

Articulation Theory for Beginners

I. What *articulation* doesn't refer to...

In American English “articulate” refers to speaking well or clearly. That is not the sense that the word is meant in cultural studies.

II. What *articulation* is...

Instead, articulation plays upon two British senses of the word: to speak (not necessarily clearly) and to be connected as in the trailer and the load of a truck (or in England a Lorry) are articulated. At one level to claim to analyze articulation is simply to study the way different sorts of things are forced to be connected to each other.

In actuality the word has a more specific meaning than that. It is specifically an analysis of how some person or group that has specific interests tries to connect other people, groups, economic arrangements (what Marx called means of production), ideas, and property to carry out their interests. Even more specifically it is an analysis of how such a person or group tries to force different sorts of objects to act or envision themselves as a group even though there are many indications that they are different.

It helps to understand that articulation came out of Marxist theory as a way of avoiding “reductionism” (i.e., explaining everything as the cause of only one thing; in Marxism traditionally everything in the world happened because of class, class struggle and economic struggle). Rather than reducing everything to economics articulation examines how different elements are combined: race, economics, sexuality, and language, for instance.

One other important aspect of articulation is that it is a focus on practice rather than just ideas or economics. There is always someone who is doing the articulation (speaking, organizing, advertising, etc.). It is not an abstract analysis in the same way that studies of ideology or economic systems can seem to involve no real, live, interested human beings. The importance of this is that it makes it much more usable for anthropological understandings of culture, in as much as it views culture as the acts of human beings (articulations) rather than as an abstract set of ideas that we are all marionettes of.

Articulation as developed by Stuart Hall, one of the original activists and thinkers in cultural studies, is both an analytic tool and a means to help organize activism.

A. An analytic tool

This is pretty much what I described above. Examine someone's action and language (discourse) for who they are trying to forge into an alliance. Examine the strength of the ties, and the differences that articulation always tries to ignore or cover-up as it suggests that disparate elements share particular interests.

B. Activism

Stuart Hall insists in an interview he carried out with Lawrence Grossberg that the key thing about focusing on articulation rather than hegemony, ideology, or power, is that articulations are always contingent. One of many possible arrangements. Other alliances, articulations are always possible.

Hall is not opposed to articulation. He wants to help specific marginalized groups be active in articulations of their interests with others who are also marginalized.

III. Articulation Quotes

from Hall, S., Morley, D., & Chen, K.-H. (1996). *Stuart Hall : critical dialogues in cultural studies*. London ; New York: Routledge. pp. 115

A. Lawrence Grossberg

1. Articulation is the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices. Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics. And these links are themselves articulated into larger structures, etc.

B. Stuart Hall

1. ...the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? The so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness.' The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.
2. The unity formed by this combination or articulation, is always, necessarily, a 'complex structure': a structure in which things are related, as much through their differences as through their similarities. This requires that the mechanisms which connect dissimilar features must be shown—since no 'necessary correspondence' or expressive homology can be assumed as given. It also means—since the combination is a structure (an articulated combination) and not a random association—that there will be structured relations between its parts, i.e., relations of dominance and subordination.

IV. Articulation in science studies

Analysis of articulation fits in very well with Latour's approach and Haraway's appropriations of Latour. In particular, both are more interested in the ways alliances are formed. When Latour talks about enrolling interests and actors, he might as well be saying "articulating" interests and actors. In other words viewing the laboratory as a site where certain interests are articulated means viewing the scientist as trying to forge (make, create, craft, etc.; rather than the more traditional and passive view of the scientists finding, discovering, tripping across, happening upon etc.) an alliance between equipment, theory, human, and non-human actors. Latour's analyses is precisely that of articulation, minus the activist element.

In his recent book *Pandora's Hope* Latour actually defines what he means by articulation, though it is the sort of definition that needs a lot of other definitions:

“Like translation, this term occupies the position left empty by the dichotomy between the object and the subject or the external world and the mind. Articulation is not a property of human speech but an ontological property of the universe. The question is no longer whether or not statements refer to state of affairs, but only whether or not propositions are well articulated.” (p. 303)

Haraway brings that activism back into the field, both analyzing how social interests get articulated in science as well as helping us to re-articulate (re-align) these same elements so that we can find possible paths to what she holds as more desirable futures.

For instance, she identifies primatology as simian orientalism; Here she is articulating/connecting primatology and western colonial practices that created a western/non-western divide. She analyzes how ape-science tried to naturalize certain images of ourselves at the same time she is implying that very different sorts of connections are possible.

V. How do you analyze articulation?

- A. Start by looking at who is doing the speaking. Articulation, according to Hall, always is an analysis of hierarchy, there is a leader or leaders. Who is that person/organization and what interests do/does she/he/they seem to hold?
- B. Then list all of the actants that the speaker is trying to bring together. This will include people (which people?), objects (what objects?), discourses or styles and subsets of speech (which discourses?), and practices (what acts, rituals, performances?)
- C. Once the actors have been cataloged, it is then time to analyze what the overall effect is. What is the speaker suggesting these elements have in common?
- D. Then the question is what differences are being erased by stressing or inventing this commonality. What are the silences in this arrangement?
- E. Finally, what alternative articulations are possible. To get at these it may be necessary to look at your subject historically (how have these people's interests been tied together differently at other times?), anthropologically (how have people in different places tied together similar actants with different interests?) , or simply through imagination (utopian science fiction is an attempt to re-articulate social arrangements).

VI. A brief suggestive example of thinking through a problem using articulation

Consider the museum of science and industry in Chicago. The museum consists of corporate sponsored exhibits (GM's Wheels of the World, or some such) in a 19th century structure that

resembles a Greek temple with a triangular roof and tall columns. What is being articulated here?

A. Who is doing the articulation?

The real force behind this is the museum's board and backers, the probably liberal, certainly wealthy, cultural and economic elite of Chicago.

B. Who is being articulated?

This is very complex. A partial list includes tourists, scientists and other university associated people, various corporations and industries with national audiences, Greek architecture, construction machinery, display cases, the contents of those cases including (exhibits on) food, transportation, computers, medical apparatuses, and commercial interests (in the snack bars)

C. What is being articulated?

Just looking at the front of the building it is clear that science and religion as well as classical thought are being brought into an alliance. It is also clear that the museum works hard to bring science and industry into a partnership. Finally the museum tries to link tourists to both forces as consumers and spectators.

D. What is being erased/silenced?

The link between science and religion hides the skepticism, questioning, anti-religious ideology that science also tries to insist on. Similarly it avoids all questions concerning the problematic nature of science as being merely the offspring of industry, ignoring, for instance, the type of questions about occupational and environmental safety that might be asked if it were government and science instead. Finally, all notions of citizens as scientists, as commentators or democratic participants in making sense of nature is avoided in favor of expertise.

E. Alternatives?

Science could be funded out of public dollars (and much of it is), for instance, and the museum could stress the sort of questions that might be asked. Also, rather than link science with religion, examples of when science has not worked, or the devastating consequences of industry's link/use of science could be exhibited (Dalkon Shield, Exxon Valdez, etc.)

VII. Resources/References

- A. Hall, S., Morley, D., & Chen, K.-H. (1996). *Stuart Hall : critical dialogues in cultural studies*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- B. O'Sullivan, T. (1994). *Key concepts in communication and cultural studies* (2nd ed.). London ; New York: Routledge.
- C. Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's hope: Essays on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.