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What's the Matter With Cultural Studies?

The popular discipline has lost its bearings

By Michael Bérubé

In the spring, I was asked to participate in a plenary panel at the Cultural Studies Association (U.S.), and the opportunity led me to rethink the history of the field. The session's title was "The University After Cultural Studies." As is my wont on such occasions, I decided to take issue with the idea that the field has had such an impact on American higher education that we can talk about the university *after* cultural studies.

For what kind of impact has cultural studies had on the American university as an institution over the past 20 or 25 years? The field began in Britain in the late 1950s with a Marxist critique of culture by Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, as the British New Left broke with the Communist Party's defense of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Williams's ambitious and provocative book, *Culture and Society* (1958), reviewed the debate over the relationship of culture and society in Britain since the days of Edmund Burke. In the 1960s, Williams and E.P. Thompson redrew the map of British labor history, and in the 1970s, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies issued a series of brilliant papers on mass media and popular culture that culminated in the prediction of the rise of Thatcherism—a year before Margaret Thatcher took office. Since its importation to the United States, however, cultural studies has basically turned into a branch of pop-culture criticism.

Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order (1978), the Birmingham collection that predicted the British Labour Party's epochal demise, is now more than 30 years old. In that time, has cultural studies transformed the disciplines of the human sciences? Has cultural studies changed the means of transmission of knowledge? Has cultural studies made the American university a

more egalitarian or progressive institution? Those seem to me to be useful questions to ask, and one useful way of answering them is to say, sadly, no. Cultural studies hasn't had much of an impact at all.

I'm saying this baldly and polemically for a reason. I know there are worthy programs in cultural studies at some North American universities, like Kansas State and George Mason, where there were once no programs at all. I know that there is more interdisciplinary work than there was 25 years ago; there is even an entire Cultural Studies Association, dating all the way back to 2003. But I want to accentuate the negative in order to point out that over the past 25 years, there has been a great deal of cultural-studies triumphalism that now seems unwarranted and embarrassing.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, we heard (and I believed) that cultural studies would fan out across the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, inducing them to become at once more self-critical and more open to public engagement. Some people even suggested, in either hope or fear, that cultural studies would become the name for the humanities and social sciences in toto.

Lest that sound grandiose, I want to insist that there was, at the time, good reason to think that way. The period of theoretical ferment that began in the late 1960s and gained traction in the 1970s seemed to have reached the boiling point. In 1990, my first year as an assistant professor there, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign held a conference on "Cultural Studies Now and in the Future." The program included historians, media theorists, sociologists, anthropologists, and AIDS activists; and the theoretical terrain—over which cultural studies had held earlier skirmishes with deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, and, of course, in an epochal struggle, with Althusserians and neo-Gramscians—had lately been enriched by the arrival of Foucauldian historicism and queer theory. It really did seem plausible that cultural studies could be the start of something big.

I'm not saying that it has had no impact. Cultural critics like Marc Bousquet, Cary Nelson, Andrew Ross, and Jeffrey Williams have written indispensable accounts of academic labor in America, and each has been inspired, in part, by some of the best work in the cultural-studies tradition, the branch that analyzes the social

foundations of intellectual labor. But if you compare the institutional achievements of cultural studies with its initial hopes, I don't see how you can't be disappointed.

In most universities, cultural studies has no home at all, which means (among other things) that graduate students doing work in cultural studies have to hope they'll be hired in some congenial department that has a cultural-studies component. The good news on that front is that you can now find cultural-studies scholars working in anthropology, in critical geography, even in kinesiology. In "museum studies" and cultural ethnography, in the work of Mike Davis and Edward W. Soja on cities, and in analyses of West African soccer clubs or the career of Tiger Woods, cultural studies has cast a wide net. The bad news is that the place where cultural studies has arguably had the greatest impact is in English departments. And though people in English departments habitually forget this, English departments are just a tiny part of the university. Cultural studies may find some sympathetic receptions in some wings of some departments of modern languages, in communications, in education, in history, or anthropology. But it hasn't had much of an impact on sociology, at least not compared with cultural studies in Britain, where cultural studies engaged critically (and often caustically) with sociology from the outset.

I recently gave a talk arguing that the political blogosphere vindicated one of cultural studies' central beliefs—and rebuking the Robert W. McChesney-Noam Chomsky-Edward S. Herman model of mass media (all three of those influential theorists said at the outset of this decade that the Internet could not work as a progressive political force, because it was commercial). That is to say: Cultural studies has taught us—or has tried to teach us—that you don't know the meaning of a mass-cultural artifact until you find out what those masses of people actually do with it. The Internet may be dominated by commercial interests, but the liberal/left blogosphere appeared out of nowhere, largely as the result of the "netroots" work of ordinary men and women with nothing more than laptops, modems, and a desire to offer an alternative to cable news. After my talk, someone asked me, "But isn't that really more a question for sociology?" To which I replied, "Well, the questions of sociology shouldn't be considered alien territory for cultural studies." The situation is even bleaker if you

ask about cultural studies' impact on psychology, economics, political science, or international relations, because you might as well be asking about the carbon footprint of unicorns.

At the same time, I know you can't measure the impact of cultural studies simply in institutional terms. It's not a matter of whether there will ever be as many cultural-studies programs as there are women's-studies programs.

So let me proceed to throw some cold water on the intellectual, as distinct from the institutional, history of cultural studies in America. First and foremost, it has been understood, which is to say misunderstood, as coextensive with the study of popular culture. That is very much the fault of cultural-studies scholars: It is what we get for saying (rather insistently, as I recall) that cultural studies has no specific methodology or subject matter.

The result is that cultural studies now means everything and nothing; it has effectively been conflated with "cultural criticism" in general, and associated with a cheery "Pop culture is fun! " approach. Anybody writing about *The Bachelor* or *American Idol* is generally understood to be "doing" cultural studies, especially by his or her colleagues elsewhere in the university. In a recent interview, Stuart Hall, a former director of the Birmingham Centre and still the most influential figure in cultural studies, gave a weary response to this development, one that speaks for itself: "I really cannot read another cultural-studies analysis of Madonna or *The Sopranos*."

Finally, cultural studies has had negligible impact on the American academic left in a political sense. (I make this argument at greater length in my forthcoming book, *The Left at War*.) That is because much of the American academic left continues to subscribe to the "manufacturing consent" model, in which people are led to misidentify their real interests by the machinations of the corporate mass media. The point to be made in response is not that corporate mass media don't dupe people; on the contrary, they do it every day. The point, rather, is that work like Hall's on the ideological underpinnings of deregulation and privatization under Thatcher (which he called "authoritarian populism") shows that the situation is much more complicated than that propaganda model. The left's task would actually be easier if all it had to do was expose lies as lies. Instead, you have to do a great deal of groundwork in civil society to

try to forge an egalitarian response.

To this day, Hall's other work on race, ethnicity, and diaspora is routinely and reverently cited (and rightly so), even as his work on Thatcherism—and the challenge it poses to the intellectual left—is thoroughly ignored. *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (Verso, 1988), the collection that contains many of the essays on Thatcherism that Hall first wrote for *Marxism Today,* is out of print and has been for some time; and most major cultural-studies anthologies, even a volume devoted to him, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (Routledge, 1996), do not include any of the essays from *Hard Road*.

In an especially rich essay, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists"—in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988), edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg—Hall wrote: "The first thing to ask about an 'organic' ideology that, however unexpectedly, succeeds in organizing substantial sections of the masses and mobilizing them for political action, is not what is *false* about it but what is *true*." What, in other words, actively makes sense to people whose beliefs you do not share? Hall proposed that leftist intellectuals should not answer that question by assuming that working-class conservatives have succumbed to false consciousness: "It is a highly unstable theory about the world which has to assume that vast numbers of ordinary people, mentally equipped in much the same way as you or I, can simply be thoroughly and systematically duped into misrecognizing entirely where their real interests lie. Even less acceptable is the position that, whereas 'they'—the masses—are the dupes of history, 'we'—the privileged—are somehow without a trace of illusion and can see, transitively, right through into the truth, the essence, of a situation."

Does anybody on the contemporary American left actually operate that way? In the Britain of the 1980s, there were those who were quite foolishly willing to accuse Hall of betraying the left by proposing that it could learn from how Thatcherism constituted a hegemonic project. Today plenty of people on the left continue to believe that working-class conservatives are bamboozled by the corporate media into misidentifying their real material interests. False consciousness, after all, is what's the matter with Kansas.

As the late, great journalist and feminist Ellen Willis wrote in 1999, it's kind of amazing—or kind of depressing—how predictably the left reaches for such an explanation of the world: "When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, a wide assortment of liberals and leftists called for unity around a campaign for economic justice. Each time the right wins an egregious victory (as in the Congressional elections of 1994), dozens of lefty commentators rush into print with some version of this proposal as if it were a daring new idea. You would think that if economic majoritarianism were really a winning strategy, sometime in the past 18 years it would have caught on, at least a little. Why has it had no effect whatsoever? Are people stupid, or what?"

The left too often replies, "No, people are not stupid, they're just hornswoggled by Fox News on the right and distracted by college professors who obsess about race, gender, and sexuality on the left." Which is why Willis basically had to make the same critique all over again six years later, when, shortly before her untimely death, she wrote the essay "Escape From Freedom" as a response to the success of Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter With Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (Metropolitan Books, 2004).

Indeed, if there was one thing that Hall inveighed against above all others in his debates with his fellow leftists, it was economism, the favorite monocausal explanation of the left intellectual. "I think of Marxism not as a framework for scientific analysis only but also as a way of helping you sleep well at night; it offers the guarantee that, although things don't look simple at the moment, they really are simple in the end," Hall wrote in 1983. "You can't see how the economy determines, but just have faith, it does determine in the last instance! The first clause wakes you up and the second puts you to sleep."

I read that passage today and think: How often do we find ourselves ascribing disparate political events and cultural phenomena solely to neoliberalism—that is, to the evisceration of the social-welfare state and the privatization of social goods? That is not to say that neoliberalism is immaterial; it has dominated the political and economic landscape for 30 years, and its effects on higher education are palpable, baleful, and undeniable—the corporatization of

administration and research, the withdrawal of state financing for public universities, the enrichment of the student-loan industry. Indeed, Hall was writing on Thatcherism—and recognizing it correctly for the radical break it represented—just as neoliberal ideology was beginning to discover its powers.

But I want to ask, in a general way, whether cultural-studies theorists are starting from the fact of neoliberalism and then proceeding to the analysis, or whether the analysis simply concludes where it begins, with "It's the neoliberalism, stupid."

There seems to me all the difference in the world between those two approaches: The material base doesn't always determine the most influential ideas and cultural artifacts of the superstructure. As Hall argued, monocausal explanations have the advantage of simplicity. They just don't work very well as accounts of the world.

In 1996, in a scathing, freewheeling, and woefully under-informed critique of the field, Robert McChesney, the media theorist, asked, "Is there any hope for cultural studies?" No, he said emphatically, because cultural studies had gotten distracted by postmodernism and identity politics and had lost sight of the simple truth that the free market is a sham and that people are misled by the mass media. Enough cultural studies already—we had to get back to good old political economy! For, as McChesney doggedly insisted, "it is only through class politics that human liberation can truly be reached." I'm sorry to say that his arguments have carried the day in all too many left precincts of the university, and I'm even sorrier to say that McChesney's claim that cultural studies "signifies half-assed research, self-congratulation, farcical pretension" has been gleefully seconded by much of the mass media and underwritten by some work in cultural studies itself.

But I still have hope that the history of cultural studies might matter to the university—and to the world beyond it. My hopes aren't quite as ambitious as they were 20 years ago. I no longer expect cultural studies to transform the disciplines. But I do think cultural studies can do a better job of complicating the political-economy model in media theory, a better job of complicating our accounts of neoliberalism, and a better job of convincing people inside and outside the university that cultural studies' understanding of hegemony is a form of understanding with great explanatory power

—that is to say, a form of understanding that actually works.

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