
Confronting Value: A Note on Richard Hoggart

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In this short essay I want to explore some aspects of Richard Hoggart's work by focusing on an agenda of questions concerning his 'reading' of cultural value and cultural change.¹ I am aware that a sizeable literature of critical commentary has developed around the key writings, particularly in recent years, but my aim is to present a brief, focused and I hope, provocative, agenda of critical points and in doing this I shall restrict myself to referencing this wider literature sparingly. Hoggart's descriptions and assessments, particularly in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957, but page references below are to 1958 edition), have been seen as a point of necessary orientation in any serious address to cultural change in post-war Britain, particularly to changes in working-class culture, although references to his work in current research are perhaps less frequent than they were, despite arguments about his particular perspective and approach 'coming back' into stronger visibility after successive waves of often conceptually elaborate bodies of cultural theory. It is important to note how, in cultural studies, the response to Hoggart has mostly taken the form of a critical dialogue, particularly with his view of the cultural changes of the 1950s, rather than a straightforward affirmation and development. There have also been assessments of a more markedly negative kind (see, for instance, Sparks, 1974 on questions of class and Owen, 2008 for a review of feminist critiques).

It is impossible to address Hoggart's work properly without recognising the broader difficulties and awkwardness of engaging academically with 'popular culture'. These follow from the tensions and sometimes contradictions – ethical and political but also aesthetic – which derive in turn from the complex interconnections and diverse normative perspectives that the notion of popular culture throws up. The phrase combines, as Stuart Hall has observed (Hall, 1981), the problems of two historically complex and contested terms, reverberating with the different arguments that have employed them as central points of reference and of orientation. The difficulties and the awkwardness continue in much cultural analysis today, their presence sometimes admitted but more often disguised by a vocabulary more specialised and self-consciously impersonal than Hoggart's own. They are to be found lying behind what I see as the distinctive 'double dynamics' of cultural studies, both that towards affirmation and even celebration and that towards the identification of deficits and

the articulation of critique. This gives to the whole area of study a degree of instability in aims and approaches, however much masked by confident assertions of intent. The underlying tensions are unlikely to disappear whatever the achievements by way of empirical work and theoretical development. Indeed, there are grounds for seeing them as so deeply entailed in the project of engaging evaluatively with 'popular culture' as to have become a necessary element of serious inquiry and discussion in this area.

Hoggart organised *The Uses of Literacy*, both its autobiographical ethnography and its analytic reading of contemporary cultural tendencies, around a sense of 'crisis', of impending 'danger' to which the working class were particularly, although not exclusively, exposed as a result of forms of cultural exploitation with potentially 'debilitating' outcomes for lived values. This sense of change comes through at several points, most sharply in its final chapter. I want in what follows to suggest that we can identify three different 'frames' within which Hoggart's descriptive and evaluative work is carried out, and that the relationship between these frames is significant for the character of the overall cultural judgement that emerges. This is a judgement that, whilst it shares something with the work, for instance, of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, displays quite distinctive features in its engagement with matters of value. In a subsequent section, I shall then try to make four related points about how issues of value are 'confronted' in Hoggart's work and how a critical review of his approach is the best way of continuing to employ Hoggart's work in our thinking about the current and future, as well as historical, conditions of culture.

Three Frames

The first frame I am interested in is the frame of 'cultural improvement'. This is the dominant frame in much of Hoggart's work and it is closely related to his sense of the need for a much greater extension of educational opportunity together with the wider and improved range of cultural choice that would follow from this. 'Cultural improvement' partly involves a greater number of people being able to enjoy a wider array of cultural artefacts and productions, including those that require some degree of acquired competence through steady familiarity. There is a prophylactic character to this 'improvement' too, insofar as Hoggart implies that a consequence of the opportunities it entails would mean a reduced audience and readership for those aspects of the currently 'popular' that he finds aesthetically, socially and spiritually questionable (as features of 'the candy floss world' 1958:206-245). A strong new educational policy would not bring about cultural transformation on its own, but it would be the centrepiece of a broader set of policy shifts introduced into the areas of arts and media. The aim is explicitly not the impractical one of making everyone 'highbrow'. It is that of giving support for a range of different kinds of cultural experience and of cultural 'tastes' to find

better conditions for achieving integrity and critical independence, thereby bringing about improved circumstances of personal and social fulfilment.

The second frame at work is that of 'political improvement'. This looks towards greater democratic participation, a more alert questioning of current political values and language and therefore a strengthened sense of the 'public' and the 'civic' in national life. The aspirations here are placed against a sense of a growing 'uniformity' being imposed upon ordinary people, in part by increasingly 'centralised' forms of social management, a uniformity in which significant freedoms, including the space for a proper degree of democratic self-determination, may be lost. Part of the broader changes has involved a significant shift in the composition and the character of the working class, with some of its more intellectually able members, among them those that constituted the 'earnest minority' of the class (1958: 318-323), now being recruited into the professional middle class through educational change. There is a sense of a new 'classless class' in the making as a result of technological and economic shifts in the shaping of material and cultural life. Hoggart, fully recognising both the benefits of education and the limiting aspects of class identities, wants nevertheless to emphasise the reduction in the critical resilience of working-class culture as a result of these shifts and the consequent weakening, essentially *political* in character, of its internal resources and self-identity.

However, whereas, for instance, in the work of Raymond Williams and certainly of Stuart Hall, the political is the primary frame, with change here being seen as a necessary context for significant cultural transformation (allowing for continuing interaction between the political and the cultural), in Hoggart it is essentially a secondary frame, although one which appears more strongly at the end of *Uses* than perhaps anywhere else in his major writings. 'Cultural improvement' against the growing tendency towards cultural impoverishment and exploitation, is the dominant theme. It is related explicitly to the political at many points, its grounds are primarily ethical and sometimes spiritual; it is about greater fairness in the way people live and greater equality in the kinds of things they can enjoy and that can improve the non-material quality of their lives.

This brings us to a third frame, which I will call here the 'frame of the politics of inequality'. This differs from that of 'political improvement' because it is essentially about the diagnosis of deficits rather than the aspiration to reduce these deficits. We can see it as a broad theoretico-analytic frame in which ideas of cultural improvement and of political improvement can be variously situated. In this sense, it is a frame of a different order from the two others. Whilst in Williams (e.g Williams, 1961), in Hall (e.g Hall, 1981) and perhaps most explicitly in the work of E.P. Thompson (classically, Thompson, 1963), this third frame is strongly evidenced and articulated with economic and political history, particularly the history of social class relations, in Hoggart it is far more muted in expression. In his work, it

can take on something of a 'folksy' character (as in discussion of the trope of 'them and us', 1958: 72-101). This approach, while it may show a keener ear for the actual vocabulary of class tension and be illuminating about the nature of popular perceptions, is not fully adequate to the deep historical and economic divisions and relations of power that are involved. Hoggart sometimes alludes to these divisions with a sharp sense of their scale and overarching importance, without ever giving them sustained address. The relatively modest attention that his analysis gives to the role of work and of work-based organisations in shaping the broader patterns of leisure and of lived culture, including the forms of engagement with mediated popular culture, is fully consonant with this perspective.

On the basis of such a rough typology, I would want to claim that the weak relation of ideas of cultural improvement to political improvement and the lack of a developed frame for addressing 'the politics of inequality', in particular the absence of any serious engagement with the history of capitalist relations, limits the cogency of Hoggart's cultural criticism. Too often, despite the subtlety of the local analysis and the overall generosity of engagement, normative ideas like that of 'spiritual dry rot' (1958: 248) gain prominence at the expense of a more focused and materialist account of the dominant cultural dynamics at work and of just what might be required effectively to oppose them and introduce new options. I shall return to this point later but now, in what is essentially an attempt at further development of parts of the preceding discussion, I want to look at four aspects of the way in which matters of cultural value appear in the writings, giving what I think is a justified prominence to *The Uses of Literacy*.

Four Points about 'Value'

1. First of all, I think it is productive when considering Hoggart's work to note how that longstanding duality in uses of the idea of 'culture' - culture as both 'way of life' and as 'expressive artefacts' (sometimes as 'art') - appears within it. In discussion of this duality, it is regularly pointed out that the relationship between these two dimensions of the cultural is so close that differentiation may be difficult and even at times distortive. However, whilst recognising this interplay, I would want to emphasise the continuing gap between the two senses of the word, a gap which I think is still frequently under-recognised in cultural studies research in a way that leads to an unfortunate merging of what are essentially sociological ideas with what are essentially aesthetic-critical ones. It is certainly true that, across a wide area of arts and expressive practice, the connections outwards to broader values and meanings and to the contexts of lived experience within which expressive work is encountered needs to be recognised and often made an integral part of critical assessment. It is also true that any account of ways of living that leaves out attention to the diverse forms of the aesthetic and of creative expressivity in circulation will be greatly reduced in its scope. However, the kind of

analytic approach that is most directly appropriate to each side of the duality may differ considerably and so may the kind of evaluative scheme that can most productively be applied.

If due notice is not taken of this differentiation, it has a tendency to produce tensions and even contradictions in the arguments subsequently developed. Hoggart sees a 'corrupt brightness' (1958: 340) in much of the contemporary popular culture that he discusses. Some of this he regards as 'dangerous'. In making these judgements about what is primarily *the social and political risk* that the cultural products carry, he often uses terms of judgement drawn from a literary-ethical vocabulary. A good example would be the idea of an artefact being in certain respects 'anti-life' (1958:340), an assessment that draws on the language of D.H.Lawrence in a way quite close to some of the judgements made both by F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis in their own, more directly literary, appraisal of art-life relations.² However, as well as warning of the risks to social values, to ways of living, posed by forms of 'bad' popular culture, Hoggart wishes to keep some disjunction between the world of this culture and the everyday world of ordinary people. He does not wish to see the 'badness' of popular culture at the level of many commercially produced artefacts and modes of cultural consumption as simply an indicator (or indeed a reflector) of 'badness' at the level of ordinary values. In the final chapter of *The Uses of Literacy*, he notes the various ways in which ordinary people are 'resilient' although he then wants to warn against the risk of slipping too easily into assuming from this that there is no threat from the cultural tendencies he has discussed. One of the reasons he does not want to align popular output too tightly with popular consciousness is that he has too much respect for (and a sense of protectiveness towards) ordinary people to allow him to identify a deficit here. This is not, of course, a problem for many of the 'mass culture' critics who preceded him or for some who have offered cultural commentary since. Another, related, reason for holding back on such an alignment is that doing so provides a continuing 'space for hope', a sense of ordinary living not yet irredeemably contaminated by the cultural materials in general circulation (which nevertheless have consequences both 'widespread and uniform' ref 264) and it therefore also provides some grounding for the development of a public for new, better and wider cultural provision within the terms of revised policies and institutional practices. There is instability here, in an assessment that wishes to warn of the negative impact of much of the cultural material currently 'popular' and yet also wishes to affirm a sense of ordinary values having a degree of independence and integrity. It is a type of instability also occasionally present, albeit in rather different ways, in the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall and it is one that is finally grounded in the dynamics of the democratic imagination and democratic hope. This does not, however, reduce the limitations it places on coherent and consistent argument about cultural value and the character of cultural change.³

2. A second, significant dimension of the engagement with 'value' is the form of address to questions of cultural difference. Cultural commentators vary in the extent to which they relate 'difference' to 'inequality'. To bring inequality strongly into the picture is to introduce a negative, critical perspective on 'difference' whereas, by contrast, to give emphasis to 'diversity' is often to present difference as positive. Clearly, some recognition of inequality is present, if implicit, in most writing on contemporary culture but it differs quite widely in the form it takes within the overall analysis and argument. In the influential work of Pierre Bourdieu, for instance (notably Bourdieu, 1984) cultural inequality is seen as part of the unequal distribution of cultural capital within the economic and social order. This might seem to provide the basis for an argument in favour of 'cultural improvement' of the kind that lies behind a good deal of Hoggart's writing, an improvement that has a strong basis in education as well in changes to media and arts policy. However, Bourdieu regards cultural differentiation, as it shows itself for instance in the appreciation of the higher art forms, as primarily a *positional* variation within a cultural system clearly stratified by social class rather than as an unequal chance to enjoy the *intrinsic values* of specific forms of cultural product and performance. Within this perspective, any direct idea of a 'cultural improvement' achieved by bringing to the disadvantaged the benefits of enjoying superior cultural works, with the enhancement of their quality of life that will follow, is made extremely difficult to advance. Hoggart would clearly want to argue both for the benefits of personal satisfaction which the opportunity to engage with work of quality in the arts offer and also the benefits of personal 'improvement' (e.g. of heightened awareness of other ways of living and perhaps, to move in a more Leavisian direction, of expanded moral sensibility) that are related to this. He would probably give short shrift to the kind of relativism that is a recurrent (and problematic) aspect of Bourdieu's assessment of cultural value.⁴ However, Bourdieu's firmly sociological recognition of social class relations and of cultural inequality, not only as formed by the traditional hierarchic social order but as imperatives of the transformed economic order within capitalism, gives to his account a robustness that Hoggart's own diagnosis of cultural ills cannot really match.

Those recommending cultural improvement have often insufficiently pursued the question of the economic roots of cultural inequality and of the historical formation of differences in 'taste'. This has often left recommendations conveying what is finally a more gestural and impractical sense of the options for change and reform than might otherwise be the case.⁵ Despite the thoughtful depth of his analysis, an analysis that is registered as part of a personal as well as a scholarly project, Hoggart shows himself to be disinclined to work too far outside established and dominant ideas of cultural value and, with moments of exception, outside of established ideas about the 'scope for change' within the economic, social and political order.

3. Connecting with many of the points discussed above, there is the question of the relationship between culture, morality and politics. Another way of putting some of the comments I have already made is to observe that Hoggart's work does not make strong connections between culture and *power*. In the later work of the Birmingham CCCS this perspective would be exchanged for one in which the political relations of popular culture (in particular its role in the reproduction of ideology) would become the primary point of reference (see, for instance, the contributions to CCCS, 1977). It could be argued that the later position seriously displaced, at least for a time, questions of aesthetics and of cultural experience (including the experience of pleasure) from the frame of inquiry. In that context, the more recent 'rediscovery' of Hoggart as continually suggestive on these questions is understandable. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive recognition of the profound ways in which many aspects of culture are connected to the 'power system' would have benefited the strength of Hoggart's analysis and the force both of his critique and his recommendations for change. If there are dangers in seeing the cultural too directly in terms of structures of power (and I think that there are), then there is also a price to be paid for addressing cultural change at the general, national level and not making the terms of its positioning within the spaces of power an explicit and important part of the assessment. It is not as if (unlike some Liberal commentators) Hoggart did not identify any problem at the level of the political system. At the end of *The Uses of Literacy* he refers to the 'false lights' (1958:345) that are now appearing in respect of political direction. In a move towards balancing his concern here, he observes that these may be partly inevitable during a period of disruption and change. He notes the possibility that important freedoms might be lost within the dynamics of a centralising uniformity which is seen as close to features of totalitarianism in some of its effects and which is bringing about a move from 'class to mass' (1958:343). Such loss, he speculates, might not be recognised widely given repeated official assurances that people are 'free'. This is a line of thinking running quite close to a Marxian sense of 'false consciousness' as well as to the realms of Orwellian dystopia. However, all this is never developed as fully as it could be as a firm background for making more specific observations about cultural tendencies and the possibilities for taking 'other routes'. Just as he has a sense of the existing popular potential for cultural improvement, Hoggart sees the popular potential for democratic development too. However, both are perceived against a marked risk of bad circumstances becoming even worse. Any clearer sense of the play-off between the need for anxiety and the basis for hope is made difficult by the relative lack of a structural framework for locating 'historically and sociologically' what he has found wanting in the current cultural conditions of the working classes and in the media and entertainment industries which occupy a significant proportion of their leisure time.

4. My fourth point is essentially one that frames many aspects of the other three. It concerns the ways in which culture value and change are related to questions of cultural economics and to cultural market relations. Hoggart was clear that ‘commercialisation’ (sometimes identified in the form of ‘Americanisation’) was part of the new, negative dynamics he saw at work in British popular culture. Nevertheless, as I noted earlier, it is interesting that in his most pessimistic judgements towards the end of *The Uses of Literacy* it is ‘uniformity’ that is identified as the main risk, thus connecting his argument directly with the negative or at least nervous evaluations of previous ‘mass society’ theorists such as McDonald (1953). Despite the empathetic character of most of his writing, in *The Uses of Literacy* he perhaps failed to understand fully *why* so many aspects of the new ‘shiny’ commercial culture appealed so strongly, particularly to an emerging generation of teenagers who had experienced their childhood within the more restricted popular cultural tonalities of the 1940s and early 1950s. Nevertheless, he was writing at a time when it was possible to believe that a firm redirection of public policy and regulation might remedy some of the more negative consequences of the newly released commercial energies at work in the reshaping of British popular culture. It is worth remembering that *The Uses of Literacy* was published only two years after commercial television began broadcasting in Britain in 1955 and that Hoggart had started it several years earlier, even before the Parliamentary decision to go ahead with this major change in national cultural life. This was a change that, of course, Hoggart would later reflect on with a largely negative appraisal as a member of the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting and an influential contributor to its Report of 1962 (see Milland, 2004 for a discussion of his involvement here).

The extent to which popular culture space is an economic space, a space for the competitive achievement of profits across different market segments, has become much clearer since Hoggart’s major writing and it is reflected in some of his later commentary. It is now impossible to engage with questions of national cultural direction of the kind which so concerned Hoggart without seeing how much these questions are in large part about the restructuring of the economy and the rise of new forms of domestic consumption, connecting directly to the shifting character of the international system. For all, or nearly all, areas of media and cultural research, the impact of markets upon quality and choice and upon the perception and experience of ‘the cultural’ has become a central point of critical debate. How far is it possible to work outside the dominant market frame? How far is that frame itself varied enough in its conditions and possibilities to allow for work that extends and expands the ‘public good’ in culture, granted that there will be a continuing argument about definitions and criteria here, rather than seeming to deplete and debilitate it? While the cultural dynamics to which Hoggart attended so perceptively - of individual, familial and social class

pleasures and fulfilments, of a variety of ‘tastes’ within an unequal spread of opportunities - still require our attention, these now need to be seen more sharply in relation to the massive structuring power of the cultural industries and the forms of consumption that they encourage and resource (see Corner, 2009 on this point).

I want to conclude by making just a few summary comments about Hoggart and value, comments which will doubtless connect with what is said elsewhere in this volume, probably from different points of judgment. What seems to me to be important first of all is recognising the extent to which Hoggart’s writing, certainly in *The Uses of Literacy*, works within the established frame of ‘mass society’ and ‘mass culture’ diagnosis and then the extent to which it pushes beyond this. There is no doubt that the ‘mass culture’ perspective with its fears of centralization and standardisation, its suspicion of the commercial popular and its intimations of decline, is an influential one for the account of change that Hoggart develops. What allows his writing to transcend this framework is the strength of his autobiographical engagement combined with the complexity of his class allegiance and the closely observed subtleties of his local instances and interpretations. Although, on occasion, a movement towards ‘easy’ generalisation can be seen and some of the formulations are over-asserted and under-argued, Hoggart is too caught up personally in what I earlier described as the awkwardness of making firm assessments in this area to fall too deeply into the passing of unreflexive, ‘received’ verdicts.

As many commentators have noted, *The Uses of Literacy* is a book which we now see as remarkable for the way in which it address a general, educated readership. It engages them without condescension in the serious discussion of matters felt to be of ‘common’ concern. The articulation of ‘feeling’ is also quietly central in different ways to most of Hoggart’s writing, further strengthening the bond with the reader. It is essentially projected as a ‘public’ rather than ‘academic’ project. In that sense it is an achievement predicated on relationships of writing and reading that no longer flourish and are unlikely to return with quite the same confident combination of scholarly and civic values.

Hoggart’s engagement with questions of cultural value, informed by his background, his social commitments and his training as a literary critic, takes him into the centre of issues whose defining contours finally lay beyond the frames he employs. However, the rich detail of his descriptions of changing forms of living and of sensibility (we can think here of Williams’ still suggestive idea of ‘structures of feeling’,⁶ the honesty of his concerns for the ‘inner life’ and for the ethical within the social, will ensure that his writing remains a necessary, and often inspiring, point of reference for any understanding of class, culture and the media in Britain.

¹ The idea of 'reading' is, of course, particularly applicable to Hoggart's work, given his interest in extending the analytic methods of literary criticism in order to interpret social values.

² F.R. Leavis is stronger than Q.D. Leavis on 'life values', taking his cue from Lawrence, but Q.D. Leavis's work on popular literature (Leavis, 1932) is an important forerunner of *The Uses of Literacy* and Hoggart has noted that he was a 'great admirer' of her work, with reservations about her evaluative attitude (see, for instance, Corner 1992).

³ This instability can also be seen in many areas of media studies, including the debate about the values of 'reality television' and the long-running discussion from the 1980s onwards about the degree to which popular audiences interpret media texts in ways which include strong elements of independence and resistance, thereby undercutting claims about the role of such texts in ideological control.

⁴ On this, see among other commentaries, Frow (1987).

⁵ Examples might include the Report of the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting (Home Office, 1962), of which Hoggart was a co-author, and the Arts Council Report *The Glory of the Garden*, together with elements of many reports on education over the last 30 years.

⁶ See, for instance, Williams (1961). The term has received regular critical attention in relation to its combination of structural and experiential elements but precisely this mix has led to it being regularly employed by writers on culture since Williams's first use of it.

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