Oblique Strategies and Counter-Hegemonic Struggles: Decoding in the Birmingham Tradition (Part One)

Halls (Re)articulated Model of Communication

Cultural studies once enjoyed the status of an outsider before it managed to sneak into the English Department at the University of Birmingham through the back door, as it were. What was the character of this outside, which would become a kind of dissident knowledge on the inside, a decentred Centre established by Richard Hoggart in 1963? The story has been told many times over but it is worth repeating, if only to underline certain neglected tendencies; indeed, the rehabilitation of neglected materials was a vitally important operation of cultural studies. ((Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies and the Centre: some problematics and problems, in *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, London: Hutchinson, 1980, p. 21. All references to Halls essay Encoding /decoding are from this volume (1980: 128-38). Points of comparison and contrast are made along the way with Encoding, decoding, in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 507-17.)) First, the outside was very much the peripatetic life of young professors plying their wares in the adult and workers education movements in the postwar years, riding the rails in the service of university outreach programs. This was in a country, it is important to recall, where train travel was not a condemnation to limbo, as those of us who have lived the life of commuting scholars in Canada, for example. Second, cultural studies may be a product of the wartime service of those such as Raymond Williams, anti-tank battery commander, editor

and major contributor to the regimental newspaper Twentyone, missionary of the Labour Party, winning the peace, and the welfare state. Cultural studies was, in this respect, like a post-army education project of civilian officers such as Williams and E.P. Thompson. Fred Ingliss chapter in his biography of Williams, Guards Officer, suggests this line of thought, but elsewhere in his work one is struck by his attentiveness to ex-soliders (Paul Fussell, for instance), and the extent to which cultural studies may be set-up as the only discipline adequately prepared for the thawing of the cold war. ((Fred Inglis,*Raymond Williams,* London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 86-106; *idem, Cultural Studies,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, pp. 237-39. The biographical explanation of the influence of war may be taken in another direction. The Gramscian influence on cultural studies has been appreciated by those working in and on in the area. For instance, Hall (*Culture, Media Language,* 35ff) lists the virtues of Gramscis Marxism: non-reductionistic (economistic); the seminal role of hegemony in cultural studies; his conception of the organic intellectual; as a historical and political correction (conjunctural) to structuralism, among many other strong points. Additionally, the fascinating convergence of military and organic motifs in Gramscis important theorization of the relation between the state and civil society and the party may be considered (see my Gramscis Organic Army, *Research and Society* 5 (1992): 58-67; and Davies, *Cultural Studies and Beyond,* pp. 116-17).)) Even metaphorically, some like Ioan Davies would come to think of cultural studies as a guerrilla war against the political centre. Third, outside on the Left meant the journals (NLR), newspapers (Guardian), small presses, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, etc. What spaces can one inhabit outside the place, the university, which has provided the platform for engaged critique (a politicization of methodology itself)? On the one hand, there is the legacy of a freelance scholarship without boundaries and with few guarantees, unbound by master disciplinary codes and departmentality and, on the other, an engaged interdisciplinarity that would prevent cultural studies,

once on the inside, from being subsumed or disciplined by English as well as saving it from the temptation to restrict its field of inquiry. The Centre for Cultural Studies remained decentred.

Cultural studies was able to deviate from the canon and focus its attention on lived cultures, combining ethnography and cultural Marxism, while taking up the easily debased popular and present; a debasement, that is, based on the collapse of the study and its object, making cultural studies as low brow and massified as some elements of the culture with which it concerned itself. This was a textbook example of the erroneous, but oft-deployed, strategy of collapsing a study and its object in order to irredeemably stain the former. Moreover, this study of contemporary culture didnt look anything like proper sociology (structural-functionalist), and triggered a blistering attack from the empirically-minded watchmen of the discipline, especially when the classic texts of the sociological tradition began to be plundered for hidden gems adaptable to the tasks at hand. I am always struck by sociologys initial resistance to cultural studies and its imposition of proper (method-theory) because it seems so distant from the milder but not so open current climate, better late than never, and even the hyperbolic celebration of cultural studies as a panacea, a form of renewal, a great opportunity, etc, that one can read in editorials in The American Sociologist, no less. ((See Philip Jenkins, Sideways in Sociology,*The American Sociologist* 29/3 (Fall 1998): 5-8. Jenkins is not a sociologist and repeats almost to the letter the early lessons of the Birmingham tradition: i) non-sociologists see in the sociological tradition underutilized riches; ii) without the appreciation of which cultural studies could not be done. The sanction of the journal makes this rehearsal, for American readers, fascinating, if one reads it against Halls remarks on the reaction of sociologists to the literary-flavoured, loose sociology practiced by members of the Centre, the break with the theoretically impoverished structural-functionalism (blind to its own ideology and contingency) that dominated

British sociology, and the appropriation of sociological tradition from the inside We staked out a line for ourselves through the classic texts and problems. Referring to Hoggarts inaugural lecture, even with its compromises and conservatism, Hall wrote that it triggered off a blistering attack specially from sociology, which, while not concerned with such issues [neglected materials drawn from pop culture] reserved proprietary claim over the territory. For example, the opening of the Centre was greeted by a letter from two social scientists who issued a sort of warning: if Cultural Studies overstepped its proper limits and took on the study of contemporary society (not just its texts), without proper scientific (that is quasi-scientific) controls, it would provoke reprisals for illegitimately crossing the territorial boundary (Hall, Cultural Studies and the Centre, in*Culture, Media, Language* [1980: 20]). Sociological countermeasures, to extend the war metaphor, proved futile against incursions, yet worked effectively from within to curb the flights of fancy of its own students. Hall and Jenkins also presuppose twenty years or more apart that contemporary sociologys disarray renders the disciplines response perhaps not impossible but at least feeble. A sprawling discipline such as sociology would, then, find consensus difficult to achieve.))

The migration of cultural studies across the Atlantic into the old pink parts of the map, and then to the US, and its occupation of institutional openings largely in virtue of the serviceable and (this and Cultural Studies) is worthy of study in itself. The exportation of the unreflexive nationalism ofBritish cultural studies, its alleged global status (lets not forget steely French resistance), and its post-colonial itinerary (pink signifying cartographically the old Empire) have all been commented upon in the critical literature. ((See Jon Stratten and Ien Ang, On the impossibility of a global cultural studies: British cultural studies in an international frame, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 363ff.)) One of the less attractive

features of this migration has been the concomitant publishing bonanza in which classic statements, such as the one by Stuart Hall with which I will be concerned in this lecture, reappear inReader formats in altered versions, in a progressive editing and extraction from CCCS Stencilled Paper #7 to theCulture, Media, Language version of 1980 (by Hall himself) and the Cultural Studies Reader of 1999. This Americanization or, better, globalization of a classic statement should be obvious to anyone, especially since it begins with the erasure of Marx! I have no great fight with Australian editor Simon During, for he is among many others who have reprinted in Readers Digest format the Hall essay. How this can happen to a supposed classic is the real issue, although the idea that a fledgling discipline has classics may be begging the question.

In the very first paragraph, the explicit reference to Marxs Grundrisse and Capital as homologous sources for the idea that along the stations or moments [production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction] of the communication model a complex structure in dominance [is] sustained through the articulation of connected [yet distinctive] practices is erased. Readers of theReader are left without a key side to the homology that supports the complex structure of dominance between the circulation of commodities and the model of communication. Hall is not actually beginning with a positive statement and it is useless to positivize his text through selected editing without great violence. He notes criticisms of the process of communication in mass-communications research but merely in a summary version without any attention to the models history focusing on the linearity of the most basic model sender/message/receiver, and then initiates a claim on this somewhat weak foundation about failures to appreciate its different moments, the absence of a structured conception, etc. Linearity is, then, Halls fall term for an intolerably smooth and undifferentiated process, a closed loop. As far as circuits go, he looks to Marxs C-M-C, the circulation of commodities as a form of communication

because it does not suffer from the problems Hall associates with linearity. First, C-M- exchange of commodities for money (sale); and then M-C, exchange of money for commodities (purchase), united in the formula-circuit of selling in order to purchase: C-M-C. Marxs description of the series of metamorphoses that constitute the curriculum vitae of the commodity along the circuit (conversion into gold and its reconversion) figures money as a medium of exchange and circulation and reveals the connected practices and determinations of the commoditys passage along its stations from production, the point of departure, through distribution, exchange and consumption, that is, from the general through the particular to the individual, and the determinations, in the first place, of the laws of nature, various social factors, formal social movement, and then to the receiver whose consumption reinitiates the whole process in the unity of production and consumption. Another closed loop, to be sure, but one whose internal structure is highly differentiated. Readers cannot properly appreciate Halls homology between commodity production and discursive production without the commodity side. Of course, Hall is interested in discursive production meanings realized in social processes, functioning ideologically and politically in context and the exclusion might be justified on this basis. But wait. Just as we think we follow him, he returns to linearity. Now, this may seem fundamentally paradoxical in the absence of the Marx material. The language model of communication, operated by codes and syntagmatic discursive chains, which is to say, sequential linearity of two or more, but fixed, number of terms in a series, the so-called linguistic order of succession of signifiers in praesentia. So, Hall cannot dispense with linearity, but he will give it a material foundation. This is why the homology is so very necessary, and in a sense, written in the shadow of Baudrillards monumental homology between the commodity and sign forms. In Hall, there is not so much a sign form but a message form (how an event appears after having been excreted by the production structures of television) that is exchanged between sender and receiver in the

televisual discourse under consideration. The message form is of the order of appearance and surface, Hall emphasizes, and in no way non-random (129) A real historical event becomes an item or a communicative event, subject both to the encoding pragmatics of media treatments of a story or idea and institutional structures of broadcasting; as Hall put it, production constructs the message (129). The discursive message form, that is, the discursive form that is the product is distributed to audiences via the televisual channel, and taken as meaningful, decoded, and consumed. The determinate moments are encoding and decoding, hence the papers title. Why is the bar of structural implication in the 1980 title Encoding/decoding subject to a diacritical revision in the Reader as Encoding, decoding? The logic of implication that covers the entire field of homologous terms production/consumption and encoding/decoding, expressed by Hall with reference to the work of Philip Elliot, from whom the conclusion is drawn that production and reception of the televisual image are not identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole. (130). The salient point is that the skewed and structured feedbacks (130) of audiences influence production and thus decoding/consumption is a determinate moment of encoding/production. The comma is a slight pause that still conjoins two items in an incomplete inventory of aspects of the communication model.

On the side of encoding one finds all of the institutional structures, division of labour, and techniques of broadcasting organizational culture; these relations of production pass under the discursive rule of language (13) in the coding process that yields a programme as meaningful discourse. Encoding is subject to what Hall summarizes as meaning structures meanings and ideas, routines, skills, professional beliefs, institutional knowledges and assumptions, combined with common or expert knowledge drawn upon in a myriad of ways from social and political realms,

conceptions of audiences, etc. In the first determinate moment, there are structures[material]-codes-messages; in another determinate moment, there are messages-decodings-social consequences[structure]. The reception of messages by the audience is also framed by meaning structures, as well as socio-economic relations, and realized by acquiring social use value or political efficacy (130) Meaning structures 1 and its sequel, meaning structures 2 on the decoding side, are not identical, even though Hall thinks production is predominant, echoing Marx that production is decisive, even products, in our case programmes, become real only in being consumed or viewed. Meaning structures are pools of knowledge that producers and consumers may share to some extent; producers try to ensure that the transfer of meaningful messages to audiences is successful by dipping into the pools (codes) of knowledge from which audiences also draw. The limits to the economic analogy may be forced to appear here because the audiences reception of the message which articulates it as a coherent group demographically and psychographically, is itself a condition for the commercial exploitation of the message form in the sale by the broadcaster of time to advertisers so that they may reach particular audiences with their messages. I use the word forced because Hall does not build into his conception of structure a reflection on advertising which is vital to a completely commercialized television system such is found in the US, and of lesser import in a mixed system of public and private, with tight reins on the presentations of advertisements, that existed in England since the mid-1950s with the result that advertisers could not gain a stranglehold on the production of programs. ((William Leiss, Steve Kline and Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising* (Toronto: Methuen,1986), p, 86.
)) So, what Hall means by structure is national-specific.

There is no immediate identity between the two meaning structures; there is no perfect symmetry between encoding and decoding. The codes may

overlap but they do not fit together without friction because of the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences, but also the asymmetry between the codes of source and receiver at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form. (131) This asymmetry is evident in the visual presentation of Halls model which is organized into a series of unidirectional arrows from institutional structures upward through meaning structure 1 on the side of encoding through the program as message and then, in order to indicate the lack of equivalence between what would otherwise suggests a mirror of communication, the arrow falls through decoding, meaning structures 2, into audience structures (which are the same as those that determined production , at least in name). Halls commmunicative chain may be full of links, but they are non-identical; this is the articulatory logic of communication, to use the Gramscian concept Hall deploys in refiguring the process of communication, which entails thinking of the non-equivalence within the unity of encoding and decoding and the fact that the components of the model are themselves relatively autonomous articulations: 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. ((Jennifer Daryl Slack, The theory and method of articulation in cultural studies, in *Stuart Hall,* op cit., p. 125.)) Communication rises and falls into the domain of the effects of decoded messages on social practices irreducible to behavioural postulates that confound the televisual message with the real referents of its signs (Halls canine pun is illustrative: behaviourism may have dogged mass media research; but semiotics reveals that the dog in the film can bark but it cannot bite!). The idea that Hall embraces is that the analysis of televisual programme content may be renewed through semiotics which leads to the insight that discursive knowledge is the product not of the transparent representation of the real in language but of the articulation of language on

real relations and conditions (131) Hall does not move very far away from the analysis of content. For semiotic will remain supplementary.

Halls version of the communication model, then, transforms previous understandings of the idea of content of television analyzed by means of content analysis and the conception of the audience based on behaviourist assumptions (cause and effect) that ignore the character of the televisual sign and the dimensionality of the visual messages themselves (a reduced three-dimensional world). Hall specifies the character of the televisual sign: iconic, after Peirce, to the extent that an icon possesses some of the properties of the thing represented and the mistaken notion of iconic transparency has caused a great deal of confusion. But so does Halls restrictive deployment of icons because by confining them to visual language (131) as he explains failures to appreciate that visual codes are culture-specific, not natural, and transparent. Icons are not really pictures this, too is has achieved a near-universality (132), to borrow Halls own language, although they come to mind. Icons share qualities with the objects they signifiy, objects whose existence is not necessary (CP 2.247) it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of the object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness (CP 2.299). A semiotic convention of representation is that an icon is a photograph; but a photograph is as much an index because of the relation that light plays in its creation, a direct existential connection involved in the sign-object relation. In connection with visual language, we have learned that iconic resemblance together with indexical connectivity that assures the objectss existence have been used to tell no end of lies, normally by deviously enlisting conventional signs or symbols toward misleading ends. But, more sympathetically, Halls point is well-taken that televisual signs require knowledge of conventions of representation and semiotic difference between types of signs in order to avoid confusions around the televisual sign: Iconic signs are, however, particularly vulnerable to being read as

natural because visual codes of perception are very widely distributed and because this type of sign is less arbitrary than a linguistic sign: the linguistic sign cow possesses none of the properties of the thing represented, whereas the visual sign appears to possess some of those properties (132). The guns in the representation of a violent event on televisual cannot literally blaze once more; the event is coded, constructed, edited and presented within the stock conventions of stories about violence. But signs in the Peircean tradition are, of course, not easily separated off in this manner, which is merely another illustration of how a convention (conventional signs are other kinds of signs) gets ahold of a theory and distorts it. In Halls usage, naturalist confusions arise when there is an achieved equivalence – between the encoding and decoding sides of an exchange of meanings (132). Such equivalence produces interpretive habits that are hard to break and allow codes upon which all messages depend there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code – to remain hidden (the [ideological] effect of concealing). Halls turn to Peirce doesnt register in the bibliography of theReader; the tracing of his intellectual trajectory is erased, and Marx fares no better, since onlyThe German Ideology appears, rather than seminal texts like the Grundrisse andCapital.

We very quickly reach the limits of Halls semiotic tolerance. He does not typically distinguish between denotation and connotation because analytic distinctions must not be confused with distinctions in the real world. (133) It is easy to be fooled by denotation, Hall tells us, because literalness is falsely connected with naturalness (uncoded). Anyway, most signs are denotative and connotative, and rarely restricted to only the former; the latter marking the multiple articulations with situational ideologies and the active intervention of ideologies (133). Hall suggests a separation between fixed ideological value (denotative) and mobile ideological values (connotative) in context-dependent struggles over meaning. His reference

to Voloshinov is instructive. ((See V.N. Volshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, New York and London: Seminar Press, 1973. Hall does not cite a page, but the Marxian critique of linguistics (Saussures Enlightenment project) as an abstract system that studies language as if it were dead (native tongue as if alien, dialogic as if monologic, etc) certainly appealed to him.
)) The struggles at issue are, of course, class struggles. What did Hall learn from Volshinov? Generally, signification is ideological, no matter at which level it is pitched. Signs, to the extent that they stand for something for somebody else are ideological (i.e., in this nomenclature superstructural). Signification is social, interactional, and addressers and addressees are situated and not abstract. Messages are shared territories involving immediate social spaces and broader social relations whose meanings are arrived at dialogically, that is, as effects of communicational interactions. Hall does not follow Volshinovs linguistic reductionism (all signs are reducible to speech) despite his emphasis on discourse. Indeed, connotations of visual signs exemplify for Hall the process by which already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions. (133)

It is appropriate that Hall then turns to Barthes in his pursuit of connotation since, as Barthes noted in hisElements, the future probably belongs to a linguistics of connotation. ((Roland Barthes,*Elements of Semiology,* trans Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York: Hill and Wang, 1968, IV.2 (p. 90).)) This is the domain of semiotic anthropology and fragments of ideology, (Hall 134) according to Barthes, at least on the level of the signified. From Barthes, then, Hall received what we may call the open version of connotation through which culture, knowledge, history, – the world enters and speaks or writes as ideology (signifieds) and rhetoric (signifiers or connotators).