



Cultural Studies in the Future Tense

LAWRENCE GROSSBERG

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in the Future Tense

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on the last printed page of this book.

This book is dedicated to Jim Carey and Stuart Hall, who taught me cultural studies, and what it means to be a political intellectual. They inspired me, and I struggle every day to live up to the example they set. We recently lost Jim, but I hope that his spirit and intelligence are embodied in this book.

And this book is dedicated to the two people who keep me going every day, who fill my life with love, and who are the reason I continue to struggle—my wife Barbara and my son Zachariah.

Thank you.

A new age does not begin all of a sudden.
My grandfather was already living in the new age
My grandson will probably still be living in the old one.
The new meat is eaten with the old forks.
It was not the first cars
Nor the tanks
It was not the airplanes over our roofs
Nor the bombers.
From new transmitters came the old stupidities.
Wisdom was passed on from mouth to mouth.
— Bertolt Brecht, “New Age”

We will walk then the same path of history, but we will
not repeat it; we are from before, yes, but we are new.
—The Fourth Key, from the March of the Color of the
Earth, in Cuautla, Morelos, March 7, 2001

I heard we made progress

But still

Let's sing the blues

Together

Not all over but again.

—Unsigned mural, Nassau, The Bahamas, July 2009

If things were simple, word would have gotten around.

—Jacques Derrida, "Toward an Ethic of Discussion," 1988

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introduction

We All Want to Change the World

I was interviewed recently and asked why I have such a protective and critical relationship to cultural studies, why I have written and lectured for so long about what cultural studies can be, and why I have fought and worked so hard to open up institutional spaces for cultural studies. The answer is that I believe ideas matter, that we are better off approaching the daunting tasks of transforming the world with the best knowledge and understanding possible. And I have believed, for my entire academic career, that cultural studies matters. It matters not because it is the only intellectual practice that can tell us something about what's going on in the worlds in which we live, but because it is a different way of doing intellectual work, and as a result, it can say and do certain things, it can produce certain kinds of knowledge and understanding, which may not be so readily available through other practices. Cultural studies matters because it is about the future, and about some of the work it will take, in the present, to shape the future. It is about understanding the present in the service of the future. By looking at how the contemporary world has been made to be what it is, it attempts to make visible ways in which it can become something else.

This book began over ten years ago. I had agreed to write an introduction to cultural studies. Almost immediately, a slew of introductory texts and collections were released: a few were imaginative and productive, some were passable, and most were rather dismal, having little to do with anything that I could recognize as cultural studies. And then it hit me: given my sense of cultural studies as something that you make up as you go, as a project that reshapes itself in and attempts to respond to new conjunctures as problem-spaces, it was difficult to imagine how one could actually produce an introduction to cultural studies.

In fact, in my opinion, too much of the work that takes place under the sign of cultural studies has simply become too lazy: lazy because it assumes its objects of study and the politics that follow from them, and lazy because it assumes its methods and theories. It too often assumes that everything is the same as it has been, or that everything is new. None of these tendencies should ever be acceptable, but they seem especially irresponsible given the contextual—institutional, intellectual, and political—crises of the contemporary world. So I turned to thinking about how one actually does cultural studies, and the sorts of intellectual work that I thought had to be done in the contemporary world.

However, let me make it very clear: this book is not intended as an introduction to cultural studies, although parts of it might be read that way. It is addressed to people who already locate themselves inside the project of cultural studies and share its commitment to political-intellectual work, although I must admit that its addressee shifts, becoming at times invitational and invocational. It is predicated on my belief that cultural studies should not simply be equated with other traditions and practices of cultural critique or analysis; rather, one must begin by embracing the specificity of its project.

My understanding of cultural studies, I have to admit at the outset, is different than other, more popular versions, some of which are worth mentioning here if only to warn off those readers who are looking for something other than what I offer. Cultural studies, as discussed here, is not “high” theory, nor is it captured in those intellectual practices that, starting with the concrete, leap into the universal. In my version, cultural studies is not the attempt to find the universal in the concrete, and the concrete is not an occasion for philosophizing, however brilliant and pertinent such philosophizing may be in the final analysis. As I hope will become clear, in my vision of cultural studies, theory is always in the service of the concrete, enabling one to produce the concrete in more productive ways. Nor is cultural studies defined by a concern with any particular politics (e.g., multiculturalism) or any particular domain (e.g., the popular). Cultural studies is most certainly not the celebration and empirical elaboration, in all its detail, of popular culture and everyday life.

At the same time, this book does not offer a defense of cultural studies. Instead, it offers a modest proposal for future formations of cultural studies. In part, it can be read as a reflection on how I go about doing my own work

(Grossberg 1992, 2005), but it is even more an attempt to set an agenda for cultural studies work in the present and into the future. I want to construct a vision for cultural studies out of its own intellectual and political history, its most productive formations and articulations, and against its frustratingly euro-centric and euro-modern inheritances and tendencies, as I hope will become clear as one reads the book. It is about the contemporary struggle over thought, imagination, and the possibilities for action as a part of the larger contextual struggles over modernity itself. The book tries to lay out some of the work we need to do—ultimately, collaboratively, and collectively—to produce a cultural studies capable of responding to the contemporary worlds and the struggle constituting them. It attempts to think about what it means to do cultural studies, which is normally understood to be a largely European or North Atlantic modernist project, in a context where modernity is the site and object of struggle.

Each chapter of this book offers, I hope, something different to the conversation that this book hopes to be a part of. The book proceeds in the following way. Chapter 1 presents my understanding of the project and practice of cultural studies as a radically contextual and conjuncturalist practice. Chapter 2 offers a preliminary description of the contemporary context as constituted by struggles against (liberal) euro-modernity, and considers some of the dominant efforts (and their limits) to theorize modernity and to describe contemporary possibilities. I conclude this chapter by considering the central place of politics in cultural studies and the question of the political responsibility of the intellectual.

The next three chapters challenge the assumption, crucial to euro-modern ways of thinking, that contexts can be treated as a set of fractured and relatively autonomous domains—economics, culture, and politics—even as they try to undo and move beyond this assumption. Each of these domains is taken up serially in chapters 3, 4, and 5, even as each chapter attempts to illustrate some aspect of the practice of cultural studies itself: interdisciplinarity, contextuality, and complexity, respectively. At the same time, taken collectively, these three chapters attempt to offer a coherent vision of some of the work required to realize the possibility of a cultural studies capable of offering better and more useful stories and analyses of the contemporary contexts of living in all their complexity. Chapter 3 considers the interdisciplinary challenges posed by taking up questions and matters of economies within a conjunctural analysis; chapter 4 interrogates the concepts of

culture, media, and the popular, arguing that they have to be rethought in response to the historical specificities and changing empirical realities of the context. Chapter 5, in many ways the least satisfying, argues against the contemporary tendency to proliferate apparently unrelated theories, sites, and forms of power, rather than considering the field of power relationally by embracing and even mapping the empirical complexity of the real. Finally, chapter 6 returns to the problem space of modernity in order to theorize other possibilities, other modernities, that can define our collective futures. It moves from the specificity of European or Atlantic modernities, through an ontological discussion of the category itself, to the concrete possibility of multiple ways of being modern.

This book is an attempt to intervene into two overlapping and in fact inseparable sets of arguments—about cultural studies and about the contemporary conjuncture—and in that way, to respond to the very serious challenge Hall (1998b, 193, 194) poses to cultural studies in the contemporary conjuncture:

Cultural studies has got a lot of analytic work to do . . . in terms of trying to interpret how a society is changing in ways that are not amenable to the immediate political language. . . . Cultural studies requires a huge bootstrap operation to lift itself out of its earlier agenda . . . so that it can come face to face with these much larger, much wider, much broader, more extensive social relations. I am struck by how much potential work there is, and I feel that cultural studies is not aware of its new vocation. It could be called on to act as the leading edge of measuring new ways of both understanding and implementing social and historical change.

This is the challenge: to wake cultural studies out of, to borrow a phrase from Kant, its “dogmatic slumber.” My effort here is simply to lay out some of the sorts of questions we must ask, some of the work we must do, some of the tools we need, to construct a cultural studies for the contemporary. I do not want to offer answers, but to change the questions and perhaps some of the direction of current work in cultural studies.

The chapters that follow are meant to contribute to this in small and modest ways. Still, the task remains fundamentally incomplete, marked as much by its absences as by its meager accomplishments. Most of all, as I have said, this book does not undertake the actual empirical and conceptual work that would let me tell the stories of the contemporary conjunctures. Even so, a

number of important issues remain unaddressed or inadequately addressed: the environment (and the materiality of the world); religion; globalizations; various structures of belongings; militarism and violence; and the changing practices of knowledge production (under specific conditions of new technological, institutional, and postcolonial developments). But as I shall argue later, the practice of cultural studies need not seek completeness; it need not attempt to equally encompass all the domains of human life, all of the complexity that is formed at the intersections of everyday and institutional life. “The life and time of man [*sic*] are not by nature labour but pleasure, restlessness, merry-making, rest, needs, accidents, desires, violent acts, robberies, etc.” (Foucault 1979, 62). Too often, and not simply by chance or necessity, many of the most intimate forms of social relations and practices, forms that often sustain and nurture us, that give us joy and pleasure, that bore and sometimes overwhelm us, fall by the analytic wayside.

Other weaknesses are the product of the moment—in the history of cultural studies and in a larger geopolitical history—and of a particular location. I do not apologize for writing a political book addressed to the academy (and largely the highly professionalized, capitalized, and formalized U.S. and European university systems), although I am aware of the price I pay. I know that by focusing on cultural studies in the academy, as a site of knowledge production, I am *not* talking about a variety of other locations for and ways of doing cultural studies. There are always multiple formations of cultural studies (although not every formation will work in a specific context), defined by complex relations among theoretical, institutional, epistemological, and political engagements. My choice to focus on academic formations is not a matter of any claim to moral or political superiority, but a statement about my own capacities and my own sense of the demands of the contemporary context. Furthermore, I know that the fact that I am trying to tell a story from inside the United States limits me in profound and sometime disabling ways, for I can only follow the lines of transformation and struggle so far. And I know that the conversations I am calling for are already taking place in various regions of the world. I have tried to acknowledge and even enter into conversation with some of them, but I realize it remains too gestural. I hope to do better in future work, and I hope that this book will bring some of those conversations together in productive ways.

This book is an expression of my own continuing belief that intellectual work matters, that it is a vital component of the struggle to change the

world and to make it more humane and just, and that cultural studies, as a particular project, a particular sort of intellectual practice, has something valuable to contribute. I hope there is something here for those committed to the project of cultural studies, and for those seeking to tell a better story about what's going on.

The Heart of Cultural Studies

In the past decades, “cultural studies” has gained public visibility both as something to be embraced and as something to be attacked (for many different reasons from all sides of the various political spectra). It has moved rapidly across geographical, disciplinary, and political spaces. Of course, outside of and long before this public visibility, people have been doing cultural studies, some without ever naming their project as cultural studies, or even wanting such a shared identity. It has appeared, largely after the Second World War, in a variety of places, arising from a variety of disciplines and intellectual projects. Admittedly, defining cultural studies is a risky business. Lots of people claim to be doing it. Yet the fact is that few people working in or against cultural studies agree on a definition. Any definition is likely to disown at least some people who want to locate themselves within cultural studies. This is often taken as evidence of the need to avoid offering one. It is sometimes assumed that any definition would inevitably police the boundaries, and that this would contradict the politics of cultural studies.

I think that we need to take the risk. Without some sense of the specificity of cultural studies, there is nothing to prevent it from becoming the latest administrative appropriation and marginalization of critical or politically inflected scholarship. More importantly, without this sense of specificity, precisely what it brings to the political-intellectual table is too easily lost, as it increasingly becomes an almost empty signifier of the study of culture, or the study of the politics of culture, which sends it back into a marketing strategy. So I hope that my efforts in this book will be read not as a glance backward, as if the relevant question were to judge various candidates, but rather as a projection forward, to embrace a project. I want to join a conversation about how we should use our energy and labor as scholars.

Let me state it very clearly. I do not think cultural studies is *about* culture, although culture is crucial to its project. Cultural studies is not the study of texts or textuality; it does not aim to interpret or judge particular texts or kinds of texts. It is not about reading social power off of texts, or reading social realities as texts. It is not the practice of reading the world in a grain of sand. Nor is it the study of national cultures, nor a new approach to language or area studies, although I do think it has something to say to all of these. Nor can it be defined by a focus on mass culture, or popular culture, or subaltern cultures. It is not about theory as a metaphor for or a guarantee of the inscription of power, whether in texts or social life.

I might begin by describing cultural studies this way: it is concerned with describing and intervening in the ways cultural practices are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power. That is, if people make history but in conditions not of their own making, cultural studies explores the ways this process is enacted with and through cultural practices, and the place of these practices within specific historical formations. But this too is inadequate, so I might try again.

Cultural studies describes how people's everyday lives are articulated by and with culture. It investigates how people are empowered and disempowered by the particular structures and forces that organize their everyday lives in contradictory ways, and how their (everyday) lives are themselves articulated to and by the trajectories of economic, social, cultural, and political power. Cultural studies explores the historical possibilities of transforming people's lived realities and the relations of power within which those realities are constructed, as it reaffirms the vital contribution of cultural (and intellectual) work to the imagination and realization of such possibilities. Cultural studies is concerned with the construction of the contexts of life as matrices of power, understanding that discursive practices are inextricably involved in the organization of relations of power. It attempts to use the best intellectual resources available to gain a better understanding of the state of play of power as a balance in the field of forces constitutive of a particular context, believing that such knowledge will better enable people to change the context and hence the relations of power. That is, it seeks to understand not only the organizations of power but also the possibilities of survival, struggle, resistance, and change. It takes contestation for granted,

not as a reality in every instance, but as an assumption necessary for the existence of critical work, political opposition, and even historical change.

Yet it seems to me that even this misses something crucial about cultural studies; in fact, it misses precisely that which is the heart of cultural studies, what defines its specificity and its passion. As Stuart Hall (1992a, 292) put it once, talking about cultural studies in the United States:

It needs a whole range of work to say what it is in this context. What it is in relation to this culture that would genuinely separate it from earlier work or work done elsewhere. I'm not sure that Cultural Studies in the United States has actually been through that moment of self-clarification. . . . I do think it matters what it is in particular situations . . . it's the precise insertion of a certain kind of critical practice at an institutional moment and that moment is precisely the moment of academic institutional life in this country.

That institutional life is only the most immediate context of our work as intellectuals, and it cannot be separated from its relations to other proximate and concentric contexts of social, political, economic, and cultural life—that is, from the entirety of the social formation.¹

I believe that the project of cultural studies, which binds different people and work together, involves a commitment to a particular practice of intellectual-political work, and to the claim that such intellectual work matters both inside and outside of the academy. Cultural studies is a way of inhabiting the position of scholar, teacher, artist, and intellectual, one way (among many) of politicizing theory and theorizing politics. The project of cultural studies is an effort to find an intellectual practice that is responsible to the changing context (changing geographical, historical, political, intellectual, and institutional conditions) in which it works. As such, it constructs for itself a more limited and modest claim to authority than one is used to from the academy; it refuses any and all dreams of universal, absolute, complete, and perfect truth, and at the same time, it refuses to give up the dream of truth to the burdens of relativism. Its modesty is based in its rigorous efforts to tell the best story that can be told, about any context, within that context. It accepts that knowledge and politics, as well as the tools of their production, are always, unavoidably, contextually bound. But it refuses to conclude that knowledge or judgments about competing knowledges are impossible; it wants to hold on to a more modest conception of the possibility and authority of knowledge. At the same time, its modesty undermines

any assumption that being a cultural studies scholar (or having an expertise in culture and in practices of interpretation) makes one into an expert on everything and anything. Instead, cultural studies takes work!

I want to try to define that common project, to perhaps explicate something about the “heart” of cultural studies as both its center and the source of at least some of the passion behind the work. To do so I will start by telling two stories: the first, largely autobiographical, retrospectively reads my desire for cultural studies out of my experience at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in the United Kingdom; the second will describe the project of cultural studies as the effort to produce knowledge based on a commitment to radical contextuality and a political engagement with the possibilities of social transformation.² I will then try to conceptualize the category of context, identifying the conjuncture as the specific understanding of context in cultural studies. Finally I will briefly show how different formations of cultural studies can be seen as responses to different conjunctural problematics.

In Search of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

In 1968, as a result of a number of fortuitous events and unfortunate political forces, I went to study—all too briefly—at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (cccs) at Birmingham University in England. This was the result, as are so many important life-defining events, of the intersection of a number of fortuitous events and determined social forces. I was caught up, as were so many others, in a set of struggles and changes that seemed momentous at the time. This moment has been somewhat mythologized as “the sixties,” defined by the emergence of a number of interconnected and competing political struggles (black power, the anti-Vietnam War movement, a popular anti-government and anti-capitalist democratic socialism, a revised marxism, anti-colonial liberation movements, feminism, environmentalism, etc.) and cultural changes (e.g., youth culture and the explosion of mediated popular culture, but also the appearance of various subcultures and countercultures built of new spiritualisms, drugs, etc.). For those of us at universities, myself included, it was often the Vietnam War, and the protests against it, that played a large role in shaping our immediate futures, and in my case, in sending me to the cccs.³

To be honest, I had no idea what the Centre was. I had never heard of Richard Hoggart or Stuart Hall (then the founding director and associate

director, respectively). I went with an interest in the “social life” of ideas (philosophies) and popular symbols, and an abiding interest in how popular music functioned to bind together politics and the popular on the one hand, and the various political and cultural fractions of what was then known as The Movement on the other. I had no idea what cultural studies was—my professors at the University of Rochester assured me that I would feel intellectually at home there—but fortunately, most people at the Centre were equally uncertain. To repeat a common phrase (first used I think by Angela McRobbie [1994, 48]), we all understood that we were making it up as we went along. It was in the often fraught, contradictory, and tension-filled,⁴ but for me always exciting, generous, and open-minded space of the Centre that the trajectory of my intellectual and political life was initiated.

The Centre was a response to significant social and cultural changes characterizing postwar British life (e.g., immigration, the impact of U.S. culture, the “disappearance” of the working class, new international relations) and the political challenges they posed. More broadly, the Centre was a response, on the one hand, to the rapid processes of social change and the increasingly visible impact of cultural changes, which seemed to bring the messiness of the world onto the academic agenda, and on the other hand, to changes in and challenges to the institution of the academy and the forms of academic practice, which seemed to call for a reconsideration of at least a part of the function of the intellectual.

I did not stay at the Centre as long as I would have liked; I simultaneously fled the traces of the Vietnam War in Britain and embraced the countercultural possibilities of an itinerant Swiss anarchist theater commune. No doubt, the brevity of my sojourn at the CCCS had consequences, both positive and negative. Most importantly, what I took away from the Centre was not any sense or even any particular part of the theoretical trajectory that defined the history of the Centre, nor did I leave with a specific set of problematics (as I will talk about soon) that came to be associated with different eras and groups at the Centre. Instead, what I took away was an understanding of cultural studies as a response to a series of frustrations with and criticisms of existing academic practices and as an attempt to do the work differently.

Hoggart had created the Centre to realize his particular vision that culture (primarily literature and art but also expressive culture more broadly understood) made available, to those trained to find it, a distinctive kind of social knowledge that is unavailable through any other means. It is a kind

of knowledge that Hoggart (1969; 1970) describes at various times as poetic, metaphoric, intuitive, and subjective. It is a privileged knowledge of or access to what Williams (1961) called the “structure of feeling.” Producing such knowledge requires a careful scrutiny of “the words on the page” through “literary-critical analysis,” moving between what Hoggart (1970) called “reading for tone” (in all its psychological, cultural, and aesthetic complexity) and “reading for value,” which was different from making value judgments. “Reading for value” seeks to uncover the complex field of values that is embodied, reflected, or resisted in the work. Crucially, Hoggart argued that such literary-critical methods could be fruitfully brought to bear on a wider range of human activities and products than traditional literary critics might have imagined. In particular, Hoggart wanted to move such analysis from the realm of high culture into the class, popular, and media cultures that increasingly occupied the center stage of modern Western societies.

This literary-critical practice defined one of the weekly seminars that constituted the regular business of the Centre. Once a week, Hoggart (or another faculty member or visiting researcher) presented the students with a mimeographed copy of passages from some text—at the beginning, from works of high literature, but as the year progressed, from more popular literary works, and even excerpts from mass media. While the works were identified at first, as the year moved on, we were often given works without any identification and asked to figure out where they might have come from. Sometimes we were asked to compare passages, determining by such careful scrutiny which were “high literature,” which popular literature, and which mass media. The entire year in that seminar was spent honing the skills necessary to read for tone and values.⁵

The other seminars were: (1) a reading seminar, later called the theory seminar, under the guidance of Stuart Hall, in which we read an enormously wide range of texts in sociological and anthropological theory, pragmatism, existentialism, semiotics, etc., and in which participants explored how to theorize the project, largely, if naively, in terms of the relations between culture and society as it had been formulated by Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart; and (2) a research seminar, in which individuals presented their own research, and eventually, a collective and collaborative—group—research project was formulated around a particular text, “Cure for Mariage.”⁶ It was here, in practice and in research, that the participants tried to figure out what cultural studies was, and what it meant to do it: what did it mean to understand culture in relation to society, and society through

culture? And it was here that participants tried to come to terms with the demand for complexity and interdisciplinarity that was implicit in Williams's (1961, 63) definition of cultural studies as "the study of the relationships between elements in a whole way of life." Cultural studies is "the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships."

I was attracted, not to the critical practice (e.g., reading values off of texts), but to the larger questions that, for Hoggart and Hall, founded the project of cultural studies. The question Hoggart (1969, 18) posed to the texts was not, as it became at a later moment at the Centre, what people do with a text, but "What relationship does this . . . complex text have to the imaginative life of the individuals who make up its audience?" For Hoggart, culture gives us knowledge of life embodied, life lived in all its complexity, the experiential wholeness of life, or what Auden called (and Hoggart was fond of quoting) "the real world of theology and horses." Culture gives us access to the texture of life as it is lived, as it develops in a particular historical and moral context; it tells us what it felt like to be alive at a certain time and place.⁷

Of course, this vision was reshaped by its own material conditions. These included:

1. The physical marginality of the CCCS (the Centre was housed in a Quonset hut on the very edge of the campus), but also the academic marginality of the work of the Centre. After all, Hoggart was hired at Birmingham as an Auden scholar, not as the author of *The Uses of Literacy* (1957); and while the English department and the university agreed to his condition that they allow him to establish the Centre, they refused to provide any real support.
2. The political contradictions of the lived experience of the 1960s.
3. The enormous diversity, bordering on the chaotic, at the Centre. This diversity was a constant and consistent feature of the Centre, although it is often eclipsed in histories that present only "the diversity that won" (to use a phrase John Clarke taught me).
4. The rather atypical postgraduate students who populated the Centre. Many were part-time and commuter students who had jobs and lives elsewhere. Almost all of them had what can only be described as atypical interests and atypical backgrounds (at least for English higher education at the time), but most importantly, most of them were involved

with their subjects in other than purely academic ways—as participants (having been shaped by the practices and relations they were studying) who were somehow politically invested in the questions they were trying to pose.⁸

Cultural studies was put forth as a kind of discursive imaginary at the Centre, which assumed that culture (symbols, language) mattered, but just as importantly, that intellectual work mattered, both inside and, even more importantly, outside the academy. In that sense, the Centre seemed to be attempting to make the academy listen to the demands of politics, the demands of the world outside of (or intersecting with) the academy, and to produce something worth saying outside as well as inside the academy, so that those engaged in social and everyday politics would want to listen to such intellectual work and even, just maybe, to participate in its production. When some notion of cultural studies had to be proffered, it was usually as a result of pedagogical demands, and it was more often than not conceptualized in terms that made pedagogical sense.

Even more, it seemed to me, a young man searching for a project that could weave together my various passions, commitments, and interests, that the Centre was not trying to create a new academic norm or field, but to articulate a different kind of intellectual project, a different way of asking and answering questions. That is to say, it was propelled by a sense of the inability of the dominant academic norms to provide adequate answers to the compelling and important questions of the age, questions that demanded a new approach to the project of understanding social actualities and human possibilities. But even more, it was the failure of the dominant academic norms to even ask the questions that mattered to students and the population more broadly, questions that had little to do with the norms of academic disciplines and canons. The questions were precisely about the cultural and social changes that were visible “out on the streets,” so to speak, but that rarely made their way into the academy—for example, questions about new forms of culture and changing norms of social relationships.⁹

In this early life of the Centre, the project was lived more as a sense of discomfort and dissatisfaction, and it was articulated as a critique and a quest rather than as a completed and positive vision of coherent alternatives. The objects of these frustrations and critiques were a set of interrelated assumptions about the “proper” way to carry out intellectual work: the disciplinary organization of knowledge; the dialectical (negative, binary) logic of theo-

retical arguments; the commitment to reductionism and simplification; the claim of universalism and the desire for completion; the demand for an objectivity that bracketed out not only any passion and commitment, but also questions of culture and change. These seemed to characterize the dominant practices of the human sciences, even within the humanities, and yet to be fundamentally inadequate to the demands of, and the changes taking place in, the world those at the Centre were living in.

In the Centre's early vision, its epistemological commitments were often offered as implicit and sometimes even rather inchoate refusals of these basic dominant logics of the academic enterprise. First, cultural studies was predicated on a sense of discomfort with (but not a complete rejection of) the disciplinary organization of knowledge, as it struggled with how to bring together the diverse bodies of expertise. But the fundamental assumption of the work of the Centre, that human existence could only be understood relationally, encapsulated in the early conceptions of the field as "culture and society," meant that cultural studies was bound to transgress the boundaries between disciplines. It would have to take up the objects that "constituted" a number of disciplines, but it would have to change those objects as well, precisely because such disciplinary objects were not yet understood relationally.

Just as importantly, the sense that no aspect of human life (as well as human life in its lived totality) could be separated from questions and effects of culture also meant that cultural studies would transform disciplinary objects even further, since they would have to be understood partly through the lens of culture, as always discursively constructed, at least in part. As a result, cultural studies would have to be interdisciplinary and antidisciplinary; it would need to transform the disciplines even as it drew upon them, and it would have to be reflexive about the ways it accomplished this, becoming self-conscious about its own conditions of knowledge-production. Thus, if the early work of British cultural studies is often described as bringing together literary and sociological studies, it is better thought of, I think, as having rewritten what it means to do either of these, precisely because they must be done together. Thus, cultural studies embodied a certain risk. It demanded speaking outside of or beyond one's disciplinary and credentialized competences.

Second, cultural studies was predicated on a sense of discomfort with the logics of argumentation and disagreement of the humanities, which tended to work in terms of opposition, negation, and contamination.¹⁰ Thus,

disagreements are usually thought of as contradictions, or binary opposites, from which one must choose, and the choice of one entails the negation of the other. Moreover, the negated other, the road not taken, so to speak, is usually condemned, not simply as a mistake but also as a somehow dangerous alternative that threatens assumed values, standards, desires, etc. This was true whether one was thinking of paradigms (humanism/structuralism, materialism/idealism), politics (domination/subordination, power/resistance, capitalism/socialism), or problems (individual/social, structure/agency, stability/change). The logic of cultural studies is and always has been, I believe, to occupy the middle ground, not in the sense of a compromise (the Aristotelian golden mean), but in the sense of operating in the between, to open up possibilities, to see multiplicities instead of simple difference.

Third, cultural studies was predicated on a sense of discomfort with the normalization of reductionism as the practice of most modern forms of knowledge-production. These forms assume that “explanation” or understanding necessarily moves from the complex to the simple, from the concrete to the exemplary, from the singular to the typical. Cultural studies is built on the desire to find a way to hold onto the complexity of human reality, to refuse to reduce human life or power to one dimension, one axis, one explanatory framework. It refuses to reduce the complexity of reality to any single plane or domain of existence—whether biology, economics, state politics, social and sexual relations, or even culture. Each of these planes exists in relation to the others without being reducible to any other. Thus, contrary to some other contemporary cultural theories, cultural studies believes that there are material (nondiscursive) realities that have real, measurable effects. It does not make everything into culture! Cultural studies does not treat the world as if it were all and only culture; it does not deny the material existence of the world apart from the ways human beings make sense of and communicate about it. Cultural studies is not a form of radical idealism in which the real world disappears into the meanings that we (as minds or as speakers) construct for it. Its constructionism is not simply a version of social constructionism, but rather an acknowledgment of the multiplicity of agencies.

Cultural studies tries, as best it can, to accept the fact that things are always more complicated than any one trajectory, any one judgment, can thematize. If the world is complex and changing, then it would seem obvious—although it seemed profoundly new to me—that the practice of knowledge-production demanded that one do more than constantly discover what you

already know. In other words, where you end up (in your analysis of what is happening) will rarely be where you began, or even where you might have expected to arrive. Instead of the disjunctive (either . . . or . . .) rhetoric of the modern academy, cultural studies adopts a conjunctive rhetoric, “yes (that is true), but so is . . . (and so is . . . and so is . . .),” a logic of “yes and . . . and . . . and,” where each additional clause transforms the meanings and effects of all the previous ones.

Nor were the participants in this project willing to postpone the difficulties, the contradictions, the excesses, the resistances, which always rendered such singular explanations inadequate, to an afterthought, an addendum, a last chapter as it were. Cultural studies recognized that people (groups, institutions, states, etc.) attempt to accomplish all sorts of things, but that the attempt is not the same as success, and that human actions are often as much about managing failure as building on success. Reality is as much about configurations of disarrangements, failures and fixes, pressures, forces, and possibilities, as it is about visions and success. The complexities are, in fact, precisely what lived reality is all about, and have to be included from the very start. This commitment to complexity, then, also embodies a fundamental political commitment: namely, that change is never well served by reducing complexity to simplicity. Cultural studies is, therefore, decidedly antireductionist!

Fourth, those at the Centre were suspicious of the claims of universalism carried by so much of academic work: theories, concepts, and relations are supposed, within whatever stated conditions are included within the theory itself, to be universally applicable. Now, while many contemporary intellectual projects oppose such universality, usually in the form of particular theories that often seem to imply (or offer little resistance to the charge of) relativism, what I saw in the work that took place at the Centre was an attempt to think about knowledge contextually,¹¹ to offer knowledge that did not claim to necessarily encompass the whole world. I have always thought (and I will try to argue this shortly) that this effort to do radically contextualist work—to bring such contextualism to bear not only on the object, but on theory and politics as well, to stand against scientific and epistemological universalism—defines the specificity of cultural studies.

Closely connected to the desire for universalism, especially in the humanities, is a desire for completeness (and a desire to protect oneself from the possibility of criticism). Such a dream—of a perfect analysis—would not only provide the measure of our scholarship, but also guarantee the politics

(the political purity and utility) of our labor; it aims to guarantee that our work can produce only the effects we want and to insulate us from the possibility of being co-opted. The mirror image of this desire is the increasingly common practice of critique in the humanities, which dictates that we are always and inevitably disappointed with any analysis since it can never be complete. Most commonly, this takes the form of arguments by absence: you did not speak about “whatever.” Even more, and even more damaging, such failures mark the complicity of every incomplete analysis in the very systems of power it seeks to understand and challenge. Again, the work of the Centre seemed to stand against such practices and assumptions. Cultural studies simply rejected the idea that any such guarantees were possible; the complexity of the world simply meant that one would have to keep on working, continue theorizing, accepting that failure is a part of the path to telling better stories.

And finally, there was in the Centre a fundamental refusal of the demand, so powerfully enforced in the academy, that one bracket one’s passions, one’s biographical sympathies, and one’s political commitments, in the name of a (spurious) intellectual (read scientific) objectivity. Cultural studies knew, as did the pragmatists (who so strongly influenced my doctoral advisor, James Carey) that without such investments in the world, in our lives, and in the lives of others, there is no desire, need for, or possibility of knowledge. Knowledge always depends on a visceral relevance. And while one seeks a better understanding in order, to some extent, to find other political possibilities, there can never be any guarantee of political utility, outcome, or purity. Cultural studies seeks to combine academic rigor and competence with social passion and political commitment.

At the same time, there was a modesty about the Centre’s sense of itself and its practice, which I hope continues to mark cultural studies. No one at the Centre thought that what they were doing was necessarily or absolutely better or more important than other forms of intellectual work. They did not think that everyone should be doing cultural studies, or that they were telling the only stories worth telling. This modesty is too often denied by some, who dislocate the work of the Centre from its context, and hence, from its own questions. Cultural studies diligently tries to avoid what I might call the “hyperinflation of (small) disciplines,” and often, even smaller differences. I am referring here not so much to the universalization of theories, but of analytic categories, where notions like culture, communication, performance, cartography, or rhetoric increasingly claim not only

omnipresence (that everything is “x” or that “x” is everywhere, rather than that everything may exist in relations with “x”) but also that this concept is somehow crucially central. I must admit that I am always suspicious of any intellectual formation that thinks its focus, its theoretical founding concept, is what we really have been searching for all along. Rarely are these concepts defined or located in anything other than a purely theoretical or even ontological way. That is, without making clear the specific empirical consequences of the concept, it is impossible to know what the stakes of the argument are or what difference such a concept makes. Such hyperinflation is accomplished in any number of ways: (1) read every intellectual work that one likes as an example of “x,” whether or not the author is aware of it; (2) if an author uses “x” at a particular moment in the larger argument, read the whole as if it exemplified the part (and so becomes an example of “x”); (3) surreptitiously appropriate polysemy without theorizing it, so that one can play on the ambiguities; and (4) apply the concept to an expanding universe of objects. And while there is often such an imperializing discourse attached to cultural studies, I think it fundamentally violates the spirit and practice of cultural studies at the Centre.

The Centre seemed to me to be trying to do something I had not encountered before: to bring together a faith in the importance of the best—most rigorously produced—knowledge, a recognition of the messiness of the world outside academic categories, and a commitment to the political responsibility of the intellectual. This search for epistemological counterlogics, for a different way of doing intellectual work, was what I saw at the Centre, at least as I looked back on my experience. And that experience, as well as the relations that I made with people at the Centre, especially Stuart Hall (and then later participants in the Centre), has shaped my academic career ever since. Most of what I have described was at best implicit, even nascent, in the early days of the Centre. What was clear was that there was an epistemological problematic; what was clear was that the challenge, the project, was to find a different practice of knowledge-production, one that not only rejected the dominant intellectual practices of the human sciences but that also found a positive expression, in its very epistemology, of its deeply held commitment to (an ontology of) relationality and the necessary effectivity of culture. These logics were also what bound together, as intellectual practices and projects, British cultural studies with the work of Jim Carey, my teacher in the United States, to whom Stuart Hall sent me as the only person he knew of trying to do cultural studies in the United States at

the time. And while I was unaware of it at the time (and would embarrassingly remain so for quite a while), they bound me to other intellectuals in other parts of the world, and in other kinds of institutions, working with a similar project.

Cultural Studies as Radical Contextuality

I have been arguing that cultural studies is defined by its practice; I want now to suggest that that practice defines its project as a rigorous attempt to contextualize political and intellectual work so that context defines both its object and its practice. In an unpublished interview with Bill Schwartz, Hall is quite explicit about the “intellectual perspective” of cultural studies as an interrogation of contexts (Hall uses the term “conjuncture,” which I shall explain shortly as a particular way of constructing contexts): “It has an intellectual vocation to produce a critical understanding of a conjuncture, a cultural-historical conjuncture.” And again, speaking of the collective project of the Centre: “The commitment to understanding a conjuncture is what from the beginning we thought cultural studies was about.”

It starts with an assumption of relationality, which it shares with other projects and formations, but it takes relationality to imply, or more accurately, to be equivalent to, the apparently more radical claim of contextuality: that the identity, significance, and effects of any practice or event (including cultural practices and events) are defined only by the complex set of relations that surround, interpenetrate, and shape it, and make it what it is. No element can be isolated from its relations, although those relationships can be changed, and are constantly changing. Any event can only be understood relationally, as a condensation of multiple determinations and effects. Cultural studies thus embodies the commitment to the openness and contingency of social reality, where change is the given or norm. This radical contextualism is the heart of cultural studies.¹²

This is why, for example, writing about *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, Critcher, et al. 1978), Hall (1998b, 192) says:

If you’d just taken race as a black issue, you’d have seen the impact of law and order policies on the local communities, but you’d have never seen the degree to which the race and crime issue was a prism for a much larger social crisis. You wouldn’t have looked at the larger picture. You’d have written a black text, but you wouldn’t have written a cultural studies text because you

wouldn't have seen this articulation up to the politicians, into the institutional judiciary, down to the popular mood of the people, into the politics, as well as into the community, into black poverty and into discrimination.

Similarly, Hall always locates (i.e., contextualizes) his work on race, as when he declares (1995, 53–54): “I have never worked on race and ethnicity as a kind of subcategory. I have always worked on the whole social formation which is racialized.” The result is, of course, that any discussion of issues of race and ethnicity cannot be separated from the particular context in which it is located and into which it is directed. Hall (1997a, 157) is rigorously consistent about this: “I don’t claim for my particular version of a non-essentialist notion of race correctness for all time. I can claim for it only a certain conjunctural [for the moment, read ‘contextual’] truth.” It is too easy to forget—and too often forgotten—that the work on racism and, moving out from there, on identity in its various forms, is undertaken in the context of and as a response to questions about a specific changing social formation. That is to say, cultural studies’ radical contextuality, while theoretical, is never purely theoretical; it is both defined and limited by its political concerns. In Hall’s (personal communication, April 10, 2005) terms, it approaches its contextualism “practically.”

This radical contextualism is embodied in the concept of articulation. Articulation names both the basic processes of the production of reality, of the production of contexts and power (i.e., determination or effectivity), and the analytic practice of cultural studies. It is the transformative practice or work of making, unmaking, and remaking relations and contexts, of establishing new relations out of old relations or non-relations, of drawing lines and mapping connections.¹³ But articulation is not a single or a singular practice. Different connections will have differing forces in particular contexts, and these must be measured; not all connections are equal, or equally important. In fact, there are as many different practices of articulation as there are forms of relationship. Using the notion of context must not be allowed to flatten all realities, as if talking about contexts necessarily makes every system of relationality equivalent, or puts them on the same plane or scale. Cultural studies’ sense of context is always of a complex, overdetermined, and contingent unity. If a context can be understood as the relationships that have been made by the operation of power, in the interests of certain positions of power, the struggle to change the context involves the struggle to map out those relations and, when possible, to disarticulate and rearticulate them.

Articulation calls for both deconstruction and reconstruction: one must first see that what appears to be a harmonious whole without seams or cracks, or a natural unity whose contradictions are inevitable and unavoidable, has been forged from diverse and divergent pieces, as has the very appearance of wholeness and naturalness. That is, the very processes of articulation have been erased and must now be rediscovered in the possibility of disarticulation. Articulation begins by discovering the heterogeneity, the differences, the fractures, in the wholes. But it cannot end there, in the negativity of critique, because heterogeneity never remains purely and simply there as heterogeneity. It is always rearticulated into other wholes; that is the very being of the relation of life and power. And if cultural studies intellectuals do not enter into this struggle, with all the work (of analysis and imagination) that it requires, if they do not attempt to think through the realities of articulations and the possibilities of rearticulation, then cultural studies abandons the very sense of political possibility that drives it.

This does not mean that reality is entirely open. Cultural studies operates with a logic of “no guarantees,” what Paul Gilroy (1993a) has called “anti-anti-essentialism.” Essentialism embodies a logic of guarantees; it assumes that the relations that constitute social and historical existence are necessarily the way they are. Essentialism is the assertion that all the relations that make up lived and knowable reality had and have to be the way they are, because the relationships are already and always intrinsic to the terms of the relationship themselves. In essentialist positions, the answers are guaranteed and everything is sewn up in advance. Identities are fixed. Effects are determined before they are even produced, because all the important relations in history are necessarily contained in the very fact that something is what it is, in its very origins. If history doesn’t appear to be unfolding according to this inevitable trajectory, it is the result of some external interference or principle of negation, such as false consciousness.

Cultural studies, like all anti-essentialisms, denies that the shape and structure of reality is inevitable. But it also refuses the universalization of contingency that characterizes many versions of anti-essentialism, which too easily deny any stability or reality to relationships or the structures they define. Cultural studies is committed to the reality of relations that have determining effects, but it refuses to assume that such relations and effects have to be, necessarily, what they are. They did not have to be that way, but, given that they are that way, they are real and they have real effects. Cultural studies operates in the space between, on the one hand, absolute contain-

ment, closure, complete and final understanding, total domination, and, on the other hand, absolute freedom and possibility, openness, and indeterminateness. It rejects any claims of “necessary relations” (guaranteed) as well as of “necessarily no relations” (also guaranteed), in favor of “no necessary relations” (while accepting that relations are real). Thus, cultural studies can be seen as a contextual analysis of how contexts are (or even better, of how a specific context is) made, challenged, unmade, changed, remade, etc., as structures of power and domination.

Articulation is cultural studies’ version of what is generally called constructionism, the claim that reality is constructed rather than given; reality is always a complex organization or configuration that is being put together constantly. Putting it this way lets us see one very simple truth: the fact that something is constructed does not make it any less real, regardless of what the pieces are that go into its construction. The fact that cultural studies asserts that some of those pieces are, of necessity, discursive, and even meaningful, similarly does not make it less real. A table is not imaginary because it was put together from separate pieces of wood, and the fact that other sorts of elements were used—nails or screws, for example—does not make it any less real. Cultural studies does not deny that there is a material reality, but it does argue, contrary to some, that it is impossible to separate what some would call brute facts from social facts. The fact that some facts are treated as brute facts, as if they were not constructed, says more about the particular organization of reality in which such a distinction is necessary than it does about the facts themselves. Constructionism, then, refuses to assume that there are two kinds of modes of being: the real and the discursive or symbolic, which exist on ontologically separate planes that can only be bridged by distinctly human acts of consciousness. Constructionism asserts that the world is made up of complex organizations of various kinds of events, some of which are expressive (or discursive). That is, just as a table is made up of wood and nails, glue and varnish, all reality is a complex articulation of many different kinds of elements or events.

Cultural studies believes that cultural (or discursive) practices matter because they are crucial to the construction of the specific contexts and forms of human life. Human beings live in a world that is, at least in part, of their own making, and that world is constructed through practices (of many different forms of agency, including individual and institutional, human and non-human) that build and transform the simultaneously and intimately interconnected discursive and nondiscursive (both material) realities. Not

only is every human event or practice culturally articulated, cultural practices are constantly involved in the ongoing production of reality, not necessarily as the intentional accomplishment of human actions. To put it simply, what culture we live in, what cultural practices we use, what cultural forms we place upon and insert into reality, have consequences for the way reality is organized and lived. Cultural practices contribute to the production of the context as an organization of power, and construct the context as a lived everyday experience of power. That is why culture matters, because it is a key dimension of the ongoing transformation or construction of reality. But that does not mean, as much contemporary theory would have it, that culture, by itself as it were (e.g., as the production of signification or subjectivity), either constructs reality or is a modality of power.

Cultural studies tries to understand something about how an organization of power is being constructed through the disarticulation and rearticulation of relations, by taking culture as its starting point, its entrance into the complex balance of forces constructed out of the even more complicated relations of culture, society, politics, economics, everyday life, etc. Cultural studies is, in the first instance, concerned with cultural practices, as its entrance into the material context of the unequal relations of force and power. But the context itself cannot be separated from those cultural practices and the relations of power, because they articulate the unity and specificity of the context as a lived environment. And this leads to one of the most visible commitments of cultural studies: its practice is necessarily interdisciplinary. This is often misunderstood as some sort of a priori commitment (or as a political attack on the disciplinary organization of the academy) rather than as a conclusion of the logic of radical contextuality. Cultural studies work has to be interdisciplinary, because contexts—and even culture—cannot be analyzed in purely cultural terms; understanding contexts and, within them, specific cultural formations, requires looking at culture's relations to everything that is not culture. But where, how, and how much interdisciplinarity is necessary? Again, the answer has to be contextual and practical. Its interdisciplinarity has to be shaped by the need to produce useful knowledge, even while it is limited by the strategic possibilities of the context, that is to say, limited by a grounded sense of what is possible, what can be accomplished, in the present.

Raymond Williams's (1961, 63) influential definition of cultural studies, given above, posed two problems: first, where is the privilege of culture located? and second, how does one specify the concept of a whole way of

life so as to identify the most pertinent elements and relations, thus making the task possible? We can advance Williams's vision by recognizing, as he sometimes did, that the space of a whole way of life is a fractured and contradictory space of multiple contexts and competing ways of life and struggle.¹⁴ (As I shall argue, this mode of contextualization is what cultural studies refers to as a conjuncture—a complex articulation of discourses, everyday life, and what Michel Foucault would call technologies or regimes of power.) Within any given space, such contexts are always plural. Moreover, within any context, as a result of its complex relations to other contexts, power is always multidimensional, contradictory, and never sewn up.

Cultural studies attempts to strategically deploy theory (and research) to gain the knowledge necessary to describe the context in ways that may enable the articulation of new or better political strategies. It takes what Marx (Hall 2003a) called the “detour through theory,” in order to offer a new and better description, moving from “the empirical” to “the concrete,” where the concrete is produced through the theoretical work of the invention of concepts. But it also must take a detour through the real, through the empirical context, in order to be able to go on theorizing. It attempts to arrive at a different and better understanding of the context than that with which it began (or which it could have predicted solely on theoretical grounds) based on the political demands and questions placed before it at the beginning. *Cultural studies is not supposed to rediscover what we already know.* That is why it is only at the end that one can raise the critical questions of politics, why politics and strategy are only available after the work of cultural studies. While it puts knowledge in the service of politics, it also attempts to make politics listen to the authority of knowledge (and hence its refusal of relativism). Thus, I want to defend cultural studies as a rigorous knowledge-producing activity, without disconnecting it from other sorts of activities and engagements.

This radical contextuality affects every element of the very practice of cultural studies, starting with its object, which as I have said, is always a context. Consequently, the object of cultural studies' *initial* attention is never an isolated event (text or otherwise) but a structured assemblage of practices—a cultural formation, a discursive regime—which already includes both discursive and nondiscursive practices. But even such a formation has to be located in overlapping formations of everyday life (as an organized plane of modern power) and social and institutional structures. That is, ultimately, there can be no radical break between the initial object or event and study