

Birmingham School

TODD WOLFSON
Rutgers University, USA

The Birmingham School, formally known as the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, was an innovative academic enterprise, which led the emergence and development of the field of cultural studies across the latter half of the twentieth century. The CCCS and the intellectual tradition it inspired reimagined how we understand culture and domination, cultivating groundbreaking work focused on the areas of media and communication, youth culture, class, gender, race, and the politics of representation. The Birmingham School includes the work of noteworthy British scholars such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, and Angela McRobbie.

Established as a postgraduate research institute by Richard Hoggart in 1964, the initial goal of the Birmingham School was to challenge the cultural elitism of literary theory as well as the positivism of British Sociology, creating an approach that had three components. As Hoggart explained of the different elements of this new field of inquiry, “one is roughly historical and philosophical; another is, yet again roughly, sociological, the third, which will be the most important – is the literary critical” (1970, 255). With a broad agenda and diverse methodologies, the Birmingham School developed a variety of critical approaches for the analysis of cultural artifacts. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the School is the reconceptualization of popular culture as a site of resistance and negotiation for

marginalized and disempowered groups. Building on the work of Antonio Gramsci, this perspective imbued popular cultural forms with a new importance, as scholars no longer designated mass culture solely as a mass distraction, but instead re-read pop culture in relationship to power, domination, and resistance.

From the beginning of the project, the Birmingham School was decidedly political, particularly because it emerged in the shadows of the rising New Left in Britain in the postwar 1950s (Shulman 1993). The British New Left was broadly socialist in orientation, with a strong anti-imperialist and anti-racist bent, and one of the central struggles was the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Many of the founders and leaders of the New Left became founding members of the CCCS, including Hoggart, literary theorist Raymond Williams, historian E. P. Thompson, and the second director of CCCS, Stuart Hall. In fact, the *New Left Review*, the principal journal of the New Left, was first edited by Hall, and routinely published the works of Thompson and Williams, among others (Shulman 1993).

In the initial period of the CCCS, Hoggart and Williams played critical roles in the intellectual life of the Centre. Both men were involved in projects focused on working-class education and socialist politics, and the work of the CCCS was an intellectual extension of this vision. The fundamental texts in this formative period were Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), and Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1964). These canonic texts influenced the early agenda of the Centre, which focused on historical and critical

inquiries into working-class institutions and struggles; and opposition to elitist notions of education and culture that emerged from T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, two towering conservative intellectual figures in English society.

In 1968, Stuart Hall took over from Hoggart as the director of the CCCS. In the ensuing years, Hall's intellectual trajectory had a strong influence on the direction of the Birmingham School. This period of the CCCS was punctuated by the scholarship of French theorist Louis Althusser's structural Marxism, and, following this, by the writing of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci, a leader in the Communist Party of Italy, was imprisoned by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. In jail he wrote *The Prison Notebooks*, in which he aimed to understand how the elite fight to retain control of society through cultural institutions. Building on the work of Marx and Lenin, he argued that the ruling elite work to forge a form of hegemony or domination through ideas and culture that induce a form of consent of the governed. Importantly, this hegemonic rule is always open and contested by counter-hegemonic forces; thus there is a constant struggle over ideas and cultural institutions. This complex of ideas became a critical building block for the CCCS and cultural studies more broadly, and turned CCCS scholars toward mass media and popular culture as critical sites to study both domination and resistance.

In this period, many cultural studies scholars also moved away from a singular approach to class, focusing more squarely on other forms of oppression, including gender and race. For instance, Angela McRobbie, Dorothy Hobson, and other women associated with the CCCS developed the Women's Studies Group within the Centre, and together they published *Women Take Issue* (1978; also see Shulman 1993). In general, the 1970s was a rich period of

scholarship for the Birmingham School, which included works like Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977), and the co-authored work by Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging the State and Law and Order* (1978).

Across the next two decades, cultural studies continued to develop as a critical new field of inquiry, particularly in Britain and the United States. As the field grew, it became less tied to the CCCS, as new sites of study developed, building on the Birmingham approach. In 2002, senior management at the University of Birmingham proposed to shut down the CCCS. Students and faculty at the school and across the globe protested against the closure, but despite the controversy, the Centre was shut down. Although the physical Centre that Hoggart envisioned and Stuart Hall carefully nurtured no longer exists, the intellectual approach that was associated with the Birmingham School has had far-reaching effects. The scholars and scholarship of the Birmingham School forged British cultural studies, while impacting a host of other disciplines and fields of study from anthropology and sociology to political theory, media studies, education, and literary theory.

SEE ALSO: Class; Marx, Karl; Mass Culture; Mass Media; Popular Culture; Williams, Raymond; Youth Culture(s)

REFERENCES

- Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging the State and Law and Order*. New York: Holmes and Meier.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.
- Hoggart, Richard. 1957. *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Chatto & Windus.

- Hoggart, Richard. 1970. *Speaking to Each Other. Vol. 2: About Literature*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Shulman, Norma. 1993. "Conditions of their Own Making: An Intellectual History of the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 18(1). Available at: <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/717/623>.
- Thompson, Edward P. 1964. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Pantheon.
- Williams, Raymond. 1958. *Culture and Society*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Williams, Raymond. 1961. *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Women's Study Group, eds. 1978. *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination*. London: Hutchinson.