

On Improbable Success: The Case of Richard Hoggart

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Richard Hoggart (1918-2014), a poor child who went onto become a university professor, was the epitome of a successful scholarship student. The trajectory of this “exemplary counter-example” sheds light on the mechanisms of social reproduction when they prove inoperative and the distance that can be traveled from one’s native milieu.

The questions posed both by Richard Hoggart’s success and his explanations of it are of great interest to sociologists who study the working class and popular culture. For the sociologist, Hoggart’s story remains as relevant today as ever. It already belonged to a distant past when he set out to tell it; for a French audience, his native culture is, moreover, a foreign one. But it is precisely this twofold distance—in time as well as in space—that allows us to better understand contemporary French culture by comparing it to another typified cultural form in a way that calls attention to their specificities. Such a comparison makes it possible to grasp the varieties of invariants that can be found in different historical and social contexts, including, for instance, the legacy of cultural handicaps, educational inequalities, and obstacles to social mobility. The concepts and the patterns that Hoggart’s case have helped to conceptualize¹ (“autonomy” vs. “domination,” “alternation” and/or “ambivalence”) can be applied to current developments in working-class culture and to transformations resulting from the changing composition of working-class populations. Recent immigrant cultures, which tend to be highly diverse, are both more autonomous (due to language and, at times, to religion) and more dominated. The rural exodus and urbanization have led to ghettoization. As with Hoggart’s own native culture, the culture of the lowest strata of the new working classes is a local culture. This is also what makes it ambivalent: the very means they use to protect themselves also shut them off from the surrounding world.

Hoggart is the fully realized ideal type of the scholarship student. He was born in a working-class neighborhood in the city of Leeds. His exceptional success constitutes a challenge to the mechanisms and theory of cultural inheritance and social reproduction. He contributed, with Stuart Hall in particular, to the development of “cultural studies.” He ran Birmingham’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, before resigning to pursue a career at UNESCO. Confronted with this exemplary counter-example, the sociologist might be tempted to remain strictly deterministic, ruling out the role of chance and delving ever deeper into statistical evidence that might indicate the counter-handicaps and compensatory advantages associated with being a scholarship student. Hoggart’s origins are not, in fact, exclusively or “purely” working class. His mother, who was from Liverpool, was *déclassé*,

¹ Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le savant et le populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature*, Paris, Gallimard, Seuil, 1989; reedited by Seuil, 2015.

belonging from “what the Hunslet Hoggarts called a ‘better class’ ... family.” Her family was poor, but belonged to the “respectable working class.”²

Alternatively, the sociologist can adopt the contrary approach, acknowledging that success as exceptional as Hoggart’s remains improbable. In this case, he or she will research the decisive events, the encounters, the auspicious accidents—in short, the fortuitous occurrences that steered this scholarship student from the path he should have followed. Knowledge of these decisive chance events make it possible to reconstruct the chain of causes and effects, to examine the “black boxes” of statistical relations, and to comprehend the processes they imply. Hoggart’s story allows us to understand mechanisms of social production when they did not function and thus, by the same token, to acquire a better understanding of how they do function.

Populism and Miserabilism

Hoggart’s ambivalent relationship with his origins, at one intimate and distant, protects him from the exaggerations that threaten the study of working-class culture. The culture of his origins was also his first culture: “home is where one starts from.” He understands its limits and insufficiencies too well to succumb to populism’s temptations. By presenting the world in which he was raised from the point of view of the native that he was, he avoids the misunderstandings that, with the help of ignorance, consists in idealizing it.

Nor does Hoggart yield to the opposite exaggeration of legitimism and miserabilism.³ He does not reduce working-class culture to a lack in relation to dominant culture. His detailed and suggestive descriptions, as well as the evocative power of his memories make it possible, on the contrary, to grasp working-class culture in all its specificity, to see its coherence as well as its autonomy. Hoggart examined the origins, culture, and milieu in which he grew up from above and afar—from the position, that is, at which he arrived. Even so, he remained affectively attached to the world of his native culture.

The atmosphere of Leeds, an unforgettable mixture of “smell, noise, and lights” still attracted him in his later years, “like a large maternal breast.” Despite his success in joining and acculturating himself to the milieu to which he raised himself, he was not a “native” of the dominant culture and did not share its unconscious certainties. “In them, but not of them,” he was still capable of putting the dominant culture in perspective, embracing its liberating qualities while rejecting those that were incompatible with the dispositions of his origins. Hoggart was no dilettante. An aptitude for “intellectual games” eludes him: along the path he traveled, “not much time for pirouettes just for the hell of it.”

Two Hypotheses: Alternation and Ambivalence

Hoggart’s autobiography provides answers to and clarifies the question of the social status of working-class culture. To what extent can the sociologist become an ethnographer, grasping working-class culture in its autonomy, on the model of pre-colonial “exotic”

² Richard Hoggart, *A Local Habitation. Life and Times, 1918-1940*, Chatto and Windus, 1988. French translation: *33 Newport Street. Autobiographie d'un intellectuel issu des classes populaires anglaises*, Paris, Gallimard, Seuil, collection Hautes Études, 1991. The translation was reedited by Seuil, in the Points collection, in 2013. See, too, Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*, Chatto & Windus, 1957. French translation: *La culture du pauvre: études sur le style de vie des classes populaires en Angleterre*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, collection Le sens commun, 1970.

³ Grignon and Passeron, *Le savant et le populaire*.

cultures? Does sociological realism not compel us, to the contrary, to consider it primarily as a dominated culture?

This is what led Jean-Claude Passeron and myself to propose the “alternation hypothesis,” which makes it possible to distinguish between situations characterized by indicators of cultural domination and contexts in which popular practices are, on the contrary, sufficiently isolated, disregarded, or protected to be considered as autonomous and coherent. On the other hand, the “hypothesis of ambivalence” posits that there is no feature of working-class culture that is not to some degree haunted by the reality and sensation of domination.

The “alternation hypothesis” entails a sharp contrast between autonomy and domination and encourages us to collect evidence and conduct empirical research that makes an increasingly detailed differentiation possible. The idea of ambivalence, however, implies a constant shift from domination to autonomy, that there is never one without the other, and that artifacts of popular culture are simultaneously and indistinguishably expressions of autonomy and consequences of domination. There is thus a risk that “ambivalence” be conflated with “ambiguity,” and that the characterization and classification of popular practices become simply a matter of interpretation. In this way, the “legitivist” reading of working-class culture may systematically discern a hidden but very real form of recognition in the most radical forms of refusal and rejection directed at the dominant culture and order.

To avoid ambiguity, one must acquire the empirical resources to determine in what ambivalence consists. The ambivalence of a practice can result from the heterogeneity of its causes and the conditions that make it possible. This is the case, for example, of domestic labor and production, which are both the result of resources that are specific to the groups that practice them (such as competencies and life conditions) and a necessity (forced savings due to insufficient income). It is the case when a characteristic of popular culture cannot have one effect without also having the opposite effect.

Hoggart, in this way, calls attention to the ambivalence of his native culture by emphasizing its local character. He shows that whatever protects and constitutes the specificity and autonomy of a subculture (such as a neighborhood or family) simultaneously encloses it, denies it access to the outside world, narrows its horizons, restricts its possibilities and aspirations, and transforms the “culture of the poor” into an impoverished culture. Beginning with decisive facts (i.e., facts that were decisive for him), he shows how, in what way, and through what means this culture is protective. For instance, his family’s isolation—the confinement of this familial subculture—sheltered Hoggart from the influence of the neighborhood culture, helping him to reach its boundaries and, through school, to escape it.

Literary Writing and Scholarly Writing

A Local Habitation reads like a novel. Hoggart manages to link literary writing and scholarly writing, to reconcile and combine their contradictory demands and respective capacities, the former’s verisimilitude and evocative power, the latter’s necessary precision. His talent as a writer brings the past to life; but his art notwithstanding, he also offers “analysis, which uses reason to decompose what the eyes have contemplated and the heart has felt.”⁴

⁴ Hippolyte Taine, *Essais de critique et d’histoire*, Paris, Hachette, 1858.

A Local Habitation is a moving book, one that speaks to the reader's imagination and emotions, capturing our "sentimental attention" (one example of which is the opening: "My Aunt Annie is dying in Saint James's Hospital"). Yet Hoggart's memories are factual, precise, and detailed. From this perspective, his story is similar to the objective and impersonal account of an historian or ethnographer. This makes it easier to translate: the more a text is literary, the more difficult it is to translate. The borderline case is that of poetry, which is, strictly speaking, untranslatable:

It is impossible to feel entirely a foreign poet ... One must be raised in the habits of a language, to have thought and felt through it, for each phrase and each word to present themselves to us with all their nuances, to awake all the memories that reinforce the ideas they offer us.⁵

But the realism of Hoggart's story often makes it necessary to abandon literal translation (which implies that the objects one is speaking of exist in the culture and society of the language that one is translating from as well as in the language one is translating to) and to resort to oblique translations, in which one seeks equivalents that are necessarily imprecise. Thus, for example, "Fred Karno's Army" (a young actors' troop in the 1920s) was translated into French as "*Les Dégourdis du 11e*" (literally, "The Geniuses of the Eleventh [Company]," an army movie that was very popular in the years before the Second World War).

Place names, which play an essential role in Hoggart's native culture and his presentation of it, are proper nouns: the objects they refer to are unique. Lacking notoriety and prestige, known only to the locals, they exist only in their original language (contrary to the names of famous cities or locations, such as London, Florence, Rome, or the Acropolis).

They are thus impossible to translate literally. Yet Hunslet and Potternewton are not Aubervilliers, Croix-Rousse, Saint-Herblain, or Cité des Pins.⁶ It is no doubt preferable to keep the original names, letting readers find their own equivalents in light of their own biographies.

"Transculturalism"

The French translation of *A Local Habitation* is thus a second order translation, a translation of Hoggart's translation. The inherent difficulties of translating scholarly language into popular language were once noted by George Sand:

If I made the laborer of the fields speak as he does speak, it would be necessary to have a translation on the opposite page for the civilized reader; and if I made him speak as we do, I should create an impossible being, in whom it would be necessary to suppose an order of ideas which he does not possess But tell it to me as if you had on your right hand a Parisian speaking the modern tongue, and on your left a peasant before whom you were unwilling to utter a word or phrase which he could not understand. You must speak clearly for the Parisian, and simply for the peasant. One will accuse you of a lack of local color, and the other of a lack of elegance.⁷

Hoggart's "transculturalism" allows him to transcribe his native culture into scholarly language without betraying it. He manages to present it in a way that is understandable and

⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Sur le caractère national des langues*, Paris, Seuil, « Points Essais », 2000.

⁶ These are names of working-class towns in France [translator's note].

⁷ George Sand, Introduction to *François the Waif*, New York, H. M. Caldwell, 1894, translated by J. M. S. [J. M. Sedgwick], p. 23, 25-36.

intelligible for “cultured” readers, without conforming to their tastes, prejudices, and expectations.

Connotation lies at the heart of literary language’s evocative abilities, while scholarly language depends on denotation. The sense of a scholarly term depends on its deictic capacity: one knows what a word means when one knows precisely, without ambiguity, what it refers to (this is also the case for technical languages and emergency languages).⁸ A text’s translatability is thus a decisive criteria of its scholarly character. From this point of view, the translation into a foreign language of that which one has recently written is an exercise, a demanding test, but a highly beneficial one for us, researchers of narrative discourse. By submitting our successive drafts to this ordeal, it is possible to identify instances in which writing does not lend itself (or does so only with difficulty) to translation, which leads one to ask “why?”

Published in Books&Ideas, June 13, 2016 ©booksandideas.net

First published in laviedesidees.fr, February 24, 2016. Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

⁸ Pius Servien, *Principes d’esthétique, problèmes d’art et langage des sciences*, Paris, Boivin, 1935.