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## CHAPTER 2

### Cultural Studies and Deconstruction

Gary Hall

## BIRMINGHAM IS DEAD — LONG LIVE BIRMINGHAM

Deconstruction is . . . on the one hand, a movement of overturning or reversal of the asymmetrical binary hierarchies of metaphysical thought (one/many, same/other . . . center/periphery . . .), in such a way as to register the constitutive dependence of the major on the minor term; on the other, a movement beyond the framework delimited by these terms . . . to an always provisional suspension of their force. This suspension operates by means of new, provisional concepts . . . (*différence, pharmakon, hymen, archiécriture*) and ‘which can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics’. (Frow 2005: 71; citing Derrida 1981: 43)

#### Deconstruction – it's just so September the 10th!

Although I work and teach in a media, communications and cultural studies department, speak at cultural studies conferences, and publish in cultural studies books and journals, what I'm really interested in and what I think I'm doing a lot of the time is deconstruction. If I've sometimes found it necessary to keep this to myself, it's partly because, well, let's face it, there aren't too many jobs around for people who 'do' deconstruction these days – at least not in cultural studies in the UK. But it's also because cultural studies tends to have a rather negative and even hostile attitude to deconstruction, at the moment anyway. You know how the argument goes: deconstruction is too theoretical, too self-reflexive, too concerned with producing texts about other texts rather than real-life empirical, ethnographic or experiential issues, while the language it uses is too complicated and too full of jargon to be understood by anyone other than a university-closeted elite. Indeed, the 'post-theoretical' sense of political urgency that

has permeated cultural studies over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, and which has only increased in intensity in the wake of the protests for global social justice in Seattle and the events of September 11, has led to some serious doubts being expressed regarding the relevance of deconstruction to cultural studies full stop. Deconstruction has frequently been censured for failing to provide an alternative left politics – in fact, for lacking any obvious political agenda whatsoever. What's needed today, it's maintained, is not more theory but more social, political and economic analysis.

Now it seems to me that this is a shame. It's a shame because for cultural studies to attempt to be *more political* in this way is not necessarily for cultural studies to be particularly political at all. Indeed, one of the things I want to convey with this chapter is that, while cultural studies habitually perceives (re)turning to politics and the 'real' as a political thing to do, it's frequently not (and paradoxically enough, it is precisely the kind of emphasis that's currently being placed on a certain understanding of what it is for cultural studies *to be political* that's largely responsible for this). But it's also a shame because this is something deconstruction can help cultural studies to understand. Deconstruction can be of great assistance to cultural studies when it comes to thinking through some of the problems and paradoxes in its complicated relationship to politics and the political. That said, I have to admit the situation hasn't exactly been helped by the way in which the majority of those associated with deconstruction have, in turn, tended to condemn cultural studies almost out of hand, because of both what they see as its lack of intellectual rigour and its rather simplistic ideas around deconstruction – with the result that cultural studies gets to keep on regurgitating more or less the same clichés about deconstruction without ever really being challenged. So let me try to go some way towards addressing this state of affairs with a quick discussion of a few cultural studies myths about deconstruction.

#### ❖ Deconstruction fails to provide a positive alternative politics and is therefore conservative.

It's certainly fair to say deconstruction *does not* provide a politics, a political programme or even a political theory as such. That's because these concepts are all part of the metaphysical tradition deconstruction is trying to understand. For deconstruction to satisfy the demand to *be political* in a way those who make such a demand could recognise, it would have to adhere to the kind of metaphysical thinking deconstruction wants to interrogate and exceed. Granted, this might finally result in deconstruction

being perceived by many of its supposedly more political critics as *political enough*. Yet this would be the case *only* to the extent that deconstruction *did* adhere to metaphysical concepts of the political (of action, activism, revolution, social justice and so on), and *did not* challenge, question or otherwise say anything radical about them.

Deconstruction – even if I restrict myself to that version which is associated with the name 'Jacques Derrida' (there are many others) – has nevertheless addressed any number of clearly recognisable political subjects, although for reasons which will become clear, Derrida has often done so by means of 'marginal themes' such as friendship, spectrality and secrecy. Here is a list of just some of the *obviously* political topics Derrida has written and spoken on: social justice; democracy; globalisation; institutions (particularly the university); the law; the death penalty; the refugee and asylum issue; the question of European identity; the question of Jewish identity (not least in connection with the Israel/Palestine conflict); political thinkers (Hobbes, Rousseau, Schmitt, Marx . . .); political documents (e.g. the American Declaration of Independence); political movements (including that for racial emancipation in South Africa); political resistance (in Algeria, for example).

#### ❖ Deconstruction is concerned too much with theory and texts, and not enough with practical political issues.

A similar point can be made regarding the idea that we can, if not entirely forget about them, then at least keep 'theoretical' issues (including those concerned with self-reflexively interrogating what it means to *do cultural studies*) within certain limits in order to proceed all the quicker to more urgent matters in the real world of concrete materiality. What would such realist or pragmatic discourses actually do or achieve, asks Derrida?

Let us answer: they could do very little, almost nothing. They would miss the hardest, the most resistant, the most irreducible, the othermost of the 'thing itself'. Such a political history or philosophy would deck itself out in 'realism' just in time to fall short of the thing – and to repeat, repeat and repeat again, with neither consciousness nor memory of its compulsive droning. (Derrida 1997: 81)

Practical 'real-world' issues can only be engaged if careful thought has been given over to the question of *how* they can be engaged.

❖ Deconstruction is just a mode of negative literary or philosophical critique.

Perhaps the quickest way to deal with this is with reference to Derrida's work on the institution of the university. I'm thinking of his claim that 'an event of foundation can never be comprehended merely within the logic that it founds . . . The foundation of a university institution is not a university event' (Derrida 1992: 30). What Derrida means by this is that an institution cannot simply found itself, because that would require it to be already in existence and to possess the authority to do so *before* it was actually founded. In this way, Derrida is able to demonstrate: (1) that there is an aporia, an insoluble difficulty or paradox of authority at the origin of the institution; (2) that the foundation of the university is both inherently unstable and irreducibly violent since it cannot by definition rest on anything but itself, in that it is a *performative* act which produces the very thing of which it speaks. Now the important thing to note here is that this reading of the institution is not a negative *destruction*; it's not connected to some naive idea that the revelation of this aporia will bring the university crashing down. Derrida's deconstruction is rather positive and affirmative, in that it shows that the impossibility of any such foundation is also constitutive for the university, and highlights the chance this situation presents to rethink the manner in which the university 'lives on'. As he puts it in a text very much concerned with the pragmatics of deconstruction:

once it is granted that violence is *in fact* irreducible, it becomes necessary – and this is the moment of politics – to have rules, conventions and stabilizations of power. All that a deconstructive point of view tries to show, is that since convention, institutions and consensus are stabilizations, . . . they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Thus, it becomes necessary to stabilize precisely because stability is not natural; it is because there is instability that stabilization becomes necessary; it is because there is chaos that there is need for stability. Now, this chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other. (Derrida 1996: 83–4)

Hence Derrida's involvement in founding and supporting numerous 'real-life' (counter-)institutions such as the Grephe, the Etats généraux de la philosophie and the Collège international de philosophie.

That's probably enough demythologizing for now. I don't want to give the impression Derrida's writings contain a secret, including a secret politics, that can be uncovered if only one devotes enough time and trouble to actually *reading* them. Even though part of the idea behind this chapter is to (re)introduce the relevance of deconstruction to cultural studies, I'm not going to be decoding Derrida's thought here into a more accessible language or otherwise excavating its 'politics'. As Derrida himself acknowledged when speaking on the intelligibility or otherwise of his writing, it is important that his texts hold something back:

there is a certain 'I hope that not everyone understands everything about this text', because if such transparency of intelligibility were ensured it would destroy the text, it would show that the text has no future, that it does not overflow the present, that it is consumed immediately. . . . If everyone can understand immediately what I mean to say – all the world all at once – then I have created no context, I have mechanically fulfilled an expectation and then it's over, even if people applaud and read with pleasure; for then they close the book and it's all over.

. . . There has to be the possibility of someone's still arriving; there has to be an *arrivant*, and consequently the table – the table of contents or the table of the community – has to mark an empty place for someone absolutely indeterminate, for an *arrivant*. . . .

*But this is also a way of giving to be read.* If something is given to be read that is totally intelligible . . . it is not given to the other to be read. Giving to the other to be read is also a *leaving to be desired*, or a leaving the other room for an intervention by which she will be able to write her own intervention: the other will have to be able to sign in my text. And it is here that the desire not to be understood means, simply, hospitability to the reading of the other, not the rejection of the other. (Derrida 2001: 30–2)

And all this despite (and as well as) the fact that Derrida really does 'try to be clear', and that it's all there, in his writings, as a reading of almost any one of his texts indicates (p. 31). (Let's take as an example 'I Have a Taste for the Secret'.)

For me to provide an 'easy' introduction to deconstruction here would not therefore be a very 'deconstructive' thing to do, at least as the latter is performed in Derrida's writings. Which is why I've so far resisted schematising the 'general strategy of deconstruction' as a 'double gesture' – you know, the kind of thing that's usually taken from the third interview in *Positions*. (John Frow's (2005) *New Keywords* entry on deconstruction, cited in my epigraph, provides a recent example.) To 'do' deconstruction I need rather to respond to Derrida's inventive and at times difficult interventions

in the texts of Plato, Freud, Joyce and so on – inventive in the sense that Derrida's writings 'performatively' transform and so 'create' the 'context' in which they can be read and perhaps eventually understood (2001: 14, 30) – by producing inventive and, yes, at times difficult interventions of my own, signed with my own name, in the texts of Derrida and others.

From this perspective, the kind of critique of cultural studies I've provided so far, although quite common among those associated with deconstruction, is not a particularly appropriate way of handling the situation. Given the concerns of this chapter and book, a more hospitable response to cultural studies' rather inhospitable treatment of deconstruction, it seems to me, is not to chastise it but to show how cultural studies, too, as a community (of academics, intellectuals and practitioners), is open to the possibility of 'someone absolutely indeterminate' still arriving, and thus to 'the reading of the other, not the rejection of the other'. So let me start again, and try to provide at least the beginnings of something of this kind, taking as my point of departure precisely the sense of urgency around cultural studies' politics at the moment that has led it, like deconstruction, to be often criticised for 'paying too much attention to culture and not enough to the state and economics, too much to cultural differences and not enough to social commonalities, too much to popular resistance and not enough to political domination' (Grossberg n.d.).

#### Cultural studies after Gramsci, hegemony theory and the Birmingham School

For many people cultural studies is currently experiencing something of a 'crisis' around its ability to understand and intervene in the societies of the North Atlantic capitalist industrial nation-states. Speaking in 1998 of the change in the political landscape represented by the then new New Labour government, Stuart Hall put it like this:

Old left positions don't seem to have any purchase . . . because those positions are not really engaged with the modern world, with the problems currently facing us. Cultural studies has a lot of analytic work to do . . . in terms of trying to interpret how a society is changing in ways that are not amenable to the immediate political language. Blair will formulate those changes in certain ways, but there's a deeper level of shifts to be included in such analyses, shifts in the popular. (Hall 1998: 193–4)

Repeating Hall's claim that it is 'a highly transitional moment, a very Gramscian conjuncture that we are in – between the old state that we can

neither fully occupy or fully leave, and some new state toward which we may be going, but of which we're ignorant . . . [we are] living in the moment of the post' (Grossberg n.d., quoting Hall 1998), Lawrence Grossberg agrees that such changes in society require cultural studies to change, too. For Gramsci, the popular was a key site at which ongoing political struggle took place – which of course is why Hall was so interested in 'deconstructing' popular culture: 'Popular culture is one of the sites where . . . socialism might be constituted. That is why "popular culture" matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it' (Hall 1981; cited by Grossberg n.d.). But once it's no longer the site of such hegemonic struggle, then cultural studies' attention needs to move on. Significantly, for Grossberg, this now involves shifting away from an emphasis on what he calls 'textual or aesthetic culture', since culture, in the 'textual (media and popular)' sense, 'does not appear to be playing the same central role . . . It is not where change is being organized and experienced, and it is certainly not where resistance is being viably organized.' Instead, he hypothesises that 'people are experiencing politics and economics as the primary field of change, and as the primary experience of change itself'. Consequently, what is required, according to Grossberg in some of his most recent writings, is a (re)turn to a more classical British cultural studies emphasis on 'political economy', albeit a 'new' or significantly rethought political economy in which politics, the state, and economies are thought of as 'inescapably cultural' (Grossberg n.d.).

Now, while Grossberg's argument seems to me incredibly interesting and important – there has certainly been something of a '(re)turn' in cultural studies to what's been termed 'cultural economy' recently (Du Gay 1997; Du Gay and Pryke 2002; Amin and Thrift 2004; Merck 2004) – is it just a shift in cultural studies' location of political struggle from 'textual and aesthetic' culture to the more explicitly political and economic that is required? Or does cultural studies need to change in more fundamental ways? The reason I ask is because this is somewhat ambiguous in Grossberg's account. Writing in another recent essay he asserts that, on the one hand, British cultural studies, the Birmingham School, '*Policing the Crisis* and the work that circulated around it and followed in its path . . . offered a unique and productive reading of Gramsci's notion of hegemony' that is still incredibly useful (Grossberg 2005: 356). On the other, he draws attention to the way 'too often, people ignore the specific theory of hegemony offered here, as a particular kind of political struggle, not a universal one' (p. 357). The 'presence of a hegemonic struggle is not guaranteed', for Grossberg: it can't be assumed that the contemporary conjuncture *can* be understood as a hegemonic struggle (p. 357). In fact, he sees it rather in

terms of 'a struggle between those (liberals and to some extent, leftists) who think they are waging a hegemonic struggle, and those (significant fractions of the new right) who are trying to invent, not only a new social formation, but a new political culture as well, one built not on compromise but on fanaticism', and in which the settlement is often 'accomplished behind the back of those struggling over the field of the social formation' (p. 358).

So, to provide an example of my own from the UK, whereas Thatcher sought to win consent to lead through a hegemonic strategy of constant (re)negotiation, the modernising of the Blair government operates rather differently. Close to two million people can protest on the streets of London against attacking Iraq, but Tony Blair is still prepared to 'ignore the public will' and take his country to war on the grounds that he and George W. Bush consider the use of such force and power *the right thing to do* – and what's more he doesn't need to hide it. Hegemony is thus 'inadequate', according to Grossberg, 'to either analyse or respond to the complexly changing balance in the field of forces or, more conventionally, to the vectors and restructurings that are potentially changing the very fabric of power and experience' (p. 358). But if the current conjuncture is not necessarily hegemonic, or not just hegemonic, to what extent *can* cultural studies continue to use the classic, mainstream, British formation of the project with its emphasis on Gramsci and hegemony (and politics and economics) to analyse it? If Grossberg and Hall are right, and we are in a period of transition, is the 'old left' cultural studies tradition associated with the old political culture appropriate to analyse and fight against what Grossberg regards as the 'production of a new modernity' (p. 365)? Or does cultural studies need to embark on the transition to a new, post-Gramscian, post-hegemony theory, post-Birmingham School cultural studies, too?

### Cultural studies and Hardt and Negri

Although the above questions can be formulated by following the logic of Grossberg's argument, these are not issues he explicitly addresses himself. For help in answering these questions I therefore want to turn to one of the places in contemporary cultural and political theory where, if 'there is a growing disparity between the apparent vectors and effects of "culture" and the leading edge of political transformation and historical change' (Grossberg n.d.), this leading edge is seen as having been analysed most powerfully in recent years.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000) is a book people in cultural studies are increasingly drawing on, whether as part of the general

move towards politics and economics, or in an attempt to understand politics in what appears to be a period of transition.<sup>1</sup> Hardt's and Negri's thesis is this: a new era is emerging, what they call Empire, for which the current methods of analysis are no longer adequate. They are inadequate because 'they remain fixated on attacking an old form of power and propose a strategy of liberation that could be effective only on that old terrain . . . What is missing here is a recognition of the novelty of the structures and logics of power that order the contemporary world. Empire is not a weak echo of modern imperialisms but a fundamentally new form of rule' (p. 146), one which replaces the sovereignty of nation-states with a '*decentered and deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers' (p. xii).<sup>2</sup> However, it's not my intention to deal with all the various ins and outs of Hardt and Negri's thesis. I want to concentrate merely on an intriguing paradox, one that has significant consequences, it seems to me, both for their analysis of Empire and for cultural studies' relation to politics.

This concerns their claim, in the section entitled 'The Mole and the Snake', that 'we need to recognize that the very subject of labour and revolt has changed profoundly. The composition of the proletariat has transformed and thus our understanding of it must too' (p. 52). Insisting that by proletariat we should now understand '*all* those exploited by and subject to capitalist domination' (p. 53), they proceed to identify, in the 'most radical and powerful struggles of the final years of the twentieth century: the Tiananmen Square events in 1989, the Intifada against Israeli state authority, the May 1992 revolt in Los Angeles, the uprising in Chiapas that began in 1994' (p. 54), signs of a 'new kind of proletarian solidarity and militancy' (p. 54). In contrast to the proletarian internationalism of the past, however, 'none of these events inspired a cycle of struggles, because the desires and needs they expressed could not be translated into different contexts. In other words, (potential) revolutionaries in other parts of the world did not hear of the events in Beijing, Nablus, Los Angeles, Chiapas . . . and immediately recognise them as their own struggles' (p. 54). For Hardt and Negri this is one of the 'central and most urgent political paradoxes of our time': the fact that 'in our much celebrated age of communication, *struggles have become all but incommunicable*' (p. 54) – and this 'despite their being hypermediatized, on television, the Internet, and every other imaginable medium' (p. 56).

Two tasks are thus urgent: (1) to recognise a common enemy against which these struggles are directed – 'the situations all seem utterly particular, but in fact they all directly attack the global order of Empire and seek a real alternative' (pp. 56–7); (2) to construct a new common language













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ALWAYS SPECULATE