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birmingham's ghostly presence

MARK GIBSON

*Culture and Power: A History of
Cultural Studies*

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Power, as a concept, is both pervasive and elusive. It has troubled philosophers and social scientists for decades, even centuries. It has particularly troubled cultural theorists for around fifty years. Mark Gibson bravely tackles this subject. Even more bravely, he tackles a history of the concept within a field that is itself controversial.

For Mark Gibson, there has been an endless oscillation in cultural studies between resisting and asserting generalised conceptions of power. This is not a new idea. What Gibson adds to this history, however, is a focus on power as a concept—a questioning of its role in cultural studies and an investigation into its multiple uses.

The book presents the beginnings of a *cultural history of the concept of power*, a cultural history that focuses, with reference to Foucault, on the ‘thematics’ of power itself. Gibson admits to this being a limited history, quite openly focusing on the British tradition within cultural studies, namely the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). This focus, Gibson argues, is justified by the need to challenge the idea that power is a foundational concept for cultural studies and that Marxism is similarly foundational. That is, he rejects the idea that culture must be understood in relation to structures of domination.

Gibson also emphasises the historical scepticism within cultural studies, as applied towards a range of concepts—such as *woman*, *black*, *nation*, or even *culture* itself—not treating them as simply ‘real’. Gibson argues that this scepticism should be extended to the concept of power. Throughout, Gibson wants to avoid

the totalisation of the concept, or the turning of it into a simple, objective social phenomenon. This is not an entirely new approach to power either, except when placed almost exclusively within a *cultural* history of power within cultural studies.

Power has been seen in and through the window of cultural studies for decades. With this study has come engagement with a range of other disciplinary approaches. It could be said that this is one of the distinguishing features of cultural studies; it is certainly one of its strengths. Gibson wants to turn this on its head, so to speak, to 'culturalise' power, to apply 'the principles of "cultural" evaluation' to the concept. (204) This does create some methodological problems. In an attempt to focus on the cultural history of power, and to distance *power* not only from Marxist understandings of society, but from an understanding of social relations in general, Gibson ends up doing what others have been criticised for: separating both power and culture from everything else.¹ If cultural studies really is the field in which theorists from different disciplinary approaches to power can come together to talk (205), then Gibson's methodology is a limit on this, not a development. Ultimately, it shows the problems encountered by attempting to understand power through culture alone.

The book is nevertheless impressive in its scope and breadth of references, especially for a book of just over two hundred pages. It is a difficult history to read, as it delves into a number of sophisticated intellectual debates from a fifty-year period, dealing with them

sympathetically and in some detail. The book's title might imply that the text is introductory; it is more suited to those already *au fait* with these debates.

Gibson structures his history around two main theoretical trends within cultural studies: Marxism and post-Marxism. While other tendencies are covered—Foucault and power, Said and Orientalism, Occidentalism and Latin America, 'the banal', the cultural policy debates, even media democracy—the primary focus is overwhelmingly on Birmingham and subsequent responses in feminist, American and Australian cultural studies. Chapters Four, Five and Six form the kernel around which the rest of the book is organised, although Chapters Three and Seven, on either side, also focus on the CCCS. Through this discussion Gibson wants to unpeel the assumption that a generalised concept of power provided the foundation of all cultural studies. He does this by first tearing apart the implied relationship between the field and Marxism. Gibson wants to emphasise the idea that power cannot be read into all culture and, likewise, that power cannot be understood universally. He does this by first critiquing 'Marxist cultural studies', questioning whether there is in fact such a thing at all. (90–1)

To do this Gibson spends considerable time on both Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. He sees Hoggart and Williams as theorists who were not only willing to break with economic approaches to power, but who were critical of grand schemas and resistant to placing power within a universal framework.

This is important for Gibson, who is more sympathetic to the early CCCS approaches to power than the later approaches around Stuart Hall and others. Gibson also emphasises the view that while there was a significant move in British cultural studies towards the European philosophical traditions, the sense of scepticism, as well as its support for empirical analyses, was never lost. It was reluctant to separate *reason* from *experience*.

The conclusion to Chapter Six and introduction to Chapter Seven are further indications of Gibson's general argument. For Gibson, it is not the developments in theories of power at the CCCS that are important, but that they offered openings for new ways of seeing things by 'their neutralization of *other* claims', particularly positivist sociology and 'Marxist grand theorizing'. (101) Gibson spends considerable time *shadow-boxing* with Marxism, emphasising the contingent, sceptical and empirical within Marxist theorists, while sidestepping the question of whether they managed to blend this with a more sophisticated Marxism, or a less economic base–superstructure theory. It is almost as if Gibson wishes to rescue some of the early Marxists from their Marxism, and, in the process, he does not entirely do justice to their theoretical approach. For example, Stuart Hall argues that the relationship between cultural studies and Marxism began with engagement with a problem:

through the critique of a certain reductionism and economism ... a contestation with the model of base and superstructure,

through which sophisticated and vulgar Marxism alike had tried to think the relationship between society, economy, and culture. (cited 89)

Gibson pays a distinct lack of attention to this problem and the surrounding debates, which are important not only to a thorough understanding of culture and power, but to an understanding of current debates in cultural studies.² This is indicative of Gibson's broader approach, that is, a distancing of *power* from Marxism, while not seriously addressing Marxism's theoretical claims over the concept.

Chapter Eight on oppression continues to focus on Birmingham. Gibson acknowledges that this is problematic because the place is not central to feminism or studies of race within cultural studies. Gibson does give a fair and considered account of the tensions within the CCCS around the rise of feminism, however. He argues that feminism introduced a new way for cultural studies to understand power, by making explicit a set of tendencies that had already been gathering. Culturally, the 1960s saw the increasing visibility of the domestic realm, partly as a result of the influx of women into higher education, alongside the increase in television-watching populations. It is within this context that oppression began to be seen both extensively and intensively. Feminism, Gibson argues, while dealing with generalised concepts of power, also tempered this through emphasis on experience and particularity. Here he pays attention to Meaghan Morris, while being critical of her tendency to simply regard

power as 'real'. (163) Similar to Foucault, Gibson argues, Morris does not interrogate *power* itself, not in the same way that she does *nation*, *woman* or '*the left*'. (163) The strength of the British cultural studies tradition, in contrast, is that there has always been 'a problematisation of the concept of power itself', even if at times 'in an oblique and subterranean way'. (163)

For Gibson, the totalisation of power is also associated with the Americanisation of the field of cultural studies; but the United States is contradictory. It tends to be very sceptical towards concepts of power; Gibson says this scepticism runs deeper than in Britain. (133) At the same time, the United States has a generalised *discourse of power* around 'politics, race, class and gender, subjugation, domination, exclusion, marginality, Otherness etc.' (133) This has led to a tendency in United States cultural studies to draw towards extremes.

The combined chapter on the debates around cultural policy and media republicanism—or media democracy—is relatively scant, but important to the conclusions drawn later in the book. The policy debates have resulted in theories that allow nothing outside 'governmental rationalities'. (174) Media republicanism has at times led to a kind of populism that reduces agency to audience participation in popular media. The most important insight of media republicanism for Gibson is that power is not continuously distributed, but made up of discrete phenomena. Once this conceptual shift is made, then:

invoking the repressive agencies of the Apartheid state in South Africa or the violence of some men against women is no longer to raise the spectre of a totalizing political vision. The way is opened to a grittier recognition of violence and conflict where they occur, but a recognition that does not extend to a prejudicial view of all social relations as conforming to some sort of universal pattern. (183)

His interest here is in the 'more immediate and practical contexts and aims' of actors. (184) However, the result of such an approach is not to necessarily improve the understanding of power as experienced in its specificity. Worse, it is to separate out specific forms of power from broader power relations. It is to end up with what Gibson is also trying to avoid: a multiplicity of unrelated powers that cannot be compared. (167–8)

Mark Gibson's book is certainly a timely contribution to the old debates around power and culture. Gibson combines a range of theoretical critiques in an interesting and thought-provoking way. The call to return to the history of the relationship between culture and power, in order to better understand current theoretical approaches, is the definite strength of the book. The case is very well put. In the end, however, the reader is left with more questions about than ideas for future development of the field of cultural studies and one of its critical concepts. Then again, maybe this was Gibson's ultimate goal.

While some may be disappointed by the lack of serious engagement with Marxist conceptualisations of power, particularly those who look to the heritage of Birmingham, this book is an impressive contribution to what will be a continuing discussion within cultural studies.

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1. See, for example, Mike Wayne, *Marxism and Media Studies: Key Contemporary Trends*, Pluto Press, London, 2003, pp. 118–45.
 2. *Ibid.*, Ch. 5.