Conflict and Contradiction: Cultural Materialism

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Abstract  
The paper states the emergence of cultural materialism was in Britain in the 1980s as a critical method to literature. Benjamin’s historical materialism attributes to Marxists’ representation. Cultural materialism also plays a very important part in Marxism. The paper explores Sinfield’s trace on consensus politics in England and comes to conclusion that conflict and contradiction is the center of Cultural materialism. Cultural materialism, like new historicism, has been successful in literary studies in coping earlier formalist concerns with textual unity and humanist concerns and altering the ways in which we handle literary texts and their meanings.  

Key words: Cultural materialism; New historicism; Marxism; Conflict; Contradiction

INTRODUCTION
Cultural materialism emerged in Britain in the 1980s as a critical approach to literature which understood and read literary texts as the material products of specific historical and political conditions. Its central concerns are in the ways in which literature relates to history, and what interpretations of a literary text might result from analyses which privileged historical contexts as the key to understanding the meanings and functions of literature. An important realization of cultural materialism is that texts produce different meanings and interpretations when read in different times and in different locations. Shakespeare’s The Tempest might have been understood in very different ways in late sixteenth-century England that it has been read and performed in the Caribbean in the twentieth century, for example. The most prominent practitioners of cultural materialism—Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore, Catherine Belsay—share much in common with new historicists in the USA, particularly in treating literary texts as agents in making sense of a culture to itself. They also share with new historicists a common preoccupation with the Renaissance period, and with the roles which literature and theatre played in interpreting and explaining Renaissance society to itself. Cultural materialists participated with new historicist critics in the radical reinterpretation of Shakespeare studies away from traditional emphases on the bard’s universalism and humanism and towards a study of how Shakespeare’s texts functioned in Elizabethan society to articulate specific cultural, gender or sexual identities, or indeed to highlight the ways in which power was deployed, distributed and manipulated in sixteenth-century England. But cultural materialists have also gone further than new historicists in emphasizing the political functions of literary texts in our own time, and in critiquing the ways in which literature is often appropriated in conservative political discourses to shore up notions of national heritage or cultural superiority. Accordingly, cultural materialists tend to read literary texts in ways which frustrate conservative interpretations, either by interpreting texts as the vehicles of radical critiques of conservative politics, or by exposing the means by which texts do serve the interests of conservatism.

1. CULTURAL MATERIALISM

1.1 The Emergence of Cultural Materialism  
The roots of cultural materialism lie in the work of prominent left-wing academics of the 1960s and 1970s who challenged traditional approaches to literature by, firstly, contesting the ways in which certain kinds of
texts were privileged as literary and others dismissed as popular, and secondly, debating the validity of the idea of literature as embodying timeless, universal human values. The work, for example, of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart in extending literary analyses to the broader domain of “culture” exposed the ways in which literary criticism had conventionally scorned the value of popular forms of entertainment and reading as tasteless, mass consumption and privileged the reading of a select canon of “literary” texts as an index of sophistication. Hall, Williams and Hoggart, each in their own ways, suspected that what lay behind such distinctions between the popular and the literary was a class distinction whereby the working classes are conveniently represented as slavishly following mass-marker trends while the middle and upper classes were seen to be improving their minds and morals by reading “high” literature. Culture, was, however, shown to be more complex than this in the work of these left-wing critics, for whom examples abounded of the ways in which popular expressions could mean as much, and function in similar ways, as a literary text. “We cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice”, wrote Raymond Williams, because those who enjoyed classical music and Shakespeare’s plays were no more sophisticated, privileged, or special than those who preferred “The Beatles” or Mills & Boon novels (Williams, 1977, p. 43).

Cultural studies was not so interested in making the icons and fashions of popular culture equivalent to high art and literature, however, as it was preoccupied with studying the ways in which cultures told stories about themselves through all forms of media and artistic representation. It was predominantly marxist in its critique of the ideological functions of “culture”, and suggested that culture was inseparable from politics. Walter Benjamin had argued in his definition of historical materialism that since history was written by the rulers and conquerors, accordingly the “cultural treasures” of the world were the spoils of conquest and oppression, remaking: There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism, which in practice means that we must take care when we encounter stories of genius writers and great art to analyze the material circumstances which enable art and literature to be so highly acclaimed. Thus, in cultural materialist terms, the claim that Shakespeare is a universal writer is also a claim that English literature can make sense of and explain the world to itself, a claim which is then uncomfortably close to the boast of English imperialism. That Shakespeare’s reputation as a universal genius and gained considerable ground in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when English imperialism reached its height, should alert us to the historical circumstances in which “greatness” is celebrated and promoted.

**1.2 Benjamin’s Contribution to Marxism**

Implicit in Benjamin’s explanation of historical materialism is a radical reversal of the assumption of progressive humanism that the road to civilization leads away from the barbarism of the past. Benjamin proposes instead that civilization depends on barbarism, that in order for the middle classes to become civilized the working classes must be made barbaric, or in order for the English to be civilized, there must be a barbaric “other” in the colonies against whom the English can define themselves. One can see in Benjamin’s thinking the significance which he attributes to “representation”. Conventional Marxist analyses emphasized the economic means of control which the middle classes exerted over the working classes, but for Benjamin, as for Antonio Gramsci, the ideological or representational means of control were even more important. The bourgeois class may dominate the workers by economic means, but their dominance is made plausible and is perpetuated at the level of representation. For Gramsci the task of Marxist criticism is then to engage with capitalism on an ideological level, representing the interests of the working and peasant classes and exposing the contradictions and false consciousness of the bourgeoisie. Indeed the possibility of all social and political change relies upon the outcome of this ideological struggle—as Gramsci explains in his *Prison Notebooks* that men acquire consciousness of structural conflicts on the level of ideologies. According to the view which sees economics as the sole determining factor, ideology is a delusion which conceals the real, and therefore need only be dismissed as false while the real task of transferring the means of economic production to the proletariat is conducted. But this is to miss the point that bourgeois ideology succeeds in holding the captive attention and support of all classes. Gramsci referred to this condition as hegemony.

**1.3 Cultural Materialism—Central Thinking of Marxism**

The influence of Marxist ideas and approaches is one of the key factors in distinguishing between the practices of cultural materialism and those of new historicism, for new historicists were more influenced by Michel Foucault’s historicist model of power relations than by Marxist cultural studies. For Sinfield, Dollimore and other cultural materialists, however, the emphases which Marxists such as Gramsci, Benjamin, and Williams placed on the function of literature as an agent of bourgeois ideology and power suggested the need for an interpretative approach to literature which could accommodate Marxist analyses of the politics of representation. Sinfield and Dollimore published what amounted in effect to a manifesto of cultural materialism as a foreword to an edited collection of essays entitled *Political Shakespeare* in 1985, a collection which represented and celebrated the arrival of radical new historicist perspectives in Renaissance studies. In their preface, the editors acknowledged a debt to Raymond Williams for the term “cultural materialism”, which he has used to describe his own work in *Marxism and Literature*:
It is a position which can be briefly described as cultural materialism: a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism...it is, in my view, a Marxist theory, and indeed...part of what I at least see as the central thinking of Marxism. (Williams, 1977, pp. 5-6)

In acknowledging the debt to Williams, Sinfield and Dollimore were declaring that cultural materialism was in many senses the progeny of Marxist literary and cultural studies. It shared with Marxism the notion of history as perpetual struggle between social and cultural factions, and it shared too the idea that representations of all kinds played a part in the cultural politics of their time. Dollimore and Sinfield set out the key principles of cultural materialism in the foreword to *Political Shakespeare*:

Our belief is that a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis offers the strongest challenge and has already contributed substantial work. Historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to recover its histories; theoretical method detaches the text from immanent criticism which seeks only to reproduce it in its own terms; socialist and feminist commitment confronts the conservative categories in which most criticism has hitherto been conducted; textual analysis locates the critique of traditional approached where it cannot be ignored. We call this cultural materialism. (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985)

The four key principles in this statement are not particularly descriptive of the method or critical practice of cultural materialism, but they are general indications of the conditions in which cultural materialists see themselves operating. The principles proposed by Sinfield and Dollimore are designed to displace what they call “traditional” approached, the main features of which are implied in the definition of each of the principles. Cultural materialism, accordingly, is defined as a reaction against criticism which treats texts as possessing “transcendent significance”, which interprets a text “in its own terms” and within “conservative categories”, and which grounds its understanding of a text solely within closed textual analysis. In contrast to the liberal and conservative critical approaches suggested in this foreword, cultural materialists registered a new phase of political and ideological conflict, in which literary criticism could not remain neutral. While the liberal political beliefs and practices of postwar Britain, realized in the form of the welfare state, the NHS (National Health Service), scholarships, nationalized industries and local government, were steadily, often swiftly, eroded by the new right-wing ideologies of Thatcherism, literary critics like Dollimore, Sinfield, Belsey, Barker and Holderness scrutinized how literary text played their part in sustaining and perpetuating conservative ideologies. Sinfield, for example, has shown how Shakespeare has been pressed into service to teach reactionary social norms, to justify imperialist ideology, even to sell military weapons, but in reply Sinfield has offered dissent readings of Shakespeare’s texts which challenge traditional conservative and humanist readings. Cultural materialists have sought to change the terms in which writers such as Shakespeare are read and interpreted. Instead of the humanist focus on issue of character, morality and “timeless” human values, cultural materialists have asked questions of texts which are concerned with power and resistance, race and gender, ideology and history.

2. THE METHOD OF CULTURAL MATERIALISM

2.1 Joathan Dollimore’s Radical Tragedy

Joathan Dollimore’s *Radical Tragedy* is exemplary of cultural materialist approaches. Dollimore analyzes Jacobean tragedies for the ways in which they relate specifically to two major ideological constructs—establishment providentialism (which held sway in Renaissance times as the explanation of monarchical power as the product of divine will, therefore justifying the union of church and state and discouraging possible rebellions or criticisms of either institution), and the autonomous, essential individual (which posits the idea of an unchanging human nature, symbolized in the individual soul). Dollimore’s study is partly recovering the ideological contexts in which Jacobean texts were produced and read, but partly also a self-consciously twentieth-century return to those contexts to challenge humanists ways of reading them. So, for example, in the case of providentialism, Dollimore shows how texts such as Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* and Jonson’s *Sejanus* not only foreground providentialist explanations of Renaissance politics and society but also provoke disquieting and challenging questions about the limits and contradictions of providentialism. At stake in his analyses is not just a concern to discover how such texts interacted with their own historical contexts, but Dollimore is also keen to show that literature acts in subversive as well as conservative ways, that literary texts can expose the limitations and faults of conservative political orthodoxies as it can reinforce them. Thus Dollimore’s book demonstrates the value of analyses of historical context, as well as highlighting the political commitment of cultural materialism to discovering the ways in which texts go against the grain of conservative interpretations and values.

In *Political Shakespeare*, Dollimore and Sinfield brought together the work of new historical critics like Leonard Tennenhouse and Stephen Greenblatt and the work of cultural materialists, largely although not exclusively, represented to politicizing literature which has become characteristic of cultural materialism. In the foreword the editors articulated their dislike of criticism which disguises its political agenda, and which pretends to be politically neutral:

Cultural materialism does not, like much established literary criticism, attempt to mystify its perspective as the natural, obvious or right interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact. On the contrary, it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class. (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985)
2.2 Sinfield’s Trace of Consensus Politics in Postwar England

This is quite different to the work of new historicism, almost invariably focused on the past as belonging to a different epoch, ideologically and politically, to our own. Cultural materialists are committed to interpretations and investigations which have overt political ends in the contemporary world. Perhaps the best example of this commitment is Sinfield’s synthesis of literary analysis, historical investigation and political engagement in Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain, in which he traces the emergence of consensus politics in postwar England, with its promises of full employment, comprehensive free education, and welfare and healthcare for all, and charts also the destruction of the welfare state under Mrs. Thatcher’s government in the 1980s. Sinfield studies the ways in which the literature of the period foregrounds and contributes to these historical shifts, finding in the working-class writing of the 1960s, for example, that such writers as Alan Sillitoe, John Braine and John Osborne did not represent the genuine interests and aspirations of the working class, but instead reflected the process of embourgeoisement which the consensus politics of the 1950s and 1960s seemed to effect.

The emergence of working-class writing does not indicate an improvement in the lot of the working class, the working-class have become the object of closer cultural scrutiny, in which service a handful of writers came to prominence. However authentic the class credentials of the writers, the fate of the working class cannot be changed, according to Sinfield, if the oppressed social position of the writers has no effect on the form in which they are working. Sinfield argues that writing itself was an inherently conservative act: “There were writers of lower-class origin, it was acknowledged, but in the very act of becoming writers they were co-opted to middle-class forms” (Sinfield, 1989, p. 40). The premise of Sinfield’s argument is that the act of writing itself in the 1950s was a middle-class act, and that the readers and audiences for literature in the 1950s were largely middle class. The representation of working-class life apparently achieves no dramatically radical position when performed to a middle-class audience already hungry for representations of ‘the other’ anyway. Such an analysis of the conservative cultural politics of working-class writing is offered up in Sinfield’s study as part of an explanation for the state of Britain in the 1980s, which for left-wing intellectuals was a dramatic shift away from the promises of the Labour government of 1945 to provide for the poor and disenfranchised of British society. Sinfield has been the most prominent cultural materialist to engage so actively in diagnosing contemporary political problems in the course of interpreting and explaining literary texts and their functions within society. Reading literature for cultural materialists is a political activity. It reflects and shapes the meanings which we as a society assign to texts and cultural practices, and it is therefore also a site of contest between competing political ideologies.

2.3 Conflict and Contradiction in Cultural Materialism

This sense of reading as political conflict can also be seen in Sinfield’s Faultlines, in which he states that his intentions is “to check the tendency of Julius Caesar to add Shakespearean authority to reactionary discourses” (Sinfield, 1992, p. 21). Literary texts acquire and are assigned cultural authority to different degrees and at different times in each society, and can be appropriated and co-opted to speak for one or more political ideologies. The meaning of these texts will always be contested, but what cultural materialists are interested in showing is that where meanings are contested there is almost always more at stake than insular aesthetic or artistic principles. Sinfield summarizes his argument in Faultlines as the following: “dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals (though they have qualities) but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself” (Sinfield, 1992, p. 41). In new historicist accounts of the operations of power, power seems to function as a flawlessly, perfectly efficient and effective machine. Sinfield disputes this, however, and offers a reading of power which reveals its faults, or more correctly the conflicts and contradictions within power which may reveal dissident perspectives and which Sinfield calls “faultlines”. It is through these “faultlines”, Sinfield claims, that we can read the alternative identities and values, and dissident ideas, of a given society.

In Faultlines Sinfield argued that the motivation for cultural materialist readings lay in the conservative and reactionary uses to which literary texts had been put. Cultural materialism as a practice necessarily reacts against the appropriation of literature in conservative political discourses:

Conservative criticism has generally deployed three ways of making literature politically disagreeable:

selecting the canon to feature suitable texts, interpreting these texts strenuously so that awkward aspects are explained away, and insinuating political implications as alleged formal properties (such as irony and balance). (Sinfield, 1992, p. 21)

In order to counter these conservative readings, and in order to make texts politically disagreeable, cultural materialists can adopt the same strategies, or turn them against traditional or reactionary texts. If, as cultural materialist critics assert, Shakespeare is a powerful ideological tool in our society, there are ways of reading which can counter the authority which Shakespeare lends to reactionary discourses.

2.4 Ways of Interpreting a Text

In an essay published in 1983 Sinfield explained that there were four principal ways of dealing with a reactionary text: (1) Rejection of a respected text of its reactionary implications...can shake normally unquestioned assumptions... (2) Interpretation...so as to yield acceptable meaning...is, of course, available to the socialist critic... (3) Deflect into Formalism: One may
sidestep altogether . . . the version of human relations propounded by the text by shifting attention from its supposed truth to the mechanism of its construction . . . (4) Deflect into History:

The literary text may be understood not as a privileged mode of insight, nor as a privileged formal construction. Initially, it is a project devised within a certain set of practices (the institutions and forms of writing as currently operative), and producing a version of reality which is promulgated as meaningful and persuasive at a certain historical conjuncture. And then, subsequently, it is re-used—reproduced—in terms of other practices and other historical conditions. The last method is a preferred method of cultural materialists in general, of putting the text in its contexts, whether the contexts of production or the contexts of reception, so as to expose the process by which it has been rendered in support of the dominant culture. Once this process has been exposed then the text can be interpreted by dissident critics against the grain. Examining literary texts in their historical contexts is, for cultural materialists, a process of estranging those texts from the naturalized conservative readings to which they have been routinely treated. To show that Shakespeare’s plays were inseparable from the ideological struggles of their time is, firstly, to dismiss the idea that his plays are timeless and universal, but it is also to alert us to the ways in which Shakespeare serves ideological functions in our own time too. In this case, historically situated and contextualized readings taught cultural materialists that the past could lend radically different meanings to canonical literary texts.

3. CULTURAL MATERIALISM IN THE 1980S
In the 1980s both new historicism and cultural materialism were interested in stressing the extent to which the past differs from contemporary uses of the past, the extent to which the past is alien or other to our own modern episteme, and, borrowing from Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz, they were at the same time aware of the structural similarities between this historical difference and the cultural differences being emphasized by postcolonial critics, feminists, gay theories and race theorists.

4. CULTURAL MATERIALISM IN THE 1990S
Increasingly in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, cultural materialist critics extended their analyses into the domains of queer theory, postcolonialism and feminism. Jonathan Dollimore published Sexual Dissidence in 1991, while Alan Sinfield examined the representations and figures of effeminacy in twentieth-century culture in The Wilde Century in 1994. Both studies extended and deepened the ways in which cultural materialist critics read literature and culture through concepts of difference, focusing in particular on the cultural politics of sexual difference. Do gay and lesbian sexualities pose a radical challenge to the prevailing norms and values of our societies, or are they merely the same as straight sexualities? This is a question which concerns both Sinfield and Dollimore in their respective studies, and it indicates the extent to which their recent work builds on their early work as cultural materialists. Both critics have extended the analyses of earlier concepts of dissidence, faultlines and deviance by focusing more particularly on the specific cases of sexual dissidence, and the dissident strategies of lesbian and gay subcultures.

CONCLUSION
Cultural materialism, like new historicism, has succeeded in literary studies in displacing earlier formalist concerns with textual unity and humanist concerns with character and authorship, and changing the ways in which we approach literary texts and their meanings. Although there are very few critics who identify themselves explicitly as cultural materialist, the influence of cultural materialism on literary studies in Britain has been pervasive, most notably in the current centrality of historicist approaches, the suspicion of texts with canonical or cultural authority, and the importance of concepts of difference in analyses of the cultural politics of texts. Arguably too, cultural materialism has been instrumental in encouraging self-reflexivity in our critical practices, and a wider concern for the way in which literary studies interacts with, and learns from, the study of culture, society, history, politics and other disciplines. Cultural materialism has enriched literary studies by probing the relationship between literature and social, cultural, political and sexual power, and giving literary criticism a sharper political focus on the present as well as the past.

REFERENCES