

On culture and representation

A propósito de cultura e representação

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ABSTRACT

The recently released Hall's *Cultural Representations* has two long articles from courses given by the Jamaican intellectual at The Open University in London in the 1990s: the first presents the author's version for the so-called "linguistic turn" in the "representation" studies in the cultural context from the Saussurean structuralism to Michel Foucault; in the second, starting from a compilation of images that comprises more than a century, Hall exposes and analyzes the formation and naturalization in the media of the nexus between racial difference and black body's subalternization. These are lucid, well-argued and generous contributions for cultural studies in Brazil.

Keywords: Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies, representation

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RESUMO

O recém-lançado *Cultura e representação*, de Stuart Hall, traz dois longos artigos originários de cursos oferecidos pelo intelectual jamaicano na The Open University, em Londres, na década de 1990: o primeiro apresenta a versão do autor para a denominada "virada linguística" nos estudos da "representação" no âmbito da cultura desde o estruturalismo saussuriano até Michel Foucault; no segundo, a partir de um repertório de imagens que abarcam mais de um século, Hall expõe e analisa a constituição e naturalização, na mídia, do nexos entre diferença racial e subalternização do corpo negro. São duas contribuições lúcidas, bem fundamentadas e generosas para os estudos de cultura entre nós.

Palavras-chave: Stuart Hall, Estudos Culturais, representação

WHEN HE CAME to Brazil for the first (and only) time in 2000, invited by the 7th Congress of the Brazilian Association of Compared Literature (ABRALIC), in Salvador, Stuart Hall made his attendance to the opening conference conditional upon the free access of all interested persons to the auditorium of the Federal University of Bahia Dean's Office, notably students and members of popular movements and black people collectives. He said he had no interest in talking exclusively with the academy. During the event, a small private room was reserved for him to rest, because of his ill health by the time. However, during breaks we could see him strolling around the campus avenues, in his weak footsteps. When one of the organizers asked him if he would like to rest in the air-conditioned room, he said that no. He preferred staying there, strolling around, so anyone wanting to talk to him could see him and get closer, with no embarrassment.

This episode is a good introduction to the newest translation of Stuart Hall in Brazil – an editorial fact that is unexplainable rare. The first collection of his essays was organized by Liv Sovik and published by the UFMG Publisher in 2003. The publisher officers did not hesitate in acknowledging that, among re-editions and successive editions, *Da diáspora: Identidades e mediações culturais* is the best sold item in their catalogue and, they add, the most widely read in Brazil. The collection is a mandatory reference in articles and academic papers in the large scope of the terms in its title – Diaspora, identities, mediations – in the field of human sciences, languages, communication, education and other social sciences. This is especially true for those who, in the last few years, needed complex conceptual operators and insurgent critical modeling to approach the black cultural production, and the *racial issue*, as it is known here.

Cultura e representação, translated and published upon initiative by Arthur Ituassu and the PUC-Rio Publisher, derives from the collection edited by Stuart Hall and published by Sage in partnership with The Open University in London, in 1997. Named *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, the collection gathers in six chapters by different professors topics approached in the course “D318 – Culture, Media and Identities”. Only the two chapters by Hall are being published in Brazil, namely: “The work of representation” and “The spectacle of the other”. These are diversified chapters or courses that, above all, share the sympathetic and sensitive pedagogy peculiar to the Diasporic academic Stuart Hall. In both the text or classes are configured like that disposition stated in the ABRALIC, to move away from the academic-scientific schedule and the ambivalence of peers, like Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Spivak, Silviano Santiago et alii, and start walking outdoors to freely talk with whoever wants to come closer.

This effect of proximity and effort towards producing something accessible to a large and uncontrolled contingent of students or readers (like in the original ambience of the book, i.e., class in a university for highly-diversified audiences, free of the typical attendance controls), is attributable to the structure, preserved in the book, of a course delivered with rigor and generosity, using essays in clear language and colloquial style – “After all, representation connects sense and language to culture. But, what does it mean?” (p. 31) – that do not save subsidiary resources aiming at the best use. Chapters bring proposals of activities and recommended literature by the end of each part, in well-proportioned fragments of bibliographic works that support the topics. Moreover, it shows summaries marking the introduction or end of each topic. In other words, it is a book developed to anyone who, with sufficient schooling, wants or needs to be equipped to handle, understand and intervene in the contemporary settings of culture. As such, it is a book different from what is typically produced in Brazil, where publications to the youth that have not (yet) entered the sophisticated graduation courses are mainly made up by anachronistic compendia or indigent didactic works.

The two chapters also share a personal and supplementary path that exposes the powers that guide Stuart Hall’s critical thought. The first one, here named as “The role of representation” is based on his investment in the “linguistic upturn”, from the Saussurean structuralism to Foucault’s poststructuralism, to constitute theoretical tools to handle with representations and suitable to the good political combat in the field of Cultural Studies. The second part, “The spectacle of the *other*”, brings the product of the tense upturn of the British Cultural Studies towards the race problem. Hall incorporated to his agenda the discourses about racialization, racial policy and resistance against racism, allied to his latest incursions in photography, movies, and visual culture. Through an untiring genealogic work and, at the same time, an exercise of curatorship, he exhibits and evaluates a sequence of images and constitute and institute the subdue place assigned to blackness in the Western world – mainly, but not restricted to the Anglo-Saxons.

Although in the Brazilian edition Stuart Hall is presented as one of the academics “strongly influenced by Marxism since the Frankfurt School” (p. 9) in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham University, which he headed from 1968 to 1979, the chapter about representation seems to point out a different way. This chapter reconstructs Hall’s conflict with the Marxism (or his confront with “Marxism as problem” as he stated in “Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies” [Hall, 2003]) and his interest in the linguistic paradigm of the 1970s:

culture is defined as an original and equally constitutive process, as fundamental as the economic or material grounds for the configuration of social subjects and historical fact, rather than a mere reflection about reality after the happening. Therefore, “language” provides an overall standard on how culture and representation work, mainly in the so-called semiotic approach, i.e., the study or science of signals and their roles as vehicles of sense in a culture. (p. 26)

The first section’s title – “Representation, sense and language” – accurately points the displacement of the focus on and centrality of language in the beginning of the chapter, when it resumes the main postulates of Saussure’s linguistic theory (“The Legacy of Saussure”) and its repercussion on new theoretical apparatus to approach culture-related facts based on the structural linguistic, like Barthes’ semiotics (*Mythologies*, by Roland Barthes, is gradually retaken) and the structuralism that interweaves human sciences and similar domains through Lévi-Strauss’ contributions, among others. The approach is rigorous and, within his tight limits, Hall presents to his readers or students both the devastating prestige of structural linguistic and the further problematization and discredit for its descriptive, ahistorical and even “positivist” (p. 77) perspective, considering the scientificist emphasis when handling with language and production of senses. As counterpoint, he evokes the importance of historicity and the interpretative and open dimension. He places poststructuralism in the heart of the exhibition, firstly and briefly through the contribution by Jacques Derrida – an author frequently mentioned in his essays from the 1990s onwards. He also outlines importance of *différance* and of deconstructing binary systems (by the way, in other essays Hall is even more skillful than Derrida to make *différance* a clear and operational notion).

For the surprise of usual readers of his articles, in “Discourse, power and subject” and up to the end of the chapter, in a dedicated, parsimonious and reverent way, the second part is entirely devoted to the “discursive upturn”, more precisely to Michel Foucault, who is presented in the book in a totally different way. There, he is not a required reference to show some topic, concept or theoretical realm, like the other abovementioned names. Foucault becomes the object of exposition itself. Hall leaves aside the representation problem, as it was being constructed, and devotes himself to present each of the structuring notions and questions approached by Foucault’s work. It is like as if Hall was endeavoring to generously mediate between his reader and a body of notions, concepts and diagnoses considered as the core fundamental of the contemporary reflection about the discursive dimension of the real. Here, it is understandable the highlight attached to Foucault’s differential approach

of power, and the articulations between discourse and power, knowledge and power, power and body, and subject, culture and power.

Finally, in the first chapter, by virtue of the reconstitution of theoretical and disciplinary strands that subsidized, or could subsidize his approach, *representation* became a sort of phantasmatic presence – always there, but always a fleeting notion – despite Hall’s several starting bids in the search for a definition or formulation that could clarify what he has in mind or to what he refers when he uses the term. In the second course and chapter, in turn, Hall waives the predicative and conceptual investment (saying *what* is representation) and moves on a transitive and pragmatic perspective resembling a study of case aimed to explore a given representation regime (Foucault is present, but not named). Such a regime constituted the racial difference in the Western world since early XVI. Hall makes this move through the exhibition and analysis of a large repertoire of images captured from mass popular culture. These images *represent* the racial difference.

“The spectacle of the *other*” – probably the most poetic and precise title of Stuart Hall – is introduced with questions that define the targets of this chapter:

how do we represent people and places significantly different from us? Why is “difference” – such an attractive topic – a so argued area of representation? Which is the secret allure of alterity [...]? Which are the typical forms of practices currently used in popular culture to represent “difference” and wherefrom come these popular images and stereotypes? (p. 139)

Focusing on racial difference, he passes by images of black people since advertisements in the colonial or British imperial context still in the 19th century, to pictorial records of slavery on covers and illustrations of books, posters and news about movies, in plastic arts, sports and publicity in closer contexts. Hall assumes that we all are familiar to this collection that is evil because is naturalized. With patient but rigorous theoretical argumentation, Hall exposes (exhibits) how the links between racial difference, gender and sexuality were built, or how the ambivalence typical to stereotypes works. Hall merges images and his analysis towards understanding a representational strategy invested in the fixation and naturalization of the inferiority of the other – the black, whose difference is shown as unarguable evidence. On the breaking point of the exhibition what is open is not a reversing utopia, but the problematization of intentions, challenges and even traps that surround the irrefutable urgency for producing counterimages on the black difference. ■

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