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Digital Intimacies: conjunctural analysis and queer men's smartphone mediated intimacies

Abstract

In this presentation I will explore the methodological issues that occur when applying 'conjunctural analysis' (Hall et. al., 1978) in research on queer men's digital intimacies.

More an approach than a strict methodology, 'conjunctural analysis' was developed at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) during the 1970s under the directorship of Stuart Hall. Marxist in origin, the objective of conjunctural analysis is to assess the balance of forces during a specific historical conjuncture (period of time) so that political strategies can be developed that bring about more progressive futures. At the CCCS this was done by analysing popular culture, broadly defined, asking what can the emergence of cultural formations tell us about the historical conjunctures in which they have emerged?

Neither the CCCS, nor its descendants, elaborated a procedure for how to carry out conjunctural analysis. How it is executed depends both on the cultural formation that is being analysed and the conjuncture in which the formation takes its shape This raises interesting issues for those of us who use it.

My colleagues and I used conjunctural analysis in the ESRC funded 'Digital Intimacies: how queer men use their smartphones to negotiate their cultures of intimacy'. This meant that this project began rooted in the idea that queer men's digitally mediated cultures of intimacy are both shaped by the historical conjunctures in which they are being mediated as well as going some way in shaping them. We therefore decided to not only interview 43 queer men in London and the East of Scotland about their smartphone mediated intimacies but simultaneously analyse both the discursive and material conditions in which these men were negotiating them. Collecting the data between 2019 and 2021 meant that the coronavirus pandemic, #blacklivesmatter, trans political struggles and the so-called 'culture wars' more widely, played determining roles in how these men used smartphones to negotiate their cultures of intimacy. Analysing the three data sets together also gave us unique insight into what it feels like to live during this conjuncture and how these historical issues permeate our everyday lives.

In this presentation I talk through these findings as well as the methodological issues faced in arriving at them, arguing for the continued value of 'conjunctural analysis' not only in researching cultures of intimacy but to qualitative approaches to the social sciences and humanities more generally.