TOWARDS AN ANATOMY OF 21ˢᵗ-CENTURY BRITISH CULTURE: CASE STUDIES FROM THE NEWSPAPERS[1]

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This paper offers a framework of analysis to encompass the variety of contemporary British culture in newspapers, drawing attention upon its "order of discourse" within the history of the present.

Ten often overlapping categories are proposed: British national identity; local identities; ethnicity and religion; social classes; war and peace; work; leisure trends; the body; gender; home and family. These combine variously and change across the periods 1901-1945, 1946-1964, 1965-1979, and 1980-2000.

The resulting grid, applied to news case studies, suggests the warps and wefts within the fabric of British culture, and a blueprint upon which 21st-century paradigms may rest.

Keywords: *cultural studies, media studies, British history, critical discourse analysis.*

Este trabajo sugiere un marco de análisis que abarca la gran variedad de la cultura británica contemporánea plasmada en la prensa, sugirendo algunas de las líneas maestras del orden del discurso (en el sentido Foucaultiano) para una "historia del presente."

Se proponen diez categorías a menudo solapadas: la identidad nacional británica; las identidades locales; etnicidad y religión; clases sociales; guerra y paz; trabajo; actividades de ocio; el cuerpo; género; hogares y familias. Estas se combinan y cambian a través de los periodos 1901-1945, 1946-1964, 1965-1979, and 1980-2000.

La cuadrícula resultante, aplicada al estudio de noticias concretas, sugieren la trama y urdimbre del "tejido" de la cultura británica, así como un esquema

sobre el que bien podrían reposar los paradigmas del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: *estudios culturales, estudios de los medios de comunicación, historia de Gran Bretaña, análisis crítico del discurso.*

1. CULTURAL STUDIES AS A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT

This paper puts forward a general framework of analysis which may encompass the variety of contemporary British culture as it is found in newspapers.[i] It understands culture primarily as concerned with the production and exchange of meanings (Hall 1997: 2), and therefore it looks at the ways it is represented through media discourse. Rather than attempting an in-depth critical news analysis along the clear-cut lines developed from functional linguistics (Fowler 2004: 222-23), it aims to offer the student of history a previous instrument to localize culture in the news. Its critical approach to discourse analysis focuses its attention upon "discourse within the history of the present – changing discursive practices as part of wider processes of social and cultural change" (Fairclough 1995: 19). Thus it draws on 20th-century histories (e.g. Morley, Robins 2001), in order to elucidate the various directions in which present culture is moving.

1901-1945

British identity	Local identities	Ethnicity	Social classes	War and peace
Imperialism	Home Rule	Church decline	Rich and poor	Hero's war
The role of media	The 3 Englands	Aliens Acts	Class conflict	People's war
Work	Leisure trends	The body	Gender	Home & family
Dilution	Rise of 'English'	Taboos	View of women	Smaller families
The great slump	Mass culture	Permissiveness	Masculinity	Garden cities
A 'living wage'	Paid holidays	Sex experience	Homosexuality	Allotments

1945-1964

British identity	Local identities	Ethnicity	Social classes	War and peace
USA 'over here'	Less nationalism	New immigrants	School reforms	Guns or butter
Commonwealth	Council housing	Race riots	Welfare State	Suez crisis
Work	Leisure trends	The body	Gender	Home & family
Full employment	Angry YoungMen	Contraceptives	Housewifery	Town planning
Dead-end-jobs	Age of affluence	Sex education	Domestic men	Consumerism
Wives at work	Juvenile gangs		Ignored others	

1964-1980				
British identity	Local identities	Ethnicity	Social classes	War and peace
Joining the EEC	Ulster troubles	Halt immigration	Class persistence	The Cold War
Economic crisis	'Scotland's oil'	'Mugging'	Higher Education	Nuclear power
Work	Leisure trends	The body	Gender	Home & family
Structural crisis	Pop Subcultures	Obscenity trials	Discrimination	High rise blocks
Trade-unionism	New technologies	Jeans and pills	Feminism	New patterns
		Legal abortion	Gay movements	
1980-2000				
British identity	Local identities	Ethnicity	Social classes	War and peace
Neo-Liberalism	Devolution	Ethnic Minorities	Monetarism	Falklands War
The Third Way	English regions	Multiculturalism	Differences	The Gulf War
The Millennium	Peace for Ulster	New Age religion	No class voting	The NATO
Work	Leisure trends	The body	Gender	Home & family
Stratification	'heritage' films	AIDS	Gay/Lesbian	Family values
McJobs	Globalization	Body-building	pride	Home ownership
'Pink collar' jobs	The risk society	Male beauties	Less polarity	The homeless
			Still inequality	

Figure 1: a grid of 20th-century British cultural trends and changes.

2. THE OVERLAPPING CATEGORIES OF CULTURE

The identification of the various cultural trends involves the use of a limited number of headings under which every aspect may be considered critically. Such a classification may allow students to read the papers from an analytical point of view, and to relate every news item to the general development of British culture and its *ordre du discourse* (Foucault 1971).

It is convenient to start with a limited number of thematic categories, therefore we propose ten: 1) British national identity; 2) local identities; 3) ethnicity and religion; 4) social classes; 5) war and peace; 6) work; 7) leisure trends; 8) the body; 9) gender; 10) home and family. Figure 1 gives some examples of two or three topics which may be representative within each category and period of 20th-century British culture.

It will be immediately noticed that these subjects are interrelated and tend to overlap and combine in different ways. For

example, British identity is always influenced by regional locality and many other factors such as ethnicity and religion, while the latter obviously affect social class, and social class is largely dependent on work, just as leisure is often seen to correlate with work; on the other hand, attitudes to the body and sexuality may respond to questions of gender and family background, and so forth. It can also be argued that some fields such as education and schooling, or the world of art, are omitted from the general classification, but this is because they are usually implicit in other categories, such as social class or leisure. Notwithstanding reasonable objections, we believe the topics to be broad and representative enough as a blueprint for cultural analysis.

3. CHANGING PERIODS

In order to learn how the classification may be applied to present day history, the student needs to sift twentieth-century news through it. In understanding cultural change different periods should be distinguished, and the simplest division is into four (see figure 1):

1901-1945: from the end of Victorianism to the end of the World Wars, when many nineteenth-century attitudes lingered in British society, and ideas of Empire still counted largely in politics and popular patriotism. Further subdivisions may be considered, such as Edwardian, pre-World War I, inter-war, and so on.

1946-1964: from post-imperial and post-war Britain to the age of affluence. British people come to terms with a new world dominated by US culture.

1965-1979: industrial decline and cultural revolutions. While British governments and people face a structural economic crisis, many aspects of culture, including ethnicity, undergo a radical evolution epitomized by the success of British pop.

Since 1980: from "New Right" to New Labour. While governments make various attempts to

reconstruct national pride, devolution makes Britain more plural, the process of European integration continues, and so does British subservience to American global interests and problems.

Each of the ten categories mentioned earlier undergo at least a sea change (more often two or more significant changes) as we move from one period to the next. For example, attitudes to the body can be seen to evolve in the first period from an initial modesty and national concern with healthy bodies to more open-mindedness and reactions against "permissiveness"; then in post-war society chastity returned along with a revival of "domestic ideology" or family values, only to be challenged again by the constant use of increasingly explicit sexuality as a commodity in consumer society; the nineteen-sixties and seventies saw the nominal (and legal) culmination of a "sexual revolution", though some of the daring measures proposed (such as "sexual education" at schools) were not uniformly implemented, and finally, in the last decades of the century, an ongoing hedonistic body culture coincided with the AIDS crisis, and a "moral panic" involving setbacks in previous developments. Any history of the body in early twenty-first century Britain must feed into those previous changes, as can most easily be noticed in the world of fashion, which to a very large extent continues to base its new senses of what is "sexy" on successive revivals of roaring-twenties looks, swinging-sixties looks, or techno-eighties looks. It is thus necessary for a study of contemporary British culture to have some knowledge of the development of the various cultural aspects along the twentieth century.

4. THE ETON SCHOOLBOY WHO ATTACKED MCDONALD'S

It remains to show how the grid of thematic categories and cultural periods can be applied to current news items. An article which lends itself to interesting discourse analysis appeared on the front page of *The Mirror* (Spanish edition) on May 4 2000 (Jones 2000: 1). The headline reads "Top schoolboy, 17, arrested in May Day violence shame", and there is a photo with the caption: "DAMAGE: A masked rioter, believed to be Eton schoolboy Matthew MacDonald, outside the McDonald's restaurant in Whitehall which was wrecked by

anarchists". The picture shows a masked rioter about to smash with a chair the shop window of premises whose façade is smeared with graffiti. Much can be made of it even before reading the article, by Gary Jones, which also informs us that MacDonald, the rioter, "is in the same year as Prince William." The student who is expected to analyse the article should be informed of the tabloid's conservative tendency, and of what Eton, and the public school system, represents. The paper's discourse not only constructs the identity of its subject, Matthew MacDonald, in terms of higher social class ("top schoolboy", "Eton", "same year as Prince William"), but also suggests a worrying contradiction between the schoolboy who should be counted among the future rulers of the country, along with Prince William, and "anarchists." The "violent shame" may also seem to involve a sense of class betrayal in the coincidence of surname MacDonald / McDonald's, as if the boy were turning on his own corporate family interests, actually the ruling economic classes for which a public school boy is supposed to be destined. From here the analysis would move beyond this particular discourse and look at the significance of May Day as workers' day, and then broach the issue of "the MacDonaldization of Britain" in terms of Englishness versus Americanisation / globalization. This would go a long way to account for the words of "his dad Professor Theodore MacDonald" which the article cites: "What is the big deal? He is a young man who goes to Eton and he was demonstrating his beliefs" (Jones 2000: 7). Understanding such a statement in turn demands some knowledge of the continuing role of public schools as the bastions of British patriotism, and also of their links with radicalism, whose origin may be traced at least as far back as the Communist intellectuals of Oxford in the nineteen-thirties.

Our example from *The Mirror* illustrates the warps and the wefts woven into the fabric of British culture in a newspaper article. Fowler's distinction of stories, topics and paradigms may be of some use (Fowler 2004: 224). A story such as that of Matthew MacDonald, the Eton schoolboy who was caught out rioting, is of contemporary import; but its topic, working-class reaction against McDonaldization, branching off late twentieth-century anti-globalization activism, looks back on the establishment of MacDonald's in Britain and certain popular reactions to what they have represented since the first one opened in 1974; finally, the paradigms which the case falls within are

even more deeply rooted in British history: complaint about the Americanization of modern Britain could already be found at the time of J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934), while the combination of working-class protest and bourgeois radicalism could be said to begin with Chartism in 1838. In sum, a full understanding of a British news text, which should be prior to, and part of, its critical discourse analysis, involves placing it within its cultural topics and histories. Until twenty-first-century paradigms emerge, our stories will rest on the past century.

How do we go about analysing a news item? The case of the Eton schoolboy shows how it should be first located within its historical period, 1980-2000, when the dilution of national identity in the global economy became of some concern to Britons. Secondly, it may be helpful to identify its main topic(s), which, in an act of public violence like this, might be the broad category of war and peace, in this case an anti-globalisation attack. Needless to say, other categories are also involved, particularly national identity (anti-Americanism), work (May Day riots) and social class (public schools like Eton). In the third place, once the article has been located within the overall grid of periods/categories, we may proceed to analyse in greater detail by applying some key subject identified by cultural studies, such as the concept of "McJobs." Last, but by no means least, it is useful to trace the nature and ideology of the paper publishing the article: in this case the popular tabloid *The Sun*, which accounts for the mild sense of outrage reflected in expressions such as "violent shame", in the peculiar language which has done so much to shape modern British culture (Conboy 2005).

5. BROACHING OTHER CASE STUDIES

A few other cases, all from end-of-the-twentieth-century British papers, may illustrate the method. A front page article in *The Weekly Telegraph*, 21 July 1999 (Harnden, Newton, Jones) brings into sharp focus the issue of British national identity in Northern Ireland. A defeatist headline, "Blair admits defeat on Ulster", suggesting that the Prime Minister was failing to make the Northern Ireland Assembly work, contrasts with an idyllic colour picture captioned "A peaceful

process in Northern Ireland", showing a horse-drawn carriage driven by a lady wearing a red jockey jacket accompanied by a man in a bowler hat in a lush green landscape. The caption reads:

> If it was all discord and despair in Stormont, it was the very opposite in a lush corner of Northern Ireland 80 miles west of Belfast (…). British royalty, Irish housewives, English farmlands and every strand of local life were in Co Tyrone enjoying a peaceful summer gathering devoid of politics.

The text thus establishes a marked duality between contemporary Irish politics and idyllic rural life, suggesting that the latter is the "right" Ireland. The colours on this front page speak for themselves: the conservative protestant "true blue" in the name of the weekly, and the red of British imperialism set against the mythical greenness of Ireland in the photo. But for a full appreciation of such ideological contents students need a grasp of two key cultural areas: that of Anglo-Irish political relations, as well as that of the deeply rooted rift between country and city images in British culture (Williams 1973).

The article in the *Telegraph*, which imposes a kind of British national identity on Ireland, may be complemented by another which expresses an Anglo-Irish conflict from a more local perspective: when the Scottish tabloid *Daily Record* reported the Drumcree March (McColm 1999) it did not doubt where its loyalty lay. The article begins by pointing out that the Royal Ulster Constabulary chief "Mervyn Waddell must have felt like the loneliest man in Ulster yesterday as he stood before thousands of Orangemen who see him as a symbol of the destruction of their culture." The accompanying photograph shows Waddell in a big close-up —a shot which, according to a TV-study manual (Selby, Cowdery 1995: 51), "you will see […] used frequently in melodrama to reveal the inner states of characters to us"— standing in front of two Orangemen whose backs are turned on the readers as if we were all behind them on the Drumcree march. The blaming finger points at Waddell as a traitor as sure as if he were inside a Presbyterian church. Thus the paper declares its sympathy for the radical Protestant cause in Northern Ireland, revealing its

popularity among its target readership in Scotland. The study of the article could be complemented by some knowledge of the close historical ties between Northern-Irish and Scottish Protestant communities, and their stout defence of their own identity within the larger nations of Britain and Ireland.

Another article in the same issue of *The Weekly Telegraph* referred to above (Combe 1999), also showing a coloured picture, touches very different cultural strands, and points to another deep rift within British culture, without being so obviously affected by the weekly's ideology, except in its interest in religious news. In the picture we see Rt. Rev. John Sentamu, bishop of the Church of England, wearing a traditional African shirt and a large crucifix over it. He is sitting by Neville Lawrence, the father of Stephen, the black teenager who was the victim of a racist murder. Both look concerned. The bishop was a member of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry team. A headline under the photo sums up Sentamu´s accusation at a recent General Synod in York: "Bishop claims Church is guilty of "institutional racism." The article elaborates on the bishop of Stepney's views that the Church "favoured a white educated elite", and represented a "monochrome culture" which failed to "reflect the ethnic mix in congregations." As a member of the Lawrence enquiry he is also entitled to accuse the police force and the magistrates, arguing that more members of Asian and black communities should join such institutions. He even calls on his superiors, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, to ensure that "ethnic Anglicans are 'more visible within the life of the Church'", and more generally demands that "we must be converted into a Church which celebrates diversity …" These declarations are very illustrative in themselves. Students may just need to find out more about the institutional struggle against racism since the Race Acts of the 1960s, and also, on the other hand, about the Church of England's decline and its attempts to modernize and become tuned in to new cultural trends. The latter is exemplified by another article which appears on the very same page, under the headline "Atheists will be offered a 'baby blessing' service." Some sceptical white readers of this conservative paper who find an incongruity in the Church's accepting to bless the children of atheists might relate this to that of the bishop's cross over his colourful ethnic shirt. But to the general student of British culture the key point lies in the difficulties had by various

British institutions in adapting to the idea of multicultural Britain, an idea which would be noisily proclaimed a few months after the publication of these articles at the Millennium Dome.

Moving into a very different cultural sphere, that of leisure and lifestyles, the *Observer* article "Pop out of the closet / Boys and boys come out to play" (Thorpe 1999) offers a perspective on the world of teenage pop and on newspapers' homophobic panic-mongering. The article focuses on the exposed homosexuality of the pop group Boyzone, illustrated with a colour photo of the them in concert with an audience of girl teenagers, and stating the supposedly scandalous fact that "Baby-faced, commercially packaged homo-eroticism is now being explicitly sold to young girls." This statement appears in large print under a photo of the front page of *The Sun* making the revelation ("Boyzone Stephen: I'm gay and I'm in love"). The remarkable similarity between some sections in so-called quality papers and the "gutter press" is evident in the fact that *The Observer* gives full credit to *The Sun* as its source, though the article in the former paper is developed in a more learned fashion: "Could it be that the attraction to a more feminine type of man is a developmental phase, as girls learn about their sexuality – a phase which the best pop managers know how to actively exploit?" This paper even concedes, however, that "It [the provocation] is a long way from the threatening, transgressive androgyny of early rock'n'roll and those unsettling themes first forced on teenagers in this country by Mick Jagger and David Bowie." The tone of the article implies that pop music has been "forcing" an "unsettling" sexuality on adolescents "in this country" since the 1960s. The influence of pop culture on teenagers' identity has been a (mostly worrying) key cultural topic in Britain particularly since the period in which Hall and Whannel published their study on *The Popular Arts* (1964). Even though the article quotes the Boyzone singer saying that "the *Sun* 'had been really sensitive' in the way it dealt with his personal life" (Thorpe 1999), it is well known that this tabloid is not usually a champion of gay rights. For example, the *Sun* agony aunt (Dear Sun 2000) protested against "government plans to allow gays in the armed forces" by publishing letters of readers from various parts of Britain mostly against it, under the headline "Trust is first casualty of letting gays in the Army." From such articles students may learn about homophobic attitudes in the press which contradict existing legislation

protecting the rights of individuals regardless of sexual preferences. Such study may be enhanced by some notion of gender as a social construct, and on the other hand by a historical knowledge of the evolution of official attitudes to homosexuality, from the sixties to the popular mobilisation against the Clause aka section 28 threatening gay lifestyles in the 1987 Local Government Bill, and beyond.

Some news reports are self-explanatory enough as to their main topic, like Thorpe's (1999) on the historical connections between homosexuality and the British pop industry, though it does not account for its own homophobic stand. Others are explicitly critical towards the topic they report. Take, for example, Johnson's commentary on the Government's official redefinition of British social classes in 1998, the most significant, as the article itself points out, since the 1911 census. Despite its misleading, but eye-catching headline "Teachers climb the social classes" accompanied by photos of sex-symbols David Beckham and *It* girl Tara-Tomkinson, the report provides clear information on how the social standing of different occupations has changed over 90 years. The article explains, for instance, how the reclassification includes an eighth social category, in addition to the seven classes distinguished by occupation, designed to place "people who wish to work but never have", while "the pre-occupations of the British aristocracy for nearly two centuries, have been swept aside", as is illustrated by the case of the late Lord Moynihan, brothel owner (therefore probably Class 4, "small employers and own account workers"), who used to describe his occupation on his passport as "Peer of the Realm." Though the ideology of the *Telegraph*, which published the article, did not usually coincide with the New Labour government producing the reclassification, the report does justice to its subject, and offers a relatively transparent critical analysis to students, who may, afterwards, expand their knowledge by reading the corresponding statistical sources and alternative analyses of them.

Other articles, however, may need more immediate background information in order to identify their cultural significance. This is the case of a front-page item in *The Sun* entitled "Sophie, you're gone too fur", reporting (or rather, *re*producing) popular "Fury at her [the Countess of Wessex's] fox hat." A reader who is foreign to British culture may at first be somewhat puzzled at the *Sun* Royal

Correspondent's self-righteous satirical tone, and wonder what the fuss is about. The key cultural notion the student needs is undoubtedly the importance of animal rights in Britain, and the whole debate about fox-hunting and its ban. A sense of confrontation between the *Sun*'s populist viewpoint and the lifestyle of the royals may also be discovered in the article. When their life appears to be sufficiently "common", "familiar" and "homely", like Princess Diana's (and, in her own time, Queen Victoria's), they gain popular sympathies. Prince Edward's "high-living" wife Sophie Wessex, however, exposes herself to tabloid censure by making a trip to Switzerland by private jet and Rolls-Royce, and visiting the show of a German firm specialising in furs (Rae 2000: 5). Students may need to turn to the various studies which analyse the celebrity status of the royals in the British media (Nairn 1988; Billig 1992). Following an altogether different trail, they could consider the *Sun*'s adoption of a morality based on animal rights activism (Garner 1993), and trace the genealogy of animal rights back to pacifist movements since the late 1950s (and further back to the nineteenth-century Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, mentioned in the article) and green politics since the late sixties. It would even be possible to argue the issue under the broad category of attitudes to War and Peace in our general grid, in the light of other shocking news such as the armament in possession of an animal rights activist (Brown 2006).

The popular tabloids are indeed excellent guides to contemporary British culture. Our two final examples may drive the point home. In one of them, *The Sun*'s "The Sex Nations" (Hendry 2000) we may discern how the meaning of masculinity had evolved by the end of the century, while *The Daily Record*'s "Doing the housework makes you live longer (… at least it feels that way)" (Frew 1999) shows, conversely, how *little* roles within the family seemed to reflect that evolution. *The Sun Woman* supplement playfully objectifies the bodies of the Six Nations rugby players, displaying their masculine torsos almost like the feminine nudes tabloids like to include in their pages, and invites (female) readers to "Line up for a quick scrum down with rugby's all-action pack." The report turns the tables on both the all-male character of usual sports news, and on the ways the male gaze reifies women's bodies, a point which feminist studies have duly tackled (e.g. Butler 1993; Grotz 1994).

The Daily Record, on the other hand, adopted a very different approach to attracting the interest of its feminine readership, though also half-jokingly. However, they based their argument that "Women may be fitter and live longer than men because they do more housework" on research by a team of "scientists" from Adelaide University. The accompanying photo is of a smiling 1950s-housewife holding a vacuum cleaner. The fifties were, in a sense, the golden age of revived housewifery, when many women who had been in jobs during the war had retired into the home, benefiting from the relative cheapness of electrical appliances. Thus the headline and the photo, however ironical, may be seen to endorse full-time housewifery as the "natural" occupation for women. This impression is confirmed by a chart showing the results of a survey of British women choosing the man (and another chart choosing the woman) they would most like to do the housework for them "in the Millennium home." The "toppers" are three male sex symbols: Tom Cruise, Pierce Brosnan, and David Beckham. This suggests that women are not thought to be likely to enjoy a role reversal in their chores - except perhaps in dreams. The tabloid article thus intimates that some aspects of British culture will remain trapped within images and categories of the twentieth century.

6. TOWARDS AN ANATOMY OF THIRD-MILLENNIUM BRITISH CULTURE

All in all, the case studies we have briefly sketched have tried to illustrate how a few newspaper articles, if carefully selected, may throw light on the various aspects of British culture, including national and local identities, ethnicity and religion, social class and education, war and peace, work and leisure, bodies, gender and family life. In combination with a chronology, they expose the warps and wefts, even the woofs too, within the fabric of British culture. These categories probably shape British life at deeper levels than the purely political anatomy which has been defined elsewhere (Sampson 2005). They help students identify significant topics before getting down to doing more detailed critical discourse analysis.

The sources we have used are taken from the end of the twentieth-century in order to offer some insights into how, on the one

hand, their topics are rooted in cultural aspects which go back into British history for decades (like housewifery), in some cases (like Anglo-Irish relations) for centuries; on the other hand, the topics are also meant to suggest how they are still relevant to the present age. New key notions modifying existing categories in definite ways, are already emerging. For instance, traumatic events like the London attacks of 7 July 2005 and everything related to them, including British involvement in George W. Bush's "War on Terror" and the increasing interest in education for citizenship, necessarily affect our views of national identity, of ethnicity and religion, of war and peace. The basic paradigms, however, still stand in place. History evolves in a continuous British present.

NOTES

[1] The presentation of this paper at the Eighth Conference of the European Society for the Study of English, 1 September 2006 (Seminar 46: Teaching British (Area) Studies through Analysis of Media Discourses) in London, coincided with the exhibition "Front Page: Celebrating 100 Years of the British Newspaper 1906-2006" at the British Library, which offered an excellent overview of the development of the press in roughly the same period covered here. Our samples are all from recent newspapers. We believe it is possible, however, to apply similar methods to older issues, which are becoming increasingly accessible through the electronic archives offered by the internet editions of various newspapers, for example *The Scotsman*.

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