Cultural studies: a critical introduction

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Going global

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of cultural studies today is the way that it is becoming global — along with trade, finance, communications and the university system as a whole. It’s taught, in one form or other, in most national academic systems. Which means that, wherever you are coming from, there will be people in the field working on material that belongs to ‘another culture’ than your own. This presents a challenge. On the one hand, as the discipline is globalised it becomes harder to take any particular cultural context as standard, let alone as universal. The horizons of dialogue, exchange and research are extended. This fits in well with the discipline’s orientation, since it has never claimed scientific objectivity and rarely assumes that it possesses analytic methods that hold good across different cultures. On the other hand, to the degree that regional cultures are in fact analysed around the world in terms of a set of methods and theories first developed in the West, the discipline becomes complicit in the logic by which regional differences are reduced under the guise of accepting them as differences. And the sheer variety of topics and histories brought into the discipline through globalisation, along with the consequent loss of shared references and competencies, threatens to disrupt its capacity to draw practitioners into a shared project.

The notion that the amount and specialisation of culture- and knowledge-production had made a single and comprehensive overview of society impossible was already commonplace in the eighteenth century (see Hall 1992). In cultural studies these days, however, that sense is felt less in terms of loss than of confusion. For example, in a 1998 volume of the flagship journal Cultural Studies, one can find a traditional literary-critical essay on Hamlet and Marx; a sociological essay on consumerism and the
geographical borders; they merge and separate; they cross and disrupt political and social divisions, and also, sometimes, strengthen them. Cultural technologies are born and die. Capital and fashions ebb and flow through different cultural forms. Some genres become specialised and 'extreme', others sweep the world.

So it often seems as if, because 'culture' no longer refers to a specific set of things and because cultural markets are so pervasive, it—and hence cultural studies—can be just about anything (see Readings 1996, 17). Certainly as we shall see it often threatens to exceed its limits and take over alternative concepts such as society. Despite all this, cultural studies does not in fact cover culture with equal attention to all its modes. It has mainly directed itself to a particular set of cultural formations—those that connect most directly to its main modes of middle-class, leftist, young(ish) or wannabe young more or less Eurocentric practitioners. Hence, it has tended to neglect, for instance, religion; food; sport; hobby-sports such as fishing and train-spotting; middle-brow and 'kitch' culture, especially that part which is family-based and of most interest to the middle aged such as home improvement and gardening. For different reasons it has neglected high culture itself.

Then, too, study of culture itself belongs to culture. We cultural studies practitioners are making culture, even if from within a fairly highly organised institution—the education system—and even if our political ends, which some would describe as the democratisation of culture, impose upon certain constraints. At any rate cultural studies' concept of 'culture' breaks with the concepts of culture that have been dominant in the past. In particular, in losing its intimate connection with traditional high arts, the discipline tends to regard all cultural practices and objects as value-equivalent. Likewise it is a child of a society where such a levelling view has an economic function, namely the increase of cultural consumption of all kinds. Nor does it adhere to the idea promulgated by followers of the great, eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant—hold—that at culture's core lies the aesthetic: the domain of activities that are 'ends in themselves' and not of use for some other purpose, as, for instance, are food or buildings. Likewise the older, anthropological sense of 'culture' is exhausted, by which the term referred to the inherited, primarily non-modern and uncontested values, beliefs and practices that organise individuals' relations to, and participation in, communities.

Method

Once these older concepts of culture begin to retreat, and once culture is treated globally, method becomes a real problem for the academic study of culture. What kind of concepts and practices should we bring to our material? Interviews? Statistical analysis? Philosophical conceptualising? Political critique? Close readings of 'texts' (which might include songs, TV shows as well as novels)? In fact it is difficult to say...
The Discipline

much more about cultural studies method except that, in a very general way, it is both a theoretical and an empirical discipline, and, at its best, is both at the same time. It need not be organized around method partly because commercial, globalised culture is so diffuse and fluid, and generates so many positions from which to engage it, and because, in cultural studies, theories and methods themselves adhere to the logic of fashion (if mediated by the education system), passing through it continually. For all that, cultural studies does consistently drift back towards the interpretive and emotive methods of traditional hermeneutic disciplines, including the literary criticism to which (as we shall see) it owes so much — methods which, paradoxically, disown the rigidity of method.

When, nonetheless, the concept of 'method', drawn from the social sciences (and routinely demanded in academicians' research funding applications), is made central to cultural studies' identity, it quickly becomes highly generalised. In his excellent book, Inside Culture, Nick Coupland, for instance, places method, which he thinks of as a 'path of reaching', at the heart of cultural studies, since it provides the shared values or 'common framework with which we can recognise that we are in dialogue' (Coupland 2000, 143). This is obviously different from those who (like myself) think of cultural studies as basically anti-methodological, but it is worth noting where this stance takes Coupland. For him, cultural studies has a tripartite method: it is materialist and reflective (that is, it continually examines its own development and processes); it is anti-purist (that is, it does not believe that culture can be accounted for in objectify fashion); and it is theoretically eclectic. In a sense this is to give the game away since it does not spell out a pushed unique to cultural studies. The claim that cultural studies is method based expresses a particular orientation within it — or maybe just a hope.

Given this it seems natural to ask: if a discrete and stable set of methods do not characterise cultural studies, and if culture is so totalising and fluid a context, where does cultural studies find its centre of gravity? One response is to contend that the theory established during the period of cultural studies' emergence (rather than method as such) provides a lingua franca for the global cultural studies community: the common ground from which debate, teaching and research can proceed, albeit without being an overarching monopoly. And there can be little doubt that much cultural studies shares an overlapping set of proper names references (Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci, Michel de Certeau, Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Paul Gilroy and so on) as collected in the standard textbooks, although many of these names mean more in Anglophone or French cultural studies than they do in, say, Asian cultural studies. Another, more rewarding response would be to say that cultural studies is united not by a discrete set of theoretical references but by dual impulses which are vaguer than a method; a will to interpret the culture within the protocols of academic knowledge (providing evidence and citations for arguments; referring to well-recognized general concepts, implicitly or explicitly placing one's work within the disciplinary field; exposing one's writing to debate, and engaging in debate with others, etc.) as well as a (political) drive to connect with everyday life as lived outside the academy, and especially as lived by those with relatively little power or status. Indeed cultural studies at its best deals mainly with quite non-technical terms such as 'popular culture', 'rhetoric', 'globalisation', 'heteronormativity' — words which have good equivalents in various languages and which are actively used outside the academy. But even here cultural studies' globalism can cause problems: some of these terms at least (multiculturalism, queer) have different circulations, references and connotations in different parts of the world, and these slight differences are easily lost sight of. Certainly too much insistence on cultural studies' own 'common culture' is likely to fall prey to the difficulties that always bedevil the quest for unity and coherence — the passing over of cultural differences, the retreat into generality and abstraction, and the almost inevitable transformation of supposed common features into regulatory norms.

The fallback position on defining cultural studies is nominalist: cultural studies is just what names itself as, and is recognised as, cultural studies. But we don't have to be quite so minimalist: I would point to two further features which help characterise the field, one which is recognised by Nick Coupland, the other which is not. The first characteristic feature of cultural studies is that it is, as I say, an engaged study of culture. By engagement — let me repeat — I mean a sensitivity to the ways in which culture is (in part) a field of power-relations involving centres and peripheries, status hierarchies, connections to norms that impose repressions or marginalisations, but I also mean a commitment to celebrating or critiquing cultural forms (often in relation to the social field in which they are produced), to producing accounts of culture that can be fed back into cultural production and/or to producing new connections between various cultural forms and people (mainly, of course, students) in 'ordinary life'.

It is because cultural studies is engaged that it belongs to the social sciences rather than to the social sciences which claim to analyse their objects objectively. And it is because it is engaged that it can so easily become a factor in cultural production itself. Cultural studies has become an element in cultural work across many fields. For instance, the young black British artists of the 1980s — Chila Baraman, Sonia Boyce, Isaac Julien, Keith Piper — who were engrossed by the theory being then produced by Homi Bhabha, Kobena Mercer, Paul Gilroy and others (McRobbie 1999, 6). Angela McRobbie has also noted that many of the young journalists working on the new magazines of the nineties aimed at young women had some training in media and cultural studies, which helped provide the framework in which they negotiated their workplace (McRobbie 1999, 28).

American novelists such as Don DeLillo and Jonathan Franzen are familiar with contemporary cultural theory, and to some degree undertake to instantiate it in their novels. Indeed in countries such as Australia and the UK, cultural studies is providing the basic understanding and interpretation of contemporary culture and society in art, design
Disciplinarity

So questions about method and coherence quickly slide into questions of disciplinarity, debate over which remains fierce. Tony Bennett, for instance, has argued strongly that the incapacity to form a proper discipline will be regarded as institutional failure (Bennett 1998b, 513–534), while the consensus among those who came to the field early was that it ought to remain outside the constraints of disciplinarity. From that point of view, disciplinarity restricts the variety of topics, interests, positions, contexts and methods that the field can accommodate. There is no clear answer to this debate, partly because the status and function of disciplinarity in the humanities is changing. Let us remind ourselves that academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have never been unitary formations: they integrate various methods, objects of inquiry and professional interests. There is an important sense in which all disciplines are inter-disciplines. Once established, they are compelled to emphasise differentiation and autonomy yet they remain joined to one another by at least some shared interests and methods -- one can take the complex entanglements of and disruptions between literary studies and history as an example. Discrete disciplines also remain connected through sub-disciplines that permeate across and connect their boundaries: social theory for instance belongs simultaneously to sociology and to cultural studies.

More importantly, disciplines are not simply defined by their intellectual projects: as Bennett recognises, they are institutions linked to units (departments, schools, faculties) in universities. It is difficult to generalise about disciplinarity and university systems since different countries have very different university systems (with different funding and governance arrangements) as well as different disciplinary investments. Here we strike at once the difficulty in making clear and true statements about such matters on a global scale. And disciplinarity is itself becoming downgraded in the university system: there is evidence that, worldwide, managers of what we can call, following Simon Marginson and Mark Constable, the 'enterprise university' are less and less focussed on disciplinarity (Marginson and Constable 2000). So increasingly disciplines flourish elsewhere than the university department or programme itself -- and especially in journals and conferences. That's where academics and graduate students interact away from the classroom or departmental common spaces, and that's where cultural studies forms itself as a discipline. And, importantly, these sites are increasingly transnational.

The academic setting

So cultural studies is a discipline that has emerged in an administrative context which does not actively encourage disciplinarity. University managers do not see themselves as providing the settings for the flourishing of disciplines but rather, on the one side, as producing knowledge through research ultimately as a resource for national productivity, and, on the other, meeting the vocational needs of their students, now usually figured as consumers of education. Behind them, governments are typically concerned both to increase participation rates in post-compulsory education and to ensure that public funding is used in the national economic interest rather than for social purposes such as equality.

Thus universities are being administrated with an emphasis on efficiency, productivity and accountability. Such moves squeeze the humanities (along with social and pure sciences), encouraging, in their own, departmental amalgamations, interdisciplinarity and courses which offer, at least putatively, clear pathways into employment. This favours cultural studies as against the older disciplines, and there can be no doubt that the rise of cultural studies has been in part the result of the post-1970s university managerialism, and the social forces behind it. There is, of course, a tension here: from within cultural studies, the discipline's rise is consistently narrated in terms of its struggle against elitism, Eurocentricism and cultural conservatism; yet from the outside it often looks like a beneficent contribution to the renaissance of political economy and economic models of university governance. Both views are justifiable: this is the first of the discomforting harmonies between cultural studies and neo-liberalism that we will encounter in this book -- which provides evidence for cultural studies itself being, what ever else it is, a product of the hyper-fluid economy and culture of contemporary global markets.

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and even fashion schools, and, as such, is presupposed in much work in these fields, especially in avant-garde work. The political sense of engagement merges surprisingly easily into this more neutral, almost economic sense of engagement. The second ideal feature of cultural studies (which is recognised by Couldry) is that it ought to be self-reflexive. It needs continually critically to examine itself, and in particular its relations to the educational system on the one side, and the non-academic cultural institutions on the other. This self-reflection is not so much a matter of method as an institutional requirement. Cultural studies needs to manage constant shifts in relations between its own home - the university - and transformations in the wider culture outside, and that need, presented to it by the sheer fact of its existence and its will to survival in the educational system, constitutes part of its project as it justifies older disciplines and long-established understandings of culture and education. This self-reflection routinely takes the form of an examination of its own history. Is cultural studies a specific discipline or does it exist across or outside established disciplines? Is it, for instance, better regarded not as a discipline but as a critical practice? In cultural studies such questions have not been secondary, they have helped to generate the discipline itself.

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So cultural studies is a discipline that has emerged in an administrative context which does not actively encourage disciplinarity. University managers do not see themselves as providing the settings for the flourishing of disciplines but rather, on the one side, in producing knowledge through research ultimately as a resource for national productivity, and, on the other, meeting the vocational needs of their students, now usually figured as consumers of education. Behind them, governments are typically concerned both to increase participation rates in post-compulsory education and to ensure that public funding is used in the national economic interest rather than for social purposes such as equality. Thus universities are being administered with an emphasis on efficiency, productivity and accountability. Such moves squeeze the humanities (along with social and pure sciences), encouraging, in their case, departmental amalgamations, interdisciplinarity and courses which offer, at least putatively, pathways into employment. This favours cultural studies as against the older disciplines, and there can be no doubt that the rise of cultural studies has been in part the result of the post-1970s university managerialism, and the social forces behind it. There is, of course, a tension here; from within cultural studies, the discipline's rise is consistently narrated in terms of its struggle against elitism, Eurocentrism and cultural conservatism; yet from the outside it often looks like a beneficiary of the new market orientated political economy and economic models of university governance. Both views are justified: this is the first of the disconcerting harmonies between cultural studies and neo-liberalism that we will encounter in this book - which provides evidence for cultural studies itself being, what ever else it is, a product of the hyper-fluid economy and culture of contemporary global markets. I have said that the enterprise university is a worldwide phenomenon, but that needs qualification since the globalising of the university is creating new hierarchies
within the international academy. In particular, the US academy, backed by the USA's military and ideological might, seems to be becoming more and more dominant. In the Anglophone world, but also to some degree in Asia and Latin America, theories and sub-disciplinary formations prosper to the degree that they are disseminated from and sanctioned by elite US universities. Yet, in these elite universities there are few anti-disciplinary pressures, and the traditional humanities remain strong, still in the business of distributing cultural capital to the most favoured social groups or to individuals given the opportunity to join such groups. So cultural studies has not flourished institutionally in these universities, nor indeed in British or European elite universities. Where it does formally exist in the more rarefied sectors of the global university system (as in Harvard's Center for Cultural Studies), it tends to nestle in a site where different disciplines meet: it gestures at a cross-disciplinary vitality rather than at even an inter-disciplinarity. There's a slight tension at work here. Cultural studies is no longer a marginal field after all it has grown partly on the logic of neo-liberal governmental policies - but it remains that out of the highest reaches of the global university system, which are largely protected from those policies.

Nor, of course, does the globalisation of cultural studies mean that it is positioned institutionally in the same way around the world, although most Angophone accounts fail to register this sufficiently (we see Stratten and Ang 1996). Indeed the humanities themselves don't everywhere take the form familiar from within the North American/European/British ex-colonies area. In Latin America they are usually covered by the term 'Faculdade de Letras' (and because the politics of ethnicity has historically been relatively weak there, they have, for instance, taken relatively little interest in 'multiculturalism' and more interest in concepts such as 'hybridity'). In Asia, culture is studied largely in language or social science departments (see Yüdice 2001, 218-219). Specifically, in the People's Republic of China, where the politics of resistance cannot easily be made academic, cultural studies is often dismissed as merely theoretical (although there is also great interest in it). This is one reason that in Asia especially cultural studies work depends more heavily on non- or quasi-academic settings than it does in, say, Britain. And certain key concerns of metropolitan cultural studies traditions are less apparent in the so-called 'third world', where the question of Westernisation, modernisation, and autonomous national identity and nation-building loom large. And also where academic secularity is less taken for granted.

In continental Europe itself, cultural studies, when thought of as the politically engaged study of culture, especially popular culture, is not as well established as it is in the Anglophone world. There, the use of cultural hierarchies to supplement economic hierarchies in the articulation of class structures (best described by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his classic Distinction) remains too well entrenched. And in France in particular what Marc Fumaroli calls the 'cultural state' - the state that directs and promotes culture - is more developed than in any other capitalist country (see Fumaroli 1991). The post-war triumph of social welfareism across the European continent, along with the perceived threat of American cultural domination has meant that cultural values have not been the object of contest that they have been in the USA and UK. In Europe, anti-Americanism also plays its part in preventing academic disciplines asserting an affirmative relation to commercial culture. More specifically, in Germany critical theory, aimed primarily at critiquing capitalist culture, dominates; and in France the stand-off between speculative (as represented by Jean Baudrillard) and critical, empirical approaches to culture (as represented by Bourdieu) seems to delimit the field. So although French theorists have provided cultural studies with core concepts and methods, the discipline has not flourished in France. French thinkers such as Michel de Certeau and Foucault are especially important to the discipline because of the radical and unsettling thrust of their thought, but the cultural traditionalism that stimulated their radicalism is apparent in cultural studies' relative inconstancy in France.

But I will have more to say about differences in cultural studies globally in sections to come. Before that we need to have a stronger sense of the enterprise culture which is taking charge of globalising processes across the board.

Further reading
Enterprise culture

Cultural studies reflects on itself so obsessively not just because it lacks a generally acknowledged set of methods, or because globalisation is dispersing and mobilising it, but also because, despite everything, it remains mystified about its own conditions of emergence. As already noted, those conditions are not quite adequately described in the often-told epic story of heroic dissident British intellectuals (Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, the Birmingham school) battling for democratisation against elitism and hegemony in the sixties and seventies. Or more global versions of this story such as Michael Denning’s account of cultural studies as a product of the transnational ‘new left’ encounter with the explosive popular culture of the sixties (Denning 2004, 76–90). After all we have begun to see how university managerialism finds common cause with cultural studies. And to see how cultural studies is entwined with the new configuration of capitalist culture. But we need now to examine more carefully what that configuration—which I will call enterprise culture—actually is.

Enterprise culture is associated first with a rapid increase in the social presence of culture, economically, governmentally and conceptually—its positive re-weighting, as ‘culture-societies’ (Schwengel 1991; Schulze 1992). Certainly the percentage of workers in cultural industries has increased markedly over the past decades, in UNESCO reports, the international trade in cultural goods has increased by a factor of 5–6 in the past twenty years. A large number of middle-class people in their twenties and thirties, making the difficult move from the education system to the workplace, are involved in some kind of creative work, which in many developed nations is supported by some kind of unemployment benefit (in some countries, creative workers and would-be creative workers have their own form of the dole) (see McRobbie 1999, 1–6). In most places in the world, every decade (and sometimes every year) there are, in relation to population growth, more television channels broadcasting longer hours, more movies, more books, more comics, more magazines, more tourist resorts, more lifestyle choices, more commodities sold on the basis of design, more records, more fashion brands, more computer games, more access to the World Wide Web, more sporting events, more celebrities in relation to total population than there ever were before.

This has had a profound impact on old high culture, which has become just another province within this large field rather than its pinnacle. High culture is increasingly dependent on state subsidies—where it competes both with community arts and its cousin, the avant-garde. Itenders less and less status upon its devotees. For almost everyone in Anglophone society, rich or poor, to go on an exotic adventure tour, for instance, offers more prestige than a familiarity with, say, George Eliot’s novels or Jacob Tintoretto’s art or Felix Mendelssohn’s music. So the academic disciplines that provided the skills fully to appreciate and contextualise Eliot, Tintoretto and Mendelssohn lose ground to disciplines which aim rather to provide entry into the cultural industries. In fact cultural studies often appeals to students for whom the old hierarchy of distinction, by which high culture possessed more cultural capital than popular culture, is not so much wrong and to be resisted as meaningless.

What exactly is this new enterprise culture? It’s another term that points to two directions—the first, to ‘enterprise’ and ‘entrepreneurialism’ as a rubric covering a wide band of social and economic activities, and, second, to the entrepreneurialisation of culture conceived more narrowly—in effect, at the totality of leisure activities. Both forms of enterprise culture emphasise the concept of the ‘career’ in which the old category of labour is replaced by one of self-organised, economically productive cultural agency. In this context, cultural studies is under pressure to present itself as preparing students with the skills required to embark on particular careers and at the same time productively to participate in the culture. From the entrepreneurial as well as the leftist point of view, it is harder and harder to defend academic training as a site of scholarship for its own sake or the preserver of received cultural standards. From the perspective of entrepreneurialism, academic study too seems to be a branch of the business of culture.

At another level, enterprise culture emphasises a set of specific personal and ethical qualities: self-sufficiency, appetite for risk, individualism, creativity and sense of adventure as well as self-control, financial expertise and management skills. Such an ethic is not confined to leisure activities of course (although there’s much in adventure sports, etc.). It belongs to the world of work, which, especially in its enlarged forms, is now saturated in culture also. The enterprise-culture ethic covers an accounting career almost as well as it does one in the arts, property or even academia. It is in these terms
that employers try to manage the cultures of their workplaces, once the cultural iden-
tities that workers bring to the workplace are seen to be either irrelevant or divisive —
except maybe where they instantiate diversity.

Products of a spirit, the capacity to respond to the unforeseen, on being
'reactive', or reactive, on mood, pleasures, identification with company aims, or to put it in more philosophical terms, as the sense that existential
wants are being satisfied at work: as a vocation. The spirit of culture also helps
place the 'old Marxist understanding of labour as alienated', that is, a failing fully to
express a person's needs and potential. And this emphasis on culture allows indi-
vidual workers to accept specific processes (e.g. performance reviews) set by
companies with a minimum of resistance. One persistent school of thought, drawing on
the work of Michel Foucault, sees this turn to enterprise culture as the workplace's
new form of 'governmentality'.

No easy political judgement of entrepreneurial culture is possible. The arguments
that it creates new subjects whose power is less for the resistance of society or criticism
of society as a whole than did the social welfare or liberal ideologies that entrepreneuri-
sim has largely replaced, or that it marks a radical increase in employment insecurity
and low pay, or that it is more directed to the relatively rich, while true, do not
end the story. Entrepreneurialism has encouraged (admittedly mainly relatively rich)
people to bring their talents to market and, more specifically, has enabled the increase
of cultural activity since the eighties. In the UK it has eased access to cultural industries
and other workplaces for those from outside the Oxbridge axis (partly because training
in those fields is relatively cheap, and there exist fewer barriers to entry than to the
professions), it has increased options about how and when to work; it has required
creative workers to take a more diverse and their requirements increasingly seriously.

It has its own utopianism: since it proposes a society of energetic individuals, both
supportive of (as consumers) and competitive with (as producers) one another,
utilising their personal dreams. And no less to the point, in the arts it is as though it
has been destructive of an older system in which quality was systematically lower. Of
course there exist exceptions to this, such as television, where the move into
outsourcing of product and a greater attention to ratings even at the BBC has had to
the production of less well-thought-out and original programming, according to its own
audiences.)

In enterprise culture, cultural industries are routinely regarded as economic
contributors, as employers, as attractors of tourism and business, as agents in urban
regeneration, for instance. Which means that government (in the vernacular sense)
Genres and genealogies

I have been writing so far mainly as if cultural studies was united, even if it lacks a unifying method. But in fact cultural studies exists in very different forms, and the term 'cultural studies' is used in a variety of ways. As we have begun to see, different nations have developed different kinds of cultural studies. But there are also developed different cultural-political positions, different intellectual trajectories, different disciplinary alliances and different accounts of the cultural studies intellectual. Among these different forms, let me at once distinguish three national dimensions of Anglophone cultural studies – British, American and Australian.

Given my insistence that cultural studies is globalising itself rapidly and needs to be understood in terms of new global flows it may seem odd that here I am, once again, emphasising the discipline's most established Anglophone national traditions. My reasons are, sadly, pragmatic and reflect political and commercial realities as much as intellectual ones. I do want to argue for British cultural studies having a particular importance to the field. But this is a book written in English and aimed primarily at American, Australian and British readers; my own competence and range is limited (I wish I knew more about the background of the kind of work that is now appearing in the Journal of African Cultural Studies for instance); and if cultural studies is appearing in different forms and out of different genealogies in many localities it can't be denied that the work which circulates most widely tends to refer back to what has been produced in the old Anglophone imperial nations. Flows of knowledge are by no means unidirectional – from the centre out – but it's not as if centres don't exert a centrifugal force even on the resistance to Eurocentrism. To argue otherwise is merely wishful thinking.
The discipline

British cultural studies

My own idealised sense of the field as the engaged, simultaneously theoretical and empirical study of contemporary culture from below or from the margin is basically borrowed from British cultural studies, which, as I say, has often (and for good reason) been regarded as the mother lode of the discipline globally. Most of all it was in the UK that culture became defined as simultaneously a way of life, a set of texts and an instrument of social division. And in Britain, the cultural studies academy has been consistently regarded as something like an ‘organic intellectual’, that is, as a representative member of an oppressed or relatively powerless group — in the early days as marked by class, and later by gender, race or sexuality, later still by membership of a state community or a subculture. He or she has a commitment to education as a tool for progressive politics (British cultural studies emerges out of the worker’s education movement) and is armed with theoretical and interpretive concepts that will enable an expanded understanding of any particular text or cultural situation.

The history of British cultural studies has been argued over repeatedly, and I don’t intend to go through these debates again in detail here (see Turner 1996; Dawkins 1997; Steede 1997). But it is important to remember that cultural studies in Britain emerged from a Centre (at the University of Birmingham) funded by the ownership of Penguin Books, which was at that time publishing quality literature and which was first headed up by Richard Hoggart, whose The Uses of Education (1957) became one of the ‘spinning points for the new field. At this point cultural studies was in dialogue with a form of literary criticism developed by F.R. Leavis. Leavis’s (as it was called) attempt that language contains residual meanings that have not been wholly incorporated into debased modern commercial culture, it retains its elements able to express more communal and harmonious ways of living. In a word, language remains a bulwark against modernisation (Mulvaney 2000, 18). For Leavis, this was most true of literary language, so that literary criticism based on immersion in great literature, was the strongest basis for cultural criticism — he even puzzling such a view might seem to us today.

It was Raymond Williams who rejected the notion that literary language contained this kind of ethical capital and turned attention away from literature to culture. In Culture and Society (1958) he analysed the history in which ‘culture’ had long been imagined as a transcendent bulwark against modern society’s commercialisation and democratisation. He showed how, in the period between Edward Burke and Leavis (i.e. between about 1760 and 1860), the concept of absolute culture became narrower and narrower, its defenders less and less connected to powerful social forces and the rhetoric in praise of it more and more shrill. A sense of culture as ‘ordinary’ had been lost. Social project was to reconcile culture in the sense of art and literature with the culture of the ordinary (partly out of a so-called ‘new left’ rejection of official Leninist Communist Party doctrine which privileged the Communist Party itself above the ordinary worker). This marks the key moment in the emergence of British cultural studies.

Genres and genealogies

The problem with Culture and Society is that Williams himself was unable to jettison culture as defined in the conservative movement after Burke because he showed its negative view of the organisation of modern society. Culture and Society ends by arguing that we need an expanded notion of culture as ‘a whole way of life’ (a phrase coined by T.S. Eliot, now given a radical twist, that would be developed further by Williams in his next book, The Long Revolution, but also, surprisingly as it turned out, that working-class solidarity might create its own democratic variation of high culture against capitalist, market-orientated modernity.

Later in his career, as he outlined what he called ‘his cultural materialism’, Williams main theme was the relation between the political, the economic and the cultural. Cultural materialism developed out of a multifaceted critique of the Marxist base/superstructure theory. That theory states that changes in the ‘superstructure’ (i.e. culture and ideology in the sense of social values and stereotypes) are determined by changes in the ‘base’ (i.e. the economy). Against that, Williams argued that changes in economic structures (and shifts in cultural organisation and content) are anything like the requisite amount of detail. Cultural forms and events are more varied, the specific possibilities available to cultural workers are abundant and less than any reference to economic foundations can account for. Furthermore Williams embraced the line that the base/superstructure model under-emphasised the materiality of culture itself. For him, culture was in the practices that help shape the world — they too are material. ‘The world is as material as the world’, to cite a catchphrase of another of cultural studies’ founders, Stuart Hall. And finally, Williams described the separation of the base from the superstructure as such. For him, both are aspects of a larger social whole that continually interact with one another and constantly mutate.

In his early books Williams’ theory remains based on the assumption that societies are interrelated wholes rather as social practices are also cultural practices, that is, practices that make collective meaning. But this kind of argument — labelled ‘culturalism’ — was under attack by the early 1970s. By the early 1970s, Williams turned to the work of the pre-war Italian communist Antonio Gramsci to problematise his early ‘organic’ culturalism, especially Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’. For Gramsci, hegemony helped to explain why class conflict was not endemic despite the fact that power and capital were so unevenly distributed and the working classes (in Italy, particularly the southern peasantry) led such ‘subalterns’. Gramsci argued that the poor partly contented to their oppression because they shared certain cultural dispositions with the rich. Cross-class alliances or ‘blocs’ could form around interests in particular circumstances or ‘conjunctures’, the point important such hegemonic ‘cultural fronts’ being popular nationalism. Yet hegemony, especially as Williams glossed it, was not a mere belief, interest or ‘ideology’. It covered (as he wrote), a ‘whole body of practices and expectations, our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature...
of man and his world' (Williams 1980b, 38). Crucially, it offered the promise, and sometimes the opportunity, for change. Hegemony was bound to beliefs and passions so deep as to form the very substance of a practice of life.

During the seventies Gramscian thought battled with another Marxist mode of social analysis, dubbed 'structuralist'. At this point structuralists abandoned the category of 'hegemony', (heavily influenced by the revisionist French communist, Louis Althusser) as an assemblage of 'relatively autonomous' (i.e. only loosely connected and self-determining) institutions - the education system being the most important of these - which in turn produced forms of knowledge and value (so-called 'signifying practices'). Thus, in the last instance, were organized so as to perpetuate capitalist relations of production.

The struggle between Gramscianism and structuralism gradually dissolved during the eighties. At that point Stuart Hall (who took over Raymond Williams' role as British cultural studies' most influential theorist and who had worked through these intellectual accounts of a pluralist, de-centred, 'post-Fordist' society, in which different social and cultural fields (economic, political, cultural) are in constant and constantly changing interaction with one another, without any fixed determining the others, although the economy continues to provide the constraints within which the others move (Hall 1996, 44). (This is the kind of model I invoke in slightly different terms above.) Indeed, leaving this particular theory aside, the understanding of individual and communal agency shifted over the years. Take as an example a relatively early work like Policing the Crisis (Hall 1978). This showed that the media panic around a 1973 mugging in Handsworth by a young black man helped the state to inaugurate policies that controlled not so much set of generally accepted beliefs and stereotypes - was constrained by the interaction and worked towards the hegemony of racist values and constraints on black people's on, rather than as players negotiating and opposing dominant forces in the social field. This vision of victim passivity was to change in cultural studies of the eighties, when individuals came to be regarded as agents rather than as subjects of larger ideological and social structures. As a result, the 'politics of representation' became paramount. In
There have been many attempts to provide a specifically American genealogy for cultural studies (see for example Grosberg 1996). Perhaps the most convincing effort has been that by Michael Denning, who attempted to correlate the legacy of thirties Popular Front intellectuals for cultural studies, thinkers who certainly were crucial to the development of post-war American studies (Denning 2004, 136-142). The 'Popular Front' was an anti-fascist alliance of left forces that included communist and non-communist activsts and claimed to represent the popular will. It is also possible to show that early twenty-century pragmatists such as John Dewey paid serious and progressive attention to the relation with lived culture and social justice and actively sought to build institutions to expand cultural horizons among workers. This task was further developed by Marxian sociologists such as C. Wright Mills (whose doctoral thesis was on Deweyan pragmatism). Mills had a stronger grasp of class and power than Dewey; he popularised the term 'elite' and turned his attention (in a negative way) to 'mass culture'. This left-wing intellectual tradition continued to influence figures such as the seminal feminist Betty Friedan, who emerged from the labour movement in the sixties and whose work feeds into cultural studies as we know it today.

On a different track one could also make a strong case to bring the African American leader W.E.B. Du Bois into the stream of American cultural studies via sixties black-power intellectuals such as LeRoi Jones. Or it could be shown that, in journals such as Politics and Pastview, anti-communist, left-wing 'New York intellectual' of the post-war years (notably Dwight Macdonald), who had loose connections with the Jewish exiles from Nazi Germany such as Max Horckheimer (of the Frankfurt School), paid attention to culture in ways which have some similarity to Leavis, Orwell and Hoggart in Britain. Or, finally, there were writers such as Robert Warshow, Manny Farber and Parker Tyler, who treated popular culture (and especially the movies) much more sympathetically than the Pastview crowd and who became mediators between journalism and the growing academic field of American Studies.

But the effort to promote an American lineage for cultural studies proper is a little strained, and invites the question 'Why bother?' Why draw national pride into the debate? The fact is that the forms of analysis developed by William and Hall (drawing upon work by Gramsci, Michel de Certeau, Althusser, Foucault, etc.) were unique and specific, and implicitly articulated with the humanist frameworks of the traditional Left, including the American Left. And these indigenous history-building accounts often slide over the fact that the traditional disciplines, armoured by an elaborate 'professionalism', are even stronger in the USA than they are in Latin America, Asia, Britain or Australia.

Today in the USA cultural studies is typically associated with 'minority' scholars, that is, with multiculturalism and the analysis of race and power. (Here, of course, 'minority' has a completely different referent than it did for F.R. Leavis, for whom 'minority culture' meant the beleaguered literary culture of those charged with resisting mass communication; and something else again for the French theorist Gilles Deleuze, for whom it meant something more like simply 'marginal'.) While cultural studies in the USA can mean the study of popular culture, Rey Chow has argued that four rather different topics have been especially important in marking it out as American (see Chow 1998, 2-4). The first is the 'postcolonial' critique of Western representations of non-Western cultures, as pioneered by Edward Said in his book Orientalism (1978). The second, following Gayatri Spivak's path-breaking work, is a concern with the subaltern (that is, the powerless and dominated), and an analysis of how gender, race, cultural otherness and class combine to fix subalterinity (Spivak 1988). The third is an analysis of 'minority discourse', that is an attention to the expressive voices of subordinated 'others'. And last is the embrace of 'lyricity' (about which see pp. 136-2 below). In Britain and Australia such topics would as likely as not fall under a different disciplinary rubric. They might well be seen as belonging to postcolonialism, multiculturalism or, perhaps, ethnic studies rather than simply to cultural studies.

In the USA cultural studies is less obsessed with America itself than British cultural studies is obsessed with Britain, perhaps because the USA is a global power and attracts more staff and students internationally. In this context, it is important to note that the USA is also where 'area studies' are strongest, that is the study of specific regions from an interdisciplinary point of view, which balance a sensitivity to the 'authenticity and authenticity of native experience' as Harry Harootunian puts it, with a potential usefulness for official foreign policy (Harootunian 2000, 4); see also Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002). These regions are supposed to form roughly discrete and coherent units requiring development. Cultural studies, which emphasises the mobility of, and interactions between, different cultures, and which attempts to speak from below, productively problematises area studies even when it enters into dialogue with them - a problematisation that has been debated most effectively in such journals as Public Culture. Nonetheless the preponderance of area studies, along with the hierarchical nature of the US university system which is less state-managed than in most other countries, has helped sideline cultural studies there.

Australian cultural studies

Australian cultural studies emerges out of British rather than US cultural studies. It was initiated by a stream of young British academics who went to Australia looking for jobs in the late seventies and early eighties (Tony Bennett, John Fiske, John Hartley, Colin Mercer and David Sanders among others). They found a thriving intellectual import culture, working outside or on the margins of the academy and focused on the latest trends in Europe, notably what the latest Althusserians were doing or where Foucault was at, and whose most active figures included Ian Hunter and Meaghan...
Morris. As it turned out, cultural studies went on to be more successful in the Australian academic system than in any other. This has meant that its claim to radical political value has been harder to maintain: it has quickly been normalised there.

Nonetheless, in an influential essay introducing the collection Australian Cultural Studies as leader, John Frow and Marghan Morris characterised cultural studies as processes which divide as much as they bring together (Frow and Morris, 1993, ix). In this light, Australian cultural studies carried out the work of the heart of all social formations and critiqued images of reconciled or unified culture migrant/settled and colonisers/colonised divisions that are at the core of the local discipline's concerns pushing aside interests in, say, popular culture.

Whatever the case in the earlier nineties, it is hard to see it like that now. And as with Ghaas Hage (1996), and a new generation of indigenous intellectuals — Tony Birch, Marcia Langton and Philip Morrissey for instance — who are articulating new understandings of contemporary aboriginal culture consistent with pioneering work by anyone working in the field anywhere (see Muecke 1992; Micale 1994).

Nowadays Australian cultural studies is increasingly normalised, concentrating on culture and the media. Indeed it is Australia that the celebration of popular culture as contributions. The key population of the seventies now hold senior posts and what was moments to encourage enterprise universities has empowered the older tertiary technical impact on more abstract and theorised cultural studies in ways that appear to have which ask even young academics to apply for funding, has had a conformist effect. Perhaps Australian cultural studies offers us a glimpse of what the discipline would be like were it to become relatively hegemonic in the humanities.

Local studies

These national versions of cultural studies need to be differentiated from the quasi-Chicana/0 cultural studies, British Studies and American Studies, all of which can be thought of as ‘local studies’. Confusingly, local studies may have sub-formations which narrow their focus further – to just culture, as for instance Chicano cultural studies and British cultural studies. Thus a recent set of anthologies published by Oxford University Press under the titles British Cultural Studies, American Cultural Studies and so on do not really belong to cultural studies in the sense discussed here (cultural studies 'proper'); they simply introduce students to British and American culture from a number of social science and humanities perspectives. These academic formations have opened because they can be packaged in the classroom economically and efficiently, often to students not majoring in the humanities or social sciences or to students in non-research institutions. For this reason, they have not achieved the status of established research-based disciplines. They have also tended to work with more essentialist notions of national identity and, often (as with Australian Studies), with an open nationalist bias. Among local studies, however, American Studies stands out. It has long been the most professionalised of these disciplines at the same time as having real roots in the left, although its national limits and tendency to resist theory have meant that its exchanges with cultural studies proper have been limited (Maddox 1999).

In some cases, however, cultural studies proper has emerged within local studies. Take cultural studies in Hong Kong as an example. It has been concerned mainly with the question of Hong Kong's exceptionalism: with analysing the way that Hong Kong's long history as a British colony, its fierce commitment to capitalism and the global export markets, and its role since 1997 as a mediating economy between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the rest of the world has placed it on the border of the West and Asia (see Erni 2001; Chan 1996; Cheung 2001). From an outsider's point of view Hong Kong cultural studies, as for British cultural studies, can seem a little parochial. But there can be no doubt that its local success as an academic discipline is a reflex to the need for the society to orient itself in the world during unstable times, to maintain the kind of intellectual capital required to produce for audio-visual export markets, and no less importantly, to give itself the conceptual tools with which to accommodate itself to, or (carefully) resist, the PRC.

In addition to such national and local streams of cultural studies (and I will deal with certain other cultural studies in the section on cultural studies' parts below), it is important briefly to single out two further cultural studies streams which are determined not by geography but by the discipline's relation to anti elitism and to ordinariness.

Cultural populism

As we have begun to see, cultural populism is a strand of cultural studies especially associated with the Australian-based John Fiske and Joan Hartley (see Fiske 1989; Hartley 1992; for a critique, see McQuail 1992 and Kellner 1995). It supposes that popular culture is not merely the opposite of high culture but also of dominant culture,
which means that, for it, championing the popular has political value (Mulhorn 1988b, 138). Thus, in a ‘famous instance’, in the late 1980s John Fiske spoke of the literary force of Madonna’s use of masquerade (Fiske 1987). From the perspectives of radical populism, popular culture always acts against hegemony, thought of here as elitist domination. It invests the various traditional ‘minority’ accounts of high culture, which regard high culture as a backlash against a trivial mass culture. Such a passion has become harder to maintain in the age of enterprise culture, not simply because high culture is losing relative value because, as we have begun to see, popular culture has itself increasingly become dispersed into niches, and is increasingly hybridising itself and soliciting a wider range of audience responses (see pp. 193-202).

**Everyday life**

The strand of cultural studies concerned with everyday life emerges from an earlier twentieth-century intellectual tradition that attempted to theorise everyday life in order to understand - and to counter - the upheavals of modern existence. Perhaps the first key moment here comes with French surrealism, the anti-childhood movement which, during the inter-war period, aimed to reveal mysteries secreted in the mundane (mysteries in the spiritual sense rather than the Sherlock Holmes sense - although, as the surrealists knew, detective fiction tends to lead us into the heart of the everyday). At about the same time, the realisation that something of value could be wrested from the familiar, the routine, combined with a fear that everyday life itself was under threat from modernity helped to motivate an aspiring, large-scale organisation to record the routines of ordinary life across the nation (Higmore 2002).

Closer ad to cultural and social theories, the French communist theorist Henri Lefebvre, created everyday life as a category for academic social theory in the 1960s, and in his responses to the totalitarianism for surrealists, such as in the Hungarian writer Gyorgy Lukacs, divided, as a work under, between work and leisure. For Lefebvre, capitalist work, in its specialisation and repulsion, cannot sustain workers’ full human potential (which is why they are ‘alienated’ from their true potential selves) and leisure becomes just an occasion for recuperation, for regaining the energy for work. Hence, for Lefebvre, everyday life is a product of capitalist modernity: ‘everyday life has been ritualised, touched by cosmic reveries as well as by an assured and participatory belief that vital traditions were being maintained’ - which meant that life was never ordinary in our society.

Modern everyday life emerges in the emptiness of a countless social order designed primarily to produce commodities. Nonetheless, for all that, it remains a space where people have a residual capacity to act freely, and where political domination 

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Peter out. Hence everyday life is ambiguous: it is less meaningful than it ought to be, but it is where autonomy and resistance to the system still have some kind of chance (see Lubet 1991).

Lefebvre’s pioneering notion of everyday life is difficult to grasp because he calls upon it to concretise both the damage sustained by modern capitalist society and the possibilities for translocation and transformation within modern capitalism. Certainly, his ‘everyday life’ is a more nuanced notion than that implied by Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart’s reverence for the ‘ordinary’ and their relatively straightforward efforts to locate cultural value and solidarity within everyday life. The category of everyday life in later cultural studies has had to negotiate between the complex category it inherited from Lefebvre and the more specific category it inherited from Williams. And it has done so mainly via the work of Michel de Certeau, a Jesuit priest and a historian of Christian mysticism, whose book, _The Practice of Everyday Life_ (translated into English in 1984), had an enormous impact on cultural studies in the late eighties and early nineties. What was appealing about de Certeau for cultural studies theorists was that he depoliticised cultural resistance and extended the concept of individual agency, for him, individuals may practice all kinds of ‘tricks’ in their dealings with society. He argues that the networks of control and meanings through which individuals pursue their social existence have become increasingly powerful and rationalised but still remain full of options. So there are still various ways of acting outside of - or even against - the system’s logics, even if these occasions are normally concealed. Such occasions are tactical (improvised from within everyday life) rather than strategic (determined by reason and planning from outside the flow of everyday life). They require what de Certeau called ‘acts of making’ (acts de force) which create something fresh, unexpected, experimental and use out of the forms of work or consumption that are demanded of us (de Certeau 1984, xii-xl): examples include an employee using her employer’s resources and time for her own ends without formally stealing or cheating. De Certeau’s framework was extended, in particular by the Australian theorist Megan Morris, to cover a range of still more familiar cultural activities (Morris 1998 and 1998).

More recently another concept of life has emerged within cultural theory – Georgio Agamben’s ‘bare life’. Agamben’s notion refers to anonymous biological life, and he uses it, following Foucault, to show how modernity may be understood as the increasing polarisation of the concept of life and of the capacity of sovereign power that is, the state) to intervene in the lives of its citizens at the level of their most basic biological functions (Agamben 1999). It is not clear how useful this concept will be for cultural studies. A version of it has been found in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s ‘borderline Empire’, which contests that, under current globalisation and deploying the new technologies, basic productive human life is now on the threshold of overcome the constraints of national difference and class oppression worldwide. But here ‘life’ is
very remote from the everyday customs theorised by Williams. It is a metaphysical notion being called upon to do abstract political work, rather than a category expressed in quotidian existence, embedded in history and politics, which can provide a context for critical analysis and action (Hardt and Negri 2000).

**Cultural studies and its disciplinary neighbours**

Cultural studies also exists as an element alongside (and sometimes within) other, more securely institutionalised disciplines. In particular, it has complex and intimate relations with literary studies, media studies, anthropology, sociology, geography, history, political theory and social policy. I will deal with geography and history in the chapters on time and space (see Parts 2 and 3 respectively). So I want briefly to describe its relations with literary studies in English departments, especially those in the USA, 'cultural studies' has tended to become a successor to deconstruction, feminism, postcolonialism and the new historicism, just as if it were another way of doing literature'. In effect it means a more extensive set of objects for analysis – one which includes popular texts, alongside an understanding of literature as a cultural product. At its best, the 'cultural studies' turn has helped literary studies move on from the production of endless 'readings' of individual texts to examining reading as a form of life for different communities and individuals in different times and places. But of course, the move toward the assumption that cultural studies is primarily a branch of literary studies. Not to put too fine a point on it, that way of thinking is finally an expression of the fact that literature will not. Cultural studies has more difficult relations with sociology and anthropology. From sociology's side, cultural studies is often seen to be a primarily literary discipline, tinged with postmodernism and post-structuralism, light on empirical research and innocent of statistical analyses. From the cultural studies side, sociology seems an implausibly as social reality independently of engagement and value. Sociology from a cultural studies point of view, seems to consist of what it is of research. Recently bringing overshooting social theories to bear on it, in a conscious effort to supplant cultural studies' supposed meta-theory (see Smith 1998). In fact however, some sectors of sociology have absorbed elements of cultural studies' approach. A less prominent example is on Raymond Williams in Anthony Giddens' In Defense of Sociology [1996] stand as an instance of this. While much cultural studies is intertwined with sociology. For instance Paul Willis' Learning to Labour (1977) or John Ellis on the idea of 'ideology' (Sinn 1998 and 2000). Althusser's formulation of ideology was characteristic of the utopian in that it insisted that the personal (or, better, the subjective) and the political could not be pulled apart. This was not an argument that the circumstances of our everyday life relations are constrained by structures open to political reform, but that our images of the world are themselves politically nuanced. The fact that we don't know or think that this is the case is a sign precisely of how powerful the politics which injects one
sense of the real actually is. Because, for Althusserians, images, social stereotypes, unacknowledged norm, media stories and vernacular forms of discourse such as jokes circulate in what and which political sciences study. Politics is everywhere. Indeed, for ideologically presented models of selfhood — 'subject positions' — that people acquire a category into the images of people like us that are communicated across and between codes and structures, routinely acting on the symbolic and political world in order to transform it because that world cannot fulfill desire. Politically, post-ideology uses the structure of the stable regime based on eternally valid principles or rights. In its contingency and open-endedness, with its shifting alliances, postmodern politics mirrors hyper-fluid culture. Another way of putting this would be to say that, in spite of itself, postmodern theory, like cultural studies, mimics capitalism's restlessness and formidable powers of innovation and destruction. And that is why postmodernism and cultural studies can cross-fertilize one another.

Cultural studies in the public sphere

I have been concentrating on cultural studies' relations with other academic fields and disciplines. But of course it also has relations with non-academic institutions, including potential employers of students, cultural producers and the media. Of these the last has received most attention, and indeed debate about relations between cultural studies academics, journalists and so-called public intellectuals (that is, intellectuals with a significant media profile) has been intense. At stake has been the following question: How can cultural studies claim to be so engaged and, as Edward Said's term, worldly practice if it remains stuck in the Kafka of the academy? There have been a number of suggestions that cultural studies academics have failed to fulfill their responsibilities to the public, having taken flight into theory and jargon. From this point of view, academics need to lift their public profile, popularize themselves and make themselves available to the media.

Something like the opposite is sayable also: that cultural studies is too journalistic and needs to restore analytic and critical distance between it and its objects (Savage and Dolphin 1993). Still another position is that the academic cultural critic is essentially deluded: the position of distant authority from which she or he writes is a chimera. And for those who take that line, it may seem that journalists, being closer to the day-by-day shifts in cultural production and being required to write for mainly non-academic readerships, are better placed to evaluate culture than academics, who necessarily remain committed to academic abstraction and analysis. Another, somewhat similar, argument is that intellectuals in general have been marginalised, that they are no longer
called upon to provide cultural leadership and that a great deal of contemporary theory (which makes of the world a more decentered and disordered place than it once was) is an expression of intellectuals' loss of power (Bauman 1988).

Once more there is no correct position in these kinds of debates. By what criteria, indeed, could one judge whether we have too few—or too many—public intellectuals? Is it the number of media, filling space that would be better set aside for well researched but more expensive stories by journalists themselves? Or journalists operate as employees of media conglomerates whose product—the story—encompasses to advertisers, against, on the one side, the various limits and pressures under which that is required to help their managers meet returns on capital targets by delivering audiences to advertisers, against, on the one side, the various limits and pressures that produce

In this situation it is difficult to do anything at all: this on the one hand, the mass media, in a way that is very different from the academy. It is especially desirable to encourage media commentary (whether by journalists or academic intellectuals) which attempts to connect social questions to cultural ones in ways that encourage a wide variety of substantive responses (one of which is one way of defining much of cultural studies). After all the mainstream media is not especially good at this, precisely because it has an economic interest in maintaining a distance between criticism and commercial leisure products. But, in general, it seems to me that cultural studies' primary commitment must be to the education system rather than to its big competitor, the media, and this is a topic that will exercise us further in the section on politics (see p. 39-42).

Cultural studies' pasts

We know, that given the absence of a strong methodological base and given itself. Almost obsessively, it multiplies over its own history. But the global dispersiveness of cultural studies both in a disciplinary sense and in a geographical sense means that the studies. In particular, the notion that cultural studies began with the work of Hoggart (including this one), cannot be regarded as having a linear relation to much of the history of cultural studies. It is a profound and general an attention to changes in the world to cultural studies around the world today. Moreover over cultural studies, a problem especially acute in those regions of the world which continue to

America for example (see Wright 1998; Kallianais 1998). Why, once one thinks globally, should not Fernando Ortiz, the US-based Cuban theorist of 'transculturality' and the African diaspora, be an ancestor of cultural studies alongside Raymond Williams (see Ortiz 1998)? Or, if it comes to that, why not Octavio Paz, José Enrique Rodó, Alfonso Reyes and many others—all the more so given that many of these Latin American cultural commentators (who by large were of cliche copy for academics) have helped form the intellectual personality of theorists such as Nistora Scaletta (an Argentinean, educated in Paris, now working in Mexico) who do participate in today's global cultural studies academy.

Given this dispensation of cultural studies' history, it seems useful to make a distinction between precursors, sources and past practitioners. Post practitioners can be dealt with most summarily: they belong to the institution of contemporary academic cultural studies itself and have played a role not only in developing concepts, methods and cases studies but may have provided guidance and partnered to later students and scholars. Most influential of these has been Stuart Hall, whose students and junior colleagues, working around (and beyond) the Anglosphere world, were primary agents of the institutionalisation of cultural studies proper.

Precursors are those who have produced work similar in some way to contemporary cultural studies but in different institutional settings and often with relatively little acknowledgment. They have a prehistoric relation to institutionalised cultural studies— that is to say they can now be seen to prefigure a field that they themselves could not imagine. Radical thinkers such as C.L.R. James, Franz Fanon, George Orwell and Fernando Ortiz who worked as activists and journalists are particularly important precursors because they provide an image of engaged cultural commentary upon which the shadow of the academy did not fall. Thus, to take George Orwell as an example: one of Orwell's projects at his best was to expose the invisibility of the working classes in dominant British (which for him meant pretty much English) culture, and to demonstrate that the commercial popular culture produced for the working class expresses a basic will to survival and, beyond that, a stoic yet bittersweet defiance (Orwell 1967, 461 and 1970, 194). A version of Orwell's argument will later enter academic cultural studies under the guise of cultural populism. In Orwell, however, it was expressed through a socialist journalist's day-by-day commentary for a wider readership, rather than inside the autonomy, rigour, will-to-theory and restricted circulation of an academic field of study.

The concept of the 'source' of cultural studies is more vexed than that of the precursor or the practitioner. At one level, sources are the academic theorists who have provided the concepts that have been used in one branch or another of cultural studies, although their overall project and disciplinary orientation falls outside the field. One can think of many names here, most French: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Michel de Certeau, Antonio Gramsci, the post-Marxists. But beyond such names, cultural studies is the heir of wider struggles in the humanities.
In Germany, for instance, one hears the line that the true founder of cultural studies is Johannes Gottfried von Herder, who first used the concept of Kultur against the rationalism and universalism of ‘Enlightenment’ thinkers of the eighteenth century. Herder elaborated the notion that different societies possess different cultures (determined by local conditions and environments), through which they make sense of themselves and, through which they articulate their humanity. Here then, we find an early and very influential moment in the anthropological account of culture. While any suggestion that Herder founded cultural studies is non-historical and loaded in that it is dismissive of the specificity of contemporary cultural studies, it should not wholly be dismissed. One of the problems with cultural studies is that it has too often placed itself even within the lineage that first developed the concept of culture and the disciplinary study of the subject (see Kittler 2000 for a corrective to cultural studies’ truncated historical sense of itself). After all, cultural studies retains strong traces of Herder’s affirmation of culture as collective expression.

A notable exception to this anamnesis is Francis Mulheren’s provocative book Culture/Metaculture (2000), in which the notion of ‘meta-culture’ is introduced in order to describe the discourses in which cultures ‘speak of themselves’ (Mulheren 2000, 190). Mulheren’s argument is that the contemporary discipline of cultural studies has failed to recognise that it is repeating the patterns of older modes of cultural critique (he uses the German term Kulturkritik) even as it overturns cultural critique’s social position and values by replacing the norms of high culture with those of popular culture. Through a historical summary of cultural critique, Mulheren reminds us how powerful and widespread the notion was that capitalist culture, based on the market, could only be protected from fragmentation and superficiality if guided by those with sufficient education and leisure to retain a disinterested, serious and informed relation to the cultural tradition. But for Mulheren, cultural studies aims to win for itself and for popular culture the authority once given to figures such as Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot with, ultimately, changing the rules of the game. In both cases, culture is supposed to carry out the work of reform that, to truth, only politics can perform. Indeed, for Mulheren, culture’s energy requires a distance from politics; the ‘discrepancy’ between them is what allows culture to possess whatever social power it does.

So, for Mulheren, Arnold, Leavis and Eliot are unacknowledged sources of cultural studies. This is arguable, even within British cultural studies (which is what Mulheren is addressing). Except maybe among a few cultural populists, cultural studies does not aim to replace high culture’s supposed power to order social anarchy with popular culture’s supposed capacity to undermine inherited social hierarchies. Rather, it attempts to show how certain cultural forms have supported social divisions and exclusions, and to encourage a culture which operates differently: a mobile, non-hierarchical, diverse, less normative culture, sometimes in the interests of a new kind of non-formalised politics...
Another useful way of approaching cultural studies is by considering the debates about method and interest that have divided the field internally. After all, it is largely around such debates that the field has articulated itself. Of these, the three most important are: (1) the debate over the claim that culture (and hence cultural studies) has strong cultural formations; and (2) the debate over the role that individual experience should play in cultural studies analyses. Let us address each in turn.

Cultural studies and politics

Despite (or because) British cultural studies emerged as a deviation from the new left of the sixties, with its distance from orthodox Marxism and organised labor (Stuart Hall was at one time editor of the British Marxist journal New Left Review), none of its new left. Such critics are particularly angered by the notion, prevalent both in cultural studies and postmarxism, that culture is politics. It is this idea that, more than anything, forms the basis of cultural studies' claim to be not so much an academic discipline but a "critical practice" with political force. Obviously this claim invites scepticism: how can sitting in a classroom chatting about television compare as a political activity with leafleting on behalf of a candidate? And it's the complacency implicit in cultural studies' claim to political left that helps give rise to the perception that there exists a template for cultural studies thinking which will produce the same kind of politically correct rhetoric on almost any topic (see Morris 1990).

In fact criticism of cultural studies' political ambitions points to three quite distinct modes of the discipline: cultural populism, which (as we have seen) traces popular culture as being counter-hegemonic; identity politics, which affirms collectivities formed around ethnicity, sexual or local identities; and ideology critique, which (against cultural populism) accords real political value to critical readings of those representations which reduce audiences into accepting dominant norms. To give an example of one form of the last mode: in an interesting recent essay about Bob Marley, Michelle Stephens argues that, as Marley's recordings became increasingly important to a major record company's catalogue, his image was de-politicised. His Rastafarianism and repudiation as a ganja-smoking, sexualized "rude boy" was downplayed as was his resistance to colonialism. As his political edge and rebelliousness was blunted out, he became a 'legend' as a family man and 'national mystic' (Stephens 1998; Gilroy 1987, 169). Such a reading claims political force in that it lets us see how commercialisation carries restricted norms.

We have already encountered Francis Mulhern's attack on cultural studies' political claims, for which the concept of politics in cultural studies is merely gestural or, as he puts it, 'phatic' (Mulhern 2000, 150). For him, the self-attribution of political force by cultural studies academics expresses nothing other than a desire; formal politics remains the arena in which meaningful debates over policy concerning resources, social justice, welfare and so on take place. If cultural studies does have a political project, then it is the misguided and impossible one of the take-over of the political by the cultural through claiming the cultural to be the political. In effect, this is to accuse cultural studies of allowing the concept of culture to exceed itself so that it comes to cover almost everything. More recent writers such as Tony Bennett have made similar arguments from a different perspective: they argue that cultural studies' political will can only be more than gestural if it begins to analyse and influence cultural policy (see pp. 73-7 for more on this).

We can accept that cultural studies is riddled with loose claims to political status and efficacy. Certainly the hopes that cultural studies would become a new organic intellectuals for new socio-political formations, claims expressed in the heady days of the discipline's emergence in Britain, have not been fulfilled (Hall 1996, 267-268). But critics fail sufficiently to acknowledge that the relationship between politics and culture has indeed changed over the last thirty years in most nations, and that their own scorn for cultural studies' politics assumes a practice of politics that is increasingly rarefied.

In the West at least this shift in the relation between politics and public culture is extraordinarily complex, but it's enough to note that the old division between left and right, based both on a philosophy of history (history as liberation from inequality from the point of view of the left; history as maintenance of order and stability from the point of view of the right) and on a class base (the left as the party of the working
classes and their liberal allies; the right as the party of employers and their traditionalist allies), has all but disappeared. So too has the situation which made Marxism seem pervasive to many. The key Marxist argument was that, under capitalism, social once a redistributive tax system and the welfare state had realigned the economy as the interests not just of property and capital but also of equity and welfare, then the progressive tax regimes may revi demand for equitable distribution of capital and social resources within mainstream politics. As domestic mass consumption became a pivot of capitalist economies, worker/owner conflict was also eroded by consumer/producer solidarity. Then much political in the best understanding of all in any particular situation, which means not much more than keeping unemployment and inflation deflation within bounds, maintaining comparativeness - the capability to make the economy continuously and so to politicalise it about indicators and trends. Yet at the same time, politics became centred on economic management, national economies were more and more internally uncontrollable, since they were increasingly aligned with international capital flows ("flight of capital"), huge multinational corporations, and commodities export markets and unforeseeable technological innovations. The old left-right division has been replaced by another strong, overarching political as by differences on how to manage the economy -- a cultural turn within the society. All this has meant that mass politics has been diminished. Politics has ceased to matter as much to most people as it once did. Political parties polling Campaigning requires more and more money, driving politicians and their parties closer to the bread money interests. Formal radicals (that is, organised left politics) exist further and further away from public alliances, and their politics too is often driven by the necessity to attract media attention. Of course a less organised radical politics has emerged, mostly from the basis as gay, lesbian, queer, trans, gender movement; multiculturalism; the green movement, the global justice movement, and from the view of governance, most of these function as relatively powerless if sporadically very interest groups. In this situation it is unfair to complain that cultural studies has traversed politics; rather it is the political domain that has been emptied out by larger social forces. At any rate, it is within this diminished politics that cultural studies' political aspirations need to be viewed. And it is because politics is increasingly informed by culture that cultural studies can claim to be political. To insist that social and cultural hierarchies map on to one another and are mutually supportive, to remember that different social and cultural groupings bring different histories of domination and oppression into the present, to demonstrate that cultures are plural and partially incommensurate (cannot be translated into one another by a rational master code), to work for an education system which allows for critical analysis of (for instance) cultural nationalism and the driving force of enterprise culture, to affirm cultural difference, to examine the concept and history of 'race' in light of the global 'war on terrorism', and in a more utopian spirit, to use cultural analysis to imagine new social relations -- all these are political projects in the context of this emptying out of the political sphere.

At least on occasions, cultural studies can be political in a more practical sense: using the institution as a place where activists, academics and students can meet, and where a pedagogy based on self-reflective dialogue among students and between students and teachers provides an example of a well-functioning public sphere (this is in the kind of pedagogy that Henry Giroux has theorised about at length; see, for instance, Giroux 1992). So far probably the most effective movement in this kind of cultural studies activism is the response to AIDS: the movement to ban the mark of homophobia which prevented those diagnosed positive from receiving the governmental and professional help they needed. Cultural studies and queer theorists played an important part in this activism, as we shall see later in Part 6 on sexuality.

We can put this case somewhat differently by stressing the political possibilities that open up from within the education system as a result of its central status in modern society. After all the education system remains a public institution (that is, organised and maintained in the public interest, and responsible to that interest, rather than simply an assemblage of private businesses) and, in many cases, is part of the state itself. So it is from within the education system that culture and the public can be brought together. The political energy of, and possibilities for, cultural studies are a function of being situated at this key institutional site where culture and the public/the state meet. These days the academic humanities do not automatically grant cultural value to their objects of study, but they can provide a gateway to the schooled publics that the education system creates. They can preserve and give an official voice to the cultural formations that both the market and formal politics neglects, and that is a ground of their political force. Yet it is not as if the universities are universal in the old sense: as far as the humanities are concerned, scholarship and criticism now are compelled to articulate particular interests too. A claim to neutral, disinterested position is only possible in the most technical of work. As soon as interpretation and evaluation enter one is connected to interests that refer back to external cultural-political groupings (feminists, diasporic communities,
cultural conservatives, fan bases) as well as to divisions within the institution itself (partic-
ular disciplines or sub-disciplines) and the teachers who live by them.

Traditionally, of course, cultural studies aimed to 'democratise' culture. In his
important book, The Long Revolution (1961), Raymond Williams argued for a 'participa-
tory democracy' in which all individuals, as inherently creative and engaged, would
play significant roles against the kind of formal democracies that actually exist
(Williams 1961, 118). This has been taken up by those who see cultural studies as a
fundamentally 'democratic' discipline (Condliffe 2000, 76). One difficulty with this
approach is that the language of 'democracy' has been co-opted by the American right
and has effectively come to mean the tyranny of majorities and the sovereignty of indi-
vidual consumer choice. George W. Bush fights for against the axis of evil,
rather than what multiculturalists struggle for in the Christian or nationalist right,
or what the labour movement urges against exploitative employers. Democracy is first
and foremost a political concept but one which can cover a number of very different
forms of organization, so its use is limited as a description of a field of humanities such
as cultural studies.

It is in these terms that it seems truer to state that the aim of cultural studies is not so
much to democratize as to liberalize — to articulate an understanding of culture in
the interests of the liberty of individuals and groups, their overarching restrictions imposed
by repressive prejudices, social hierarchies and economic inequalities. Cultural studies has
had trouble in taking one step past liberalism, in criticizing the fact that particular things
and values are good in themselves. And it resists seeing itself as liberal not simply because
liberalism connotes a failure to perceive individuals as socially and economically posi-
tioned but also because cultural studies retains a commitment to collectivisms of various
kinds. Yet, as we have seen, its capacity to collective limited. At best it can draw its
practitioners into an institutionally and professionally based cadre, linked only indirectly
to other social and cultural formations.

Cultural studies and political economy

Don't we now all accept that culture is shaped, indirectly or directly, by economic
structures? But to what degree, and precisely how, do economic structures determine
(or if that is too strong a word, 'shape') cultural formations? And if economic inequality
remains the most important social issue, how do cultural studies afford cultural forms
without reference to their relation its maintaining such inequality?

Debates over such issues have helped form cultural studies. Nicholas Garmash in
particular has argued that cultural studies has been crippled by its failure to take political
economy seriously (Garmash 1997 and 1999). What would a political economy
analysis involve, according to Garmash? First, placing cultural production rather than
consumption or reception at the discipline's centre; second, an acceptance of the class

hierarchies embedded in capitalism at the ultimate horizon and target of cultural
analysis; third, reinstating 'false consciousness' as a key category on the grounds that
social and economic 'structures of domination' are veiled by popular culture, it being
the task of cultural studies intellectuals to lift that veil and to disseminate the hidden
truth. And, fourth, it would involve marginalising other, more or less emergent, social
identities - feminist, ethnic, queer - on the grounds that they are insufficiently constitu-
ted in relation to the main game: class and capitalism.

Many would argue (myself included) that this is an 'old new left' line, which does not
sufficiently take account the duly consequent upon globalizing enterprise culture and
the transformations of old-style politics. Thus, on the other side of the debate, Lawrence
Grossberg points out that Garmash's concepts of capitalism, false consciousness and the class
are historically and spatially undifferentiated abstractions; that class, race and gender are
articulated with one another, and that, for Grossberg, the market, and its opening up of possibilities, is reduced to a classical antagonism between capital and labour (Grossberg
1998). One could add that Garmash is not at all clear about what his alternatives to capi-
talism are, or how the study of culture's political economy might help to produce them.

We should also note that in practical terms a great deal of cultural studies work does
in fact consider how economic structures interact with cultural formations (Maxwell
2001a, 129-136). In light of this it seems as debates over political economy continue
to pursue a historical struggle between two old antagonists - liberalism, that is in declaring that cultural studies belong as much to liberalism as
to materialism. After all, the field is grounded, first, on a rejection of vulgar Marxist
Dogma, by which 'the base determines the superstructure' and, second, in the understand-
ing that the meaning and value of culture is to be located in the ways in which it is
lived and used by individuals, rather than as the repository of particular values.

In fact the terms of this debate are reductive, since cultural studies tends to be a form of
liberalism and of materialism simultaneously. Let's put it like this: at the level of theory,
most forms of cultural studies are influenced by a concept articulated by Althusser and
Foucault (and which we can think of as belonging to a tradition founded by
the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza), namely that ideas and actions are
forms of social energy and power too (see Althusser 1971, 168—169). At Raymond
Williams phrased it, 'consciousness and its products are always, through variable forms,
part of the social process itself' (Williams 1977, 60). If in practical terms this means that
not all forms of oppression and subordination are economic, in terms of cultural studies it
means that the pleasures and uses of cultural production and reception need not be trans-
lated back into political-economic terms, and that economic and 'cultural' axes can be
thought of as being relations of dynamic interrelation with one another, and not that the
first simply determines the second.
Let's make this more concrete by imagining what a successful cultural studies analysis would look like, one based loosely on Janice Radway's exemplary analysis of *Tame, and Middle-Class Days* (1997). Such an account of the popularity of book club malamagization and marketing techniques, as well as shifts in the technology of book club behavior, would explore the attitudes, motivations, and intentions of those working in, or on behalf of, book clubs, whether amateur or professional, for book clubs. It would describe the cultural status of reading as *a* practice relative to, *books* as a leisure choice. At the same time it would offer some account of the take cognisance of conditions in a world where books are produced as objects, and in their use and consumption. This is an important point, and it means that academic writing is being brought to bear on cultural issues. It is no longer a matter of trying to understand the impact of *books* on a book club's readers, but of understanding the impact of *book clubs* on readers. What happens when a book club is formed? What happens when a book club is destroyed? These are questions that need to be addressed in any account of the impact of book clubs on readers.

Individualism, subject positions and disciplinary identity

The role of the individual (and the personal) in cultural studies is problematic too, as the rhetoric of academic writing often figures the 'I' as 'we' (in a figure of speech which allows us to imagine the personal as an abstraction). But the degree that cultural studies refuses to acknowledge the social and cultural contexts of the research object is the degree that it refuses a psychoanalytic approach where individual psychic structures are-organised by deep drives, and to the degree that it is interested in experience and lived practices, cultural studies is driven to find a basis in personal responses to cultural formations. So, increasingly, academics in the field find themselves writing essays in which they share their personal involvement with, and passions for, *some* other cultural form (see Kipnis 1992 and Rapping 2002 for good examples).

The academic value of the personal response is always limited: academic writing is required to produce knowledge or theoretical interventions that are useful and applicable by others, conditions which confessional writing often does not meet. Very few books manage to reconcile this tension. One of the few that does is Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), in which the author's own experiences are interwoven with descriptions of her mother's life in a careful meditation on the history and society that shaped her in different ways. Here the personal and the public are brought together in a way that resonates with important ongoing academic debates and which also lies to the background of many, but not by any means all, of Steedman's readers' lives. Yet, importantly, Steedman does not assume that she belongs to any coherent political collectivity: if she did her confessional approach would have much less point.

In general terms, cultural studies draws some of its energy from a systematic, long-term social turn to the West, which has been theorised by sociologists and cultural theorists from Foucault to Christopher Lasch. Few questions motivate students to join cultural studies more powerfully than: what are the external frameworks which have formed and through which I might understand myself? However, when this question shifts enquiry from analysis of external structures towards the individual experience itself, we enter tricky territory. After all: what is individual experience? To the individual it may seem like, more or less, everything. In particular, experience is so much there for consciousness that it prevents us from reconceptualising the complex ground out of which we act. It is as if we, as a bounded interiority continually filled with sensations, memories, thoughts, feelings, are the originating agent in our lives. But the overwhelming interiority plenitude that gives this sense looks very fragile under scrutiny: it is invisible, it is as unique as it seems, it is affirmative. It is more as if subjectivity when thought of as a flow of unique interior psychological events is simultaneously a pristine and a variable one. This further conundrums for this is that, in order for this subjectivity to be present for anyone else or, indeed, to matter to anyone else (and at least sometimes to oneself), it needs to be communicated. And communicative acts (when they happen in signs and conventions as they almost invariably do) compromise the individuation of the experience, or at least subordinate it to a mastery of communicative technologies, since individuality can only be expressed through such a mastery. (Of course we can communicate physically or emotionally too – a cry of pain, a touch – but, although these may compel empathy, they don't express much individuality.)
THE DISCIPLINE

To approach the fragility of the subject from a different angle: to what degree is subjective reflection and experience structured and limited by larger historical processes embodied in social structures? One of the most influential interventions or a term associated with Michel Foucault. What the individual is differs across history and culture since individuals are produced through techniques of self-fashioning of practices of practical and practices of self as well as in particular theories. Thus, for instance, since the late nineteenth century (but not necessarily before) many Western individuals have 'repressed' and are likely to be expressed in displaced and unexpected acts or thoughts.

Theorized, disseminated, for instance, in specific practices of child-rearing and therapy, formed within such processes don't necessarily know themselves as such, believing that they are who they are as if by spontaneous nature. Indeed, coming to understand selfhood historically and socially (through academic study) may not be just to know something new but it may be to acquire a new form of self. However, cultural studies has usually thought of individuality slightly differently: as a 'subject position' where, as we have seen, that phrase refers to the more or less fixed positions available to assign an individual with an identity inside particular social certain kinds of statements and take certain kinds of attitudes which, in broad outline at least, come already prepared for them. That's what is meant by a subject position.' Positions' unthinkingly. Elements of them at least can be chosen quite consciously for tactical reasons or to make a statement. Why, for instance, might one be a conservative working-class woman or an Italian-opera-loving Parsi in Mumbai? Maybe to flag individuality; maybe to participate in that which excludes you; maybe to disidentify with cultural studies, inherited or imposed subject positions can be resisted, although one's power to escape them may be limited. So when one examines how subject positioning works at the level of the everyday, it finds ourselves in relation to them, sometimes taking the identities that they offer pretty wholesale (whether knowingly or not), but just as often distancing ourselves from them by taking advantage of a whole range of tones and modes that allow this, including irony and camp (see pp. 145–52 for more on this topic).

At any rate individuality is not a category that can easily be used to save cultural analysis from abstraction and clumsy covering over of difference. But it is a category that can be used to draw cultural studies towards the artistic and literary. Since, for better or for worse, literature, art and performance are the cultural practices in which individuality is expressed and publicly cultivated most insistently, as well as being, for that very reason, the cultural practices most open to impressionism and narcissism. Then too of course a strong emphasis on individuality runs the political risk of merging with that brand of popular liberal individualism whose conceptual basis is the uniqueness of every person, whose politics essentially appeals to the rights of each individual to express and live out their specificism, and whose ethics is focussed on our responsibility to respect and listen to the uniqueness of others.

The difficulty for cultural studies is that it cannot assume a collectivity proper to itself, which it might set against individualism of this kind. In this regard, all it has is the professional teachers/academic writers who make their careers in the field and the generations of students whom they teach. And that institutional collectivity doesn't have the force or authority of an I despite the fragility of the individuality which that particular pronoun marks.

Further reading