

Afterword

Engaged Scholarship in Practice; or: How to Look Back into the Future

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I Intertwining the Local and the Global

It is stupid and arrogant to suppose that any of these meanings can in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance. To try to jump the future, to pretend that in some way you are the future, is strictly insane.¹

Critical thinking functions in never ending circles. Throughout the present volume, in which young scholars take a detour through theory to arrive at their own conclusions, cultural studies shows its cyclical nature as a discipline that cannot and must not ever become completely attached to anything. So, what have our authors found out about the possibility of global cultural studies? Is there one answer, or are there many contradicting ones? And what is at stake in formulating such an answer or answers? In my afterword, I would like to argue that our book offers not one clear message, but rather an authentic picture of where cultural studies is right now globally. Moreover, I will make a humble proposal as to where it could go.

Perusing the twelve essays making up this collection, one observation suggests itself to me with surprising clarity: There is a certain break in the methodology and contents of the essays, and this break seemingly depends on where the texts originated. While the case studies penned by our Indian authors tend to be rooted in a relatively firm consciousness of their positionality – local examples, for instance, are repeatedly brought up –, some of the texts produced by German contributors privilege a more global or transnational view. At the same time, global becomes theory and local becomes practice. While one should beware of generalizing – or worse, essentializing – I still believe that our book reflects a general trend that permeates cultural studies as an academic field: Cultural studies is done differently in different regions, drawing from the unique conditions at hand. With respect to our collection, it would be a mistake to draw strong conclusions or to privilege one approach over

¹ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 10–24, quotation: 15. Emphasis in the original.

the other. Rather, we should enquire about the reasons for these differences and their ultimate consequences for our discipline and its transnational ambitions.

A global alliance of cultural scholars is not only a possibility, but already a given reality, albeit one that is still in its beginning stages. What I consider the major moment of danger is not the creation of such an alliance, but rather its strenuous mission of finding common ground. Stressing voice and agency with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a theorist frequently referenced in this volume, the solution could be simple: to focus on whatever is most pressing and attack it relentlessly until progress is made.² This, however, is not in and of itself a complete mode of thinking. Let me instead formulate an alternative meta-methodology: one that does draw on the fundamental ideas of cultural studies and is already taking shape.

II On the Possibilities of Practical Optimism

If we understand cultural growth, we shall know that it is a continual offering for common acceptance; that we should not, therefore, try to determine in advance what should be offered, but clear the channels and let all the offerings be made, taking care to give the difficult full space, the original full time, so that it is a real growth, and not just a wider confirmation of old rules.³

One of the major points of contention outsiders have with the postmodern left, not only in the academic space, is its purported tendency towards a certain kind of exclusionary moral elitism. There is no need to deeply discuss viral and tired buzzwords such as “cancel culture,” which is in fact both a highly destructive misapplication of progressive thought and a potentially useful tool of a truly democratic culture, to see examples of this. As a field closely jointed with practical political work, cultural studies is an arena for engaged scholarship and, consequently, particularly vulnerable to ideological fights. One ought to remember Raymond Williams’s weighty words in “Culture is Ordinary” (1958): His cultural growth is about “offering,” not forcing, and it is about open minds instead of ideologically predetermined directions.⁴

Williams was not alone in foreseeing the dangers of elite-thinking. The picture that Stuart Hall paints concerning the dangers of institutionalisation in his essay “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies” (1999) is much darker. Hall’s anxieties, however, are productive ones: Instead of panning the new developments in the field, he critically embraces them because “dangers are not places you run away

² See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). 271–313.

³ Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 22–23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

from but places that you go towards.”⁵ This assertion is grounded in the clear vision of a constant core of cultural studies. No one has more clearly defined the evasive field than Hall, who characterizes cultural studies as a discipline that is attractive and productive “not just because of its sometimes dazzling internal theoretical development, but because it holds theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension.”⁶

Rather than simply serving as a political tool of whatever the zeitgeist demands, we ought to hold on to this conception of cultural studies as a field of continuous and ardent debate. Tension is uncomfortable and it is occasionally counterproductive. However, I believe, that it is also the only way forward for our discipline. We need yet more diversity: not just diversity in terms of ethnicity or religious belief or gender identity, but also diversity in relation to political opinions and basic ideas. A cultural studies that is no longer hungry for change in discourse has no reason to exist.

That change arises from the very tension, controversy, and conflict that tend to be actively discouraged in the conformist academic environments in which we often find ourselves. Making space for controversy also means to admit voices with which we might be uncomfortable. It means widening the topics we discuss. And it finally means addressing our own dogmas and interrogating the monuments we have built to our own values and methodologies. As Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler have admonished: “Cultural studies must constantly interrogate its own connection to contemporary relations of power, its own stakes.”⁷

To do so, cultural studies needs to rid itself of any illusion of standing on a moral high ground. It needs to courageously disconnect its scholarship from political projects that want to use it as a mere means to an end, and not as a method of investigating discourse and changing it for the better. Because, according to Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, “critical practice is not only determined by, it is responsible to, its situation,”⁸ we have to keep in mind that “these mutual interests do not in themselves make every ‘progressive’ project of cultural recovery and transformation an integral part of cultural studies itself.”⁹ To be sure, my argument is not intended as an attack on engaged scholarship. Rather, it represents a call for a more nuanced approach that is more democratically adventurous in its voices and agency, and yet also more ready to call out problematic or even false conclusions and discuss even deep discord productively.

One such departure from dogma could lie in taking evidence more seriously. Evidence-based critique has plenty of merits and ignoring those merits is not a winning strategy, neither in terms of finding truth nor in terms of facilitating successful

⁵ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 97–109, quotation: 107.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷ Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction,” in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1–22, quotation: 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

communication. This process could include, for instance, new approaches towards our field's relationship with capitalism. Do we, as Fredric Jameson puts it, "think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together"?¹⁰ This is just one topic out of many in which a changed basic assumption could lead to productive cultural analyses. Replacing a reserved cynicism with a pragmatically optimistic approach is the direction I would suggest.

In such an approach, the public must always be implicated. An accessible cultural studies, open to a wide range of voices, trusting the forces of the working class and what some might call "the masses," makes an incremental, ever-continuing progress viable. It puts the ultimate agency in the hands of the people, who then exercise their own influence on the process as they see fit. This is what thinking democratically ultimately means, if we take democracy as seriously as we like to assert. To come back to Williams one last time: "We should not seek to extend a ready-made culture to the benighted masses. We should accept, frankly, that if we extend our culture, we shall change it: some that is offered will be rejected, other parts will be radically criticized. And this is as it should be [...]. I, for one, do not fear this."¹¹

III

"Global Cultural Studies": A Concluding Proposal

Now, how does this proposal of a more open, incremental, and courageous field correlate with the opportunity of a global cultural studies? Limiting areas of application, as much as opinions, inevitably stalls possibilities for finding global voices. Therefore, cultural studies must continue to take an open and participatory approach. This can be achieved by building networks of local thinking on both local and global issues. The diverse inhabitants of such networks must be free to disagree and argue, united only in the basic aspects of methodology and aim. The ground rules could be fairly simple: Target whatever needs to be talked about locally with as much weight placed on local, involved voices as possible and only as much outside input as necessary. If this is implemented in an accessible fashion, what could ensue is a global community of local issues. Its pillars would include celebrating incremental progress over grand triumphs and diverse, authentic amateur work over the often scarcely readable work of a limited circle of professionals.

Thankfully, all of this is anything but a purely hypothetical musing. On the contrary, such a development showed itself everywhere around me while editing this book: both in the classic texts that the volume revisited and the new essays and projects that were developed. Cultural studies as a practice already seems to be evolving into what I have outlined. Now, the task ahead is to stay the course. This is an exciting challenge with the very real stakes of influencing global politics. Yet,

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), 47.

¹¹ Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 22.

while dreaming of a better world is tempting, we should also be careful not to overestimate our own reach. To invoke Stuart Hall one last time, all researchers in the discipline, including myself, would do well to remember that “there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics.”¹² The “intellectual modesty”¹³ that Hall espouses is a key component of incrementalism and our only way of avoiding frustration. Improvements in working on and with a discourse are necessarily almost always small. Working in cultural studies means committing to a slow pace of progress, piece by piece and step by step. If this book can be one such tiny step towards a more grounded, open, and participatory discipline, it has more than served its purpose.

¹² Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*