Chapter 19

Looking Backwards and Forwards at Cultural Studies

Paul Smith

It's probably a completely boring thing to be doing, as we enter the twenty-first century, to be looking back over cultural studies and its history and trying to imagine its future. For one thing, the issues involved in thinking about this field, or about what could or should constitute it, have rather been done to death over the last four decades, even if there's not much sign of the activity abating. On the other hand, it seems to be the case that this perpetual undertaking of defining and redefining, looking backwards and forwards, has often been taken as a sign of the very vitality of the field, and sometimes as an essential and positive part of its nature and task; therefore, insofar as a constitutive claim of that sort keeps being made, it still needs attending to. Cultural studies, we often hear, is what it is and is valuable in part because it doesn't rest or stand still but rather continually reinvents itself to adjust to new information and new circumstances. We might argue, on the other hand, that this state of flux is rather more a symptom of confusion and uncertainty than an essential strength in the enterprise. It might be that at this juncture, as before in the history of the field, nobody really quite knows what cultural studies is, and what it will be, even where it is, where it will be.

As well as risking the boredom of yet more of such rehashing, this chapter will probably also be a somewhat foolhardy thing, since in a way it comes to try and bury cultural studies – at least, the cultural studies that I see in front of us right now, as well as some of its central claims or most frequently repeated vanities. And by that token it will also probably be a somewhat hubristic chapter in that I'll be trying to make some recommendations and even exhortations around the topic of cultural studies. It will be a somewhat difficult project to keep under control, as well, at least in part because of my own history, a history that underlines – if not exemplifies – the disjuncture in cultural studies between British and American "versions." Having been educated in the British cultural studies vein I've spent almost 20 years in the US, working in the first cultural studies undergraduate program in the country (at Carnegie Mellon) and more lately in one of the first Ph.D. programmes (at George Mason University). Now returning to the

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UK, I'm possibly out of touch and my view parochial. But all these risks seem worth taking because of what still seems to me the most important potential of cultural studies: that is, its promise to be an intellectual endeavor with an overt claim on the political shape of contemporary culture and society.

Real cultural studies junkies will no doubt have noticed that the title for my article refers to – or rather it repeats almost verbatim – the title of one of Stuart Hall's more extraordinary pieces of writing, a talk he gave first in 1989 and which was published in 1992 in *Rethinking Marxism*.[1] Hall's work is, of course, everywhere taken to be seminal for cultural studies and is consistently understood as definitive in many respects. I don't want to argue with that assessment, but rather want to use that particular article to follow up some questions which continue to provoke debate within contemporary cultural studies, namely, the relation between politics and culture. In order to approach such issues, I begin with a somewhat skeptical reading of Hall's article.

In his own looking back Hall presents one version of what is by now an almost canonical view of the history of cultural studies. But it's also a history that, for my purposes here, is rather emblematic: in a symptomatic reading it can show some of the strange maneuvers and weird leaps that cultural studies has consistently made and still makes. At its beginnings, Hall suggests, cultural studies stood in opposition to positivist social science departments which had seen cultures merely as analyzable systems composed of abstract norms and values; cultural studies was equally a corrective to the disciplines of the humanities which had chronically refused to "name let alone theorize or conceptualize culture." Then – and here's the first of several of Hall's emblematic moves that I want to point to – he goes on to precisely not offer a definition or conceptualization of culture. Or rather, he falls back on a version of those large nebulosities that cultural studies has been pleased to be able to pull down wholesale from Raymond Williams' altogether more satisfying work where culture is defined very generally as "whole ways of communicating . . . whole ways of life, where popular culture intersects with the high arts . . . where power cuts across knowledge . . . where cultural processes anticipate social change."

This is the first thing I want to point to by way of Hall's article – the propensity in cultural studies to avoid offering up any especially firm definition or methodologically suggestive view of what culture really is. This isn't the only place where Hall offers such a vagueness at the heart of the endeavor. In another well-known article, for instance, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," he goes further and suggests that in the foundational work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies there had been "no single, unproblematic definition of culture" to be found. What the CCCS operated with was, rather than a logically or conceptually clarified notion of culture, a convergence of what he calls "interests."[2]

What I want to suggest here is that this determination not to define the central object of cultural studies has led to what can only be described as a pluralistic tendency at the heart of the project. This is a tendency that has authorized

cultural studies to take many forms, of course, and in that sense might be considered a good thing, especially by those who think of cultural studies as precisely an opportunity to escape the perceived rigors of the usual disciplinary structures. But it seems unarguable at this point that the lack of willingness to define the central object of study has also and necessarily implied a lack of methodological and procedural consistency and denied any but the loosest cohesion to cultural studies. We might here consider John Frow's recent claim that by and large the cultural studies version of culture is in fact an embarrassment, not only in its lack of clarity and definition but also in its inability to properly engage with other disciplinary and methodological approaches to culture, such as those found in ethnographic and anthropological traditions.[3]

But as I've pointed out, it's often this very looseness and openness that many cultural studies practitioners have chronically held to be most valuable about the enterprise. Certainly, Hall has been by no means alone in talking out against the "codification" of CS and reminding us that there can be no final paradigm for the field.[4] Some of the most prominent names in cultural studies have made analogous claims on the grounds that the flexibility of cultural studies assumptions and procedures allow for a kind of analytical freedom which can flexibly react to the ever-changing complexities of cultural life. Perhaps the strongest version of these claims is made in the editors' introduction to one of the most influential anthologies in the field, *Cultural Studies*. There the editors object to the idea that the field should be policed in any way and recommend a loose and open intellectual approach, one equivalent to a kind of *bricolage* in method. The line is, in all its glory, that "cultural studies has no guarantees about what questions are important to ask within given contexts or how to answer them; hence no methodology can be privileged or even temporarily employed with total security and confidence, yet none can be eliminated out of hand."[5]

This position has been so internalized in the field by now that it's almost an article of faith to say that cultural studies does not need definition because it is antidisciplinary or nondisciplinary and that some large part of its strength lies in its capacity to offer intellectual freedom. Indeed, as the argument runs, any moves towards a "disciplined" cultural studies would constitute a policing of the project in a discourse where the notion of policing is understood as authoritarian from the start and therefore somehow antithetical to cultural studies. This championing of the openness, looseness, or unfinished character of cultural studies work thus becomes the sign of a properly liberated intellectual project.

Such a position is exactly what Hall adopts in his article – the second move he makes to which I want to draw attention. Armed first of all with the vaguest definition of culture, Hall goes on to claim that cultural studies gets its specificity from its contingent location, its flexible positions, and its self-reflexivity. There can be no argument: those features have indeed tended to establish the specific character of what we know as cultural studies, but at the not inconsiderable price of rendering cultural studies an at best eclectic, at worst unprincipled intellectual endeavor. This is a perspective that produces the kind of argument that

Lawrence Grossberg makes when he insists that cultural studies is and must always be influenced by its outside, or that the nature of work in cultural studies must somehow be dictated by existing concerns.[6] There is clearly a problem with this perspective in that cultural studies is perhaps the only current form of knowledge production that explicitly argues that the processes of knowledge production are ideologically and historically contingent; to then throw cultural studies itself at the mercy of existing concerns is to refuse to allow it any possibility of breaking through the ideological construction of knowledges into what Hall himself has called "useful knowledges."

Equally to the point, the assumptions of this somewhat reactive approach – what I'd call a wait-and-see methodology – are that the object of knowledge will automatically make evident the mode of analysis proper to it, or that method and intellection can somehow be pulled from the air in order to deal with changing circumstances and variable phenomena. Such a view mystifies the relationship between object and knowledge, and it seems to me that such a mystification is a high price to pay for what the argument intends to buy, namely, the freedom of the individual scholar or researcher to follow their track without the constraint of discipline. Obviously such methodological freedom compromises intellectual results.

From the point of view of intellectual method, this all leaves cultural studies with only one place to go. With no focused definition of the object and with what amounts to an *ad hoc* or merely opportunistic methodology, cultural studies can then justify itself only in terms of the topics it approaches. In other words, cultural studies can do no more than become a thematically organized area of study where the choice of specific topic or theme comes to be of more import than the choice of method or procedure. And this indeed is illustrated by the third emblematic move in Hall's essay, which arrives pat on cue as his discussion of procedural or methodological issues is displaced onto largely thematic concerns. Cultural studies is visibly transformed, in Hall's account, into a topical enterprise. In this particular essay, the privileged topic is race and ethnicity which emerge as the essential point of the field. My pointing out this third move on Hall's part is not, I want to emphasize, to say that race and ethnicity are not amongst the proper objects of investigation for cultural studies. It's simply to suggest that, given the history and assumptions that I'm examining, it seems inevitable that this topic, or some topic quite like it, should have emerged as a quasi-definitional element for the field at the same time as any particular or "codified" way of approaching it is eschewed.

That's not to say that the way Hall approaches the chosen topic is entirely unfamiliar, nor that he doesn't try to sketch out something like a recognizable cultural studies approach. The set of bedrock ideas to which he appeals in that regard in order to approach the question of race include a predictable tour around Fanon's phenomenological schemas and related bits of Lacanian psychoanalysis and side-trips to Freud and Lévi-Strauss. Those points of reference are, evidently, familiar from the chapbook that cultural studies has been peddling for

many years now, and they sit alongside the forms of semiotic analysis, deriving mostly from Saussure via Roland Barthes, which have stood unchallenged in the field for decades as tokens for a common methodology. To see how deeply those points of reference have taken root, one has only to look at the kind of work published under the rubric of cultural studies in the last few years. The heady mix of Fanon and psychoanalysis that Hall concocts, a rather *ad hoc* schema of self and other, has since been taken to its intellectual extremes by Homi Bhabha and more recently to its purest banality by Kevin Stevenson.[7] The persistence of the semiotic model for the analysis of meaning is fully evident even in the kind of work which is currently claimed to be a recasting of cultural studies, like the essays collected in Angela McRobbie's *Back to Reality*. And perhaps the strongest indication of the unreconstructed nature of the influence of the semiotic model is to be found in two recent Open University textbooks: *Representation*, edited by Stuart Hall himself, and *Doing Cultural Studies*, a primer of the field construed around an extended case-study of the Sony Walkman. In each of the three mentioned texts, a Barthesian semiotics is taken as read, as it were, with little regard for the numerous critiques of such a model of meaning production and still less regard for alternative theories.[8]

Whatever else can be said about what I'm calling the cultural studies chapbook, it's easy to see that the points of reference it contains construct a field that is simultaneously eclectic and narrow and that many of its most frequently deployed components have been pressed into service for many years now without serious renewal or reconsideration. In any case, it would be hard to dignify this set of coordinates as anything approaching a coherent methodology, even if it's a set that guides a majority of cultural studies practitioners. In the face of such a situation it becomes hard to resist the accuracy of Meaghan Morris's observations about what she calls banality in cultural studies, whereby the limited and yet eclectic range of theoretical coordinates tends to produce and reproduce a kind of template cultural studies article in which essentially the same thing can be said about any object in the cultural life.[9]

We can now leave Hall's article, having pressed it perhaps a little too hard in any case, especially considering its admittedly schematic nature. But the points I've tried to draw from it remain for me emblematic of a certain set of problems within cultural studies. If I've stressed the issue of methodology it's not that I rather simple-mindedly believe that in order to rediscover itself cultural studies needs to be able to establish protocols and procedures which would be more rigorous and more intellectually consistent. I *do* believe that, but also reckon that the kinds of analysis that remain acceptable and even applauded in contemporary cultural studies have consistently proceeded on the faulty assumption that to address a certain set of thematically construed issues is to willy-nilly be doing politics. In other words, and to generalize, cultural studies work often seems to assume that to undertake cultural analysis and commentary is tantamount to undertaking political analysis and even political intervention. In that sense

politics is understood as an automatic engagement, as the necessary and inevitable outcrop of a certain kind of intellection. If we then turn to the question of what relation, if any, to existing political projects in theory or practice cultural studies can claim, we might have to understand that to discover any such relation might not be altogether welcome. For instance, what relation is there between current cultural studies in the UK and the ascendancy of New Labour, a relation going back at least to "New Times" and the critique of Thatcherism which simply admired Thatcherism too much;[10] or the relation between the policy strain of cultural studies in Australia and the erosion of labor politics in that country; or the relation between cultural studies in the United States and the forms of individualism and identity politics which resonate with a permanent strain of reactionary thought in the history of that republic. Those are questions which I won't be attempting to answer here, even though they are surely questions which cultural studies needs to be asking.[11] And this would seem especially appropriate where, in the UK particularly, cultural studies not only takes the political for granted but often claims a connection to an organic politics of resistance.

Perhaps as much to the immediate point would be to try to suggest ways in which cultural studies might reinvigorate its idea of the political, or even begin the task of drawing up a new political agenda for the field. And it might be as well to cut to the chase, at were, by saying that the way forward seems to me to be a way back. That is, somewhere in the past of cultural studies is an almost forgotten engagement with Marxism and with the analysis of capital that should, in my view, reside at the heart of any serious consideration of culture. I do realize that for many cultural studies practitioners such a suggestion can only cause a groan of weary recognition or boredom, since it would appear on the face of it that any debate about the place of Marxist analysis has given way to what is essentially an absence of Marxism in cultural studies.

The coming about of that absence has, of course, a lengthy history by now. Indeed, Colin Sparks' account of the relation between cultural studies and Marxism points first of all to the relatively weak or skeptical Marxism of the "founding fathers" of cultural studies, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson. Even though Marxism gained some prominence in cultural studies in the aftermath of 1968, particularly with the stress on ideology under the influence of Althusser's work, this was part of a much more generally eclectic searching around for theoretical tools and was in any case almost immediately eclipsed by the liberal and selective version of Gramsci adopted by Hall, and/or the almost explicitly anti-Marxist version of Gramsci promulgated by Laclau and Mouffe in their influential book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.[12] The influence of Laclau's and Mouffe's work on cultural studies can hardly be underestimated, especially in the USA where its assault on the supposedly intractable essentialism of Marxism was taken up with great relief by cultural studies practitioners for whom the (more imagined than real) whiff of Marxism around cultural studies had been an embarrassment in a context where red-baiting is still a popular sport.

Inevitably, too, the eclectic tastes of cultural studies have found much to like in the well-stocked kitchen of poststructuralism, and the tendency of poststructuralism to elide Marxism has been easily adopted. The elision is almost total if one looks at recent cultural studies metacommentaries such as *Cultural Studies in Question*, a collection of essays on the current state of the field.[13] There, in the course of more than a dozen supposedly cutting-edge essays, Marxism is mentioned a handful of times, and even then only as a historical curiosity (in relation to theories of ideology, for instance). Even the contributions of Nicholas Garnham (someone whose long insistence on the importance of political economy for any study of culture has been more or less ignored within cultural studies) and Doug Kellner (writing on the use of political economy for cultural studies) seem to feel constrained not to mention the M-word, even while they argue strongly for the use of what are Marxist analytical tools.

The standard or most frequently repeated objection to Marxism in cultural studies is probably the double-headed notion that Marxism is "reductive" and "economically determinist." Those two charges still get used as a shorthand way of dismissing Marxism – though to them has been added the claim that Marxism's emphasis on class position necessarily precludes the dynamic studies of other forms of subjectivity, race and gender in particular. Such claims are mostly mere rhetoric, pointing to a kind of Marxism that I, for one, almost never see, but which in any case would be far outweighed by other kinds of Marxist theory and analysis. The charges seem in any case peculiarly problematical when made from within a discourse that has clearly been unable to even begin to think the question of determinations within the processes of culture – and this even despite promptings from one of the "founding fathers," Raymond Williams, whose work came to insist on the need to establish "the real order of determination between different kinds of activity. That there always is such an order of determination cannot be doubted . . . This is the necessary, theoretical base for the recognition of genuinely different social orders."[14]

The understanding of determinations – and, of course, of levels of overdeterminations – within cultural life is really no more than a single one of the huge gaps in the knowledge produced by cultural studies, but it is an important one. I can recall no cultural studies text which has argued specifically against the "necessary theoretical base" Williams recommended; and that's perhaps because the mere possibility of thinking through issues of determination disappears once the specter of Marxism's economic determinism has been raised. More crucially even, the absence of that register of analysis from cultural studies authorizes the treatment of particular thematically selected cultural elements more or less in isolation from each other, or at least as discrete entities whose contextual relations are not importantly to do with the mode of production. Or else, in the extreme, such an absence authorizes a kind of reading operation to be done on cultural objects or events as, essentially, *texts* with no necessary reference to the place or conditions of their productions.

What I'm pointing to is what Fredric Jameson has noted in his carefully understated but ultimately quite scarifying indictment of cultural studies; that is, the tendency of cultural studies to eschew the economic and the whole question of determinations and thence land up in what he calls "a kind of forthright anarchistic stance on the thing itself" – a critique similar to what John Clarke has called, even more loudly, "the abolition of the object" itself within cultural studies.[15] A clear example of what analysis then looks like from that kind of anarchist or nihilistic stance in relation to the object might be provided by one of the books I mentioned earlier, Paul du Gay's textbook, *Doing Cultural Studies*, where all questions of the economic are turned into a mere contextualization of the object and where all questions of determinism are rejected as unthinkable. In other words, for work of this sort the role of what are clearly political-economic elements can be no more than instrumental – political-economic elements may be used to help provide "readings" of particular features of the object but must not be used to forge an explanation of the logic of the object itself. In this case the object is the highly successful commodity, the Sony Walkman, but there is no recognition that its role in the general circuits of the commodity is a crucial part of its identity as object. The notion that the representational logic of the object itself could be in the end no more than a function of a political-economic logic is always already ruled out of court.

In a more ordered and calm way than I, John Frow has recently addressed some of the kinds of problems that I'm pointing to in cultural studies. His view is that the kind of work that I'm criticizing, with its emphasis on the production of meaning rather than the production of commodities, will always be at a distance from work which stresses the political-economic elements of culture. Indeed, Frow thinks that as a field cultural studies is at an impasse with an impossible job of reconciliation on its hands. His position seems worth quoting fully:

> There is no simple way (apart from straightforward reductionism) of squaring a methodological concentration on the productive working of texts with a methodological concentration on the productive work of the [capitalist] system. They are not complementary, and the effect of this tension is a kind of necessary indeterminacy principle. Both positions are "correct," but there is no way of reconciling them in a single perspective. By the same token, to elaborate a "correct" position is therefore by definition to fail to perform the countervailing analysis.[16]

In my view Frow's point here is a little pessimistic. It doesn't seem quite or necessarily impossible to produce the kind of cultural studies analysis that would make the connections between the production of meanings and subjectivities and the production of commodities. The important point is to be able to consider and analyze the processes of determination amongst and between the different levels of production. This implies, at very least, an agreement that it is impossible to think of any kind of cultural form or any kind of cultural artifact or event as being autonomous. Rather, cultural phenomena, far from being autonomous texts, are caught in a logic of totality (a totality considered, of course, in all of its contra-

dictions). The task of thinking any object whatsoever in that manner has traditionally fallen to Marxism, and the particular attention that Marxism has paid to all realms – the cultural, the social, the political, and the economic – still constitutes a more advanced and difficult project than the vagueness of this thing called cultural studies which, it would seem, has shied away from such difficulties, preferring instead a lack of rigor that has somehow come to think of itself as radically democratic and liberating.

In the end cultural studies has not been a radical intellectual movement that upset disciplines, reformulated knowledge, continually interrogated itself and its methods, opened out onto a thriving area of politics beyond the academy, and addressed the public sphere. It's really been none of those things, if we're honest about it. Cultural studies has never managed to fill the gaps it made in itself when it elided Marxism; no other feasible theoretical forms have come to do the job that Marxism did and that cultural studies always claimed it wanted to do. To now rehabilitate a set of ideas and methods which are associated with Marxism would not make cultural studies Marxist *per se*. But it would mean that cultural studies could no longer afford an antipathy to Marxist theory, an antipathy that has helped lead it into numerous dead ends and crises and held it back from realizing its best intellectual and political aspirations.

Notes

1 Stuart Hall, "Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies," *Rethinking Marxism* 5(1) (1992): 10–21.
2 S. Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* 2(2): 57–72.
3 J. Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
4 S. Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation" (an interview edited by L. Grossberg), in D. Morley and Chen Kuan-Hsing (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1996.
5 L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 2.
6 See L. Grossberg, "Cultural Studies: What's in a Name?," in his *Bringing It All Back Home*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997 [1995].
7 See H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994; K. Stevenson, *The Transformation of the Media: Globalisation, Morality and Ethics*, London: Longman, 1999 (especially the final chapter on the Rwandan genocide).
8 See A. McRobbie (ed.), *Back to Reality? Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997; S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage/The Open University, 1997; P. du Gay, S. Hall, L. Jones, H. Mackay, and K. Negus (eds.), *Doing Cultural Studies*, London: Sage/Open University, 1997.
9 M. Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies," *Discourse* 10: 3–29.

10 This point is made more fully in my *Millennial Dreams: Contemporary Culture and Capital in the North*, London: Verso, 1997, pp. 152–7.
11 More along the same lines will be found in my forthcoming *Cultural Studies: A Manifesto*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
12 C. Sparks, "Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies and Marxism," in Morley and Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall*. Perhaps Hall's most productive use of Gramsci is in "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in Morley and Chen (eds.), pp. 411–40. See too E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso, 1985; and my critique of it along these lines, "The Secret Agent of Laclau and Mouffe," in Miami Theory Collective (eds.), *Community at Loose Ends*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
13 M. Ferguson and P. Golding (eds.), *Cultural Studies in Question*, London: Sage, 1997.
14 R. Williams, *Towards 2000*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1983, p.15.
15 F. Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" *Social Text* 34 (1993): 45; J. Clarke, *New Times and Old Enemies: Essays on Cultural Studies in America*, London: HarperCollins Academic, 1991, p. 25.
16 Frow, *Cultural Studies*.