

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of Lancaster University are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA licence which allows you to:

- access and download a copy;
- print out a copy;

This Digital Copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this Licence are for use in connection with this Course of Study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by the University.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

Course of Study: Socl 923

Name of Designated Person authorising scanning: Adrian MacKenzie

Title of article or chapter: Introduction

Name of Author: Couldry

Name of Publisher: Sage

Name of Visual Creator (as appropriate):

McRobbie also kindly commented on early drafts of some chapters. Thanks to the postgraduate students on the MA Media and Communications, particularly the Methods in Cultural Analysis course, for being stimulating commentators on many of the issues discussed in this book; and thanks to the students I taught on Gareth Stanton's Postcolonial Theory course, an important experience for me. Thanks also to Keith Negus for helpful comments on my original book proposal. Further afield, I have benefited greatly from the exchange between the Goldsmiths' Media and Communications Department and the Department of Journalism, Media and Communications (JMK) at the University of Stockholm. The exchange, over the past five years, has made possible some wonderful discussions which, for me, have been an example of intellectual openness at its very best. I wish to record my thanks to Professor Johan Fornas, the late Kjell Novak and Michael Forsman for their role in making those meetings possible. I also want to acknowledge the 'Researching Culture' conference at the University of North London in September 1999 as a stimulating context for finishing the writing.

I am especially grateful to my friend and ex-colleague Dave Hesmondhalgh (now at the Open University) not only for reading all the chapters and making numerous helpful suggestions and searching criticisms, but also for providing encouragement when my belief in the feasibility of the book was wearing thin. The result, I'm sure, is a better book than I would otherwise have written, even if it leaves unresolved some of the questions he raised.

Finally, I want to thank my parents, Philip and Lilian Couldry, for the love and support they have always given me along my own route to reflexivity and to acknowledge that their history and fortitude has been constantly in my mind while writing this book; and to thank my wife, Louise Edwards, without whose love and insight none of this book could have been written, or even imagined.

Nick Couldry
London, September 1999

1 Introduction

Forty years ago, Raymond Williams (1961: 10) wrote that there was no academic subject which allowed him to ask the questions in which he was interested: questions concerning how culture and society, democracy and the individual voice, interrelate. It is cultural studies, we normally assume, that has filled this gap; however, when we look for a consensus about what cultural studies actually involves, we find high levels of uncertainty.

As cultural studies enters a new century, now is a good time to reflect on the space cultural studies occupies and ask in what direction it should be going. I want to map that space, but without the bitterness that has characterized much recent debate.¹ The map is, of course, a personal one; in the contested space of culture, how could it be otherwise?

I shall highlight questions of method. I mean here 'method' in the broadest sense: what types of things should cultural studies be doing? What problems does it face? Those questions necessarily take us through other questions, which we might call 'personal': what is the individual's place within cultural formations? How are those formations involved in forming my voice? The latter questions are not merely for closed introspection: they have a public significance for the cultural life we share. We are forced also to confront issues of pedagogy: what exactly is it that we hope to teach, or study, in cultural studies? All these questions can be brought together in a single underlying methodological question: what is the space from which cultural studies speaks?

My answer, in essence, is that cultural studies is an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture.

Images and principles

To begin with, some images by which to orientate ourselves. First, we can picture cultural studies as the distinctive approach to culture that results when we stop thinking about culture as particular valued texts and think about it as a broader process in which each person has an equal right to be heard, and each person's voice and reflections about culture are valuable. Cultural studies represents that space of equality. That is what Raymond Williams (1961: 321) meant by overcoming the 'long dominative mode' of thinking about culture. This principle is still radical and important today.

We have only to state it, however, to see that culture, as it operates, recognizes those rights of equality very imperfectly. Actual culture involves the concentration, not the dispersal of voices; being represented by others, not speaking directly in our own voice; the commodification of speech and image, not complete openness. That is a basic consequence of the irreversible link between cultural life and the capitalist economy. 'Culture', then, is already a paradoxical term and that paradox is something each of us as an individual may feel. Stuart Hall, while discussing the notion of 'black popular culture', has expressed this well:

popular culture . . . is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an area that is profoundly mythic . . . It is there that we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented. Not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (S. Hall, 1992a: 22)

This means recognizing the complex and contested nature of culture. As a result, cultural studies thinks of culture in relation to issues of power: the power relations (whether driven by economics, politics or other forms of social discrimination) which affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent, what counts as 'culture' and what does not. The necessary link between studying culture and theorizing *power* is one thing on which most cultural studies writers agree,² and it is treated here as fundamental to defining cultural studies as a distinctive area of study.

It is precisely here, however – in thinking about cultural studies as a democratic vision of culture, committed to investigating the links between culture and power – that the self-critique of cultural studies must begin. Applying this vision rigorously, I argue, means revising radically some of our standard assumptions about what 'culture' we study and what researching culture involves.

Cultural studies began with a democratic critique of earlier elitist

approaches to culture, recognizing the fundamental importance of 'popular culture': the experiences and pleasures of those outside the cultural elites. This step was absolutely essential in expanding the range of cultural production deemed worthy of academic study. Now, however, our priorities must be formulated in different terms.

There has always been a problem of how cultural studies' academic voice relates to popular culture: academic writing is, by definition, not part of popular culture but analyses it from outside. As Dick Hebdige put it insightfully at the end of his classic study *Subculture*: 'We [the academic analysts] are cast in a marginal role. We are in society but not inside it, producing analyses of popular culture which are themselves anything but popular' (Hebdige, 1979: 139–40). Others have made a similar point (de Certeau, 1984: 41; Chambers, 1986: 216; cf., generally, Ross, 1989). In addition, many have doubted whether something called the 'popular' can be identified which is always subordinated to, or dominated by, another part of culture – 'high' culture. What if this is wrong and it is now popular culture which is dominant?³ Or, more cautiously, what if the status-map of culture is changing radically, through the overwhelming influence of centralized, popular media such as television? Can cultural studies' relationship to what we call 'popular culture' be unchanged by this?⁴

The problem with the term 'popular culture' is symptomatic of a wider difficulty. If we take seriously the principle that culture is a process in which each person's experience is significant, then surely any limitation on what aspect or 'level' of culture we study – including any bias against or towards the 'popular', the 'marginal', the 'deviant' – is problematic. If we accept this, we must start thinking about culture differently, and radically expand the aspects of culture we study. This means facing up to the exclusions which cultural studies itself has entrenched over the past thirty years. To list a few: the ignoring of the cultural experience of the old; the downplaying of the 'middlebrow' or of any cultural experience which is not 'spectacular' or 'resistant'; the lack of attention to the cultural experience of elites (we cannot assume that the boundaries of elites are unchanging); the limited research (within cultural studies at least) on the cultures of work, business and science; and so on.⁵ Indeed if, as Hall points out, popular culture is *not* simply 'what we experience', then we have to study the much larger space suggested by this 'not': the shadows which popular culture casts, as well as the light it projects. This general principle – of opening up much more the range of cultural experience which cultural studies investigates – runs throughout the book.

My original image of cultural studies has a further methodological consequence. If we take seriously the contribution that everyone makes to cultural life, then we have to be sceptical about all attempts to reify culture, that is,

4 INSIDE CULTURE

to see it as a unified ‘object’ rather than a mass of open-ended processes. This applies not only to the ‘popular’/‘high’ culture distinction, but also to ideas of national cultures, ethnic cultures, even the idea that an individual’s identity can be easily read off from certain cultural or social coordinates. Cultural studies, therefore, should take seriously the full complexity of being ‘inside’ culture.

This – to anticipate a little – is where method comes in. We should always reject short cuts in cultural description, not because we want complexity for its own sake, but because this is the only way to think culture in a non-dominative way, to recognize it as a space of multiple voices and forces. We need a theory of cultural complexity, but without lapsing into excessively complex language (a fault of some recent cultural studies). We need the tools to think about, and research, cultural complexity in a manageable way.

If we can imagine cultural studies as a democratic space of cultural exchange, we can also imagine it another way. In a cultural situation where we are continually represented within – and assumed to belong to – a cultural ‘present’, we surely need another space, a space where we reserve the right to refuse those forms of address, or at least question them. We need a space where we can ask: How did those forms of address come to be directed at us, at me? Who, or what, is this ‘me’ formed by those types of address? Social forces may have helped form our individual voices, but that does not mean our position as individuals within wider cultural formations is unproblematical. This space of questioning and reflexivity is another way of imagining the space of cultural studies itself. Our descriptions and theories of cultural complexity must be brought back to bear upon the individual’s experience of culture: the difficult, uncertain questions of belonging and detachment.

In addressing the central issue of cultural studies – the links between culture and power – I shall emphasize these three principles: *openness*, *complexity* and *reflexivity*.⁶ Taken together, they have generated the argument of this book. Chapter 3 looks at the complexities which individual experience generates for broader claims about culture. Chapter 6 then explores in more detail what it means to bring into the work of cultural studies our own voices (whether as researchers, as teachers, or as students) while at the same time maintaining a grasp of the wider forces which shape individual selves. Together, Chapters 3 and 6 explore the significance of reflexivity for the method of cultural studies. Chapters 4 and 5, by contrast, reflect on the complexity of cultural experience from a more general, trans-individual perspective. They look, respectively, at how we should think about texts and about cultural formations. Underlying all these discussions are certain values of cultural democracy which are central to cultural studies: those are developed explicitly in Chapter 2. Chapter 7 connects those

values and the book’s overall argument with recent thinking about democracy and community.

Taken as a whole, the book brings together two aspects of studying culture which are often kept apart: the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ – the scale of social and cultural production, and the scale of individual sense-making and reflection. Yet they are, I argue, two aspects of the same picture: how we speak about others and how we speak personally must be consistent with each other, if our theory is to be fully accountable (see especially Chapter 6). We cannot oversimplify the cultural experiences of others, without caricaturing our own.⁷ Cultural studies in this sense involves an ethic of reciprocity, a mutual practice of both speaking and listening, which is inextricably tied to taking seriously the complexity of cultures. It is here that ethics (and politics) converge with method; for it is method that provides the basic tools with which we can empirically research that complexity in a systematic and accountable way. This is the central argument of the book.

Cultural studies as a discipline?

One measure of the success of cultural studies’ central vision has been the wide popularity of the term ‘cultural studies’. It has come to be applied to almost any form of theoretically influenced textual study, from literary analysis to art history. I adopt, however, a narrower usage. If we stand by the central vision of cultural studies as the study of culture which addresses its connections with power, then by ‘cultural studies’ I shall refer only to those areas of research which genuinely have the methodological tools to analyse those connections systematically. Although such tools will include some from literary analysis (inevitably, given cultural studies’ ancestry in literary studies), the principal methodological focus is the *sociologically influenced, and fully materialist*, analysis of ‘culture’, usually traced back to British cultural studies of the late 1950s (especially the work of Raymond Williams). This is an indication of the methodological region in which I see cultural studies as operating; the rest of the book, I hope, justifies this position. I am definitely not claiming that cultural studies ‘originated’ in Britain, let alone that in such an ‘origin’ lies its destiny.

Looking in the opposite direction, cultural studies’ concern with power and its insistence on certain democratic values at the heart of its method distinguish it sharply from the approaches to culture in traditional social science, or what is formally called ‘cultural sociology’, which explicitly reject such a ‘power-based framework of analysis’ (P. Smith, 1998b: 7). Having said that, in recent years the sociology of culture has made various attempts

to ‘catch up’ with cultural studies’ work and there are siren calls for cultural studies to be ‘reintegrated’ into sociology (see generally, Long, 1997). In one way, I am sympathetic to the spirit of those calls, in so far as I am arguing for a cultural studies whose methods are in broad terms ‘sociological’, but unsympathetic if that means abandoning cultural studies’ distinctive values. In fact, the institutional movement can just as easily be read the other way, with (most) sociology of culture representing now a detailed inflection of cultural studies. There are also significant overlaps between cultural studies and contemporary cultural anthropology, now that the latter has extricated itself from its exclusive concern with mapping ‘other’ cultures.

Later chapters will reflect these connections. However, I am not interested in disciplinary boundary wars. By ‘cultural studies’ I mean the discipline (see below) that studies the relations between culture and power, using a method the primary orientation of which is very broadly sociological rather than literary (but allowing for borrowings from literary and anthropological analysis and elsewhere). In terms of detailed methods, there is increasingly an interchange between historic disciplines, making absolute boundaries based on method outdated. What remains distinctive, however, about cultural studies and its institutional history is its concern with culture and power, and the values and commitments which flow from that.

Values and commitments lead on directly to the question of the ‘politics’ of cultural studies’ work. As this is a disputed area, I want to make clear where I stand. From time to time I use the term ‘politics’ or ‘political’ in relation to cultural studies, particularly as a contrast to, say, positivist cultural sociology. I explore in detail in Chapter 2 what the distinctive values of cultural studies are. I do not, however, naively believe that academic work in itself has automatic political value: that overestimates the significance of academics by some way. Whether cultural studies’ work might, in the long-term, have real political effects is difficult to judge, and must involve looking closely at how it is taught and in what institutional settings. I broach these issues in various places but they are slightly to one side of the methodological issues which are the central focus of the book. In terms, then, of the actual political effects of cultural studies, I am prepared to be sceptical and cautious. What I do want to insist upon, however, is that the practice of cultural studies is based on certain values and those values, if consistently and effectively applied in the ways we teach and do research, may have long-term implications for the contexts in which we, our students, and maybe others beyond our institutions think about politics. We should not be afraid of acknowledging that the values of cultural studies are those of cultural and political democracy and the progressive undermining of inequalities of power. It is in this, limited, sense that I refer to the ‘politics of cultural studies’ and cultural studies’ potential to empower.

That is enough explanation of the book’s overall outlook, but there are a number of other issues which must be broached at this stage, as context for the debates of later chapters.

Examining ourselves

My emphasis on reflexivity and the personal perspective may seem unusual when the broader aim is to study culture on a large scale. But the paradox is only apparent. To reflect on the individual experience of culture does not mean turning our backs on the social; instead, thinking about the individual story plunges us immediately into the web of relationships out of which we are formed. As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt put it graphically:

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it, and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author. (Arendt, 1958: 184)

An emphasis on the individual perspective might, of course, seem narcissistic, and some of the more unkind attacks on recent cultural studies have suggested this (for example, Moran, 1998: 74). But such attacks completely miss the point of how the individual story works. Ien Ang, discussing her relationship to ‘Chineseness’ as someone of Chinese origin who does not speak Chinese, has expressed such stories’ function in terms of ‘a reflexive positioning of oneself in history and culture’ (Ang, 1994: 4). Thinking about the individual’s relation to culture means thinking about the process of individuation (how we each became ‘individuals’). This may be a matter of contested and painful history (Probyn, 1993), and it opens directly onto the social and cultural terrain in which individuals are formed.

The individual perspective is also important in cultural studies for another reason. It is central to thinking about how we *communicate* cultural studies as an academic subject: the question of ‘pedagogy’, or how and what we teach. Pedagogy has been a neglected issue in cultural studies,⁸ which is surprising since, arguably, the subject originated from a pedagogic challenge. As Raymond Williams put it in a much-quoted discussion of the demands for new ways of teaching literature and culture in 1930s and 1940s Britain:

in adult education, where people who had been deprived of any continuing educational opportunity were nevertheless readers, and wanted to discuss

what they were reading; and even more specifically among women who, blocked from the process of higher education, educated themselves repeatedly through reading . . . both groups wanted to discuss what they'd read, and to discuss it in a context to which they brought their own situation, their own experience – a demand which was not to be satisfied, it was soon very clear, by what the universities . . . were prepared to offer. (Williams, 1989a: 152, added emphasis)

This idea of teaching culture so that students can bring ‘their own situation’ to bear upon it is, as the US educational theorist Henry Giroux (1994: 131–2) has argued, directly relevant to cultural studies today in the context of the multicultural classroom. The link of teaching to experience is, in fact, a general one. As Paulo Freire put it: ‘studying is above all thinking about experience, and thinking about experience is the best way to think accurately’ (1985: 3).

If cultural studies is to remain true to its democratic vision, it must address the question of experience in all its complexity.⁹

Method without guilt

More generally, analysing cultural complexity means having the right investigative tools, the tools of method. The word ‘method’ derives from the Greek words for road (*hodos*) and ‘after’ or ‘about’ (*meta*): method is the route down which you go to pursue something. Without some agreement about that route, and the issues which need to be resolved in analysing culture, it is difficult to see how cultural studies can function as a space where people – across many dimensions of difference – exchange and see reflected their experiences of culture. That, I shall argue, means understanding cultural studies as a coherent subject, a discipline with recognizable methods – or at least a recognizable set of methodological debates.¹⁰ Yet defining the methods and disciplinary status of cultural studies is precisely what many writers have resisted doing.

The idea that cultural studies is somehow ‘above’ disciplinarity has been given credence, partly because it seemed to reflect a consensus over the past two decades that you cannot do serious work in the humanities without drawing on the methods of various disciplines.¹¹ There is a long line of argument within cultural studies that sees it as essentially interdisciplinary.¹² And certainly, cultural studies emerged by addressing questions taken from elsewhere – from sociology and literary criticism – in a distinctive way. In that sense, at the level of detailed method cultural studies must remain ‘interdisciplinary’, inspired by many theoretical perspectives; that is now the situation of most disciplines. But it is quite

another matter to argue that cultural studies is not itself a historically distinct discipline.

I want to argue that, in terms of its history, values and overall methodological orientation, cultural studies *is* a distinctive discipline. The arguments for the non-disciplinarity of cultural studies are weak. First, there is the romantic rejection of all disciplinary authority in education.¹³ But the power relations inherent in the teaching situation cannot be wished away, since in some form or other they are a precondition of any act of teaching: the attempt to show a way through what is otherwise impenetrable or intractable. Power relations are an inherent part of any critical educational project, including cultural studies (O’Shea, 1998). Second is the idea that what is distinctive about cultural studies is not its methodological stance, but its way of engaging with the cultural and political world. This has been suggested by Lawrence Grossberg in America (1997a, 1997b), and it has sometimes characterized comments by Stuart Hall in the UK (1992b).¹⁴ The Australian cultural theorists John Frow and Meaghan Morris (1996) in an important discussion imply something similar, although they waver on the question of whether cultural studies is a discipline or not. In one way, perhaps, it doesn’t matter much: what’s in the word ‘discipline’? In another, however, it is quite crucial; evasiveness about whether cultural studies is a discipline is an excuse to neglect the fundamental problems of method that contemporary cultural analysis faces.

It is evasiveness on the question of method that has led cultural studies, at the end of the twentieth century, into something of a crisis (cf. Tudor, 1999: 187–94). Without some shared commitment to methodological debate, cultural studies risks being no more than a trail of political interventions by authoritative voices. This is the implication of some of Lawrence Grossberg’s statements:

I would propose that cultural studies, at any particular time and place, is constructed by articulating its practice into particular *projects* and *formations*. Cultural studies always and only exists in contextually specific theoretical and institutional *formations*. Such formations are always a response to a particular political project based on the available theoretical and historical resources. In that sense, in every particular instance, cultural studies has to be made up as it goes along. (Grossberg, 1997b: 252, original emphasis)

In Grossberg’s vision, cultural studies risks becoming merely reactive, at the mercy of changing historical and political events. There are two directions in which cultural studies could move to escape that fate: first, by concentrating on making its political interventions in culture more specific, engaging directly with cultural policy (as Tony Bennett has extensively argued: 1992, 1993, 1998a), or second, by focusing more precisely and systematically on the methods of cultural analysis.

I have chosen the second route, not because cultural policy does not matter, but because I consider the problems which face us in understanding what culture *is* to be more fundamental and of greater long-term importance. (That of course leaves open the possibility that cultural studies' research will have detailed implications for policy issues, for example in relation to the democratization of culture.) The most important task, as I see it, for cultural studies in the new century is to open up a terrain of sustained *empirical* research about cultural experience in today's exceptionally complex cultural environments. I shall show how little of its potential field cultural studies has so far explored.

The aim of this book

Thinking about broad issues of method does not, however, mean imposing a methodological straitjacket. There is, of course, a need for interdisciplinarity at the level of detail and much room for legitimate differences of 'taste' or emphasis. There is no single, ready-made approved method for doing cultural studies! The issues to be analysed are far too complex for that. This book is not, therefore, intended as a 'methods primer' but is an attempt to clear the ground for some consensus on what in cultural studies we should be about; what our priorities for research and study are. Nor, equally, does this book attempt a substantive analysis of, for example, the institutional and economic bases of cultural production and cultural life. I take it for granted that this is necessary and important but, as I see it, it does not raise fundamental methodological difficulties and is, therefore, not a priority here.

My aim, very simply put, is to focus on the sheer difficulty of researching contemporary cultures and the consequences which flow from this. We need not so much a map in the conventional sense, as what the Colombian cultural theorist Jesus Martin-Barbero has called a 'night-time map' (1993: 211–12)¹⁵ – to help us orientate ourselves in very uncertain territory: the space of culture. We need to develop a manageable way of investigating cultural complexity (a method, in other words). One obstacle here is the sheer difficulty of cultural studies texts on these issues and, even more, the difficulty of matching up the different languages and terms which they involve. As a result, each chapter develops its argument by comparing a number of important texts from cultural studies and elsewhere: introducing key authors, explaining their concerns and where necessary their language, and focusing on the key issues where they overlap with or differ from other important texts. This should help to demystify some of the literature. Each of the central chapters concludes with some ideas for further thinking about the debates of the chapter.

Inevitably, however, some of the terrain crossed is difficult. Contemporary cultures are complex, and they pose complex problems of analysis and even description; there is no getting away from that. To assist the reader I have organized the chapters in roughly ascending order of difficulty.

Chapters 2 and 3 are partly historical in focus and they review, from a critical contemporary perspective, material from earlier phases of cultural studies – some of which will be familiar to most readers. Chapter 3 lays the ground for the questions of complexity which the later, more difficult chapters pursue. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 confront directly some central problems for cultural studies' method: the status of the text, rival models of 'culture' and 'cultures', and the importance of self-reflexivity. Because these are difficult issues, it is sometimes best to approach them quite abstractly, in order to get our thinking straight, but any abstract discussions are then worked out in discussions about where specific empirical research either could lead or is already leading. Each of these later chapters ends with a summary of the main argument, as a reference point for readers. By Chapter 6, some of the issues discussed will raise serious issues of a philosophical nature, and potential post-structuralist critiques of the approach taken will need to be addressed; inevitably those discussions are the most difficult, and can safely be omitted by readers less interested in the philosophical background to my approach. Chapter 7 – the concluding chapter – however, summarizes the argument of the whole book in a non-technical way, ending with comments on its broader ethical implications, and returning to the general terrain explored in this chapter and Chapter 2.

Some theoretical background

The chapters of this book each cover a core methodological question: the nature of cultural studies' values, the nature of 'texts' and 'cultures', the significance of the individual perspective, and so on. While examples are used to illustrate the debates, the overall discussion is deliberately at a more general level, since it is there that the fundamental difficulties lie. The point, however, is throughout to open the way to *empirical* research.¹⁶ There is, of course, some theoretical background to this emphasis on the empirical which needs to be explained.

First, my approach to culture can broadly be described as 'materialist'. I understand cultural production (whether it is a text, a song, a film, an idea or whatever) as the result of what particular people have done at particular times and places, and under particular constraints and limitations. The

ultimate origin for this approach is Marx: his rejection in the *German Ideology* of an abstract ‘history of ideas’ and his insistence on what he called ‘the representation of practical activity . . . the practical process of development of men’ (1977a: 165, added emphasis). He put it another way in the *Grundrisse*: ‘there is nothing which can escape, by its own elevated nature or self-justifying characteristics, from [the] cycle of social production and exchange’ (1977b: 363).

There is, however, enormous room for debate about what precisely count as ‘material’ conditions. Important here are Raymond Williams’s discussions in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and *Culture* (1981). Williams rejects the position of cruder forms of Marxism which holds that cultural phenomena can and must be reductively explained in terms of material practices at some underlying economic level (the ‘base–superstructure’ model). Instead, Williams insists that all forms of cultural production are themselves material processes. Quite apart from their directly economic aspects, they involve real material constraints in terms of who speaks and who does not, who is represented and who is not, and so on. In fact, the very separation of ‘art’ or ‘culture’ from the rest of social life – which crude base–superstructure models reflected – was itself, Williams argued (1981: ch. 5), a social construct reflecting particular material conditions for the production of art separate from the rest of the economy. There is no getting away from the materiality of culture (for a clear recent statement of this principle, see du Gay et al., 1996).

Secondly, this materialist approach to culture, while clearly involving detailed empirical research, involves an affirmation of the necessity of reflexivity about method: here, again, the difference from (positivist) cultural sociology (P. Smith, 1998a) is plain. Positivist research treats ‘facts’ or ‘data’ as unproblematic evidence for an independently existing external world. But an essential part of method in cultural studies is thinking systematically about how specific methods influence the results produced and shape our picture of the world. The sources for the attack on ‘positivist’ science are multiple (see, for example, Polanyi, 1958; Husserl, 1970; Gadamer, 1975; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Harding, 1986), but they matter less than the consensus across much of the social sciences and humanities on the need for reflexivity about method. Cultural studies is part of that wider consensus.¹⁷

I return to the question of reflexivity in greater detail in Chapter 6, but it is worth mentioning here one specific connection: feminist epistemology (that is, feminist work on how knowledge is produced), the significance of which for cultural studies has until recently been neglected (Skeggs, 1995; Gray, 1997; Pickering, 1997: 89–90). Feminist epistemology (such as the work of the feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding, 1986, 1993; cf. Haraway, 1991b; Hartsock, 1998) provides a useful entry-point to a

question crucial for the rest of the book: namely that a commitment to reflexivity about method and the power relations involved in producing research is perfectly compatible with a commitment to carrying out new empirical research. This is quite different from the ‘radical’ scepticism about empirical research which has been a feature of some post-structuralist and postmodernist theory.

Harding, for example, makes it very clear that questioning critically the conditions of knowledge production does not make empirical work impossible; on the contrary, it is a resource to make it more objective (1993: 73). As long as those who produce knowledge are from an unrepresentative group (relative to those they write about) – say, they are overwhelmingly men, but writing about women or about ‘mankind’ generally – then the types of questions they think worth asking will be distorted. So interrogating the power relations which have historically affected who conducts research is a precondition for doing research better. To give two examples: it took *women* researchers (Oakley, 1974; Smith, 1987) to put onto the sociological agenda the domestic work of women and the wider gender inequalities it reflects; and it took a *woman* psychologist (Gilligan, 1982) to raise the possibility that the types of narrative American women tell about themselves and their skills are quite different from those of American men, something which reflects many centuries of gender inequality.

Given this risk of distortion, Harding proposes a form of ‘strong objectivity’ in scientific research which involves problematizing not only the ‘object of knowledge’ (the issue or people to be investigated), but also the ‘subject of knowledge’ (the situation of researchers themselves): ‘a sociology which does not transform those it studies into objects but preserves in its analytic procedures the presence of the subject as actor and experiencer’ (Harding, 1986: 155, cf. 1993). More specifically, Harding argues that research questions should be formulated explicitly from the perspective of the marginal and disadvantaged (that is, people at the furthest remove from the social conditions of those who normally produce scientific knowledge); hence the name of this approach: ‘standpoint epistemology’. This has something in common with cultural studies’ attention to those who are marginalized within culture, but Harding usefully makes it clear that science is not *about* studying the marginal. Instead the ‘marginal’ standpoint is simply a way of broadening the range of questions which are to be asked, avoiding the trap of reproducing a dominative mode of thinking in reverse into which cultural studies – by focusing exclusively on the ‘popular’ or the ‘marginal’ – has sometimes fallen.

Recognizing the individual standpoint is, then, quite consistent with aiming for greater objectivity. The feminist science theorist Donna Haraway

has expressed a similar point by arguing for the ‘situated’ nature of all knowledge claims: ‘situated’, that is, in the sense of marked by a particular perspective and the limitations of a particular, materially produced position. There is, Haraway argues, no ‘view from above, from nowhere’ (1991b: 195); from which the conclusion is: not postmodern relativism but rather a continual dialectic, or exchange, between thinking about the ‘object’ of research (whatever aspect of cultural life is being studied) and thinking about the ‘subject’ of research (the material processes by which study is conducted and knowledge produced).¹⁸ This is a useful model for cultural studies, which I draw on again in Chapter 6.

The third point about my approach I want to emphasize is a pragmatism in relation to wider theory. Cultural studies should engage with broader theory (not just in sociology and anthropology, but also in linguistics, psychoanalysis and philosophy) not for its own sake, but only if it can open up perspectives for possible empirical work into culture. As Stuart Hall put it, ‘the only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency’ (1992b: 280). Cultural studies has no need to adopt, for example, the whole of Freud, Saussure, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan or Deleuze, as if they were ‘founding texts’. In deciding what theory can help us understand culture, we should be sceptical rather than reverential.¹⁹ While theoretical work can sometimes transform an area of study (for example Frantz Fanon’s work in post-colonial studies), excessive theoretical elaboration can also stand in the way of less ‘exciting’ but essential empirical work.

I therefore adopt a strategic approach to structuralist and post-structuralist thought, in spite of their great influence and authority in cultural studies. In Chapter 6, for example, I acknowledge the important questions about individual experience which Foucault’s late work opens up, but argue that they bring major problems as well and it is better not to be tied to the philosophical complexities of post-structuralist formulations.

We should avoid becoming overwhelmed by the difficult questions which lie unresolved at the broadest level of social and cultural theory: for example, questions about the methodological status of psychoanalysis and its relation to sociological theory. Clearly, these large issues lie beyond the scope of this book, although I should admit my own scepticism (influenced by Foucault) about the centrality of psychoanalysis to social theory and cultural studies. What matters, however, is not whether I am right or wrong on this, but instead to try and formulate the central methodological issues of understanding culture in a way that allows us, so far as possible, to put those deep-seated theoretical uncertainties to one side. Given that we at present lack ‘an account of the practices of subjective self-constitution’ (Hall, 1996a: 13), there seems to be no other way to move things forward.

In such a situation, the best strategy is greater openness towards a *variety* of theoretical legacies, which might help us think about culture, identity and language, including cognitive psychology and social psychology operating outside a psychoanalytic framework (Potter and Wetherall, 1987; Billig, 1992, 1995; Shotter, 1993; Harre, 1998), cultural anthropology (Miller, 1995; Sperber, 1996), cultural geography (Massey, 1994; Sibley, 1995), and social theory (Maffesoli, 1996). Graham Murdock put the wider issue very well a decade ago:

Cultural studies’ *relative isolation* . . . is one of the penalties of its emergence as a self-sustaining area of academic study with its own selective tradition of canonized texts. To counter this we need to recover the original interdisciplinary impetus and be more adventurous in crossing intellectual check-points. (1997: 88 [1989], added emphasis)²⁰

This point continues to apply today.

Finally, if we are to adopt a greater theoretical openness, we need an inclusive rather than an exclusive working definition of what types of detailed research cultural studies might cover.²¹ A good approach here is represented by John Frow and Meaghan Morris’ wide-ranging collection, *Australian Cultural Studies* (1993). This includes work on art, computer games, media events, music, television series, film landscapes, tourism and the cultural politics of diplomacy. This inclusive approach is preferable to defining cultural studies, effectively, in terms of media studies, as do Graham Turner’s early review of British cultural studies (1990), and Barker and Beezer’s *Reading into Cultural Studies* (1992), although there was once some historical logic in that approach. A broad working definition is also crucial if we want to think of cultural studies as a global discipline.

To raise the question of the global reach of cultural studies opens up a host of further questions: Can cultural studies be globalized? How can it overcome its original ties to a rather parochial agenda in Britain? Should there be competing ‘national’ cultural studies? These are questions I cannot resolve here. Nor do I need to, if my underlying assumption is right: that, in spite of inevitable differences in priorities between cultural studies conducted in different parts of the world, there is sufficient common ground to enable shared debate over issues of method. Throughout the book, I make connections between theory and research developed in different parts of the world, and attempt to de-centre the role of British perspectives. Nothing less will do if the democratic vision of cultural studies is to be fulfilled on an international scale.

Speaking personally

I need to say something of the personal history that brought me to write this book. There are limits and biases built into my position, like any other.

I am British, and am writing from within the trajectory of 'British cultural studies' (but with the crucial qualification that this no longer seems to be a space which determines a particular viewpoint – or even a specific range of questions). Inevitably what I write will be read in the light of that Britishness and the 'authority' which British cultural studies has, rightly or wrongly, acquired. For this reason I emphasize that the whole point of this book is to *undermine* the sense that cultural studies has a necessary trajectory built into it, tied to a particular national origin or source (whether British or otherwise). Cultural studies must operate in an open way without an agenda that appropriates the subject for a particular location. Handel Wright recently posed an important challenge to cultural studies as a subject²² when he wrote:

while British cultural studies provides the British intellectual not only with a home but also an authoritative place from which to speak, the absence of Africa in genealogies of cultural studies means that I need to make a case for the very existence and legitimacy of African cultural studies and hence a legitimate speaking position [for myself]. (1998: 39)

As Wright points out, any history of cultural studies should start from the principle of multiple 'origins', perhaps devaluing the notion of 'origins' altogether (cf. Hall, 1996b: 394). Only in that way can it take adequate account of the theoretical and pedagogic practice of, say, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) in contesting the impacts of British colonial 'education' in Kenya in the 1960s, or the origins of cultural studies practice in 1960s Australia (Morris, 1992; Frow and Morris, 1993: xxvi; Stratton and Ang, 1996).²³ This is not just a problem about British hegemony; there is always the danger of forgetting the hegemonic power of 'the West' in the history of all disciplines (Dirks, 1998: xi).

So when I offer this book as a particular way of thinking about cultural studies and its methods, I do not want to close off other possibilities. Inevitably, as I make connections across established lines of difference, yet myself speak from a particular (and in some ways privileged) position, there is a risk of seeming to 'speak for' others, rather than allowing them to speak in their own name (cf. hooks, 1992). But that is the exact opposite of my intention. I am offering just one vision, to take its place among those from other places and perspectives. A central part of that vision is the principle that each person's reflexivity about the vast mass of cultural processes that

surround them has significance and must be listened to. Cultural studies (internationally and nationally) must be the space for that mutual openness.

My own stake in imagining cultural studies and its method this way is real, and perhaps ambiguous: the product of two very different educational histories. Although I did not realize it at the time, my initial education matched all too neatly the personal trajectory of many involved in British cultural studies: the 'scholarship boy' who goes to an elite British university (Oxford), as the first to 'make it' from a family of working-class parents, or in my case parents who grew up working-class and then made a difficult and uncompleted journey to middle-class, professional status. But, if that history and my left political leanings fitted me, perhaps, to join the ranks of cultural studies, the match was not made. In the early 1980s I knew nothing of media or cultural studies. The second educational history was much longer: a curious sort of self-education as I tried to read critical thought in my spare time while working in an office by day. New horizons were opened up for me by working as a musician on the edges of the London professional music scene and a chance encounter with media studies at Goldsmiths College in the early 1990s.

I have a personal stake in cultural studies, because this was the space where I began to find a voice and bring a host of dispersed ideas, doubts and anxieties to bear on a single question: how does culture work, and who does it work for? But equally, I have no stake in an exclusive notion of what cultural studies is. The space of cultural studies is, I suspect, far larger and less charted than we have so far imagined; it must be explored from many different directions at once. Cultural studies' strength remains its openness to new voices, and its commitment to an expanding range of empirical research.

It is in that spirit, over the next few chapters, that I want to explore what it means to reflect on our lives 'inside culture'.

Notes

1 For example, Ferguson and Golding (1997) and Philo and Miller (1997) whose polemical tone has unhelpfully polarized positions between 'political economy' and 'culturalist' approaches.

2 For example, Giroux (1996), Bennett (1997: 51–3; 1998b: 535–8), Grossberg (1997a: 237).

3 Cf. Nowell-Smith (1987), O'Shea and Schwarz (1987), Schwarz (1989: 254).

4 As John Frow points out (1995: 81–4), we need to shift from taking 'the popular' as a taken-for-granted descriptive category to treating it as a normative category,

- which needs to be carefully examined and questioned. Cf. also Chapter 3.
- 5 There are exceptions of course. For example: John Tulloch's (1991) work on the aged audience; Simon Frith's (1986) argument in favour of broadening the range of music that cultural studies covers; the work of audience studies on the 'ordinary' processes of viewing in the home (Morley, 1986; Lindlof, 1987; Silverstone, 1994); various important investigations of the cultures of work (Negus, 1992; du Gay, 1997; McRobbie, 1998). A number of writers have also spoken generally about the validity of cultural studies analysing something other than popular culture (Nelson et al., 1992: 11; Nelson, 1996: 729; Webster, 1996). But the overall pattern of restricting the areas of the cultural field we study remains. For parallel critiques, see Harris (1996) and Miller and McHoul (1998).
- 6 These principles reflect broader intellectual currents, as I bring out later. Inevitably, therefore, there is overlap with the directions now being taken in other disciplines, for example the current emphasis on complexity in social science (M. Smith, 1998).
- 7 I am echoing here a famous phrase of Raymond Williams (1958: 306).
- 8 See especially Henry Giroux (1994, 1996), and cf. McRobbie (1992: 721), and Pickering (1997: 88).
- 9 Cf. Pickering (1997).
- 10 Cf. Goodwin and Wolff (1997), Bennett (1998b) and Miller (1998: 43, 48).
- 11 See, for example: Nelson et al. (1992: 2) and Nelson (1996: 277).
- 12 C. Hall (1992), Nelson et al. (1992: 4), Murdock (1995), Nelson (1996), Garcia Canclini quoted in Murphy (1997: 80), Grossberg (1997b) and Johnson (1997).
- 13 For subtle reflections on the issue of pedagogical authority, see Grossberg (1997c: 384–90).
- 14 Hall's position is, however, rather subtle: 'although cultural studies as a project is open-ended, it can't simply be pluralist . . . Yes, it refuses to be a master discourse or a meta-discourse of any kind . . . But it does have some will to connect; it does have some stake in the choices it makes . . . There is something at stake in cultural studies, in a way that I think, and hope, is not exactly true of many other very important intellectual and critical practices. Here one registers the tension between a refusal to close a field, to police it, and, at the same time, a determination to stake out some positions within it and argue for them' (1992b: 278). My underlying argument is that many of those choices must concern issues of method, if cultural studies is to function effectively as a space for engaging with the political dimensions of culture.
- 15 Cf. de Certeau on culture as an 'oceanic night' (1993: 211 [1974]).
- 16 On the centrality of empirical research, even in the light of post-structuralism, see McRobbie (1997).
- 17 Which means, incidentally, that it is no good claiming that cultural studies is distinguished by its reflexivity (as, for example, does Grossberg, 1997b: 267–8).
- 18 An important parallel to feminist epistemology here is the work on sociological and anthropological method by Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972], 1990). The necessary dialectic between thinking about the subject and the object of knowledge is condensed neatly into the opening sentence of his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*: 'the practical privilege in which all scientific activity arises never more subtly governs that activity (insofar as science presupposes not only an epistemological break but also a social separation) than when, unrecognised
- as privilege, it leads to an implicit theory of practice which is the corollary of neglect of the social conditions in which science is possible' (1977: 1, second emphasis added). See also Chapter 6.
- 19 From a materialist perspective, it is worth bearing in mind how much, institutionally, is invested in the 'mastery' of these theoretical terrains.
- 20 Cf. Durant (1997: 205) on cultural studies' 'selective interdisciplinarity which rules out so much interesting thinking'.
- 21 Cf. hooks (1991: 125) and Ang (1992: 312).
- 22 The Argentinian Ricardo Kaliman has made a parallel point about how within Latin American cultural studies a theoretical agenda developed under European influences gives insufficient account to 'the consciousness of practitioners of [Latin American] culture' themselves (1998: 263). Cf. also hooks (1992).
- 23 Cf. Eskola and Vainikkala (1994) on how Scandinavian cultural studies developed independently of British models. As Bill Schwarz has remarked, we need 'an expanded cultural geography of cultural studies' (1994: 389).