First Person Reflection: Origins of the Marginal Disposition
Theorists under the Big Top, Disorientated

While writing of the marginalist enterprise from another angle, Craig Ireland has adroitly traced something of its origins to the political and discursive fracas between the British and French Marxisms of the early 1960s. After various political skirmishes, cultural theory emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a kind of feral subaltern inquiry that sought to gain ascendency in the name of a certain politics of identity, an ‘immediate experience’ that ‘can as readily foster progressive subaltern politicking as they can exacerbate regressive, convulsive tribalism’.¹

The British culturalist Marxist E.P. Thompson had savaged the French structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser, arguing that a true counter-hegemonic political agenda required agency and the specific cultural experiences of its agents to conduct it; the Althusserian structuralist move, he argued, was simply too deterministic to allow for the necessary play of such agency.

For Thompson and others in his camp (Williams, Hoggart, Willis) it was through the sharing of lived experience that the subaltern (well, the working classes) could achieve a class- and self-consciousness that should, it was argued, give rise to political action. The culturalists argued that Marxism had become too easily identified with a determinism that constrained the role of human agency and experience in history, rendering the human role passive; and, moreover, an economism in Marxist theory had restricted the apprehension of human relations to those merely of labour. Culturalists were unashamedly humanist in their leanings and argued instead that Marxist theory should look to the human freedoms as displayed in their intellectual, cultural and political relations as a place from which action could be stirred. It was
from here, they argued, that the subaltern could chance their arm against the hegemon.

Thompson had argued that his theoretical work had already explored in terms of both theory and practice the critical concepts of the social apparatus ‘by which through the missing term “experience,” structure is transmuted into process, and the subject re-enters history’.² Where Thompson sought a foothold for the subject to ‘get back into history’ – from which he’d argued Althusser had extracted or, at least, occluded him – he now found a body politic in each corner of the ring so tenacious his fight plan was proving difficult, to say the least. As Ireland paints Thompson’s dilemma, by the early 1960s ‘Althusser’s version of structuralism had turned ideology into so tentacular an entity that the very possibility of agency became wishful thinking at best. It was no longer sufficient to clamour for counterhistories and local cultures’ which ‘had yet to be written, and subaltern cultures, when present were in need of invigoration’.³ If not a technical knockout, the structuralist enterprise was already winning on points. Culturalism was suffering the insults of structuralist sorties both from abroad and from within, as their own were beginning to take heed.

While the German neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School and some influence from the Italian Marxist Gramsci had already mounted a formidable counterhegemonic front well before the structuralist enterprise raised its head, their work trailed the French in sheer popularity. And, while certain major works and theoreticians – Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse, and especially Benjamin – made inroads into cultural theory (even influencing the French), their solidity and seriousness seemed less of an insult to the British Marxists.

By the late 1960s it was evident that structuralism in various guises was indeed taking hold in the Anglo-American studies of culture. Structuralism of various incantations from the sociopolitical to the semiotic and the psychoanalytic – was enthusiastically translated by the British (Brewster, Heath, McCabe, New Left Review and New Left Books, Radical Philosophy, Screen) and by the early 1970s was just as enthusiastically shoe-horned into university courses that could conceivably accommodate a cultural studies bent (English and French studies, sociology, philosophy, comparative literature) where it was not yet formally and discretely offered as in the vanguard of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. As Stuart Hall, at the end of his tenure as Director at this very institution, described this new eclectic cultural theory of the time, ‘it conceptualizes culture as interwoven with all social practices; and those practices, in turn, as a common form