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EDITORIAL STATEMENT

In the ten years since this journal was founded, the field of cultural studies has expanded and flourished. It has at once become broader and more focused, facing as it does the challenges of global economic, cultural and political reconfiguration on the one hand, and of new attacks on the university and intellectual work on the other. As we look forward to the next decade, we expect *Cultural Studies* to continue to contribute to both the expansion and the integration of cultural studies.

With this expectation in mind, the journal seeks work that explores the relation between everyday life, cultural practices, and material, economic, political, geographical and historical contexts; that understands cultural studies as an analytic of social change; that addresses a widening range of topic areas, including post- and neo-colonial relations, the politics of popular culture, issues in nationality, transnationality and globalization, the performance of gendered, sexual and queer identities, and the organization of power around differences in race, class, ethnicity, etc.; that reflects on the changing status of cultural studies; and that pursues the theoretical implications and underpinnings of practical inquiry and critique.

Cultural Studies welcomes work from a variety of theoretical, political and disciplinary perspectives. It assumes that the knowledge formations that make up cultural studies are as historically and geographically contingent as any other cultural practice or configuration and that the work produced within or at its permeable boundaries will therefore be diverse. We hope not only to represent this diversity but to enhance it.

We want to encourage significant intellectual and political experimentation, intervention and dialogue. Some issues will focus on special topics, often not traditionally associated with cultural studies. Occasionally, we will make space to present a body of work representing a specific national, ethnic or disciplinary tradition. Whenever possible, we intend to represent the truly international nature of contemporary work, without ignoring the significant differences that are the result of speaking from and to specific contexts, but we also hope to avoid defining any context as normative. We invite articles, reviews, critiques, photographs and other forms of 'artistic' production, and suggestions for special issues. And we invite readers to comment on the strengths and weaknesses, not only of the project and progress of cultural studies, but of the project and progress of *Cultural Studies* as well.

Lawrence Grossberg
Della Pollock

January 1996

Contributions should be sent to Professor Lawrence Grossberg and Della Pollock, Dept. of Communication Studies, CB #3285, 113 Bingham Hall, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599– 3285, USA. They should be in triplicate and should conform to the reference system set out in the Notes for Contributors. An abstract of up to 300 words (including 6 keywords) should be included for purposes of review. Submissions undergo blind peer review. Therefore, the author's name, address and e-mail should appear *only* on a detachable cover page and not anywhere else on the manuscript. Every effort will be made to complete the review process within six months of submission. A disk version of the manuscript must be provided in the appropriate software format upon acceptance for publication.

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ARTICLES

CULTURAL STUDIES AND ETHNIC
ABSOLUTISM: COMMENTS ON STUART
HALL'S 'CULTURE, COMMUNITY, NATION'¹
SABA MAHMOOD

ABSTRACT

The author argues that despite the recent intellectual opening characterized by the institution of cultural and postcolonial studies, certain parts of the world (such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe) and social movements (such as politico-religious and ethnic) continue to occupy the paradigmatic status of backward cultural Others in the ruminations of writers from the left and right of the political spectrum. Taking S.Hall's essay 'Culture, community, nation' that appeared in the October 1993 issue of *Cultural Studies* as a template, the author shows how arguments made with a progressive political agenda sometimes converge argumentatively and epistemologically with those of the conservative right in their failure to decenter normative assumptions derived from the entelechy of Western European history about ethnic and religious aspirations. Illiberal results of profoundly liberal ideologies, such as nationalism, continue to be explained through culturally particularistic arguments so as to avoid critiquing the fundamentals of Western European liberal-humanist projects. Symptomatic analyses that explain the success of ethnic and politico-religious movements as signs of socio-cultural disorder, cultural backwardness and/or lack of appropriate modernization fail to take these movements seriously; that must be dealt with through argumentation. Both the critics and champions of modernity take the West as their point of departure, and political languages that depart from the recommended repertoire of public expression are often dismissed. The author calls for a historically specific and culturally nuanced analysis of movements that are often considered to be the antithesis of modernity in order to both parochialize the Western experience of modernity, and to understand the significance of these movements to the present historical moment.

KEYWORDS

Stuart Hall; ethnic; religious; nationalism; history; modernity

Stuart Hall's 'Culture, community, nation' in the October 1993 issue of *Cultural Studies* seems to capture the suspicion and dismissal with which most intellectuals of widely divergent political persuasions treat contemporary social movements (in regions as disparate as Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East) inspired by religious, ethnic and nationalist affiliations, without investigating the historical, political and economic particularity of each case. As someone who has respect for Stuart Hall's erudition and commitment to critically progressive politics, it was with some alarm that I read what may best be described as a division of the world yet again into 'big and small' nations, culturally backward absolutist regions, and by implication civilized areas, as a means to explain the rise of ethnic and religious movements around the world. Such characterizations evoke modernization theory paradigms that felicitously explained the Janus-faced character of modernity, global capitalism and nationalism as simply matters of cultural misfit between the best intentions of such projects and the unfortunate consequences that seemed to follow in large parts of the world. Whereas analyses of this kind are rather widespread in popular and most academic journals, the recent intellectual opening characterized by the institution of cultural, postcolonial, subaltern and feminist studies, etc., has given one reason to believe (perhaps falsely) that positing the essential backward nature of cultures as explanations for any kind of political development is *passé*. Yet, as a student of politico-religious movements, I am quite troubled at the stubborn persistence with which certain areas of the world continue to occupy the paradigmatic status of backward cultural Others in the ruminations of intellectuals from the left and right of the political spectrum.

There is, of course, a personal aspect to my engagement with Stuart Hall's text, and it is best clarified at the outset. As a feminist activist in the United States and Pakistan under the US-supported militarist-theocracy of Zia ul-Haq, I have resonated in recent years with Stuart Hall's reconceptualization of a Gramscian vision of political struggle and the relevance of progressive intervention on multiple cultural fronts. Yet as a student of Islamic movements in the context of late-capitalist modernity, I was taken aback by characterizations in his article such as 'political cultures with strong ethnic and religious absolutist traditions' and 'species of *fundamentalism* every bit as backward-looking as those to be found in some sections of the Islamic world' (1993:355, 358). Since Pakistan may easily fit Hall's schema, I had to ask: could Pakistani society, often characterized as a 'fundamentalist Islamic state', be analyzed by its 'ethnic and/or religious absolutist tradition', or would it be more accurate to take into account the cynical and opportunistic character of contemporary warfare and politics that made Pakistan into a front-line state for the geo-political game between the US and USSR, thereby making political opposition to Zia ul-Haq's regime difficult if not impossible? It is quite surprising that someone with Hall's familiarity with attempts to legitimize racist practices in Britain, through similar arguments of 'cultural backwardness', could revert to such forms of argumentation. In fact it is precisely because of Hall's particular political positionality, and the respect I have

for his work that it became all the more important to understand why and how certain forms of reasoning, despite the best intentions to hold progressive ideals, slip into ideological constructions of Other cultures.

In what follows I will treat Stuart Hall's aforementioned article as a template to work through what seems to me a curious paradox: how is it that arguments made with a progressive agenda converge epistemologically and argumentatively with those of the political right, perhaps unintentionally, in their failure to decenter normative assumptions derived from the entelechy of Western European history about the political aspirations of ethnic, nationalist and/or politico-religious social movements? And despite our renewed commitment to cultural difference, what are the political and cultural limits that seem to police our engagement with difference? Finally, how do these conceptual limits obfuscate, rather than clarify, our understanding of the new social movements occurring in large portions of the world today? These are some of the questions that will guide me as I outline Hall's argument, and comment on the significance of the political baggage that his analysis seems to carry.

Big and small nations

Hall begins with a tribute to the late Raymond Williams, and moves on to discuss the revival of 'nationalisms in *big and small societies* and the aspirations of marginalized peoples to nationhood', issues that have become a hallmark of the late modern world in the 1990s (1993:352; emphasis added). Hall correctly notes that instead of the increased homogenization and cosmopolitan consciousness that discourses of modernity (in their capitalist and socialist forms) had predicted, particularistic attachments (e.g., to nation, culture and religion) have been on the rise. He traces the impetus behind this revival to the paradoxical logic of global capitalism, inasmuch as it encourages particularistic loyalties to national cultures and states while at the same time generating transnational global imperatives that impel regional economies toward integration through capital, commodity and human migrations (354). Two parallel features that Hall considers characteristic of this development are: 'the re-valorization of smaller, subordinate nationalisms and movements for national and regional autonomy' by groups dominated by the 'big nation-states', and the concomitant 'growth of a defensive reaction by those national cultures which see themselves threatened from their peripheries' (354). To elucidate the former tendency, Hall gives the example of ethnic movements in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that had previously been 'submerged' under the 'supernationalism' of the Soviet Union. The white supremacy movements in France and Germany, and the formation of the Northern League in Italy serve as examples of the latter.

Even though Hall acknowledges the linked and parallel development of 'ethnically pure' nationalist movements in Western Europe and the non-Western world, he is careful to distinguish them, first, by the division of big and small nationalisms:

The drive to nationhood in many of the 'ascending' small nationalisms can often take the form of trying to construct ethnically (or culturally, religiously, or

racially) closed or 'pure' formations in the place of older, corporate nation-states or imperial formations; a closure which comes, in Gellner's terms, from trying to realize the aspiration, which they see as the secret of success of the great modernizing nation-states of Western modernity, of gathering one people, one ethnicity, gathered under one political roof.

(Hall, 1993:356)

Hall's use of the 'big and small nations' trope merits some attention. One may ask what makes certain nations small and others big? Certainly it is not an indication of the size since, we can assume, Britain would qualify as a big nation. Is Japan a big nation or a small one? It seems that the big and small nomenclature is an ideological distinction that indicates some sense of superiority of the big nations in relation to the small ones, usually achieved either through colonial domination of other nation(s), or (inter)national economic domination, or both (some would argue one is not possible without the other). It also follows from Hall's argument that, at the very least, small nationalisms are imitative of the big nation-building strategies, but gravely mistaken in their strategic endeavors to ascend the global ladder. Hall does not indicate what the appropriate behavior would be for 'small nations' to be successful in their emulation. More significantly, one may ask why the histories of various nations/peoples must be seen through the singular lens of Western European dynamics (small nations aping the big ones) in order to understand the sociopolitical realities of cultures that have radically different historical dynamics and socio-political projects? This form of analysis utilizes Western European history as a silent but privileged referent to all social and political developments in the non-Western world, and any departure from the pre-determined script cannot *but* point to the 'failings' of such societies to abide by the prescribed behavior.

Hall seems to be heir to a longstanding tradition of argumentation in which the 'small and big nation' trope is coterminous with other parallel distinctions such as traditional/modern, savage/civilized, East/West, etc. Anthropologist Ernest Gellner, to whom Hall refers, is only one of the authors of this tradition. Among others are Hans Kohn, John Plamenatz and Elie Kedourie—all of whom were major figures in the debate on nationalism through the 1950s and 1970s. In an attempt to come to terms with the illiberal effects of a profoundly liberal ideology, there was an outpouring of literature to explain how human tragedies such as that of Nazism in Germany, fascism in Italy and Spain, and the two world wars were acted out in the name of nationalism. A distinction was drawn between the 'good nationalism' of the Western European variety and the 'bad nationalism' of the Eastern European, German, Asian and African kind, in order to preserve pristine and idealized notions of human-liberalism, and blame the contradictions germane to this ideology on the deviancy and immaturity of Other cultures. Hans Kohn wrote:

In the modern West, nationalism which arose in the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, was predominantly a political movement to limit governmental power and to secure civic rights. Its purpose was to create a liberal and rational civil society representing the middle-class and the philosophy of John Locke. When

nationalism...penetrated to other lands—central and Eastern Europe or to Spain and Ireland—it came to lands which were in political ideas and social structure less advanced than the modern West.

(Kohn, 1965:29–30)

Kohn continued to expand this line of argument to discuss how Germany, Asia and Africa were to persist in hijacking the well-intentioned project of nationalism through human history. Kedourie made a similar argument by distinguishing between ‘patriotism’ versus ‘nationalism’: the former described the civilized behavior of Western European nations, whereas nationalism appropriately captured the divisive and xenophobic character of the non-Western peoples’ struggles for nationhood (Kedourie, 1960: 73–4). John Plamenatz further amplified the distinction between Western and Eastern nationalism, whereby the former was synonymous with the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment, and the essence of the latter was represented in the history of the Balkans and the rest of Eastern European cultures still besought with kinship, religious and territorial loyalties (Plamenatz, 1976). Gellner expanded this argument in his now classic book *Nations and Nationalism*, and argued that world cultures were of two varieties: ‘savage/wild’ and ‘cultivated/high’. Whereas the ‘cultivated or garden cultures’ were intrinsically equipped to carry out the project of statehood in their ‘complexity and richness, most usually sustained by literacy and by specialized personnel’, the wild cultures tended to get mired in ethnic or nationalist conflicts in their attempts to emulate the process of statehood (Gellner, 1986: 50–1). This is a genealogy derived from Morgan and Tylor’s social evolutionism, which also influenced the writings of Marx and Engels. Predictably, Gellner included Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East as representative of the ‘savage culture’ typology. In various renditions of the same theme, he has expanded his repertoire to include terms such as ‘folk’ and ‘little’ traditions to signify the savage cultures, and ‘high/industrial/modern’ cultures to signify the cultivated kinds.

Good and bad social movements

Clearly Stuart Hall, having experienced and written about the logic of racism as one incarnation of the high/low culture division, would not be sympathetic to the arguments listed above—his agreement with Gellner notwithstanding (1993:354, 355). Yet elements of this kind of reasoning are ineluctably central to Hall’s thesis, and alert one to the power and influence such arguments carry in their persistence to reappear in the most unlikely of places. Consider, for example, the distinction Hall makes between nationalist struggles of the decolonization era and those being waged currently in different regions of the third world, in an attempt to show that nationalism can be put to progressive or reactionary uses:

The nationalism of, say, Third World’ countries in the era of decolonization, which were produced as the counter-discourses to exploitation and cultural colonization and linked with critical cultures and political traditions, had a very different political meaning and trajectory from those which have been generated as the

historical reaction against imposed state socialism *but which have reappeared in political cultures with strong ethnic and religious absolutist traditions.*

(Hall, 1993:355; emphasis added)

Hall is clearly referring here to Central Asia and Eastern Europe as regions under the Soviet sphere of influence. One is compelled to ask, especially given the tradition of scholarship discussed above, why these cultures should be considered ethnically and religiously absolutist? Is there something pathological that confers this status in them? It is significant that these areas are non-Protestant in their religious orientation: primarily Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Muslim. To distinguish Anglo-Saxon projects and the institutions of Western Europe from those of Eastern Europe and the non-Western world is an old and familiar modernist ploy, so as to deflect fundamental critiques of liberal-humanist ideological frameworks. Samuel Huntington echoes this sentiment in a recent article in which he argues that, after the end of the Cold War, it is the cultural division of Europe into Western Christianity, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam that is the most significant dividing line along which future global conflicts will be waged (1993:30). Central to these discussions of non-Protestant areas is the assumption that it is the imbrication of religion with politics that gives rise to 'absolutist' practices in its intolerance of difference. Yet if we were to examine human history we would realize that it is the secular, modernizing states in the last two centuries that have instituted the most intolerant and genocidal operations, and this record remains unmatched when it comes to the violence committed in the name of religious and ethnic communities. Prejudice and bigotry have persisted despite the legalistic separation of religion and the state in most of contemporary Western Europe and the US.

It is, however, apparent from Hall's work on Afro-Christian Rastafarian practices in Jamaica (1985) that he does not insist that the Anglicized conception of privatized religion be made a condition of modernity for *all* cultures regardless of their respective histories and traditions. He insightfully analyzes the creative character and polyvalent symbolism of Rastafarian religious discourse, and considers it capable of generating or influencing a variety of political projects. Hall's careful discussion stands in contradistinction to popular images of Rastafarianism as an escapist and hedonistic form of political protest. It is puzzling, therefore, that he neglects an equally amenable inquiry into other religio-cultural traditions and dismisses them through invocations of cultural backwardness. It may be that Hall's sympathy towards Rastafarianism *and* for decolonization movements is similar inasmuch as both are judged to be politically progressive and 'produced as the counter-discourses to exploitation and cultural colonization and linked with critical cultures and political traditions' (1993:355). While I can respect Hall's desire to support certain causes over others, it does not however follow that the movements he does *not* support are any less resistive to 'exploitation and cultural colonizations' than the one he *does* uphold, or that they do not belong to 'critical cultural and political traditions'.

The Islamic movement in contemporary Algeria is a case in point: it belongs to a long tradition of anti-colonial struggle and Islamic critique, and is opposed to both Western political and cultural hegemony and socialist-styled statist rule. We may choose to differ with the political goals and strategies of the Islamists in Algeria (and there are a variety of

positions among them), but any simple labelling of complex socio-political movements only serves to accentuate ahistorical readings of politico-cultural traditions that have acquired a paradigmatic status of the regressive irrational Other in discussions on standards of progressive behavior. Appeals to systems of morality and justice have historically been made on the basis of a wide range of socio-political ideologies, and bigotry comes in a variety of guises; consider the divergent trajectories of and sympathies for Catholicism in colonial Latin America and liberation theology more recently.

Furthermore, it is quite apparent that ethnic, politico-religious and nationalist movements have been able to apprehend people's goals and aspirations, in various parts of the world, in ways that socialist or left-liberal politics have failed to do in the present historical moment. If we are unwilling to dismiss the large number of participants as delusional in their support of these movements then, I would contend, it is of paramount importance that we debate and engage with the specificity of their arguments in order to assess the potential, creativity and/or danger of such projects to progressive politics. Symptomatic analyses that explain ethnic and/or politico-religious movements as signs of socio-cultural disorder and/or persistence of cultural backwardness fail to take them seriously as political challenges that must be dealt with through argumentation. As Hall conveys in his analysis of late-Thatcherite Britain, left and socialist constituencies need to connect with the feelings and experiences of ordinary people who supported Thatcherism, and rearticulate their lives in progressive idioms so as to displace the hegemony of Thatcherism and its incarnations—in short to argue and engage with the specificities of people's apprehensions and ideals (1988:170–1).

Partially and fully modern cultures

Hall's characterization of certain modes of resistance as foreign to the enterprise of modernity is best expressed in another key distinction he makes between 'big versus small' nations. Hall contends that while 'fundamentalisms which are afflicting "modern" national cultures are not only arising from the very heart of modernity' (e.g., the white supremacists in Europe, Protestant fundamentalists in the US), movements described as a 'species of *fundamentalism* every bit as backward-looking as those to be found in some sections of the Islamic world' are 'often ambiguous responses by those *either left out of "modernity" or ambiguously and partially incorporated* in one of its many forms' (e.g., Serbian nationalism, Islamism, etc.) (1993:358; emphasis added). Hall does not clarify how these movements are only partially modern, and in what ways they are 'fundamentalist'. I would argue that to reduce a wide range of socio-political movements (in Germany, France, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and parts of the Islamic world) to a substratum of religious dogmatism and political conservatism, subsumed under a single category of fundamentalism, is analytically problematic to say the least. In addition, Hall's evocation of Islam in this context irresponsibly plays into the contemporary version of European demonization of the 'fanatical Muslim', thereby perpetuating, rather than challenging, the use of bigoted imagery.

More importantly, the objection I have to this kind of characterization is the implicit assumption in Hall's analysis that exclusionary and absolutist practices are somehow only

partial incorporations into modernity. A variety of social movements from Protestant fundamentalism to politico-religious movements (in India and the Middle East for example) are often characterized in recent literature as either partially modern or anti-modern (see Marty and Appleby, 1991). Such analyses construct an oppositional other, culturally and ideologically backward, exonerating the modern conditions that helped make this kind of political position possible. Susan Harding, in her research on Protestant fundamentalist movements in the US, raises the following objections to these explanations:

Singly and together, modern voices represent fundamentalists and their beliefs as an historical object, a cultural 'other,' apart from, even antithetical to, 'modernity,' which emerges as the positive term in an escalating string of oppositions between supernatural belief and unbelief, literal and critical, backward and progressive, bigoted and tolerant. Through polarities such as these between 'us' and 'them,' the modern subject is secured.... Fundamentalists, in short, do not simply exist 'out there' but are also produced by modern discursive practices.

(Harding, 1991:374)

Harding is insistent that, at a time when studies of cultural marginality are on the rise, this conceptual space should not be limited to familiar left constituencies (such as people of color, indigenous peoples, gays, lesbians, etc.) but that the analytical tools, made possible by recent intellectual debates, be used to interrogate those we hold to be our existential and social opposites (1991:302). Such an analysis may reveal the imbrication and co-implication of modernity and its supposed antithesis in ways that may force one to undertake nuanced and historically accurate readings of conflicts that have enormous implications and stakes for all the protagonists. As Zygmunt Bauman (1989) has argued persuasively, the Holocaust was made possible by the unique and necessary conditions of modern bureaucracy, scientific management and instrumental rationality, and bears testimony to the destruction modernity can and does make possible. His analysis confronts the reader with the troubling reality that the technological and organizational powers of modernist states (of the capitalist or socialist variety), combined with the impersonal practices of civil institutions and the opportunistic character of economic and political markets, pose the most forbidding challenges to human survival. The Bosnian tragedy analyzed in the context of Bauman's and Harding's admonitions perhaps does not appear as simply a demonstration of Serbian cultural backwardness, but as a situation produced by the most civilizing projects of human history—a profoundly disturbing proposition.

Hybridity and modalities of power

Finally, I will close with some brief comments on the notion of hybridity posed by Hall. He argues that the ability to live with difference and hybridity is the key challenge of the coming century, and the communities most suited to this task are those displaced from their places of cultural origins, living in diasporic situations, and carrying the multiple