

Aula 5

WHAT IS BLACK IN BLACK POPULAR CULTURE? (A TEXT BY STUART HALL)

META

Illustrating how the text “What is black in black popular culture” can serve as an antidote against an essentialist conception of race and ethnicity.

OBJETIVO

Understanding how essentialism can perpetuate certain conservative conceptions;
Raising students’ awareness about the complex question of ethnicity and race in contemporary society.

PRERREQUISITO

Familiaridade com os períodos formativos da literatura norte-americana;
Conceitos-chave da Teoria da Literatura e da história literária.
Noções de história dos Estados Unidos.

Luiz Eduardo Oliveira
José Augusto Batista dos Santos

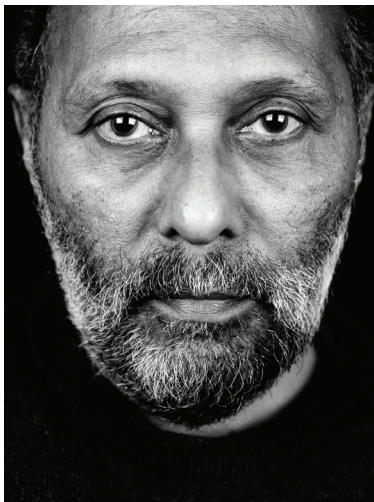
INTRODUCTION

Stuart McPhail Hall (1932-2014) was a Jamaican-born cultural theorist, political activist and Marxist sociologist who lived and worked in the United Kingdom from 1951 until his death, in 2014. Along with Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, he was one of the founding figures of the school of thought that is now known as British Cultural Studies or The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies.

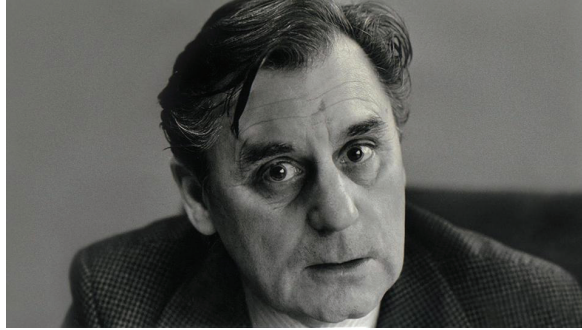
In the 1950s Hall was one of the founders of the influential *New Left Review*. At Hoggart's invitation, he joined the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in 1964. He took over from Hoggart as acting director of the Centre in 1968, becoming its director in 1972, a position he kept until 1979. While at the Centre, Hall is credited with playing a role in expanding the scope of cultural studies to deal with race and gender, and with helping to incorporate new ideas derived from the work of French theorists like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes.

Hall left the centre in 1979 to become a professor of sociology at the Open University, in England. He became President of the British Sociological Association in 1995, remaining in the post until 1997. He retired from the Open University in 1997 and became a professor emeritus. The British newspaper *The Observer* called him “one of the country's leading cultural theorists”. Hall was also involved in the Black Arts Movement.

In this class we are going to read and interpret one of his famous articles, “What is black in black popular culture”, in order to learn how to avoid some essentialist conceptions of race and ethnicity with which it's impossible to think about the question, once we studied, in the previous class, Civil Rights Movement and learned how it was important for the affirmative cultural politics which took place decades later.



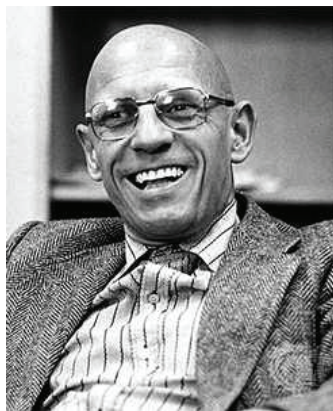
Fonte: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/professor-stuart-hall-sociologist-and-pioneer-in-the-field-of-cultural-studies-whose-work-explored-9120126.html>



Herbert Richard Hoggart (1918-2014) was a British academic whose career covered the fields of sociology, English literature and cultural studies, with emphasis on British popular culture. Fonte: <https://www.gold.ac.uk/honorands/richard-hoggart/>



Raymond Henry Williams (1921-1988) was a Welsh Marxist theorist, academic, novelist and critic. He was an influential figure within the New Left and in wider culture. His writings on politics, culture, the mass media and literature made a significant contribution to the Marxist critique of culture and the arts. Some 750,000 copies of his books have sold in UK editions alone and there are many translations available. His work laid the foundations for the field of cultural studies and the cultural materialist approach. Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Williams



Paul-Michel Foucault (1926-1984), generally known as Michel Foucault, was a French philosopher, historian of ideas, social theorist, and literary critic. Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault



Roland Gérard Barthes (1915-1980) was a French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician. Barthes' ideas explored a diverse range of fields and he influenced the development of many schools of theory, including structuralism, semiotics, social theory, design theory, anthropology, and post-structuralism.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Barthes

DESENVOLVIMENTO

In his essay “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”, published in 1992 in a collection of essays entitled “Black popular culture”, Stuart Hall argues that each historical moment has a different view of what is the meaning of “black” and of “black culture”. In order to give his readers a context of the moment during which he was writing, that is, the beginning of the 1990's, Hall quotes Cornel West's article “The New Cultural Politics of Difference”, which can give us, according to the author, a “genealogy” of the preset situation of black culture.

According to Cornel, in the article mentioned above, this moment has three general coordinates:

- The displacement of European models of high culture;
- The emergence of the United States as a world power and, consequently, as the center of global cultural production and circulation;
- The decolonization of the Third World, culturally marked by the emergence of the decolonized sensibilities.



Cornel Ronald West (1953-) is an American philosopher, political activist, social critic, author, and public intellectual. The son of a Baptist minister, West focuses on the role of race, gender and class in American society and the means by which people act and react to their “radical conditionedness”. A radical democrat and democratic socialist, West draws intellectual contributions from multiple traditions, including Christianity, the black church, Marxism, neopragmatism, and transcendentalism. Among his most influential books are *Race Matters* (1994) and *Democracy Matters* (2004).

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornel_West

To those coordinates, Hall adds some qualifications. First, he mentions the ambiguities of the shift from Europe to America, in the twentieth century, and America's ambivalent relationship to European high culture and its own ethnic hierarchies. Differently from Europe, which did not recognize, until recently, any ethnicity of its own, America has always had a series of ethnicities, and its cultural politics is defined by the construction of ethnic hierarchies. The author says that, silenced and unacknowledged, American popular culture itself has always contained within it black American popular vernacular traditions. The second qualification refers to what the author calls "the period of cultural globalization", which was "in progress" during the time he was writing, and the third qualification is related to an ambivalent fascination with difference: sexual difference, cultural difference, racial difference and ethnic difference. Quoting Hal Foster, Hall argues that the rupture of primitivism, managed by modernism, became a postmodern event, becoming the difference that may not make a difference. This, according to the author, is what marks the ambiguous appearance of ethnicity in the so called "global postmodernism". Nevertheless, cultural life, especially in the West, has been transformed in our lifetimes by the voicing of the margins.



Harold Foss "Hal" Foster (1955-) is an American art critic and historian. He was educated at Princeton University, Columbia University and the City University of New York. He taught at Cornell University from 1991 to 1997 and has been on the faculty at Princeton since 1997. In 1998 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hal_Foster_\(art_critic\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hal_Foster_(art_critic))

Although it remains peripheral to the broader mainstream, marginality has never been in such evidence as it is now. And it is, above all, the result of the cultural politics of difference, as well as of the struggles it implied: the production of new identities and the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage. The author emphasizes that it is true not only for racial issues, but also for other marginalized ethnicities and for feminism and the gay and lesbian movement. Thus, the most important thing is the struggle over cultural hegemony. The high/popular culture distinction is what the global postmodern is displacing. As the term itself suggests, cultural hegemony is not about pure victory or domination, but about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture.

Thus, cultural strategies can make a difference, and this is the main point of the article. Although the spaces “won” for difference were few, they are very carefully policed and regulated. But the author recognizes that there is always a price of incorporation to be paid when the cutting edge of difference and transgression is blunted into spectacularization, because, as he explains, what replaces invisibility is a kind of regulated and segregated visibility.

One thing is very important to notice, and to this Hall calls our attention: if, on the one hand, the global postmodern represents an ambiguous opening to difference and to the margins, making a certain kind of decentering of the Western narrative, it is matched, on the other hand, by the backlash: the aggressive resistance to difference; the attempt to restore the traditional canon of Western civilization; the attacks on multiculturalism; the return to grand narratives of history, language, and literature, which are, according to the author, the three great supporting pillars of national identity and national culture; the defense of ethnic absolutism and of a cultural racism that has marked the Thatcher and the Reagan eras (the eighties); and the new xenophobias, or neo-nazism, which are present everywhere, in Europe and the Americas. It is not, as the author insists, a matter of cultural dialectics. It is necessary, from this point of view, to deconstruct the popular, cleaning it from any innocent view.

The reason why popular culture has always been counterpoised to elite or high culture, being a site of alternative traditions, is because it has its base in the experiences, pleasures, memories and traditions of the people and has connections with local, aspirations and tragedies of ordinary folks. It is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “the vulgar” — the popular, the informal, the underside, the grotesque. That is why, according to Hall, the dominant tradition suspect they are about to be overtaken by “the carnivalesque”, as Bakhtin puts it. Thus, Hall comes to the conclusion that the role of the “popular” in popular culture is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength.



Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar who worked on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. His writings, on a variety of subjects, inspired scholars working in a number of different traditions (Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, religious criticism) and in disciplines as diverse as literary criticism, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Although Bakhtin was active in the debates on aesthetics and literature that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, his distinctive position did not become well known until he was rediscovered by Russian scholars in the 1960s. Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Bakhtin

Thus, popular culture has become the dominant form of global culture, as well as of power and capital. It is the space of “homogenization”, for it stereotypes and processes the material it draws in order to control the narratives and representations. Black popular culture, likewise, is bound to be contradictory. It can never be simplified or explained in terms of simple binary oppositions, such as high and low; resistance and incorporation; authentic and unauthentic; experiential and formal; etc. Nevertheless, this deformed, incorporated and unauthentic forms black people and black communities are represented in popular culture can make us see the experiences that stand behind them through its musicality, orality and inflections toward the vernacular and the local. Not to mention its production of counternarratives and its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary.

The author argues that, although there are deep questions of cultural transmission and inheritance, as well as complex relations between African origins and the consequences of the diaspora, he will not analyze these problems, because the cultural mainstream is the only performative space we had left. That is the reason why we cannot talk about black popular culture nowadays without mentioning the processes of selective appropriation, incorporation and rearticulation of European ideologies, cultures and institutions.

Thus, strictly speaking, there is no pure form of black popular culture. It is always the product of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, as well as of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding. That is why they are always impure or hybridized from a “vernacular base”. Black popular culture, from this perspective, is not the recovery of a lost dialogue from the past, but it is formed from adaptations, molded to the mixed, contradictory, hybrid spaces. It is this mark of difference that is carried by the signifier “black” in the term “black popular culture”. It has come to signify the black community, where these traditions were kept, and whose struggles survive in the persistence of the historical experience of black people in the diaspora, as well as in the counternarratives which are struggling to be heard.

Hall quotes Paul Gilroy, who said that blacks in the British diaspora must refuse the binary “black or British” because the “or” remains the sight of constant contestation when the aim of the struggle must be, instead, to replace the “or” with the possibility of an “and”. From this perspective, you can be black and British. Essentialism, decidedly, naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural or genetic. Thus, when the signifier “black” is apart from its historical, cultural and political context and inserted in a biological and racial category, we tend to valorize the kind of racism we are trying to deconstruct.



Paul Gilroy (1956-) is a British historian, writer and academic, who is Professor of American and English Literature at King's College London.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Gilroy

Hall gives us a very clear example of how essentialism in ethnic questions can reinforce conservative and even oppressive conditions: when black men, living their counter-identities as black masculinities, replay those fantasies of black masculinities in the theaters of popular culture, they are reproducing masculine identities that are oppressive to women. That is because dominant ethnicities are always underpinned by a particular sexual economy and class identity.

The author ends his argumentation with two points. In the first he wants to remind us that popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it is, is not arena where we find who we really are, or the truth of our ancestral experience. On the contrary, it is a mythic arena, as if it were a theater of popular desires and fantasies. In other words, it is the place where we discover ourselves, where we are imagined and represented, to the audiences and to ourselves. In the second, he reminds us about the importance of the structuring of cultural space in terms of high and low and the threat of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. According to Hall, the carnivalesque is not simply an upturning of oppositional frameworks, but a crosscut which Bakhtin calls “the dialogic”.

The article ends with an account of what is involved in understanding popular culture, in a dialogic rather than in an oppositional way, from *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, by Stallybrass and White (1986, p. 5):

A recurrent pattern emerges: the “top” attempts to reject and eliminate the “bottom” for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon the low-Other [...] But also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear, and

desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central [...].

CONCLUSION

The race issue in Brazil is a very complex question. First of all, it is not a consequence of three centuries of slavery, but a historical manifestation of prejudice which is common among people of different ethnicity, something always forgotten by the defenders of the supposed melting pot of Brazilian culture. An example can be given with the case of a black person or mulatto who reaches a certain social rank. When this occurs, his (or her) racial or ethnical condition is omitted, but not only because of a cynic and disguised prejudice, but also because of what Gilberto Freyre calls “race ascendancy”, that is, Brazilian society never rejects its succeeded black members, but accepts them only in terms of their social importance, what makes them change not only from one class to another, but also from one race to another. That’s the reason why the racial condition of writers like Gonçalves Dias or Machado de Assis is always omitted. But the social acceptance of blacks who succeed in fields dominated by the whites – like the political, intellectual or scientific fields –, differently from pop music or football, is not guaranteed, because if they fail, they become black again.



RESUMO

Hall’s main idea in the article we studied in this class is that a dialogic approach is a better strategy than an essentialist one in relation to black popular culture. It means that race is merely a historical category, rather than a biological one. Hall argues that although achievements of cultural struggles may be limited, they are real. He points out that in a cultural hegemony there is never a pure win or loss, but some positions have been won to achieve better outcomes for marginal groups. His interest, therefore, is in cultural strategies that can make a difference and “shift the dispositions of power”.



ATIVIDADES

Based on the article we read in this class, how can you explain, with your own words, the dangers of having an essentialist conception of race and ethnicity?

ACTIVITY COMMENT

Esta atividade tem por finalidade principal fazer você construir uma síntese dos principais conteúdos desta quinta Aula em sua resposta, de modo a compreender criticamente os argumentos do célebre intelectual jamaicano neste artigo.

REFERÊNCIAS

- Foster, Hal, 1985. **Recodings: Art, Spectacle, and Cultural Politics**. Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press.
- Hall, Stuart, 1988. **“New Ethnicities”**. Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Black Film/British Cinema*, ICA
- Hall, Stuart, 1992. **“What is black in black popular culture?”**. **Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies**. Ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 468-478.
- Document 7. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1990. **“States of Desire”**. (Interview with Isaac Julien). *Transition* 1,3.
- hooks, bell Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White, 1986. **The Politics and Poetics of Transgression**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- West, Cornel, 1990. **“The New Cultural Politics of Difference”**. Russell Ferguson et al. (eds.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Cambridge: MIT Press in association with the New Museum of Contemporary Art