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The theory and method of articulation in cultural studies

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ARTICULATION AS THEORY AND METHOD

The concept of articulation is perhaps one of the most generative concepts in contemporary cultural studies. It is critical for understanding how cultural theorists conceptualize the world, analyse it and participate in shaping it. For some, articulation has achieved the status of theory, as in 'the theory of articulation'. Theoretically, articulation can be understood as a way of characterizing a social formation without falling into the twin traps of reductionism and essentialism. It can be seen as transforming 'cultural studies from a model of communication (production-text-consumption; encoding-decoding) to a theory of contexts' (Grossberg, 1993: 4). But articulation can also be thought of as a method used in cultural analysis. On the one hand, articulation suggests a methodological framework for understanding what a cultural study does. On the other hand, it provides strategies for undertaking a cultural study, a way of 'contextualizing' the object of one's analysis.

However, articulation works at additional levels: at the levels of the epistemological, the political and the strategic. Epistemologically, articulation is a way of thinking the structures of what we know as a play of correspondences, non-correspondences and contradictions, as fragments in the constitution of what we take to be unities. Politically, articulation is a way of foregrounding the structure and play of power that entail in relations of dominance and subordination. Strategically, articulation provides a mechanism for shaping intervention within a particular social formation, conjuncture or context.

Articulation can appear deceptively to be a simple concept – especially when one level or aspect of its work is taken in isolation. For example, it *seems* manageable if we limit our treatment of articulation to its operation as either a (or *the*) theory or method of cultural studies. But when theory and method are understood – as they have been in cultural studies – as developing in relation to changing epistemological positions and political conditions as well as providing guidance for strategic intervention, it

becomes impossible to parse out a neatly packaged theory or a clearly delineated method.

It seems timely to belabour this point, precisely because the popularity and institutionalization of cultural studies has been accompanied by a widening interest in finding out – and often finding out quickly – how to 'do' a cultural study and what it means to be a cultural theorist. The risk comes in that it has become a bit too easy to separate out articulation as *the* theory or method of cultural studies, to isolate it as having formal, eminently transferable properties. This has taken the form of scholars interested in utilizing articulation in the service of research whose theoretical, methodological, epistemological, political and strategic commitments are rather dramatically different from those of cultural theorists. Although the boundaries of cultural studies are certainly indistinct and changing, they do sometimes get unquestionably crossed.

Consequently, a certain care is in order when using the designations theory and method. However useful it may be to think of articulation in terms of theoretical and methodological valences, to do so is to take the risk that theory and method will be taken too formally. Stuart Hall recognized this in 1980 when he acknowledged that 'articulation contains the danger of a high formalism' (Hall, 1980a: 69). While he wrote this at the height of the Althusserian structuralist moment in cultural studies, when the threat of formalism was paramount, we still need to be sensitive to the warning today – even if for slightly different reasons.

'Theory' is a term that often connotes an objective, formal tool, or even a 'value-free' heuristic device. Cultural studies resists thinking in terms of the 'application' of theory in this sense, where theory is used to 'let you off the hook, providing answers which are always known in advance or endlessly deferring any answer into the field of its endless reflections and reflexivity' (Grossberg, 1992: 19). In place of that conception of theory, cultural studies works with the notion of theory as a 'detour' to help ground our engagement with what newly confronts us and to let that engagement provide the ground for retheorizing. Theory is thus a practice in a double sense: it is a formal conceptual tool as well as a practising or 'trying out' of a way of theorizing. In joining these two senses of practice, we commit to working with momentarily, temporarily 'objectified' theories, moments of 'arbitrary closure', recognizing that in the ongoing analysis of the concrete, theory must be challenged and revised. 'The only theory worth having,' Hall maintains, 'is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency' (Hall, 1992: 280). Successful theorizing is not measured by exact theoretical fit but by the ability to work with our always inadequate theories to help us move understanding 'a little further on down the road'. A commitment to 'the process of theorizing' is characteristic of the project of cultural studies; it is 'the sign of a living

body of thought, capable still of engaging and grasping something of the truth about new historical realities' (Hall, 1983: 84).

'Method' similarly can suggest rigid templates or practical techniques to orchestrate research. But again, cultural studies works with a conception of method as 'practice', which suggests both techniques to be used as resources as well as the activity of practising or 'trying out'. In this double sense, techniques are borrowed and combined, worked with and through, and reworked. Again, the commitment is always to be able to adapt our methods as the new historical realities we engage keep also moving on down the road.

Thinking of the theory and method of articulation as practice also highlights an important political aspect of cultural studies: the recognition that the work of cultural studies involves at a variety of levels a politics within a – broadly understood – marxist framework. With and through articulation, we engage the concrete in order to change it, that is, to rearticulate it. To understand theory and method in this way shifts perspective from the acquisition or application of an epistemology to the creative process of articulating, of thinking relations and connections as how we come to know and as creating what we know. Articulation is, then, not just a thing (not just a connection) but a process of creating connections, much in the same way that hegemony is not domination but the process of creating and maintaining consensus or of co-ordinating interests.

Working with that understanding of theory and method in interrogating the role of articulation in cultural studies requires keeping in mind two general insights. First, articulation was not 'born' whole nor has it ever achieved that status. It has never been, nor should it be, delineated or used as a completely 'sewn-up' theory or method. Rather, it is a complex, unfinished phenomenon that has emerged and continues to emerge genealogically. Second, articulation has never been configured as simply one thing. The ways in which articulation has been developed, discussed and used tend to foreground and background certain theoretical, methodological, epistemological, political and strategic forces, interests and issues. As theory and method, articulation has developed unevenly within a changing configuration of those forces. It carries with it 'traces' of those forces in which it has been constituted and which it has constituted. To understand the role of articulation in cultural studies is thus to map that play of forces, in other words, to track its development genealogically.

My project here is a beginning; it is surely not a genealogy but an attempt to map some particularly profound forces and moments that contribute to a genealogical understanding of articulation.

ARTICULATION IS . . . : A MOMENT OF ARBITRARY CLOSURE

In order to begin on some common ground, I offer a few definitional statements, helpful moments of 'arbitrary closure'. Articulation is

> the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? The so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'. The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.
>
> (Hall, 1986b: 53)

> Articulation is the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices. Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics. And these links are themselves articulated into larger structures, etc.
>
> (Grossberg, 1992; 54)

> The unity formed by this combination or articulation, is always, necessarily, a 'complex structure': a structure in which things are related, as much through their differences as through their similarities. This requires that the mechanisms which connect dissimilar features must be shown – since no 'necessary correspondence' or expressive homology can be assumed as given. It also means – since the combination is a structure (an articulated combination) and not a random association – that there will be structured relations between its parts, i.e., relations of dominance and subordination.
>
> (Hall, 1980d: 325)

Articulation is an 'old word' and predates cultural studies by several centuries. It has had a variety of dental, medical, biological and enunciative meanings. But in every case, the word suggests some kind of joining of parts to make a unity. Even the articulation of sounds or utterances suggests the 'clinging together' of notes (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971: 118). It is interesting to note that 'articulation' is *not* in Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (Williams, 1976); it was not a term in the lexicon of 'culturalism' (see Hall, 1980a for the meaning of 'culturalism'). It is in the 1970s, however, that articulation begins to be explicitly theorized. This happens as the problem of reductionism in marxism (and the related

problem of essentialism) becomes salient and the question of how the elements of the social field are joined to form unities in a non-reductionist way becomes paramount.

By the 1970s, cultural theorists were explicitly engaged in critiques of 'classical' or 'orthodox' marxism and its reliance on two related forms of reductionism: economic reductionism, which relies on a limited reading of Marx's notion of the relationship between base and superstructure; and class reductionism, which relies on a limited reading of Marx's notion of class. Briefly put, economic reductionism maintains that economic relations, thought of as a virtually static mode of production (the base) controls and produces (determines) everything else in society (the superstructure). Hence, every element in society (including changes in those elements) can be reduced to (explained by) the operations of the corresponding mode of production – and those operations alone. Class reductionism holds that all political and ideological practices, contradictions, and so on, in short all that might be conceived of as other than economic, have a necessary class belonging which is defined by the mode of production. Consequently, the discourse of a class and the existence of the corresponding class itself constitute a direct reflection of, or a necessary moment in the unfolding of the economic. (For discussions of reductionism, see especially Hall, 1977; 1980d; Laclau, 1977; Williams, 1973.)

'Culturalism', the term Hall used to describe what had been the dominant, early paradigm in cultural studies, struggled against the reduction to the economic in part by attending to the specificity of particular practices (Hall, 1980a). But culturalism lacked, as Hall put it 'an adequate way of establishing this specificity theoretically' (69). The tendency was often to fall back on versions of the reduction to the mode of production or to class. For example, Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* disappointedly concludes by attributing the post-war changes in English working-class culture essentially to capitalism, via the imposition of mass culture (Hoggart, 1958).

Posing reductionism as a problem had several related sources. Most notable here is that marxist theorizing had developed its own 'internal' critique of reductionism in that reductionism offered inadequate explanations of the mechanisms of domination and subordination in late capitalism. Reduction to the mode of production could not account for the shape of a social formation if it was understood to be composed of relationships among several modes of production (Hall, 1980d). It could not account for apparent disparities among the conditions of one's existence, how one lived out those conditions, and what one believed about those conditions. It could not account for the non-revolutionary culture of the working class. And finally, it could not account for the way in which factors other than class (gender, race and subculture, for example) entered into what looked like far more complex relations of dominance and subordination.

The struggle to substitute the reduction that didn't work with . . . something . . . pointed to the need to retheorize processes of determination. The work of cultural theorists in the 1970s and early 1980s, especially the work of Stuart Hall, opened up that space by drawing attention to what reductionist conceptions rendered inexplicable. It is as though a theoretical lacuna develops, a space struggling to be filled. It gets filled with terms like 'productive matrix' and 'combination of relations' (Hall, 1977), and eventually 'articulation'. The term is almost, at first, what Kuan-Hsing Chen has called 'a sign to avoid reduction' (Chen, 1994). Without having exactly theorized what articulation is and how it works, it becomes the sign that speaks of other possibilities, of other ways of theorizing the elements of a social formation and the relations that constitute it not simply as relations of correspondence (that is, as reductionist and essentialist) but also as relations of non-correspondence and contradiction, and how these relations constitute unities that instantiate relations of dominance and subordination. This process of siting the space as a terrain for theorizing accounts to some extent for the difficulties and resistance – that still exist – in pointing to what exactly articulation is. The point is that it isn't *exactly* anything.

In theorizing this space, a number of marxist theorists are drawn on: most notably Althusser (who drew on Gramsci and Marx), Gramsci (who drew on Marx) and, of course, Marx. Its principal architects have been Laclau and Hall. Without wanting to sidetrack the discussion, it is important to indicate broadly at least what in Althusser, Gramsci and Marx is drawn on in developing conceptions of articulation. In brief, from Althusser, the conception of a complex totality structured in dominance figures immensely. The totality is conceived of as made up of a relationship among levels, constituted in relations of correspondence as well as of contradiction, rather than of relations reducible to a single essential one-to-one correspondence. These levels come to be thought of as 'articulated'. One of the levels, the ideological, takes on special significance in that in it and through it those relations are represented, produced and reproduced. The process comes to be thought of as a process of articulation and re-articulation (see Hall, 1980d, 1985). From Gramsci, the notions of hegemony, articulation and ideology as common sense have been influential, through their appropriation by Althusser as well as independently. Hegemony, for Gramsci, is a process by which a hegemonic class articulates (or co-ordinates) the interests of social groups such that those groups actively 'consent' to their subordinated status. The vehicle of this subordination, its 'cement', so to speak, is ideology, which is conceived of as an articulation of disparate elements, that is, common sense, and the more coherent notion of 'higher philosophy'. Gramsci offers a way of understanding hegemony as the struggle to construct (articulate and re-articulate) common sense out of an ensemble of interests, beliefs and practices. The process of

hegemony as ideological *struggle* is used to draw attention to the relations of domination and subordination that articulation always entails (see Mouffe, 1979). From Marx is drawn the conception of a social formation as a combination of relations or levels of abstraction, within which determination must be understood as produced within specific conjunctures of the levels rather than as produced uniformly and directly by the mode of production. The conjunctures come to be seen as historically specific articulations of concrete social forces (see Hall, 1977).

AN EXPLICIT THEORY OF ARTICULATION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF ERNESTO LACLAU

Ernesto Laclau configures these elements – and others – in an especially forceful way in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (Laclau, 1977). His work warrants special attention here for at least four reasons. First, his is the initial attempt to formulate an explicit 'theory of articulation'. Second, Hall's work on articulation takes Laclau's position as a major contribution to the theoretical ground on which and from which to engage the concrete and retheorize. Third, Laclau's reconstitution of the problematic in the discursive mode, foregrounding the role of ideology, figures significantly in a range of directions (replete with problems and possibilities) taken by articulation after Laclau's intervention. Fourth, the relative absence of Laclau in the 'histories' of cultural studies suggests some disturbing reconfigurations (can I now safely say, re-articulations?) of foregrounded and backgrounded features of articulation.

In *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Laclau engages in the play of theorizing the concrete in terms of articulation and theorizing articulation in terms of the concrete, principally in terms of Latin American politics. Reductionism, he argues, specifically class reductionism, failed – both theoretically and politically. The world communist movement was divided, the Cold War was winding down, the masses were emergent on a world scale, and while capitalism was in the decline, it had proved to be highly adaptable. Laclau sets out to formalize marxist categories to contribute to a new socialist movement, one in which the 'proletariat must abandon any narrow class perspective and present itself as a hegemonic force to the vast masses seeking a radical political reorientation in the epoch of the world decline of capitalism' (12).

Laclau develops his theory of articulation in contestation with class reductionism. The failure of such reductionism, he argues, lies in its failure to account for the existence of actual variations in the discourse of classes. Simply put, not everyone believes what they are supposed to believe or acts in a way they are supposed to act, regardless of their class belonging. Laclau rejects the usual explanations that these aberrations are either accidents or indicative of an as yet underdeveloped mode of production

(11–12) and argues instead to replace a simple determination by the economic with a concept of articulation.

Laclau links this political rationale with an epistemological one and renders his own genealogy of articulation. He argues that a concept of articulation is embedded in the western philosophical tradition but that it requires refiguring. Using the example of Plato's allegory of the cave, in which the prisoners in the cave incorrectly link the voices they hear with the shadows on the wall, Laclau explains that

> Common sense discourse, *doxa*, is presented as a system of misleading articulations in which concepts do not appear linked by inherent logical relations, but are bound together simply by connotative or evocative links which custom and opinion have established between them. (7)

Articulations are thus the 'links between concepts' (7), and Plato's goal is to disarticulate the (misleading) links and to re-articulate their true (or necessary) links. Articulation is at this point then linked to and defined by the rationalist paradigm.

Laclau amends what he takes as this western philosophical move with the insistence that (a) there are no necessary links between concepts, a move that renders all links essentially connotative, and that (b) concepts do not necessarily have links with all others, a move that makes it impossible to construct the totality of a system having begun with one concept, as one could do in a Hegelian system (10). Consequently, the analysis of any concrete situation or phenomenon entails the exploration of complex, multiple, and theoretically abstract non-necessary links.

In his most influential argument, in the chapter 'Towards a theory of populism', Laclau theorizes articulation in relation to political practice by bringing into focus the process by which a dominant class exerts hegemony. Although, according to Laclau, no discourse has an essential class connotation, the meanings within discourse are always connotatively linked to different class interests or characters. So, for example, the discourse on nationalism can be linked to a feudal project of maintaining traditional hierarchy and order; or it can be linked to a communist project accusing capitalists of betraying a nationalist cause; or it can be linked to a bourgeois project of appealing to unity in order to neutralize class conflict, and so on (160). In any case, the class that achieves dominance is the class that is able to articulate non-class contradictions into its own discourse and thereby absorb the contents of the discourse of dominated classes (162). The link between articulation and the concept of hegemony is thus made explicit. Laclau writes that

> A class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized. (161)

Consequently, in the concept of articulation, Laclau brings into focus a non-reductionist view of class, the assertion of no-necessary correspondence among practices and the elements of ideology, the critique of common sense as contradictory ideological structures, and a commitment to analysing hegemony as a process of articulating practices in discourse.

Articulation, thus articulated, provided a way for, indeed compelled, cultural theorists to rethink the problem of determination. But in theorizing the space by highlighting the role of the discursive in the process of articulation, Laclau foregrounds a theoretical position that has an interesting – even ironic – backgrounding effect on the very politics that played such a crucial role in Laclau's work to begin with. As Hall puts it, what 'matters' in Laclau's formulation is 'the particular ways in which these [ideological] elements are organized together within the logic of different discourses' (Hall, 1980c: 174). The effect of this move, as Hall identifies it operating in Laclau and Mouffe's later work, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), is

> to conceptualize *all* practices as nothing but discourses, and all historical agents as discursively constituted subjectivities, to talk about positionalities but never positions, and only to look at the way concrete individuals can be interpellated in different subject positionalities.
>
> (Hall, 1986b: 56)

If what is at issue is the operation of the discursive, it is easy to leave behind any notion that anything exists outside of discourse. Struggle is reduced to struggle in discourse, where 'there is no reason why anything is or isn't potentially articulatable with anything' and society becomes 'a totally open discursive field' (Hall, 1986b: 56).

Laclau's turn from reduction, which provides a basis to articulate relations *in discourse*, thus also provides a basis to posit a radical non-correspondence among discourses and practices. In effect, Laclau's no-necessary correspondence could be and was easily used in service of 'necessary non-correspondence'. Laclau and Laclau and Mouffe certainly do not *intend* to leave behind politics, indeed to claim that would be outrageous, especially given their explicit intent to develop a 'radical democratic politics'. But among the effects of their theorizing, that possibility is brought into focus. So even though the idea of an 'articulating principle' seems meant to insist on a mechanism with which to ensure attention to the way in which discursive structures are always articulated to particular class practices (Laclau, 1977: 101–2, 160–1; Mouffe, 1979: 193–5), the clarity of its operation is never really established and its theoretical status is never secured.

In spite of the importance of Laclau's formulations, he has been excluded – as has Mouffe – from most of the popular histories of cultural studies, such as those of Brantlinger (1990), Inglis (1993), Storey (1993), and Turner (1990). Perhaps this is because of Laclau's own ironic contribution to dislodging (or re-articulating) the concept of articulation from the political concrete – conceived of within a marxist problematic – that was the focus of the work to begin with. In effect the political is easily backgrounded in foregrounding attention to the theoretical debates focused on the play of discursive possibilities.

However, the anti-reductionist turn in cultural studies, as exemplified here by Laclau, effectively disempowered the possibility of reducing culture to class or to the mode of production and rendered it possible and necessary to re-theorize social forces such as gender, race and subculture as existing in complex – articulated – relations with one other as well as with class. (See Hall, 1980d and 1986a, on race; McRobbie, 1981, on gender and subculture.) Furthermore, when Laclau is read without losing grip on the ensemble of forces, by attributing to them something more like equal weight, without privileging the discursive, the space of articulation has greater possibilities.

Since about 1980, the proliferation of these possibilities and the excitement generated by them has certainly contributed to the astounding growth of interest in cultural studies. Here was a way to talk about the power of the discursive and its role in culture, communication, politics, economics, gender, race, class, ethnicity and technology in ways that provided progressive-minded people sophisticated understanding as well as mechanisms for strategic intervention. So at the same time that an expanding cultural studies community begins to try to clarify and 'nail down' the meaning of articulation, there is a corresponding expansion in the number of theoretically possible directions within which it begins to get thought.

ARTICULATION AS UNITY IN DIFFERENCE: THE VOICE OF STUART HALL

Stuart Hall's contributions to the development of articulation have been significant for at least four reasons. First, he resists the temptation of reduction to class, mode of production, structure, as well as to culturalism's tendency to reduce culture to 'experience'. Second, he elevates the importance of articulating discourse to other social forces, without going 'over the brink' of turning everything into discourse. Third, Hall's commitment to the strategic feature of articulation has foregrounded cultural studies' interventionist commitments. And fourth, Hall's treatment of articulation has been the most sustained and accessible. His willingness to engage different philosophical and political traditions in theorizing articulation has meant that his influence is quite widespread; and the generous manner in which he engages people and arguments provides an exceptional exemplar of articulation at work.

When Hall 'reigns in discourse' or 'tames ideology', he does so by insisting on the Althusserian recognition that no practice exists *outside* of discourse *without reducing* everything else to it. In a frequently cited quotation, he claims that

> It does not follow that because all practices are *in* ideology, or inscribed by ideology, all practices are *nothing but* ideology. There is a specificity to those practices whose principal object is to produce ideological representations. They are different from those practices which – meaningfully, intelligibly – produce other commodities. Those people who work in the media are producing, reproducing and transforming the field of ideological representation itself. They stand in a different relationship to ideology in general from others who are producing and reproducing the world of material commodities – which are, nevertheless, also inscribed by ideology. (Hall, 1985: 103–4)

By insisting on the specificity of practices in different kinds of relations to discourse, Hall contests the move that Laclau and other post-Althusserians have taken positing the absolute, rather than relative, autonomy of practices that is implied by the position that all practices are nothing but ideology (Hall, 1980a: 68).

Hall pulls articulation back from the extreme, theoretically-driven logic of 'necessary non-correspondence' (what he called the 'excesses' of theory) to insist on thinking and theorizing practices within which unities – often relatively stable unities – are also constituted. For Hall, articulation

> has the considerable advantage of enabling us to think of how specific practices articulated around contradictions which do not all arise in the same way, at the same point, in the same moment, can nevertheless be thought *together*. The structuralist paradigm thus does – if properly developed – enable us to begin really to *conceptualize* the specificity of different practices (analytically distinguished, abstracted out), without losing its grip on the ensemble which they constitute. (Hall, 1980a: 69)

Thinking articulation thus becomes a practice of thinking 'unity and difference', of 'difference *in* complex unity, without becoming a hostage to the privileging of difference as such' (Hall, 1985: 93).

Hall's model of strategic intervention is not then limited to a kind of theoretically-driven Derridian deconstruction of difference and the construction of discursive possibility, but a theoretically-informed practice of rearticulating relations among the social forces that constitute articulated structures in specific historical conjunctures. He maintains that

> The aim of a theoretically-informed political practice must surely be to bring about or construct the articulation between social or economic forces and those forms of politics and ideology which might lead them in practice to intervene in history in a progressive way – an articulation which has to be *constructed* through practice precisely because it is not guaranteed by how those forces are constituted in the first place. (Hall, 1985: 95)

In practice, this has opened the way for cultural theorists to consider the role of a range of *other* social forces both in their specificity and in discourse, interrogating the ways in which they are complexly articulated in structures of domination and subordination and considering ways that they might be re-articulated. (See for example, Slack, 1989, on the technological; Slack and Whitt, 1992, on the environmental; Grossberg, 1992 on the affective.)

REARTICULATING COMMUNICATION: MAPPING THE CONTEXT

Stuart Hall's practice of articulation can be tracked through any of a number of sites of contestation, for example, through his work on race (for example, Hall 1980d; 1986a), ethnicity (for example, Hall, 1991), the popular (for example, Hall, 1980c; 1981) and so on. The site of Hall's engagement with the concrete that I choose to track here is his critique of communication theory and the methods used to study communication. This serves as a useful example for several reasons. First, this engagement with practices of communication demonstrates the effectiveness of the resistance to thinking the elements in articulated structures as being 'potentially articulatable with anything'. Second, in the United States at least, Hall's work on communication has been particularly influential and thus a way that many people – including myself – have come initially to understand the space articulation theorizes. Third, articulation as it is developed in relation to communication comes closest to 'looking like' a theory and method. Hence it is this site where it might most easily be disarticulated from its political, epistemological and strategic traces.

The study of communication was built on the model of sender-receiver, the components of which are solidified in Laswell's definition of communication as 'who says what in which channel to whom with what effect' (Laswell, 1971). Each component has, in this model, its own isolatable intrinsic (or essential) identity. Neither the components nor the process are articulations. In considering the *process* of communication, what is sought is the mechanism whereby correspondence between the meanings encoded (the what) and the effects that meaning generates is guaranteed.

While working with a still-recognizable model of transmission, Hall's 'Encoding/decoding' (Hall, 1980b) challenges the simple assertion of intrinsic identity by insisting that the components of the process (sender,

receiver, message, meaning, etc.) are themselves articulations, without essential meanings or identities. This move compels a rethinking of the process of communication not as correspondence but as articulation. The tension between the reliance on the mainstream model of encoding/decoding and an articulated model of the communication process is palpable in 'Encoding/decoding' as well as in the work of David Morley (1980), who used the developing articulated model to analyse the relationship between the encoded and decoded meanings of television news; and they are particularly interesting in that regard.

What comes to be understood is that if each component or moment in the process of communication is itself an articulation, a relatively autonomous moment, then 'no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated' (Hall, 1980b: 129). The insistence that the autonomy is only relative (drawing a link to Althusserian structuralism) rescues articulation from the brink of a 'necessary non-correspondence' and allows Hall and Morley to acknowledge that some articulations – the discursive form of the message, for example – work from more privileged – or powerful – positions (Hall, 1980b; Morley, 1981).

Hall continues to develop this notion of power and privilege and, drawing on Gramsci, argues that some articulations are particularly potent, persistent, and effective. These constitute, for Hall, 'lines of tendential force' and serve as powerful barriers to the potential for re-articulation (Hall, 1986b: 53–4). With respect to contemporary communication practices, he depicts communicative institutions, practices and relations as posing that kind of barrier. They have become a 'material force' dominating the cultural (Hall, 1989: 43).

Theorizing communication in this way suggests methodological direction and strategic implications. Interrogating any articulated structure or practice requires an examination of the ways in which the 'relatively autonomous' social, institutional, technical, economic and political forces are organized into unities that are effective and are relatively empowering or disempowering. The specificity of the domain of communication, for example, requires that we examine the way in which these forces,

> at a certain moment, yield intelligible meanings, enter the circuits of culture – the field of cultural practices – that shape the understandings and conceptions of the world of men and women in their ordinary everyday social calculations, construct them as potential social subjects, and have the effect of organizing the ways in which they come to or form consciousness of the world.
>
> (Hall, 1989: 49)

Determining when, where and how these circuits might be re-articulated is the aim of a cultural theorist's theoretically-informed political practice. The examination of and participation in communication – or any practice – is thus an ongong process of re-articulating contexts, that is, of examining and intervening in the changing ensemble of forces (or articulations) that create and maintain identities that have real concrete effects. 'Understanding a practice involves,' as Grossberg puts it, 'theoretically and historically (re)-constructing its context' (Grossberg, 1992: 55).

Seen from this perspective, this is what a cultural study does: map the context – not in the sense of situating a phenomenon *in a context*, but in mapping a context, mapping the very identity that brings the context into focus (Slack, 1989; cf. Grossberg, 1992: 55). It is possible to claim that this is what I have done throughout this chapter, for example, in explaining how for Laclau 'the concept of articulation . . . brings into focus a non-reductionist view of class, the assertion of no-necessary correspondence,' etc. It isn't as though the context *for* the development of articulation *is these things*. Rather the articulation of these identities (in a double articulation: both as articulated identities and in an articulated relationship with one another) is brought into focus in and through the concept of articulation. To put it another way, the context is not something *out there, within which practices occur or which influence the development of practices.* Rather, *identities, practices, and effects generally, constitute the very context within which they are practices, identities or effects.*

GOING ON THEORIZING

There is certainly more to mapping a genealogy of articulation than I have offered here. More pieces or forces to be articulated might include drawing more explicit links to structural linguistics (raised by Hall, 1980d: 327) and postmodernism; foregrounding the status of the 'real' rather than the problem of reduction (as does Grossberg, 1992); considering the role of specific articulations such as those of gender, race, ethnicity, neo-colonialism; foregrounding the politics of institutionalization; and finally, considering the influence of strategic interventions practised among the ranks of the practitioners of cultural studies.

We can certainly expect that different conceptions of cultural studies and the development of cultural studies over time can and will be explained in part by changing configurations of articulation. I am particularly concerned that as cultural studies becomes more 'domesticated', that is, as it becomes a more institutionally acceptable academic practice, the 'problem' of articulation will be cast more as a theoretical, methodological and epistemological one than a political and strategic one. To some extent this is happening already. Given a dominant politics of despair and the political and economic realities of education, this is hardly a surprise; though it is discouraging. What I would hope, at least, is that by drawing attention to the ways in which the re-articulation of articulation entails changing

relations among theory, method, epistemology, politics and strategy, we might expect more of our detours through theory, not less.

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