THE BEGINNINGS OF CULTURAL STUDIES IN BULGARIA: ACADEMICS IN VELIKO TURNOVO

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Abstract

The article traces the initial steps of the discipline Cultural Studies in Bulgaria. The first conference convened in Veliko Turnovo by the British Council in 1993 is taken as a conceptual metaphor for the influences on the discipline and the basic principles that inform the theoretical framework of this cross-disciplinary field. Cultural Studies is a relatively new phenomenon in Academia. The first conference in Bulgaria was also the first conference on British Studies to be held outside the United Kingdom, so the inchoative factor operates at various levels. The status of English as a "target" language has long been approved all around the world and the need for knowledge about countries where it is spoken as the official language has long sought and found some degree of satisfaction as Civilisation courses. However, the field of Cultural Studies had never been introduced into the picture of language learning as a rich multidisciplinary project up until that conference. The presentations reveal what Bulgarian academics had developed to contribute and what the invited guests sought to showcase. Thus, the presentations are analysed for the topics and key concepts they apply. The conclusions relate to the scope of Cultural Studies courses, their interdisciplinary nature, and the constitutive principles. Additionally, relevance for courses of philology is proposed, with a view of the fields of graduate employment: teaching and translation.

Key words: ***academia, culture, cultural studies, interdisciplinary, cultural competence***

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doi.org/10.33919/flcy.20-21.3.3

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On March 9th, 1993, several academics were attempting to reach snowbound Veliko Turnovo for the first conference on British Cultural Studies to be convened outside the UK. The unusual snowfall in March highlighted the uniqueness of the event. An academic subject called Culturology did exist in Bulgaria. It defined itself as the study of Art and therefore preparing its graduates to organise exhibitions, festivals, public relations, to write critique about pieces of art etc. A bachelor-degree programme was introduced at Sofia University in 1990 in the Faculty of Philosophy (Department of Cultural Studies, Sofia University, 2012), coming in the footsteps of an exclusive specialized Centre of Culturology, providing additional training for graduates of Arts Courses at Sofia University and the Arts Academies.

Hence, the subject matter had little relevance to culture with a small letter, relating to everyday life. Neither did it relate to the anthropological concept of the facets of human experience that extend beyond physical fact; as the way we understand ourselves both as individuals and as members of society, and includes stories, religion, media, rituals, and even language itself (Geertz 1973); as the sets of values held by extended social groups and managing the struggle for power and domination among them in the framework of society, thus often relating to political science and social architecture (Althusser 1971). Culture as defined in Culturology courses seemed equally distanced from the project of language learning (Montgomery 1999) – for which influence from the British council was unconditionally welcomed, unlike in other spheres of life – and exclusively reserved for highbrow researchers of Art with a capital letter.

On the other hand, most philologists traditionally did study a subject related to culture interpreted as national culture – *Civilisation*, *Landeskunde*, Regional Studies, History and Geography of a country where the language under investigation is spoken as native (Stoicheva 2019). Many of the courses were taught by professors of History and the exams would focus extensively on timelines, periods marked by significant discoveries, wars, and other historical landmarks. The nature of the courses was

designed to supplement the courses in literature, so that the students could understand the historic background to literary works. No transfer existed from culturology, sociology, or anthropology, restricted in those times mainly to ethnology. The civilisation courses were meant for professional language teachers, who stood considerably lower in society compared to art critics and cultural event organisers. The most frequent partner for the project which inherently called for interdisciplinarity was History.

This division was reflected in the affiliations of the Bulgarian participants in the Veliko Turnovo conference – they were mainly literary scholars and historians.

Cultural Studies

In 1989 Grossberg, identifying himself as an American at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, described Cultural Studies as an essentially British phenomenon called into existence by four significant challenges (Grossberg 1993). In the fifties, this was the Americanisation of Britain, taking place after the Second World War. Although in Eastern Europe Americanisation sounds too familiar to be applied to the UK, Grossberg describes it as occupying central place in British Culture, and some academics even saw a threat to British culture in the viral spread of its products. The fears of the invading American media (“if America spoke Spanish, Britain would have a cinema”, anonymously quoted in critical circles) combined with the role of the New Left of the time (Davis 2017) (not to be confused with Tony Blair’s project years later) struggling for influence with Marxism, with the main thrust to explain the advent of imperialism and its hold on large swathes of the population, including members of the working class. In the sixties, the challenge for cultural studies were the media: they seemed overtaken by ideological functions and several subcultures fought for domination and control. In the seventies, the fourth challenge presented gender and sexuality, taking control of the major discourses in society.

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Thus, Cultural Studies occurred on the academic stage aimed at resolving problems of people and society concerned with the sphere of identity, bonding with others and distinguishing from them. On the one hand the nature of identity loomed large in the project – what is British behind a language spoken all over the world and what unites people in the diversity of racial identities. Hall (1973), in his British Jamaican identity developed the theory of how meaning is encoded and decoded in television seen as a discourse. Foucault (1972) collected and analysed discourses of madness, including articles, medical case histories, interviews etc. Barthes (1993) looked at advertisements and analysed as textual the denoted and the connoted. These few examples reveal how culture was seen as emanating from a host of discourses. Following from the premise that the identity of a community is based on a consensus manufactured in the interaction of popular media, cultural studies focus on the discourses that reach the largest audiences. All of these trends fight and bond over the philosophical debate whether social reality exists beyond the conceptions of people reflecting it.

Theoretical influences over the discipline have been defined as coming from literary studies, anthropology, and sociology. "Close reading" of literary texts – typically conducted by literary criticism – reveals characteristics of society, argued Hoggarth (1990), one of the founding fathers of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham. In a series of books, he reveals the nature of literature as the type of text that projects issues of social life, as well as the 'imaginative life' of its readers (Hoggarth 1969: 18).

A significant trend in literary studies was the tendency to focus on works and topics associated with the working class. This inevitably led to the concept of popular culture – a culture which rather than high standards sought broad audiences and was bound to be associated with lower tastes, less elevated quality, and a mass appeal. But it is this culture that lies in the crux of the interests of cultural studies scholars. Williams warned against the distinction "enlightened minority, degraded

mass” (Williams 1957). The ability to empathise with the readers of the Sunday papers was seen as another success in the battle against the hegemony of the ruling classes. Fiske (1987) was even inclined to reverse the existing quality criteria and crown as art any piece that appeals to vast numbers of people. In America, Cultural Studies typically centre around the study of popular culture.

Alongside literary analysis, cultural studies included stylistics, rhetoric, and semiotics. Williams (1957) theorises two formations of interest to Cultural studies: the structure of feeling and the community of process. They provided more systemic methodology of literary and cultural readings. Thus semiotics – through the works of Barthes (Barthes 1993), for instance – revealed communication as a formal process rather than a sociological one.

Culture is defined as “a level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life and give expressive form to their social and material life experiences” (Clarke 1975). That is why sociology plays a decisive role in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. But its findings are saved from the practice of attributing sociological labels by the role that ethnography plays in studying society – rich descriptions, engagement with emotion and observer distance rather than dispassionate accounts. Reality is textual and representational – each text is interpreted from specific positions, their politics is redefined, and the reflection is always “in the eye of the beholder”.

From its inception, cultural studies deal with ideology since it strives to explain the way people make sense of relations in society. Ideology is in the communication of values, “cultural power is consent, cultural struggle is the opposition of competing, sociologically locatable struggles of meaning” (Grossberg 1993).

In non-English speaking cultures, the term culture comes to be associated with the effort to teach and learn the language together with its cultural context. Byram (1989) presents culture as the basis of developing skills for interaction with representatives of different social groups, called intercultural competence. Pulverness

(1999) identifies culture as the fifth skill in teaching language alongside reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Kramsch (1999) claims that in the interaction between a learner's identity and the culture of the acquired language, a third space is created where language learning helps develop the identity of the learner. Through a host of intercultural learning projects, teachers of English define their own concept of culture with a small "c" – the way people live, the values they share, everyday rituals, rites of passage etc.

The invited speakers

Organising the conference was obviously part of the mission of the British Council – 'promoting abroad a wider appreciation of British culture and civilisation [by] encouraging cultural, educational and other interchanges between the United Kingdom and elsewhere' (British Council 1940). Therefore, for the landmark conference outstanding academics were invited. Malcolm Bradbury, Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia and author of a book extensively discussed at the conference – Rates of Exchange (Bradbury 1983), modelled on a fictional Eastern European country – was among the keynote speakers. He spoke as an expert on modern British literature, author of several books of criticism, in addition to his fiction. Later he was awarded the Order of the British Empire for services to literature. Thus, he represented the traditional strand of Literature in what was already called "a studies" subject. He spoke both as an author and as a literary scholar. In his speech, he characterised a distinct group of modern novelists, known as 'angry young men ', with these words: "… most of them weren't angry, a lot of them weren't young, and several of them were women" (Kostova 1994). The witty and disparaging qualification emphasised the specific role literary criticism played in cultural studies: to analytically outline the participants in the literary process and social groups that emerge from their role in literature as a communicative activity.

The second keynote speaker was John Caughie, head of the department of Film and Television at Glasgow University. Remarkably, he was neither actor, director, or cameraman, but a theorist and historian of cinema, who was later elected to lead the School of Culture and Creative Arts. Thus, the new approach to film as culture was introduced as part of Cultural Studies. Television, spurned as the most popular of media, but preferred by Cultural Studies scholars as reaching the largest possible audience, was presented through the crucial issue of financing films. Caughie discussed the landmark film Chariots of Fire as financed, among other institutions, by the National Union of Mineworkers Pension Fund (Kostova 1994) and reviewed the role of television in film production. This culturalist approach was mainly sociological with a focus on the struggle for domination through cultural practices.

The least expected member of the keynote panel was a sociologist – Professor Jock Young. Sociology had not been seen as integral part of the type of Cultural Studies existing in Bulgaria by the nineties of the twentieth century. Professor Young's speech (Kostova, 1994) was an example of ethnographic methods adopted in sociology to combat crime. He discussed the term 'moral panic' as "a sociological expression which occurs when an atypical event, sometimes monstrous, sometimes quite innocuous triggers off deep seated anxieties in society is picked up by the media, it escalates … I myself was doing work on Hippies, cannabis and the panic about drug use." The scrupulous participant observation informed also by analysing the role of the broad context had led the researchers to significant conclusions in their work with delinquent young people. The life of these people was called 'a culture' in the surprising new sense of this term.

Bulgaria contributed with the highest possible rank – the Vice President Blaga Dimitrova, a prominent author and political activist. In her speech, she sounded the alarm that some concepts are appropriated to name phenomena entirely different from the original referents. "CHANGE. Never utter this word in a loud voice! You could be robbed in broad daylight in the middle of the street because people might think you possess foreign currency" (Kostova

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1994). Theoretically, Vice President Dimitrova's address was uninformed by the Cultural Studies canon, but it raised awareness of the significance of the intensional meaning of words (van Orman Quine 1963), the way each culture fills with meaning the metaphors it operates by. She offered loan words which accrued with local content, as seen from her example where 'change' had come to mean exchanging foreign currency and the fraudulent practices associated with it in Bulgaria in the last decade of the twentieth century. A symbolic mistake occurred with the motto of Vice President Dimitrova's speech. Since the text was written in Bulgarian and translated into English, the quote from an English newspaper was backtranslated into English from a previous Bulgarian translation. The often-quoted headline "Fog over Channel. Continent Cut Off" was rendered as "Stormy weather, dense fog, the continent has been isolated from Great Britain" (Kostova 1994). A web search of the original headline returns 1700 results, the top ones from reference sources discussing whether this was a real newspaper headline, or a clever metaphor invented by academics to illustrate the purported isolationism of the British. However, the Bulgarian translation community – not to say the whole society – was obviously unaware of this landmark text. Little did they know of newspaper style, either, given the structure of the sentence. Therefore, isolation and rapprochement had to make a fresh start, Cultural Studies being a flagship in the much-needed project.

Without giving a keynote speech, one of the finest translators of Shakespeare's works, Valeri Petrov took part in the discussions. Pictorial contributions were made by the outstanding photographer Ivo Hadjimishev, who had contributed to international agencies even in the times of communism – a rare feat for selected artists.

The international participants were typically University lecturers. Among them were two British Council Lecturers: Alec Gordon posted in Hungary and Margaret Dobing – in Veliko Turnovo. The position had been created for British academics to help develop the teaching of English by native speakers, slowly withdrawn later when the 'studies' project had taken root.

[1] There are numerous examples of similar hybrids in Zhabotinska, 2014 and Perianova, 2014.

The Content

Studying the content of the conference from the publication of selected papers (Kostova 1994), literature is in the centre of the presentations of most Bulgarian presenters. Katsarova (*ibid.:* 122ff) analyses Kingsley Amis' *I like it here*, Krasteva (*ibid.*:130) Julian Barns' *The Porcupine*, Stoicheva (*ibid.:* 126ff) – Malcolm Bradbury's trilogy about the fictional Eastern European country Slaka. "I want to argue that the way Slaka is constituted and offered for circulation acknowledges and strengthens the opposition between the two Europes. In an attempt to define Eastern Europe in terms of political reality the narrative discourse inadvertently mobilises some of the West's dominant stereotypes about itself and others" (*ibid.:* 126). Both the terminology and the stance are reminiscent of the cold war discourse of literary criticism: the West and the East, eyeing each other from behind the wall with apprehension and misunderstanding. In his paper, Shurbanov (*ibid.:* 117) wittily calls Hamlet's gravediggers liquidators of Capitalism, blaming the urge to always find harbingers of class struggle and triumph over the enemy, even in minor characters in literary classics. This is what was meant by "ideology" back in the times of communism, unlike the reference to Marxism as a formative influence on Cultural Studies by Grossberg (1993), Althusser (1971) and numerous others, who define ideology as relating the social and the personal, despite the exaggerated focus on social class, called 'dehumanising' and "economic reductionism", as well as the central role given to the less privileged classes.

The idea that "the political is now personal" was developed at the conference by Stone (Kostova 1994). Politics is no longer seen as a war of ideologies but in simple day-to day issues, such as taxes, identity constructions and other factors that transpose it onto individual lives, "the problematic representation of dominance, reality, and illusion".

A traditional Bulgarian approach to national culture is demonstrated in Philipov's paper (*ibid.:* 85), entitled "The image of England and the English in Bulgaria

before the Liberation from Ottoman Domination". The author reviews English novels, such as Robinson Crusoe adapted for Bulgarian readers and their reception in Bulgaria. Morals are drawn from a retelling of selected episodes in what is called 'adaptation' and certainly not translation. The issue for selecting what to translate and the type of adaptation has been a major dissertation topic for generations of academics at Sofia University (Stoicheva 2019), thus placing translation, together with the more recent occurrences of localisation and mediation into the processes of deciphering the cultural content in literary texts.

The fact that identity is subject to construction is reflected in Kostova's paper (*ibid.:* 91) on John Bull through the term 'national mirage' – a stereotypical representation of a given foreignness. Through Warnake's notion, Kostova analyses a number of English characters in Bulgarian literature, thus introducing a theoretical instrument through which to look at intercultural contact and representations – in itself a novelty in the bulk of Bulgarian Cultural studies.

An interesting approach to identity is seen in Brinzeu's presentation Two Palimpsest Countries (*ibid.:* 76). The term 'palimpsest' is a metaphor for racial, national, and religious identities that overlap and evolve hyphenated terms of reference, such as British-Indian, so prolific these days and are enshrined in the very basis of Cultural studies, where the issue of freely determined identities is the centrepiece. Brinzeu's is an external, maybe a little stereotyped view of the problem posed by Kumar (*ibid.:* 56) Britishness and Englishness: what prospect for a European identity in Britain today. He debates the issue of basic nationalities in Europe and the (unlikely) project of all of them being subsumed in a common European identity, quite similar to the situation on the British Isles, where people who consider themselves Welsh should also accept being called British. "The task of constructing 'higher order' loyalties in the absence of historic foundations is, one must hope, not impossible, but it is clearly very difficult", Kumar concludes prophetically.

The issue of identity, nationality, history, conquest, and domination proves a difficult one to unravel. In a later paper, Stoicheva (2019: 61) traces the need to go beyond giving “information about the geography, history, culture, art, and the political structure of the respective country, so that they (students – E.T.) would better understand literary texts.” As sponsors of resources for such courses she mentions the British Council, the Irish and the American Embassies. Canada is also included in the spectre of the courses to round up the list of countries “which formerly were part of the British Empire” (*ibid.:* 2019: 64). The reference to the Empire, however, is ill-chosen since the accusations that Cultural Studies is often dominated by Issues of imperialism (Grossberg 1993), intercultural relations of inequality (Montgomery 1999) and even linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 2018). The gaps on the map are transparent, leaving out India, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Barbados – which recently left the British Commonwealth because of the unfortunate legacy of the colonial power – and many other counties. The temptation to bundle together the 54 countries on all the continents forming the British Commonwealth and consider British Culture as a proxy for their Union is an easy solution, except it defaces most of the countries and serves as a perfect example of devouring the dominated. This is the type of culture the project of Cultural Studies is opposed to by definition. The very approach raises the issue of nationality and the national state – a vexed issue, yet to find its resolution in Bulgarian academe and cancel long programme names, such as British, American and Irish Studies.

A second innovation that the conference brought to Bulgaria were genres different from the literary. Templer (Kostova & al. 1994: 184), an American at a Bulgarian University, discussed the relevance of rock-and-roll in comparative studies, Linke (*ibid.:* 177) analysed personal advertisements and there was a Bulgarian contribution to the popular genres – so essential for Cultural Studies – by Todorova (*ibid.:* 173) about the discourse of advertisements.

The British lecturer to Hungary Alec Gordon declared the "replacement and even rejection of old-style from Civilisation courses" (*ibid*.: 163) unnecessary and called for repositioning the field of study by upgrading them. The new Cultural Studies are seen as the multidisciplinary study of history, literature, politics, arts, media etc. and – significantly – their interpretation. Pipeva (*ibid.:* 169) quotes Kane's taxonomy of the components of Cultural Studies courses: the theoretical bases of the subject, the institutional and social framework of the target society, and the everyday life of the target society. She includes Byram's affective parameter for intercultural competence – building empathy and the hands-on methodology of studies projects. Significantly, Pipeva emphasises the interactive presentations and connecting with real life – a feature unimaginable in previous times, as well as the comparative perspective.

Conclusion

The materials from the first conference on British Studies in Bulgaria were reviewed here as indicative of the nature of the evolving discipline. Attention was drawn to a multidisciplinary battery of subjects, such as sociology, anthropology – just as the practice of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Studies suggested. The concept of small culture was embraced, meaning the everyday life of people and the way they make sense of social structure and relations and applying the term Culture to groups denied cultural delineations, such as delinquents. The function of ideology as interpreting the ordinary amplified with the role of Marxism to give voice to those less powerful in society stood in sharp contrast to the iron curtain concepts of opposition, class struggle, overcoming the oppressor, being more progressive. Rather than conceive of the countries in the former British Empire, Cultural Studies introduced the concept of fluid identities, driven by the people who possess them, quite in opposition to blatant nationalisms. The role of popular genres, such as film, advertisements, music was redeemed and the need to outbalance the overwhelming focus on

literature was emphasised. The theoretical component of cultural studies was laid bare to be included in the teaching of Cultural studies.

With a view of identities, Cultural Studies seems to project a solution to selecting countries to pair with a target language. This solution cancels countries and evokes communities and the cultural features that unite them. Ironically, this goes counter to sponsorship of CS projects by national institutions, but releases academics from commercial foreign cults – a dependency hard to overcome in Bulgarian academia.

The first Cultural Studies Conference in Bulgaria raised the significant issue of translation: the content of borrowed terms, the style of genres, culture-specific icons and how they can be deciphered to audiences unfamiliar to the source culture. The facility of branding the country where a language is spoken as a “target culture” is problematised and redirected towards shaping a cultural identity in the interface of a culture of learning.

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