

## Series Foreword

### JMU Cultural Studies – Strategies for Struggling with the Obvious

As a matter of course, it was Stuart Hall who offered the most appealing digest of what cultural studies is all about. “Cultural studies,” Hall explained in an interview from the late 1990s, “are based on the supposition that it takes a lot of theoretical work to bring light into the darkness of the obvious.”<sup>1</sup>

Wistfully – and already somewhat retrospectively – Hall’s dictum articulated the central promise of cultural studies: the supposition that cultural forms and practices (especially everyday forms and practices) matter hugely – and that a clearer understanding not only of their weight but also of their volatility and transformability would enlighten the individuals enmeshed in their obviousness, providing them with a lever for unhinging the seemingly inalterable. Hard theoretical work might thus create a position and a strategy for successfully redefining the social and the political on the accessible terrain of the cultural.

The idea proved seductive. This was partly because cultural studies offered a tool of political empowerment which might work against and within the disempowering political situation created by authoritarian neoliberalism since the 1970s. Another reason for the startling success that cultural studies enjoyed in the last decades of the twentieth century (first in the UK and the USA, then in Europe and other parts of the globe) was the new purchase it seemed to provide for the faltering humanities. The result was an academic “cultural studies boom” of which Hall was tellingly sceptical.<sup>2</sup> Cultural studies – often fitted in as a new annex to language and literature departments – became standard fare in universities nearly all around the world.

About three decades after the boom, JMU Cultural Studies is setting out to reinvestigate the analytical approaches of the cultural studies tradition and retool them for the current moment. In the process, the bold hopes on which the cultural studies project of Hall and his contemporaries rested can perchance be revived. Indeed, we

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, “Ein Gefüge von Einschränkungen’: Gespräch zwischen Stuart Hall und Christian Höller,” in *Die kleinen Unterschiede: Der Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Jan Engelmann (Frankfurt: Campus, 1999), 99–122, 119. That the quotation comes from an interview which was conducted by an Austrian art scholar and activist – Christian Höller – and which exists only in German translation may be particularly apposite. The interview has not been published in English. The quotation above is our own re-translation from the German version of the interview.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 97–109. Here, Hall argues that “the explosion of cultural studies” certainly should not be regretted but still represents “a moment of extraordinarily profound danger” (107).

believe that the need for cultural studies – understood as a theoretically astute and critically acute endeavour of “bringing light into the darkness of the obvious” – has never been greater. While disembodied fragments of what Chris Barker terms the standard “language games”<sup>3</sup> of cultural studies (clustering around concepts such as “narrative,” “discourse,” or “identity politics”) have become commonplaces in mediatized political discourse, in the jargon of advertising, and even in determinedly right-wing rhetorics, we are simultaneously seeing a baffling resurgence of nationalist, essentialist, and decisionist ideologies in their most blatant form. This resurgence is coinciding with a long-anticipated, yet nevertheless surprising, configuration of crises: from global warming (yet quicker than feared by many) via the Covid-19 pandemic (more permanent than most would have thought) to Russia’s war against Ukraine (more brutal and irrational than could have been imagined), and the concurrent resurgence of Cold-War rhetorics (astonishingly eager on all sides). All of these developments and ruptures obviously play into, and to a large extent are being played out in, the domain of the cultural. This domain in turn seems to be entropically evolving into an ever more expansive and ever more complex network of articulations: an all-pervasive “virtual reality” or “metaverse” driven by the paradox of dissociating associations.

As a consequence, it has never been more necessary to “bring light into the darkness of the obvious,” and it has never been more difficult to do so. But is cultural studies up to the task? Can their originally inspiring neo-Marxist fusion of humanism and materialism define a new relationship to the provocations of the environment and the animal? Will they find a language to address the reality-bending dynamic of digital processing and networking, and thus the new power of a machine that will eventually emancipate itself? And will it be possible to push this endeavour of “engaged scholarship” beyond its roots in distinctly national (particularly British and American) discourses? Can there be transnational cultural studies – i.e., a form of cultural studies that might reclaim and redefine the realm of the global in the way in which cultural studies originally tried to reclaim and redefine the realm of the national?

JMU Cultural Studies, the new series of books that we are publishing with Würzburg University Press (WUP), will address these questions from a position that is closely aligned with the concrete teaching and learning environment that emerges from our location at Würzburg in combination with our cooperation with scholars and students from other parts of the world. The present first volume of the series emerges from seminars that took place at Würzburg University in the years 2020 und 2021. Through the support of the International Virtual Collaboration (IVAC) initiative of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), we were able to make a virtue out of the necessity of online teaching at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. In cooperation with our eminent Indian partner universities – Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), both located in New Delhi – Indian students could come on board to join our discussion and enable a genuinely

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 5th edition (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 4.

transnational framework of exchange. All the essays published in *Global Cultural Studies? Engaged Scholarship between National and Transnational Frames*, the first instalment in the JMU Cultural Studies publication series, emerged from these seminars. The present collection is also edited by a seminar participant.

We would like to close by underscoring our gratitude for the enthusiasm and energy invested by everyone involved in putting this initial volume together. We could not ask for a more intellectually adventurous launch of the publication series.

Zeno Ackermann and MaryAnn Snyder-Körber  
– series editors