

What Is Cultural Studies?

The Global, Aesthetic, and New-New Left in 2015

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Introduction

What is the current state of cultural studies?

This question is a particularly good one for two reasons. Foremost, cultural studies has experienced a decline in popularity. The past decade has seen the disaggregation of the discipline as well as an onslaught of internal attacks.¹ Moreover, the methods of literary criticism that cultural studies organized in opposition to—including aestheticism, formalism, antihistoricism and apoliticism—have experienced a significant resurgence. Over the last academic year at Fordham University, I attended Sianne Ngai’s brilliant talk on aesthetic categories, participated in Wojciech Maleckion workshop on skeptical realism and object-oriented philosophy, heard Annika Thiem reconsider Benjamin through metaphysics, and practiced book history with the digital humanities initiative. In short, with the exception of Judith Butler’s lecture “We, the People’ or Plural Action,” the alleged pendulum shift away from cultural studies has been part of my particular graduate career and academic life.²

Second, *What is cultural studies?* is a question that dominates its very practice. Right up there with “culture” and “hegemony,” defining “cultural studies” has been a central debate that reflects the tradition’s theoretical and methodological contours. And while the uncertainty and flexibility of cultural studies’ self-definition has been cited as a debilitating weakness, many scholars argue it is “a productive sign of the field’s continued growth and its refusal to succumb to intellectual or political stagnation” (Farmer 358). This essay examines the development of the movement’s self-definition (or lack thereof) with the goal of understanding its current state as a critical theory and discipline divided into three camps: the “global,” “aesthetic,” and “New-New Left.” Additionally, this account of the three branches of cultural studies, as I have dubbed them, aims to grapple with the field’s contradictory status as, at once, exhausted and renewed, anachronistic and continually relevant, reflexively abstract and politically useful.

¹ Michael Berube’s *Chronicle* piece “What’s the Matter with Cultural Studies?” (2009) is a useful summary of this decline. Quoting Stuart Hall, “I really cannot read another cultural-studies analysis of Madonna or *The Sopranos*,” Berube shows how some of its most influential figures do not recognize much of the current criticism characterized as “cultural studies” as worthwhile expressions of the movement.

² Even Butler’s lecture, with its desire to advance theories of embodiment and the field of disabilities studies, reflects the disaggregation of cultural studies as a result field specialization and subspecialties seeking their own identity.

What Was Cultural Studies?

The Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies is known as the birthplace of cultural studies. It officially opened at the University of Birmingham, England in 1964, and the works of the center's chief practitioners —Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall—are considered the earliest iterations of the movement's theory and practice. Their writings, such as William's *Culture and Society* (1958) and Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (1957), sought to rethink the conflict between power and culture as it had been conceived by structuralism and Marxist criticism, for these earlier lines of inquiry contended that popular culture is a capitalist culture industry, a superstructure that proceeds from and reproduces the conditions of the economic base. Moreover, the indivisibility of culture from capital makes consumers the duped victims of "false consciousness."³

Cultural studies took aim at this "pessimistic elitism," arguing that "popular culture is a genuine arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant and subordinate groups" (Storey).⁴ And perhaps nowhere more clearly, Stuart Hall's "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" (1980) credits Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Foucault's theories of power and discourse with allowing the field to conceptualize and treat popular culture as a key site of both ideological oppression and political agency—"Foucault and Gramsci between them account for the most productive work on concrete analysis being undertaken in the field" (71).

Gramsci's refined conception of hegemony laid the framework for cultural studies projects such as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) and Janice Radaway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), which examine the relations between cultural production and consumption in order to explicate the dialectic of resistance (agency) and incorporation (structure).⁵ More concretely, adopting Gramsci's "complex superstructures" as a "terrain of struggle" led this brand of criticism to adopt methods associated with sociological study—surveys, statistical analysis, participant observation, and institutional critique (Hall 69-71). On the other hand, Foucault's insights on power enabled a constructivist approach to representation, epitomized by the critiques of imperialism in Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and heteronormativity in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). The Foucauldian return to "concrete analysis of particular ideological and discursive formations, and the sites of their elaboration" privileged methods of

³ See Adorno and Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), especially the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception."

⁴ Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society* (1958), also charges T.S. Eliot for his elitism, citing his criticism's undemocratic strictures of "high art" and separation of art and social process with enforcing the oppressive class system.

⁵ Thomas Frank parody of cultural studies' "subversive mall walkers" in *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) is a implicit response to these works and their treatment of punk style and the Romance novel, respectively. Frank argues that cultural studies' inherent affirmation of market populism and consumer empowerment makes it an adjunct rather than antagonist to America's conservative business culture and, by extension, modern capitalism.

deconstruction, historicism, social analysis, and ideology critique (Hall 71). Moreover, Foucault's influence on the field reflects the move away from commodity culture critique (and its focus on class conflict and the logic of capital), a move that typified the rise of American cultural studies.

By the 1990s, British cultural studies had crossed the Atlantic and was a bona fide movement in America academia. The 1990 conference "Cultural Studies Now and in the Future" and its published proceedings *Cultural Studies* (1992), catalogued the expansion of the field's interests. From gender and sex to colonialism to technology and ecology, the range of topics and subfields (in addition to critical modes) was vast. This expansiveness was met by invectives from within and outside the field that charged cultural studies with meaning everything and nothing due to its lack of theoretical/methodological/disciplinary rigor. But reactionary efforts to give cultural studies established boundaries and trajectories—such as Cary Nelson's discipline criteria, including "engagement with Marxism, from Raymond Williams to Stuart Hall"—were continually eclipsed by cultural studies projects that looked very different than those that came out of Birmingham (qtd. in Leitch). Fredric Jameson's meditation on the conference and its publication, "On 'Cultural Studies'" (1993), explicates this conflict. In a possible reference to Nelson, Jameson argues that the struggle for the "rigorous formulation ... for the correct verbal rendering" of the cultural studies enterprise is both unimportant and unproductive (17). Most significantly, it betrays the historic specificity, new structural complexity, and possibility for social alliance that the engagement with the new social movements—"identity politics"—importantly entails (17, 25). Further, according to Jameson, cultural studies' resistance to positive "definition" constitutes its useful, agenda-setting potential. Of course, Jameson wants to rethink "groups, articulation and space" in terms of late capitalism rather than the intergroup struggle of identity politics, but his essay anticipates the range of transformations and translations cultural studies undergoes into the twenty first century (49).

Cultural Studies Today: The Global, Aesthetic, and New-New Left

Over the past decade, American critics have continued to reconfigure cultural studies to account for a number of auto-critiques and new concerns, including interdisciplinary specialization and academic labor in America. However, three interests have led to the most provocative and cogent developments of the field: globalization, aestheticism, and neoconservatism. In the volume *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Age of Globalization* (2007), Rob Wilson describes the "worlding" of cultural studies as a response to the oppressive force of globalization. In order to fulfill the political aims of this brand of cultural studies—"to prod, irritate, refigure, de-reify, and critique US-led Empire of neoliberal globalization"—critics proceed from a transnational perspective that traverses geographic, temporal, and disciplinary boundaries to make visible the process of "world-making" (211). In turn, postcolonial theory

and nation-based literature are foundational to this this mode of criticism. In fact, the transnational turn in cultural studies, according to co-editor Christopher Leigh Connery, is in large part a response to the problematic use of these theoretical and cultural works by earlier scholars: “cultural studies engagement with the global ... led to the hegemony of post-colonial studies as the primary lens through which globalization is understood” (8). In addition to the “postcolonial predicament,” during the acme of American cultural studies, Western cultural artifacts and a Western vantage point dominated critical accounts of globalization (Connery 11).

Louis Chude-Sokei’s essay from the volume typifies how transnational cultural studies reframes the problematic Western vantage point. It examines the American cowboy western as it was appropriated and “dubbed” by Jamaican music, vernacular style, and film in the late sixties and early seventies. The movement of the Wild West generic form, in turn, allows Chude-Sokei to investigate the political and cultural reconstruction of Jamaica after “independence.” Moreover, it allows him to investigate the conjunction of imperatives in global space: “the island found space within American allegories to navigate and explore the conceptual and economic meanings of the “West,” the “frontier,” the “border,” as well as various promises and challenges made by the relentless global and borderless technological signifying of America” (139). Ackbar Abbas and John Nguyet Erni’s anthology *Internationalizing Cultural Studies* (2005) similarly aims to “internationalize” North Atlantic dominated cultural studies “whose objects of and languages for analysis have had the effect of closing off real contact with scholarship outside its (western) radar screen” (2). They advocate “towards a [general] politics of knowledge and culture, which we believe is the major trajectory in Cultural Studies” rather than a plurality of forms of cultural criticism (4). To crudely summarize, these global cult studs believe that by incorporating non-Western cultural forms, the field’s productive political work of explicating configurations of knowledge and power can signify on a global scale, beyond cultural studies’ traditionally national or Anglocentric scope.

By contrast, in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (2004), Michael Denning argues that the era of cultural studies has come to an end with the sociopolitical paradigm shift from the Cold War “age of three worlds” (1945-1989) to our contemporary period of “globalization” (post-1989). For Denning, a global cultural studies characterized by representations from a plurality of geographic origins misses the point. The historic conditions that facilitated the “cultural turn” have passed.⁶ Globalization marks a new valuation of culture and cultural politics – perhaps most significantly, “mass culture has won. There is nothing else” (103). And our theorizing of popular culture does not sufficiently account for corporate

⁶ Denning argues that the historical conditions that facilitated the intellectual “cultural turn” were the emergence of the New Left in each of the three worlds as well as the contested proliferation of mass culture.

power, the global economy, and labor rights. In turn, Denning calls for a new conception of the spectrum of cultural forms based on the historic specificity of globalization.

Like Denning, Michael Berube is one of the leading proponents and detractors of cultural studies today. Also like Denning, he is interested in rethinking the field's theoretical framework, but to different ends. In the introduction to *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (2007), Berube sets out to reclaim literary studies for cultural studies. As opposed to the global camp's political drives, this brand of cultural studies emphasizes the importance of engaging formal and aesthetic critique.⁷ Therefore, the works of Williams and Bourdieu – critical debates between Marxism and formalism – are central and reflect the twofold nature of this movement. Firstly, Berube along with Jane Juffer and Laura Kipnis encourage critics to explicate aesthetic theory. Just as Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1978) deconstructs the art/social world binary and posits the work done by “bourgeois aesthetic theory,”⁸ criticism must take seriously the discourse and history of aesthetic theory. For example, how are aesthetic categories such as erotica and porn or the move from Kantian to contextual aesthetics complicit in regulatory power structures? Additionally, explicating aesthetic theory allows for the reflexive critique of criticism (and the critic) – a task that resonates with Barthes's ideological positioning and Jameson's historicizing.

The aesthetic camp's second and overlapping imperative is seemingly more radical: to practice a form of aesthetic criticism. Jonathan Sterne proposes a return to the familiar paradox of the non-instrumentalist theory of aesthetics. Sterne's sees culture's resistance to political service as potentially useful for left theorists. Likewise, he contends that criticism should not and cannot perpetually interpret a cultural activity's human energy, effort and creativity as an expression of a discrete politics (Sterne 99).⁹ Another example is Jane Juffer's account of how literary erotica's aesthetic value is circulated and

⁷ Berube frames the collection as a response to the late nineties “Return to Beauty” *Chronicle* essays and their attendant critiques of the single-mindedness of cultural studies (which go something like, cultural studies views culture as a form of social semiotics that can and should be used in the war against late capitalism, and consequently, it treats culture like a mere political instrument to the grave detriment of the canon, art, literary study, etc. The solution: aesthetics!). As Berube playfully summarizes in his discussion of “the Madonna business,” “it is one thing to map the politics of social semiosis, and quite another to say . . . whether the politics of social semiosis is danceable and has a good tune” (6).

⁸ In *Marxism and Literature* (1978), Raymond Williams claims that bourgeois aesthetic theory (the separation of art from the social world) “in concentration on receptive states, on psychological responses of an abstractly differentiated kind, it represents the division of labour in consumption corresponding to the abstraction of art as the division of labour in production” (Williams qtd. Berube 14). Conversely, Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art* (1996) examines the merits of Russian Formalism, advancing a conception of the separation of the cultural and social, in which the struggle of artists, writer and intellectuals in the cultural sphere represents the capacity of the critique of the economic and political realm.

⁹ This idea of noninstrumentality has also been central to lines of queer theory, such as Corey McEleney's scholarship on queer pleasure and play in Renaissance literature. Additionally, there are striking resonances between Sterne's argument and Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), in which Adorno argues that art's autonomy is the key to (modern) art's social character, namely, to be “the social antithesis of society” (8).

transformed at different sites. In a nuanced endorsement of aestheticism, Juffer suggests, “aesthetic claims open up a realm of possibilities that are not predictably contained by governmentality” (66)—ultimately, her study advances Foucault’s concept of “arts of existence,” aesthetics as the discourse of self-formation (77). Lastly and least abstractly, critics such as David Shumway and John Frow emphasize the need to make traditional high arts and literary texts the objects of cultural study, “the films of John Sayles and the plays of Robert Myers are examples of the kind of politically invested art that cultural studies has neglected ... [We] should be arguing more about what works we think are valuable and less about what pernicious effects other works may have” (Shumway 115).

Following the reflexive impulse that underwrites global and aesthetic cultural studies, the New-New Left is a branch interested in reviving and reevaluating what, if anything, is the field’s trademark: new epistemologies and political programs. Paul Bowman in *Post-Marxism Versus Cultural Studies: Politics Theory and Intervention* (2007) and Lawrence Grossberg in *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (2010) take on this challenge. Bowman argues that post-Marxist discourse theory, unlike cultural studies, does not account for Derrida’s insight that the institution is “an irreducibly and fundamentally textual matter” (172). Its practice of discursive deconstruction “does not adequately theorise the politics of its own institution” (174). While cultural studies is also deconstructive, according to Bowman, it offers a markedly different critique of politics because it does textual deconstruction, a form that acknowledges its own state as “a disciplinary object, a paradigm that organizes the way cultural research is designed, legitimated, and conducted” (17). In turn, cultural studies criticism is itself a site of political praxis. Building on this distinct strength of cultural studies, Bowman advocates a form of textual politics based on a “new interdisciplinarity” in which “disciplinarity” is a pivotal locus for intervention (208). In turn, this new strategy of intervention works to intervene in and through the language and powers it opposes, taking contemporary disciplinarity—marked by its disarticulation and conservative containment—as its ground zero.¹⁰

One of the leading international figures in cultural studies, Lawrence Grossberg shares Bowman’s interest in imagining a new cultural studies for the politically committed academic. But his project stakes a larger opponent than neoconservative disciplinarity. “Euro-modernity” is the adversary, and “the struggle for modernity” is where cultural studies must intervene through a renewed practice of “conjunctural analysis.” Euro-modern thinking assumes “context can be treated as a set of fractured and

¹⁰ His remarks on pedagogy, specifically teaching cultural studies, seem confused in light of his ostensible goal: political intervention in and through the university. He challenges the notion that “teaching can consciously educate others and that these others might somehow ‘do something’ with the knowledge cultural studies has given them” (191). While pedagogical (like textual) consequences are never certain, teaching seems to share theory’s political potential: the power of the contingent textual practice, a form of articulation and intervention.

relatively autonomous domains – economics, culture, and politics – even as they try to move beyond this assumption” (3). Grossberg’s impressive intellectual history of cultural studies models and proposes a solution to this thinking. Conjunctural analysis – revealing the contingency and contexts of lived, discursive, and material articulations – conceptualizes the field of power as relational, as opposed to “fractured” and “autonomous” spheres. So while conjecture affirms cultural studies’ key concepts (economy, culture, politics, and modernity) as well as its insistence on hegemonic struggle, it also indicates the need and means to rethink these concepts through a trans-institutional, epistemic, national, regional, disciplinary, and ontological conversation (293). “I do not know what this conversation will look like, and I do not know what the outcome will be. I do not know what the new university will be . . . but I do know that we have to begin imagining such possibilities” (294).

Conclusion

These three current modes of cultural studies are distinguished by their respective critiques of globalization, aesthetics, and intellectual neoconservatism, but they are unified in their conception of cultural studies as a performative and dialectical rather than prescriptive and stable practice, a meeting point that reveals why the questions *What is cultural studies? How is it defined, practiced, and used?* are themselves on-going and worthwhile inquiries:

I guess I also have to say, against definitions ... that I think we already know, somehow, what Cultural Studies is; and that “defining” it means removing what it is not ... Whatever it may be, it came into the world as a result of dissatisfaction with other disciplines, not merely their contents but their very limits as such. (Jameson 18)

As it did when it first emerged in the late 1950s, cultural studies continues to stand against apoliticism, ahistoricism, formalism, and disciplinarity in an effort to offer ways of being politically, culturally, and intellectually engaged in the struggle for new and better relations of power.

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