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Cultural Studies

Paul Smith

It is sometimes hard to believe that cultural studies has been around for over fifty

-years—since before personal computing and the Internet, since before the collapse of the

Soviet Union and the onset of globalization, neoliberalism, and all kinds of austerity

-programs, since before gay marriage, since before the wearing down of public education in

both the United Kingdom and the United States, since before many of its current practi-

tioners were born. The field is actually old when measured by the momentous cultural

changes that it has witnessed. One telling measure of this might be the sheer distance

between today’s ubiquitous availability of pornography of all kinds and in all kinds of

places, and the prosecution of Penguin Books in the British High Court in 1960 for

obscenity. The publisher, Allen Lane, and Penguin Books were put on trial for publishing

D. H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover, a book about which the prosecuting counsel

famously asked whether one would want one’s wife or one’s servant to read it. That rhetor-

ical remark (and the mere fact that such a book could be prosecuted for obscenity) is a

symptom of the moment in the cultural history of the United Kingdom that gave direct

impetus to the first institutionalization of cultural studies. It will be recalled that the

Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was founded within the precincts of

Birmingham University, just four years after the Lady Chatterley trial, by Richard Hoggart,

star witness for Penguin’s defense, and that the bulk of his funding came from Penguin,

￡2,400 a year in gratitude for his testimony.

The birth of British cultural studies endowed it with a set of genetic deficits that it has

never managed, or perhaps been willing, to try to surmount. Indeed, changing circum-

stances (changing circumstances to which cultural studies always claimed to be able to

adjust) have tended to underline the fundamental weaknesses in the epistemology of

British cultural studies, such that we are now looking at a compromised and enfeebled

project. Ironically, many of the characteristics that I want to identify as essential -weaknesses

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proved quite congenial and helpful to the importation of cultural studies into the United

States starting in the 1980s. But the course of US cultural studies, I suggest, has been such

that it is now in a much better position to confront the circumstances and conditions of

contemporary culture than its British predecessor. To demonstrate what I mean, I will

renarrate the story of British cultural studies, a story that has admittedly been told many

times, not least by its own protagonists such as Stuart Hall. But I have taken a cue from

the fact that this story gets told so many times and in so many ways, and I’ve concluded

that it’s in the earliest iterations of British cultural studies that its essence is to be found.

This moment when one old sociocultural form (the British obscenity laws) furnishes the

means for the establishment of a new field (cultural studies itself) is remarkable in all kinds

of interesting ways—including, as Ted Striphas has suggested (2000), because it marks the

beginning of what turns out to be the chronic symbiotic relationship that cultural studies

seems to have had with the book publishing industry. But it is perhaps especially significant

because it exemplifies important elements of Britain’s classed culture, the very culture that

it was the avowed mission of CCCS to monitor and alter. In the post‐World War II context,

where the nature, role, and behavior of the British working classes were changing,

Hoggart’s personal aim—his whole social and cultural mission, really—was to reconsider

and recast the connections between particular class interests and specific cultural objects.

For him, both Lane’s publishing aims and the aims of the CCCS were about democratizing

culture and popular access to culture. Thus, for Hoggart, the logic behind institutional-

izing cultural studies, both in the academy and in book publishing, lay in the potential for

democratizing knowledge and learning.

But there was always a hint of a contradiction in Hoggart’s posture. His own most cel-

ebrated book, The Uses of Literacy (1957), is in many ways a deeply conservative one. While

it certainly has an open and realistic view of the kinds of texts on which working classes

exercised their literacy, and a well‐founded suspicion of the industrial massification of

popular culture, there is always a sense lurking in the background that literacy should

really be used for moral and intellectual betterment, as well as for the production of

authentic communal identity. Hoggart often sounds as if he is guided by his own particular

sense of the moral authenticity of organic class culture, a sense that is in its turn very

British, tracing its heritage back to Matthew Arnold and on forward to F. R. Leavis. That

kind of benevolent, pro‐working‐class project was always going to be impeachable some-

where along the line—as patronizing, condescending, or both.

Hoggart and CCCS did indeed end up effectively installing the working class and the

popular as reified objects of study rather than as organic components of a democratizing

movement. But more worryingly, this iteration of cultural studies turned out to be a

project that never escaped a familiar and chronic middle‐England, middle‐class supercil-

iousness about the working class and its values. The bourgeois culture that had relied

heavily on Arnold and Leavis for the articulation of the logic of its values was never likely

to comprehend or ultimately even empathize with the changing tastes of a class whose

economic identity was shifting and whose cultural identity was being remade by the media

and consumer culture around it in the decades following World War II. Some of the pit-

falls of this posture towards the working class and popular culture are to be glimpsed in a

book that characterizes early British cultural studies, even though it is not often noticed:

Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel’s The Popular Arts (1964). In what is essentially a school

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textbook, Hall and Whannel (who, as Colin MacCabe points out, dominated “the whole

institutional framework in which cultural studies developed in the 60s and early 70s”

[1992: 29]) try to take seriously cultural forms such as film and television, and they do so

through the lens of a decidedly left‐Leavisite position on mass culture, similar to Hoggart’s,

that insists on the validity of the cultural texts they study, while at the same time betray-

ing a faith in not just the democratizing function of cultural objects, but their humanizing

function as well. Their analysis of the depiction of sex on screen seems especially quaint at

this juncture: theirs is an almost prudish approach, calling for the need for a positive depic-

tion of sex and love, and evoking the working‐class morality of a D. H. Lawrence.

In the early days of cultural studies, Hoggart, Hall, and Whannel thus confront what is by

now an essentially outdated question about the place of “low” culture, and they tendentiously

champion such “low” culture in the name of democratizing what has been an entrenched

class‐based culture. In some ways, the most surprising thing about this strand of cultural

studies is how little it seemed to know about the similar kinds of work in other contexts;

notably absent is the work of the Frankfurt School with its stress on both the industrial and

the ideological aspects of mass culture. If Hall and Whannel define “the popular arts” as work

that derives from specific class experience, and is produced by people who have been privy to

such experience, the Frankfurt School’s understanding of mass culture is far less based in

individual experience or agency and recognizes instead the implication of mass culture in the

totality of social relations. The early cultural studies approach is in many ways much more

crude and simplistic, to the point that it is perhaps rather dignified when MacCabe calls the

CCCS project “an ethnography of the working class” (McCabe 1992: 29). To be sure, how-

ever, early cultural studies did attempt to turn working‐class experience into an object of

study, and if there is an ethnographic project it is a rather piecemeal one that nonetheless

leads later to some of the Centre’s most notable works, such as the collectively written

Resistance Through Rituals in 1976 and Paul Willis’s Learning to Labour (1977).

Cultural studies as a field begins with a dissatisfaction with, and suspicion of the existing

disciplines, and especially the disciplines of English and sociology. As Fredric Jameson

notes, “whatever it [cultural studies] may be, it came into the world as the result of dissat-

isfaction with other disciplines, not merely their contents but also their very limits as such”

(Jameson 1993: 18). It is all the more surprising, then, that in regard to the whole question

of mass culture and the low/high divide, British scholars knew little about the fields and

disciplines they were dissatisfied with, except for what they saw immediately around them:

in English, a Leavisite tradition of close reading and promotion of canonical value; in soci-

ology, a discipline still trying to find its way away from its complicity with literary and

philosophical study. Critical theory of the sort represented by the Frankfurt School was not

in their purview. Indeed, the absence of any apparent knowledge of, or any mention of the

Frankfurt School in early British cultural studies has still not been rectified in any substan-

tial way. This is an oversight that many have noted and bemoaned, not least Douglas

Kellner, who calls the absence of an overt relationship between cultural studies and critical

theory “the missed articulation.” Kellner notes the many similarities between the projects:

Like the Frankfurt School, British cultural studies observed the integration of the working

class and its decline of revolutionary consciousness, and studied the conditions of this

catastrophe for the Marxian project of revolution. Like the Frankfurt School, British cultural

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studies concluded that mass culture was playing an important role in integrating the working

class into existing capitalist societies and that a new consumer and media culture was forming

a new mode of capitalist hegemony.

Both traditions focused on the intersections of culture and ideology and saw ideology

-critique as central to a critical cultural studies. Both saw culture as a mode of ideological

reproduction and hegemony, in which cultural forms help to shape the modes of thought and

behavior that induce individuals to adapt to the social conditions of capitalist societies.

(Kellner 2002: 35)

I have great sympathy with Kellner’s view here. I would, however, draw out a few

aspects of the two “schools” which would render their articulation somewhat less of a per-

fect marriage than he would suggest. First, the attention of the Frankfurt School to the

longue durée of capitalist development, and indeed to history itself, is not even remotely

shared by cultural studies—and this, indeed, is one of the general weaknesses of cultural

studies as it rushes to privilege purely conjunctural analyses with almost no regard for

structural or organic analysis, nor anything that approaches historical analysis at all.

Second, the way that the method of Frankfurt School thinkers continually aspires to

dialectical expression is a matter of supreme indifference to cultural studies, and this per-

haps underscores the general discomfort that cultural studies exhibits and has chronically

exhibited towards “theory” in general and any theory that smells too strongly of the

Marxist tradition in particular.

These two weaknesses in early cultural studies seem to me to have everything to do with

the particular context of the genesis of cultural studies, in a way that is often overlooked.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the British left was undergoing a quite extensive set of

changes. Stuart Hall suggests that these changes, leading to the formation of what he calls

the “first new left,” were initially provoked by the Soviet quelling of dissent behind the

Iron Curtain, particularly with the suppression of Hungary in 1956. The relationships bet-

ween Western European left parties and the Soviet Union had already been quite fungible

and problematic, but the invasion caused widespread disenchantment among, and stern

condemnation from, the European left and caused such splits in most of the Western

European communist parties that it became common for some parts of the left to repudiate

the Soviet Union, communism, and Marxist thought all in one blow. That was certainly

the case for a large portion of the British left, and for Hall and many of his colleagues. As

Hall himself opines,

Marxist models were far too mechanical and reductive … On the wider political front, I was

strongly critical of everything I knew about Stalinism, either as a political system or as a form

of politics. I opposed it as a model for a democratic socialism and could not fathom the

-reluctance of the few Communists I met to acknowledge the truth of what was by then

common knowledge about its disastrous consequences for Soviet society and Eastern Europe.

(Hall 2010: 179)

This kind of position was not unusual and it was no doubt also subtended by recogni-

tion of other contemporaneous issues. For the British and French left, for instance, the Suez

Crisis was particularly important; as was the more general perception that in the postwar

years the working class, as the putative agent of radical opposition and revolution, was

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being weaned away from that role by postwar welfarism and lured by the increasingly

consumer‐oriented cultures of the capitalist nations. Hall’s retrospective look is, all the

same, symptomatic for the way it consigns the problems of that moment to the dustbin of

history. There is, it seems, no argument to be had about “the truth.” The temptation here,

of course, and a danger that really hasn’t been much heeded within cultural studies over

the last fifty years, is to uncritically take on the mantle of the New Left’s anti‐communism

as if it were the state of scientific truth about the Soviet Union, communism, and Marxism

generally. However, my claim is that the repudiation of Sovietism and the quasi‐permanent

suspicion of Marxism itself become important facets of cultural studies that will mark it

throughout its British history, right up to the present. Colin Sparkes (1996) offers a rather

unarguable mapping of how this suspicion manifested itself, and in regard to Stuart Hall

himself points out “there is little in his other writings of the [early] period to suggest

anything other than that, at this early stage in his career, Hall identified Marxism as an

obsolete and reductivist system of thought” (Sparkes 1996: 78).

Certainly, it would be a simple enough matter to follow throughout the history of

British cultural studies the antipathy to Marxism that Hall’s work largely validates.

What is perhaps a little more provocative is to suggest that Hall, his colleagues, and

many subsequent followers have in fact suffered from an even more fundamental antip-

athy—an antipathy to theory itself. This is what I want to suggest by way of this retro-

spective of the early history of cultural studies. It has been a cultural cliché for a long

while, of course, that the British intellectual hates theory and favors good old Johnsonian

empiricism instead; and in the context of British cultural studies the most spectacular

proof of that pudding is obviously E. P. Thompson, often credited as one of the forefa-

thers of cultural studies, writing on Louis Althusser’s “theoreticism” in The Poverty of

Theory, in which Althusser’s philosophy of history is brought firmly to the bar. Setting

the tone for decades of cultural studies followers, Thompson is enraged not only by

Althusser’s theoretical habits, but equally by his belief in the structural (or organic) logic

of historical process. In that latter sense, Thompson’s diatribe is consistent with the

founding logic of cultural studies: he is unwilling to countenance an objective logic of

history, but engages in a form of conjunctural analysis to which cultural studies has com-

mitted itself. The move in cultural studies generally towards a conjunctural analysis that

transcends Marxism and holds theory at arm’s length whenever possible is normally

made under the auspices of a claim about the demands of oppositional politics, where the

need to move away from all and any theories of social structures and to focus instead on

the analysis of specific conjunctural articulations is promoted and celebrated. The

political in that perspective is always to be seen opportunistically, and is understood and

treated as a function of very specific conjunctural circumstances, loosed from any logic of

articulation beyond the moment, and loosed, too, from any dialectical dependency on

historical or structural logic.

None of this is to say, of course, that early cultural studies never engaged in theoretical

work. Quite the contrary: it made a definite effort to do so in what Hall calls “a very un‐

British way.” But it is certainly true to say that it struggled to cope with what was

becoming an overpowering influx of theory in the first decades of the project. Hall is clear

about this difficulty in an astonishing paragraph in his essay, “Cultural Studies and its

Theoretical Legacies,” which begins:

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I want to suggest a different metaphor for theoretical work: the metaphor of struggle, of wres-

tling with the angels. The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not

that which you speak with profound fluency. I mean to say something later about the aston-

ishing theoretical fluency of cultural studies now. But my own experience of theory—and

Marxism is certainly a case in point—is of wrestling with the angels—a metaphor you can

take as literally as you like. (Hall 1996: 265)

This essay, as intellectually unguarded a piece as Hall ever published, continues in this

vein, stressing the essential difficulty of working with theory. More recently, David Morley,

looking back at his time at the CCCS, uses exactly the vocabulary of struggle to describe

the Centre’s dealings with theory (Morley 2013: 839). Indeed, there remains a history of

the Centre still to be written that would track its successive difficulties with, and mis-

recognitions of various theoretical frames. It is perhaps not especially surprising that

theory should be made so marginal, since a central ideology of the Birmingham School was

that theory ought not to be produced, but only used, in a kind of bricolage, as and when

necessary. This approach was initially celebrated by the U.S. importers of cultural studies,

for whom the eclectic, tool‐box approach suited perfectly their needs; as we see, the legacy

of anti‐theory even within what constitutes theory has had repercussions on the shape and

form of contemporary examples of cultural studies.

One significant and even exemplary theoretical casualty of this approach is the work of

Antonio Gramsci—a name that unhappily has come to be almost synonymous with

cultural studies itself. The examination of Gramsci’s work that Stuart Hall led in the

1980s drew mostly on Gramsci’s notions of hegemonic negotiation and produced a brand

of Gramscianism that was designed to suit the analysis of a particular conjuncture—

namely that of an emergent Thatcherism and a British left that seemed increasingly com-

mitted to a position of fighting retreat. But this did serious injustice to Gramsci’s thought.

For Gramsci, conjunctural analysis could only ever be a provisional and even ephemeral

strategy, and should always be seen in a dialectical relationship to what he calls “organic”

movements and structures. It’s important, Gramsci says, to distinguish

organic movements (relatively permanent) from movements which may be “conjunctural”

(and which appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental). Conjunctural phenomena too

depend on organic movements to be sure, but they do not have any far‐reaching historical

significance … Organic phenomena on the other hand give rise to socio‐historical criticism,

whose subject is wider social groupings. (Gramsci 2000: 201)

As Aksikas and Andrews have pointed out (2014: 20–1), Gramsci deplores exactly the

tendency that becomes a constitutive habit for cultural studies: a “common error in

-historic‐political analysis,” Gramsci says, is the “inability to find the correct relation

-between what is organic and what is conjunctural. This leads to presenting causes as

-immediately operative which in fact only operate indirectly, or to asserting that the

immediate causes are the only effective ones. In the first case there is an excess of

-‘economism’… in the second, an excess of ‘ideologism’” (Gramsci 2000: 201).

The revisionist version of Gramsci’s theoretical work that cultural studies has been ped-

dling for so long is born out of the genetic weaknesses of the field and yet is commandeered

into service as exactly a central theoretical guarantee within it. Aside from the cost to

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Gramsci’s reputation, the use of his work in cultural studies as a theoretical guarantee for

a merely conjunctural politics very obviously pays the price of excess “ideologism” while

paying little attention to (indeed, simply repudiating) any “economism.” This preference

for the conjunctural is, of course, justified by the need for theory and analysis to be flexible

and nimble in order to adjust to immediate conditions and concerns. In the process of

importing cultural studies into the United States, this flexibility and eclecticism were

major selling points. There certainly has been no shortage on either side of the Atlantic of

cheerleading statements that render those characteristics as essential to cultural studies.

But this determined posture, to always be ready to adjust to immediate conditions, can

easily topple over into superficiality, where the conditions and determinations of the

-conjuncture are no longer properly considered. Indeed, when those conditions have been

produced by and for the interests of the dominant classes, then accepting them as a given

in the name of reality is tantamount to ceding the field to the enemy. For instance, early

cultural studies did understand the way that postwar compromises (including welfare state

provisions) had defanged the working class and produced a decline of revolutionary con-

sciousness and class solidarity. But the tendency then was to treat those conditions as done

and irrecoverable. New agents, new assumptions, new questions, and new solutions had to

be sought in the name of realism or of tackling the world as it is now. The problem here is

not so much with the political will embodied in such a position, but more with the aban-

donment of any sense of a dialectical historical logic; or to put it in another way, the

fetishization of the conjuncture and of the logic of contingency to the detriment of a more

rigorously structural and historical analysis.

It might seem that I am flogging a dead horse to be rehearsing once again this history

of British cultural studies, particularly since on one level cultural studies is fully aware of

all the characteristics I am describing; Stuart Hall in particular has done much to describe

and explain them (see, for instance, Hall 1980 and 1996). However, in the name of a

purely conjunctural politics, most cultural studies practitioners choose to see these charac-

teristics as strengths, whereas I am calling them weaknesses. So while it might seem a

shade tedious to be rehashing these arguments, and while many of the points I have been

making are hardly original, I am trying to lay out a set of characteristics that makes the

case that cultural studies in its British cast has many intellectual and political problems,

most of which were there from the beginning as what we might call genetic deficiencies

and which have largely remained as permanent features. The field bears the marks of its

own genesis and has significantly failed to erase some of them and drastically failed to

exploit some of the others.

At the moment when cultural studies was imported into the United States, around the

late 1980s, its constitutional characteristics were already quite fixed and apparent. The

field had grown out of the kind of matrix I’ve been describing, producing its most

significant works in the years immediately prior to its U.S. reception—the work done on

youth and subcultures, like Resistance Through Rituals (Hall and Jefferson 1976); lots of

collective work on crime and the media in the 1970s, which led to the quintessential

cultural studies opus, Policing the Crisis (Hall et?al. 1978); and still more collective work on

media and ideology, such as Culture/Media/Language (Hall et?al. 1980). The constitutive

characteristics of this run of works can be readily enumerated: a rather vague and -sometimes

even condescending and class‐inflected pro‐popular, pro‐democratizing urge; a -disaffection

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with existing disciplines, and both their procedures and their ambit; an emphasis on

cultural texts, media, and consumption as components of dominant ideologies; a chroni-

cally anti‐Soviet (or anti‐communist) politics that readily carried over and/or evolved into

a general suspicion of Marxism; a general distaste for theory and theoretical production;

and an abhorrence of any attempt to codify a methodology for the field. All these charac-

teristics together seem to me to have been subsequently responsible for what I have referred

to elsewhere as the thematizing of cultural studies;1 that is, the production of a field of

knowledge whose relation to methodology is so loose that coherence can be lent to it only

by way of some topical or thematic ordering. In the case of post‐1980s cultural studies in

Britain, the prevalent themes were perhaps race and ethnicity (although as the field entered

the twenty‐first century, the emphasis shifted to the cultural and creative industries). This

topical approach stemmed from what Hall (1980: 63) called the “culturalist” strand of

cultural studies. This strand, which Hall himself dubs “humanist” in its orientation,

developed almost unchecked and indeed became dominant in cultural studies and both

facilitated and enabled the thematizing development.

The problem here is not the fact of concentrating on this theme or that topic, on race

and ethnicity or on some other theme; rather it is the abnegation involved in thematizing

a whole field of inquiry. Once the field has defined its methodology as opportunistic,

eclectic, and not only deliberately uncodified but perhaps essentially uncodifiable, then it

cannot be methodology that guides the field, but only its object. That is, as an intellectual

and practical project, cultural studies can only justify itself in terms of the topics that it

approaches. It becomes willy‐nilly a thematically organized area of study where the choice

of the specific topic or theme comes to be more important than the choice of method or

procedure.

Of course, many of the characteristics I’ve focused upon so far, along with this thematiz-

ing of cultural studies, actually proved quite congenial to the U.S. academic market in the

1980s and quite helpful for the importation of a cultural studies brand into the United

States. “It is one of the ironies of history, one of Hegel’s ruses of reason,” says Colin

MacCabe, “that at the moment in the early 80s when the project of the Birmingham

Centre expired in the face of working class support for Thatcher, it was reborn in the

United States” (1992: 25). MacCabe’s implication here is certainly not that British cultural

studies suddenly rediscovered a working‐class constituency in the United States! It is the

case, however, that cultural studies arrived in the United States at a moment that afforded

it a generally sympathetic academic hearing, as it joined a whole raft of intellectual trends

across the Atlantic to the United States, most of them traveling under the flag of “theory.”

It is a little ironic that cultural studies was included under that heading, given its general

antipathy to theory, but it was perhaps the tendency in cultural studies to refuse to privi-

lege any particular theory that allowed it to travel unchallenged. In his account of this

moment of importation MacCabe’s suggestion about how and why cultural studies could

be imported so readily into the United States is very similar to what I want to point out

here. Cultural studies appeared to be appropriate grist for what was fast becoming an

American academic mill obsessed with “theory” of all kinds.

The importing of “theory” was done largely by way of U.S. literary departments

(English, modern languages, and comparative literature), but many other disciplines also

experienced a theoretical influx and a “cultural turn” driven by that theory (anthropology,

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sociology, history, and others). The British cultural studies that traveled with that theory

encountered very different soil to that which it had known in Britain. First of all, the

British wariness of theory itself was totally absent from this wave of enthusiastic importa-

tion. In addition, the particular sociocultural contexts from which British cultural studies

grew differed greatly from the U.S. context. The experience of class, for instance, was not

replicated, nor indeed was the history of race and ethnicity the same for the two countries.

Perhaps the only shared conditioning was a certain anti‐Marxism, or at least a suspicion of

Marxism. Though it could be argued that Marxism was in fact much less of a bugbear to

the U.S. academy than it appeared to be for British cultural studies (having found its way

in to American academic discourse in many guises and forms), nonetheless a suspicious and

skeptical view of Marx and Marxism has chronically characterized U.S. intellectual life.

The appearance of British cultural studies in the American academy actually begins as

an open assault on Marxism, as we can see by taking a particular snapshot of how cultural

studies was imported. The most significant events in the importation were the publica-

tion of two mammoth anthologies, both products of conferences at the University of

Illinois, Urbana‐Champaign, in 1983 and 1990 respectively and both edited by Lawrence

Grossberg and Cary Nelson (joined by Paula Treichler for the second), who were to

become prominent figures in the initial formation of the cultural studies landscape in the

United States. The gist of the first of these anthologies, Marxism and the Interpretation of

Culture (Grossberg and Nelson 1988), is given in the title, but it comes as no surprise that

the burden of both the conference and anthology is to depict a Marxism in definitional

and indeed existential difficulty, inadequate for the task of confronting contemporary

realities: “the problem for Marxism is … on the one hand to deterritorialize its own

discourse in response to changing historical realities; and on the other hand to reterrito-

rialize itself in order to constitute that very response” (Grossberg and Nelson 1988: 11).

This challenge to Marxism apparently appears via the need provoked by the cultural

realm, the need to address immediate realities, and to jettison outmoded ways of thinking.

On cue, the collection proceeds to sketch out the failure of Marxist theory to meet the

challenge it supposedly faced.

If this first conference anthology does the job of clearing the ground, it is left to the

second anthology to displace Marxism from prominence and replace it with a smorgasbord

of “theory” and theoretical speculation on culture. This second volume properly announces

the achieved arrival of cultural studies into the United States, and its ambit and cast of

characters went a long way to defining the field itself and what it stood for. The version of

cultural studies heralded by this second anthology seems to be entirely happy with all the

characteristics of British cultural studies that I have been pointing to and the editors’

introduction dutifully repeats all the shibboleths, as do many of the individual contribu-

tions. But especially congenial to both the editors and many of their contributors is the

uncodified methodological posture of cultural studies, a characteristic that quickly

becomes an article of faith for American cultural studies: “Cultural studies has no guaran-

tees about what questions are important to ask within given contexts or how to answer

them; hence no methodology can be privileged or even temporarily employed with total

security and confidence, yet none can be eliminated out of hand” (Grossberg, Nelson, and

Treichler 1992: 2). The future of American cultural studies as a field is thus absolved from

elementary intellectual tasks and obligations in one fell swoop.

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If we think of this moment in Urbana‐Champaign as the moment when cultural studies

actually arrives into the United States, it’s clear that its crystallization forms around one of

the principal elements of what I have been calling the genetic deficiencies of British

cultural studies—namely, its agnostic posture towards theory. That version of cultural

studies has found plenty of cheerleaders and mouthpieces over the years since 1990 in the

United States, many of them leaning almost hagiographically on the word of Stuart Hall.

But the context of American cultural life, and indeed of the intellectual climate in the

United States, was and is fundamentally different from the British matrix. In my view

there are two essential critiques with which cultural studies was faced after its entry into

the United States which both underscore those differences and allow American cultural

studies to become more fungible and less intellectually simplistic.

First, the wave of theoretical importation of which cultural studies was a part actually

enabled a questioning of cultural studies that, in my view, the British branch still has not

heard, even today. That questioning was essentially about the role of critique and the posi-

tions from which an intellectual and political project could be launched. This kind of

critique is exemplified for me by Adam Katz’s book, Postmodernism and the Politics of Culture

(2000), where cultural studies is put to the sword for the way that its logic of inquiry is

limited to a mimicry of its object. Katz argues that cultural studies eschews the possibility

of producing a politically accurate critique of contemporary culture because as a practice

it is modeled on its object (in this case, postmodern culture, in Katz’s language) and

because it agrees in advance to share the values and logics of its object. Katz’s argument,

conducted through a series of brilliant assaults on the logics of a whole array of cultural

studies texts, readily aligns with what I suggested earlier about conjunctural analysis and

the tendency of such analysis to accept as a given the conditions of the conjuncture. The

result is that cultural studies cannot in the end subject its object, however opportunisti-

cally it is chosen, to a structural critique and is therefore doomed to be an ideological

variant of its own object.

Second, once it was imported into the United States, cultural studies had immediately

to grapple with the question of institutionalization. For a very long time, just as American

cultural studies kept on constituting itself by prolonging the very question “what is

cultural studies?”, the field was nevertheless becoming institutionalized—evidenced by a

whole array of academic programs at both graduate and (importantly) undergraduate

levels; by the establishment of a professional organization, the Cultural Studies Association;

and by the continued symbiosis with the book publishing trade. The very fact of U.S.

institutionalization seemed to infuriate the disciples of the British branch and was

-condemned by Hall himself a number of times. The grounds for that kind of disapproval

are related to the antipathy of British cultural studies to theoretical or methodological

“codification,” which an American cultural studies has tended on the whole to retain, even

as U.S. cultural studies degree programs and national organizations have proliferated.

Embedded in this anxiety about institutionalization, I would suggest, is a kind of

-malfunction of the cultural studies imaginary. If, the argument goes, cultural studies is

institutionalized, it will lose its flexibility, its eclecticism, its free‐form engagement with

the conjuncture. But of course, the other side of institutionalization is empowerment and

scholarly legitimation. The anti‐institutional posture of British cultural studies is nothing

more than a kind of anarchic narcissism that, if successful, condemns cultural studies to

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the status of ephemerality and opportunism. In any case, by now the question of institu-

tionalization has been settled by default: there are now all manner of cultural studies

-programs all over the world. Even some of the major figures in the field have now come

around to suggesting that the fact of institutionalization and disciplinarity is both a given

and a boon. Graeme Turner, for example, having once avowed his attachment to the

-free‐form and anti‐disciplinary version of cultural studies, now says that that position’s

“flimsiness is revealed … and the affectation is not without significant, and I would argue

deleterious, consequences” (Turner 2012: 8).

These two critiques are not the only signs that American cultural studies has -transcended

its British ancestry and is now in a position to be the more viable enterprise of the two.

British cultural studies has been turned, first, into a casualty of the British government’s

cultural and educational policies when the iconic Birmingham program was forced to close

down; and subsequently, it has also been transformed into something like an instrument of

those same policies, as the field has been retooled as an attractor for overseas student

tuition fees and blackmailed into providing quasi‐vocational training for the cultural and

creative industries. At the time of writing, it certainly seems that the American context

holds the greater promise as the site for the emergence of a renewed version of cultural

studies, one not bathed in the old‐fashioned homilies of the British “New Left” of the

1950s and, ironically enough, one more attuned to the realities of today’s sociocultural

context! Even if the scenarios in which American cultural studies finds itself right now are

not entirely auspicious (the price of austerity is being deeply felt pretty much everywhere

in the American academy right now), that fact should be taken as a call to arms rather than

as a sign of defeat.

Indeed, in this moment of neoliberal austerity and neoconservative ignorance, I fre-

quently have cause to recall the appeal that I and three colleagues made even before cultural

studies had been fully imported into the United States, at a time of another seemingly

intractable political situation—the Reagan years. Our article, “The Need for Cultural

Studies” (Giroux et?al. 1984), thought to see in cultural studies a way of recognizing and

clarifying the material struggles within universities and colleges over the stakes of

knowledge and knowledge production. Facing what was then the still incipient or inchoate

regime of neoliberalism, we saw cultural studies as the proper vehicle for resistance to the

enclosure of the university as a site for the reproduction of capital, as well as the entrepre-

neurial logic of research and education that we find so thoroughly entrenched in higher

education today. While those kinds of struggles have arguably become harder in the

ensuing years, the university remains a crucial site of struggle; indeed, its importance

increases all the time. What I have called before the “phantom limb” of cultural studies

(Ross and Smith 2011: 246)—its desire to be politically activist—must surely be made

more substantial. There are signs that American cultural studies is beginning to define its

political stakes better than it has before, and certainly beyond the identity politics with

which it was associated in the past. Some of those stakes are necessarily in the university,

but cultural studies is now also quite closely allied and aligned with many oppositional

social movements, from Occupy to the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions)

movement. And there are signs, as Marcus Breen has pointed out (2015), that cultural

studies may be becoming the preferred institutional and intellectual home of the increas-

ingly large and important teaching precariat in the United States, and more and more as a

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venue for scholars whose interdisciplinary effort is not necessarily in the van of identity

politics or hobbled by the standard disciplines.

My general claim here, that cultural studies in its U.S. variation is now in a position to

do things that the genetic deficiencies of British cultural studies actually inhibited from

the start, will not please everybody. Stuart Hall frequently expressed his disapproval of

what cultural studies had become in the United States and even some of his last work con-

tinues with that complaint (see Hall 2013). And that tradition is carried on when David

Morley suggests that the kinds of arguments I have put forward before and am now mak-

ing here “point towards [what] would be the death, rather than any kind of renewal of

what I think cultural studies ought to be” (Morley 2013: 839).2 But for the reasons I have

sketched out here, the trajectory of cultural studies in the specific context of the United

States allows it to move beyond the weaknesses of British cultural studies and it should not

be afraid to expel the somewhat stuffy air of its British forebears.

Morley’s comment, and Hall’s complaints, are to be found in a special issue of the journal

Cultural Studies which offers a series of interviews from 2011 with people who attended the

CCCS in Birmingham or were closely associated with it—from Hall himself and well‐

known figures such as Paul Gilroy and John Clarke, to other less well‐known but impor-

tant contributors. There are, of course, many different views expressed among these

interviewees as they look back at the Centre, but the image of cultural studies that emerges

is not far from the one I have been painting in this argument. The incessant carping about

the dangers of “theory,” in particular, is well represented. Amidst this tiresome repetition,

however, is also a salutary reminder of the Centre’s commitment to, and cultivation of

-collaborative writing and research. Almost everyone who is interviewed stresses how much

of the work done at the Centre was done collectively. This is one characteristic quality of

British cultural studies that has not fared very well in the intervening years, and it is

-certainly something that did not survive its importation to the United States, where schol-

arship is most frequently an individualized endeavor. This is perhaps one aspect of the

Centre’s work that it would be good to revive in the American context, as part of an effort

to set a new agenda that extends and surpasses British work.3

But a much more important part of mapping out such a new agenda would be a compre-

hensive reconsideration of the commitment to purely conjunctural analysis that cultural

studies has chronically made. It seems to me that such a reconsideration would also entail

adopting a much less sniffy, much less censorious attitude towards “theory.” The conjunctural

approach that cultural studies has tethered itself to has to be seen for what it is: anti‐theoretical

(maybe even anti‐intellectual) and, as I have suggested, also anti‐Marxist in motivation.

One can perhaps see how to move beyond this intellectual impoverishment by trying to

make up for the lost or missed articulation with the Frankfurt School. There is no room

here to elaborate much on this, but it is worth noting that the agenda that Max Horkheimer

set out for the Frankfurt School at its very start, back in 1930, not only expresses the best

aspirations of cultural studies but has both a sharpness of focus and a breadth of vision that

cultural studies should share. The task for a critical project, he says, takes up “the question

of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychological development of

its individuals and the changes within specific areas of culture to which belong not only

the intellectual legacy of the sciences, art and religion, but also law, customs, fashion,

public opinion, sports, entertainments, lifestyles, and so on” (Horkheimer 1989: 33).

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There are ways in which contemporary cultural studies might want to thicken that

agenda, add to it, or adjust its terms here and there; but most importantly Horkheimer is

proposing that it is a necessary project to investigate the fundamental connection between

political economy and all the epiphenomena of sociocultural life. Far from a simple con-

junctural analysis, this would necessarily be a dialectical analysis—one that recognizes the

necessary conditioning of any conjunctural element by structural and historical forces. One

of the first places to begin the articulation of this missed connection is through the kind

of work I’ve done here, which explores the historical forces which have given us the forms

and modes of cultural studies we currently have today. A different account of cultural

studies than the one I have offered here would be needed to track this dialectical encounter

of structure and history across the various other national contexts within which it has

taken root over the past thirty years. To attend to the movement from British to U.S. acad-

emies is not to ignore the way cultural studies in Canada, or Australia, for example, has

generated distinct foci and modes of critical practice, refracted through the particularities

of their political economies, colonial histories, racial and ethnic differences, and so on.

Rather, the narrative I’ve offered of the transition of cultural studies from the United

Kingdom to the United States constitutes an account of the dominant trajectory of the

field and a trajectory that, by virtue of the hegemonic power of the Anglo‐American

-university system, continues to shape development in academic systems far afield.

Notes

1 This paragraph draws on and quotes from a more methodological (theoretical) coherence in

longer argument about Hall’s work that I cultural studies. He does not appear to notice,

develop (Smith 2001) around an essay of his however, that the anthology argues primarily for

(Hall 1992). the use of the Marxist tradition; no doubt symp-

2 In the course of this interview, Morley discusses tomatically, he neglects to mention Marx at all.

the past and future of cultural studies, and his 3 One of the few collaborative efforts I know of

views present many of the characteristics of in American cultural studies was a project run

British cultural studies that I have been calling by graduate students in the Cultural Studies

weaknesses. He shows himself especially PhD program at George Mason University,

dubious about “theory.” Interestingly, he dis- where I work. Their project on the Hummer

cusses the anthology I edited, The Renewal of vehicle was published as a book of essays

Cultural Studies (2011), rubbishing its call for (Cardenas and Gorman 2007).

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