaling-down of expectations as compared with making history. Whilst waiting to be shoved in a new direction by some (counter-) hegemonic project, we can 'creatively' watch television or pay a 'playful' visit to the post-Fordist shopping mall. Such are the limits of 'identity'.

Conclusion

Writing on identity does attempt to address some significant contemporary issues – 'race' and gender inequalities, for example, or the changes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Although one might sympathise with some critics' impatient dismissal of the direction such work has taken as a 'dead end', it is also easy to see the appeal of the theoretical agenda which Hall and others have set. The critique of essentialism appears to be pitched against the sort of ahistorical approach entailed in the notion of a timeless natural essence. There is a legitimate objection to biological essentialism, whereby social phenomena, such as racial inequality, are explained in a non-social fashion, as the result of natural factors. The critique of universalism seems designed to question the Eurocentric, racial thinking which many have associated with this perspective. The deconstruction of the 'selective tradition', for example, unmask the false universalism of Western culture. Similarly, the critique of humanism is ostensibly inspired by the wish to escape both from a deterministic essentialism, and from an inadequate conception of the social as equivalent to intersubjectivity.

However, it would be mistaken to be stampeded into abandoning such ideas as essence, universalism or humanism, distinctly unfashionable though they may be. Where Hall's critique of essentialism is that it is ahistorical, in fact it is the espousal of indeterminacy which leads to an ahistorical approach. In a relativist perspective there can be no attempt to explain the falseness of appearances by reference to the historical

and social circumstance which give rise to them. Just as ideology appears to be a free-floating sphere, so identity seems a more or less arbitrary matter of discursive construction. Though the charge against universalism is that it is oppressive and leads to racism, in fact it is the particularist preoccupation with identity and difference which is ill-equipped to challenge racial thinking or the treatment of cultural differences as fixed, innate characteristics.^[71] If some now repudiate 'identity politics' in favour of a more theoretically sophisticated emphasis on difference, the long-standing celebration of a multiplicity of identities has nevertheless helped to encourage just such an 'identitarian' viewpoint. Similarly, whilst the charge against humanism is that it is deterministic, the opposite is again true. As I have argued, in the anti-humanist conception, ideology, identity and culture appear to dominate us. Whilst the goal of addressing contemporary social and cultural changes is certainly worthwhile, it is perhaps preferable to think, as Füredi suggests, in terms of social consciousness, rather than identity.

Notes

[1] Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding, 'Cultural Studies and Changing Times: An Introduction', in Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (eds.), *Cultural Studies in Question*, London, Sage, 1997, p xxvi.

[2] Terry Eagleton, 'The Hippest', *London Review of Books*, 7 March 1996, p3.

[3] Paul Gilroy, 'Diaspora and the Detours of Identity', in Kathryn Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference*, London, Sage/Open University, 1997, p301.

[4] Kobena Mercer, 'Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics', in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p43.

[5] David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1995, p122.

[6] Ferguson and Golding, op. cit., p xxvi. Of these, probably the most significant has been feminism, where the deconstruction of identity and subjectivity anticipates similar later debates regarding race and ethnicity. See, for example: Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1987.

[7] Kathryn Woodward, 'Concepts of Identity and Difference', in Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference*, p17.

[8] Woodward discusses identity and the former Yugoslavia in *ibid.*, p8-12. The assumption that the conflict can be explained in 'ethnic' terms has been widely held in media coverage of the war. The Defence Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, John Keegan, for example, writes that: 'The horrors of the war in Yugoslavia, as incomprehensible as they are revolting to the civilised mind, defy explanation in conventional military terms. The pattern of local hatreds they reveal are unfamiliar to anyone but the professional anthropologists who take the warfare of tribal and marginal peoples as their subject of study' (John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, London, Random House, 1993, pxi). For a broader discussion of the importance of national identity and nationalist conflict in the

former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, see: Craig Calhoun, 'Nationalism and Civil Society: Democracy, Diversity and Self-Determination', in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994.

[9] Cornel West, 'The New Cultural Politics of Difference', in S. Daring (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, 1993, p203-4.

[10] Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"?', in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London, Sage, 1996, p4.

[11] Edward Said, 'Between Worlds', *London Review of Books*, 7 May 1998, p7.

[12] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, p224. Hall makes a similar argument in, for example: 'New Ethnicities', in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds.), *Race, Culture and Difference*, London, Sage, 1992.

[13] Judith Butler, 'Merely Cultural', *New Left Review*, No. 227, Jan/Feb 1998, p34. Butler goes on to rebut these charges as characteristic of the 'neoconservatism' of the Left. Her own position is elaborated in, for example, *Gender Trouble*, London, Routledge, 1990.

[14] Butler is writing in a North American context. For an interesting discussion of the fragmenting effects of identity politics on the American New Left, see: Todd Gitlin, 'From Universality to Difference: Notes on the Fragmentation of the Idea of the Left', in Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. For a discussion of these issues in relation to U.S. and Canadian academia, see: Vered Amit-Talai and Caroline Knowles, 'Introduction: Against Parochialism and Fragmentation', in Vered Amit-Talai and Caroline Knowles (eds.), *Resituating Identities*, Ontario, Broadview Press, 1996.

[15] Jorge Larrain, *Ideology and Cultural Identity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1994, p165. In somewhat similar vein, and also inspired by Habermas, Jim McGuigan considers the possibility of reconciling contemporary perspectives on identity with a universalist conception of citizenship. See: Jim McGuigan, *Culture and the Public Sphere*, London, Routledge, 1996, Chapter 7.

[16] Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996, p258. Malik's understanding of the human essence is derived from Marx's view, expressed in the 'Theses on Feuerbach', that: '...the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations' ('Theses on Feuerbach', in Fredrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Moscow, Progress, 1978, p67).

[17] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, London, Routledge, 1995, p259.

[18] Larrain, *Ideology and Cultural Identity*, p23. The subtext of Larrain's book is that a substitute for the universal class may be found in countries dominated historically by colonialism.

[19] Greg Philo and David Miller, *Cultural Compliance: Dead Ends of Media/Cultural Studies and Social Science*, Glasgow, Glasgow Media Group, December 1997, p37-39. Interestingly enough, Philo and Miller note the move away from questions of ideology as symptomatic of what is wrong with Cultural Studies (ibid., p2).

[20] Although Colin Sparks argues it does not make sense to speak of 'Marxist Cultural Studies' as existing until around 1968, he acknowledges that the influence of Marxism was apparent much earlier. Interestingly, he also suggests that the death of Marxist Cultural Studies can be dated to 1990 and the 'collapse of the Soviet Empire'. It would seem that both birth and death can be traced to a reaction to Stalinism. See: Colin Sparks, 'Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies and Marxism', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London, Routledge, 1996, p72.

[21] Stuart Hall, 'A Sense of Classlessness', *Universities and Left Review*, No. 5, 1958. See: Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1995, Ch. 2, for an interesting discussion of Hall's ideas in relation to those of other early New Left writers.

[22] Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory' [1973], in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London, Verso, 1980, p39. Emphasis in original, as throughout.

[23] Quoted in Tony Bennett, 'Marxism and Popular Fiction', in Peter Humm, et al. (eds.), *Popular Fictions*, London, Methuen, 1986, p238.

[24] One might view Richard Hoggart's seminal book, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984 [1957]), as embodying both of these concerns. It attempts to make some critical discriminations (albeit in a recognisably Leavisite mode) between the products of popular culture, rather than counterposing high and low culture; at the same time, it also voices some contemporary anxieties about the erosion and breakdown of traditional forms of working-class community and culture.

[25] Edward Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', *The New Reasoner*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 1957, p109.

[26] Edward Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, London, Merlin, 1978, p281, p201.

[27] Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, London, Verso, 1970, p139-40.

[28] Raymond Williams makes a similar point, arguing that: 'One of the unexpected consequences of the crudeness of the base/superstructure model has been the too easy acceptance of models which appear less crude – models of totality or of a complex whole – but which exclude the facts of social intention, the class character of a particular society and so on' ('Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', loc. cit., p36). Similarly, Hall says he wishes to avoid 'falling back into the essentially relativistic sociological notion of a social formation as composed of a multivariate interaction-of-all-sides-on-one-another, without primacy of determination given or specified at any point' (Stuart Hall, 'Rethinking the "Base-and-Superstructure"')

Metaphor', John Bloomfield et al. (eds.), *Class, Hegemony and Party*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1977, p44).

[29] As Hall has often remarked, determination 'in the last instance' might be seen as still dangerously close to determinism. See, for example: 'The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London, Macmillan, 1988, p72; and 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees', in B. Matthews (ed.), *Marx 100 Years On*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1983, p62. He therefore deploys Althusser's point that: 'From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the last instance never comes' (Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969, p113). The point is endorsed by Hall in, for example: 'Culture, the Media and the "Ideological Effect"', in James Curran et al. (eds.), *Mass Communication and Society*, London, Edward Arnold/Open University Press, 1977, p327; and 'Rethinking the "Base-and-Superstructure" Metaphor', loc. cit., p68. Yet a last instance which never comes (not even at the 'last moment') is not a last instance. This produces a 'Waiting for Godot' theory of determination which inevitably tends to treat ideology as an autonomous sphere.

[30] Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p139-40.

[31] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms' [1980], in Tony Bennett, et al. (eds.), *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*, London, Batsford/Open University Press, 1981, p30.

[32] André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, London, Pluto, 1982 [1980]. Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' [1978], 'Response' [1979], and 'Observations on the Debate' [1981], in Martin Jacques and Frances Mulhern (eds.), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, London, Verso, 1981. As Hall put it: 'Especially today, we live in an era when the old political identities are collapsing. We cannot imagine socialism coming about any longer through the image of that single, singular subject we used to call Socialist Man. Socialist Man, with one mind, one set of interests, one project, is dead. And good riddance'. Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us' [1987], in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, London, Verso, 1988, p169-70.

[33] Hall, 'Culture, the Media and the "Ideological Effect"', loc. cit., p324.

[34] Roland Barthes makes a similar point, of course, in *Mythologies* (London, Paladin, 1973 [1957]), attempting to discover a direct equivalent of the signifier/signified relationship for 'myth'.

[35] Lawrence Grossberg (ed.), 'On postmodernism and articulation: an interview with Stuart Hall', in Morley and Chen, op. cit., p145. In the same interview Hall indicates the continuing importance of Althusser for his work (ibid., p149), and in a recent essay he again engages explicitly with Althusser's thought ('Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"?', loc. cit.). As Larrain points out: 'The onslaught on the subject and the emphasis on the primacy of discourse [in Althusserian thought] anticipate what will later become basic premises of poststructuralism and postmodernism' (*Ideology and Cultural Identity*, p65).

[36] Stuart Hall, 'The Centrality of Culture: Notes on the Cultural Revolutions of our Time', in Kenneth Thompson (ed.), *Media and Cultural Regulation*, London, Sage, 1997, p220.

[37] Jonathan Rutherford's introduction to his edited collection, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, provides a clear indication of the connections between a Gramscian approach and more recent work on identity. See also: Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity' [1985], in Morley and Chen, op. cit..

[38] Grossberg (ed.), 'On postmodernism and articulation: an interview with Stuart Hall', loc. cit., p145.

[39] Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', loc. cit., p165.

[40] Stuart Hall, 'Learning from Thatcherism', in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, p281. Initially, the sort of 'counter-hegemonic alliance' envisaged by Gramscian writers understood other 'identities' – usually designated as 'new social movements' – as supplementing a more traditional working-class constituency and politics. As Ellen Meiksins Wood points out, however, the logic of the focus on a plurality of identities was actually to exclude class as a political consideration (*Democracy Against Capitalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p260). This logic is drawn out by Laclau and Mouffe, discussed below.

[41] Stuart Hall, 'The Meaning of New Times', in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds.), *New Times*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1989, p119.

[42] Ibid..

[43] Ibid..

[44] Chantal Mouffe, 'Hegemony and the Integral State in Gramsci', in G. Bridges and R. Brunt (eds.), *Silver Linings*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1981, p173. Ernesto Laclau voices a similar position in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London, Verso, 1979 [1977].

[45] Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees', loc. cit., p78. Strictly speaking, this view of meaning-production as an active, fluid process is more a post-structuralist than a structuralist argument. Hall draws on Voloshinov here, whose notions of 'multi-accentuality' and 'polyphony' prefigure the post-structuralist view of language. In later work, the theoretical reference points are Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

[46] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso, 1985, p85.

[47] Hall has said he prefers the argument of Laclau's earlier *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (Grossberg (ed.), 'On postmodernism and articulation: an interview with Stuart Hall', loc. cit., p147). However, he admits the force of Laclau and Mouffe's argument and acknowledges that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is the 'logical conclusion' of that argument. See: 'Introduction' to Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to*

Renewal, p10-11. Here, Hall also warmly endorses the argument of Laclau and Mouffe's article 'Post-Marxism without Apologies', *New Left Review*, No. 166, Nov-Dec 1987, implying that this essay is somehow different from the argument of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. This is not the case, however: the article defends their position point by point against the critique advanced by Norman Geras, 'Post-Marxism?', *New Left Review*, No. 163, May-Jun 1987.

[48] Stuart Hall, *Race: The Floating Signifier* (videotape lecture), Northampton, MA, Media Education Foundation, undated (but c. 1996).

[49] Hall, 'Culture, the Media and the "Ideological Effect"', loc. cit., p324-5.

[50] Hall also discusses this passage in a later essay, 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees' (loc. cit., p70), where he acknowledges roughly the kind of interpretation I have offered but comments: 'In many ways, then, the passage contains all the so-called cardinal sins of the classical Marxist theory of ideology rolled into one: economic reductionism, a too simple correspondence between the economic and the political ideological [sic]; the true v false, real v distortion, "true" consciousness v false consciousness distinctions'. These perceived problems then lead Hall to re-read the passage differently. The same passage from *Capital* is also quoted by Jorge Larrain in an interesting discussion of Hall's misreading of Marx. See: Jorge Larrain, 'Stuart Hall and the Marxist concept of ideology', in Morley and Chen, op. cit., p59-62.

[51] Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees', loc. cit., p83.

[52] See, for example, *ibid.*, p66. As Philo and Miller point out, the claim to know that there is no such thing as true knowledge is a logical non-sequitur (op. cit., p16). Larrain acutely describes the difference between Hall's view of ideology and that of Marx, explaining it as a 'neutral' conception in contrast to Marx's 'negative' view. The negative conception understands ideology as false, partial or misleading ideas generated by the social relationships of capitalist society. The neutral conception, by contrast, 'seeks to provide an account of how certain political discourses in search of hegemony are constructed and reconstructed...gain ascendancy or lose it'. However, Larrain does not pursue the logic of his own critique, concluding instead that both concepts ought to be retained, and that 'the early Laclau and Hall have made an important contribution to the Marxist study of ideology'. In fact it is difficult to see how such a reconciliation might be managed, since the structuralist-inspired view of ideology as representation allows no room for understanding ideology as the product of social relations – the latter are bracketed out to avoid reductionism. See: Larrain, *Ideology and Cultural Identity*, p84.

[53] In discussing the class-neutral character of ideological elements, nationalism is the principal example given by both Laclau (*Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, p160) and Hall ('The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees', loc. cit., p81).

[54] The unwitting similarities between idealist approaches to ideology and the sort of vulgar materialism they are designed to avoid has been noted by other commentators. See, for example: Frank Füredi, 'Introduction', in Franz Jakubowski, *Ideology and Superstructure in Historical Materialism*, London, Pluto, 1990, pxvi; and Hillel Ticktin, *The Politics of Race*, London, Pluto, 1991, p48.

[55] Morley and Robins, op. cit., p45.

[56] Hall, *Race: The Floating Signifier*.

[57] Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"?', loc. cit., p5-6.

[58] Frank Füredi, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future*, London, Pluto, 1992, p227. Perhaps surprisingly, Perry Anderson makes a similar point against Edward Thompson in *Arguments within English Marxism*, London, New Left Books, 1980, p87.

[59] Füredi, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future*, p258. Similarly, Philo and Miller note that, in Hall's recent work, 'History is simply a resource of the mythical to be used in the "invention of tradition" and the construction of new identities'. Countering this, they cite Edward Thompson's emphasis on experience, and argue that 'history provides the real material circumstances in which identities are produced and project towards the future' (op. cit., p39).

[60] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, p225. Hall makes a similar point in his essay 'Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"?', loc. cit., p4.

[61] Morley and Robins, op. cit., p46.

[62] Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', loc. cit., p173. David Harris comments on the way that in Gramscian work there is a 'view of "ordinary folk" as incapable of any sustained political thought', and identifies the usual mode of address as a 'combination of hectoring, lecturing, and...[a] patronisingly "kindly tone"' (David Harris, *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure*, London, Routledge, 1992, p190, p194).

[63] Jonathan Rutherford, 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha', in Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, p220.

[64] Hall, 'The Meaning of New Times', loc. cit., p130.

[65] Stuart Hall, 'Brave New World', *Marxism Today*, October 1988, p28.

[66] Morley and Robins, op. cit., p48.

[67] See, for example: John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1989. For a critique see, for example: James Curran, 'The New Revisionism in Mass Communications Research: A Reappraisal', *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 5, No. 2/3, 1990.

[68] Morley and Robins, op. cit., p127.

[69] Jonathan Rutherford, 'A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference', in Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, p24.

[70] Gilroy, 'Diaspora and the Detours of Identity', loc. cit., p301, p341.

[71] This is one of the main arguments of Malik's book, *The Meaning of Race*. On the previous point about essentialism he is also a perceptive critic: 'The paradox of poststructuralist anti-essentialism, then, is this: it is an outlook that arises from a desire to oppose naturalistic explanations and to put social facts in social context. But in rejecting all essentialist explanations, in celebrating indeterminacy and in opposing the idea of totality it has undermined its own ability to explain social facts historically' (p257). On the treatment of cultural difference as equivalent to racial difference, see also: Phil Hammond (ed.), *Cultural Difference, Media Memories*, London, Cassell, 1997.