

DOES CULTURAL STUDIES HAVE
FUTURES? SHOULD IT? (OR WHAT'S
THE MATTER WITH NEW YORK?)

Cultural studies, contexts and
conjunctures¹

This paper examines the state of cultural studies, primarily in the United States and Northern Europe. Arguing for a radically contextualist and conjuncturalist understanding of the project of cultural studies, it suggests that cultural studies emerged in particular forms as a response to a particular geo-historical conjuncture. However, while the conjuncture has changed significantly, these older forms of cultural studies have congealed into a "center" that has limited its ability to contribute to a better understanding of "what's going on," of the possible future and the realities and possibilities of both domination and contestation. The paper suggests an understanding of the present conjuncture as a struggle, from both the right and the left, against liberal modernity and the attempt to shape an alternative modernity as the future. It suggests some of the ways cultural studies might have to rethink itself if it is to respond to this conjuncture.

Keywords cultural studies; context; conjuncture; modernity; alternative modernities

This essay is offered at a certain moment in the history of cultural studies (and of course, in a larger geopolitical history), a moment in which I think it is necessary to ask the questions posed in the title of this text. It is also offered from a particular location in both cultural studies and that larger geopolitical context, and a particular institutional site of knowledge production (i.e. the highly professionalized, capitalized and formalized US university system). Thus, my comments in this paper are no doubt most pertinent to certain groups of cultural studies intellectuals in the United States but I hope that they speak, to differing degrees and in differing ways, to people in other contexts –

institutionally and geopolitically. My comments are necessarily incomplete not only because I do not talk about other institutions and sites of knowledge production, or about other places and other histories, but also because I do not engage enough with the crucial questions about the inter-relations among the multiplicity of institutions, sites, places and histories, questions of alliances, transnationalisms and globalities.

Nevertheless, I want to talk about the 'state(s)' and 'future(s)' of cultural studies. This essay is articulated out of my own continuing belief that intellectual work matters, that it is a vital component of the struggle to change the world and to make the world more humane, and that cultural studies, as a particular project, a particular sort of intellectual practice, has something valuable to contribute. Cultural studies also matters!

It is important to distinguish cultural studies from a whole set of disciplinary sedimentations that have, to some extent, slipped out from cultural studies without always acknowledging it.² As Raymond Williams (1989, p. 151) reminded us, 'the relation between a project and a formation is always decisive', and it is clear that Williams thought cultural studies had to remain outside the techniques of insulation and closure of the disciplines that lead one away from 'the real project'.

As you separate these disciplines out, and say, 'Well, it's a vague and baggy monster, Cultural Studies, but we can define it more closely – as media studies, community sociology, popular fiction or popular music', so you create defensible disciplines, and there are people in other departments who can see that these are defensible disciplines, that there is properly referenced and presented work. But the question of what is then happening to the project remains (Williams 1989, p. 158).

Cultural studies is a project not only to construct a political history of the present,³ but to do so in a particular way, a radically contextualist way, in order to avoid reproducing the very sorts of universalisms (and essentialisms⁴) that all too often characterize the dominant practices of knowledge production, and that have contributed (perhaps unintentionally) to making the very relations of domination, inequality and suffering that cultural studies desires to change. Cultural studies seeks to embrace complexity and contingency, and to avoid the many faces and forms of reductionism.⁵

It follows that any formation of cultural studies has to continuously reflect on its own contextuality, on the questions it poses for itself, and on the tools it takes up in response to those challenges. As Hall (1992, p. 292) puts it in the less frequently quoted part of his discussion from the 1990 Illinois conference, talking about the American context of cultural studies:

It needs a whole range of work to say what it is in this context. What it is in relation to this culture that would genuinely separate it from earlier

work or work done elsewhere. I'm not sure that Cultural Studies in the United States has actually been through that moment of self-clarification . . . I do think it matters what it is in particular situations . . . it's the precise insertion of a certain kind of critical practice at an institutional moment and that moment is precisely the moment of academic institutional life in this country.

That institutional life is only the most immediate context of our work as intellectuals, and it cannot be separated from its relations to other proximate and concentric contexts of social, political, economic and cultural life, that is, from the entirety of the social formation.⁶

Such a contextualizing – and therefore concrete – self-reflection is necessary if cultural studies is to respond to the demands (the questions posed), the constraints and the possibilities of the context, including the dispersed possibilities for intellectual practices and resources that can constitute committed political intellectual work in that context. Cultural studies always has to reflect on its assumptions about the context it is analyzing, and its place within or relation to it. It has to question its own questions – and the categories and concepts within which such questions are thinkable – and this is why the most difficult part of any project in cultural studies is often to figure out what the question is. The context is the beginning and the end of our researches. The trajectory from the beginning to the end provides the measure of our success at mapping, at arriving at a better description/understanding of the context. Cultural studies requires a 'rigorous application of . . . the premise of historical specificity' (Hall 1980, p. 336) (in which the object is the organization – by power – of the social formation as a configuration of unequal positions and relations).

This is why, for example, writing about *Policing the Crisis*, Hall (1998, p. 192) says:

If you'd just taken race as a black issue, you'd have seen the impact of law and order policies on the local communities, but you'd have never seen the degree to which the race and crime issue was a prism for a much larger social crisis. You wouldn't have looked at the larger picture. You'd have written a black text, but you wouldn't have written a cultural studies text because you wouldn't have seen this articulation up to the politicians, into the institutional judiciary, down to the popular mood of the people, into the politics, as well as into the community, into black poverty and into discrimination.

Hall always locates, contextualizes, his work on race, as when he declares (Hall, 1995, pp. 53–4):

I have never worked on race and ethnicity as a kind of subcategory. I have always worked on the whole social formation which is racialized'.

The result is, of course, that any discussion of issues of race and ethnicity cannot be separated from the particular social formation in which Hall's discussion is located and into which it is directed. Hall is rigorously consistent about this:

I don't claim for my particular version of a non-essentialist notion of race correctness for all time. I can claim for it only a certain conjunctural [for the moment, read 'contextual'] truth'.

(1997a, p. 157)

I want to try to clarify the specific way in which cultural studies understands contexts – as relational. The first thing that needs to be acknowledged is that cultural studies approaches its contextualism 'practically'.⁷ Using the notion of context must not be allowed to flatten all realities, to singularize every territory, as if talking about contexts necessarily makes every system of relationality equivalent, or puts every territory on the same plane or scale. Second, its contextualism aims to understand any event relationally, as a condensation of multiple determinations and effects (Frow and Morris 1993) and embodies the commitment to the openness and contingency of social reality where change is the given or norm. Its sense of context is always a complex, overdetermined and contingent unity. Contextualism in cultural studies is often defined by and as a theory of articulation, which understands history as the ongoing effort (or process) to make, unmake and remake relations, structures and unity (on top of differences).⁸ If reality is relational and articulated, such relations are both contingent (i.e. not necessary) and real, and thus, never finished or closed for all times.

But the particular practice of contextualism in cultural studies often involves a location within and an effort at the diagnosis of a conjuncture,⁹ that is a focus on the social formation as a complexly articulated unity or totality (that is nevertheless not an organic totality). In fact, Hall is, in a recent set of interviews, quite explicit about the 'intellectual perspective' of cultural studies: 'It has an intellectual vocation to produce a critical understanding of a conjuncture, a cultural-historical conjuncture'. And again, speaking of the collective project of the Centre: 'The commitment to understanding a conjuncture is what from the beginning we thought cultural studies was about'.¹⁰

A conjuncture is a description of a social formation as fractured and conflictual, along multiple axes, planes and scales, constantly in search of temporary balances or structural stabilities through a variety of practices and processes of struggle and negotiation. According to Hall (1988, p. 127), the concept of a conjuncture describes 'the complex historically specific terrain of a crisis which affects – but in uneven ways – a specific national-social

formation as a whole'. It is not a slice of time or a period but a moment defined by an accumulation/condensation of contradictions, a fusion of different currents or circumstances.

A conjuncture is always a social formation understood as more than a mere context – but as an articulation, accumulation, or condensation of contradictions. Conjuncturalism looks to the changing configuration of forces that occasionally seeks and sometimes arrives at a balance or temporary settlement. It emphasizes the constant overdetermined reconfiguration of a field producing only temporary stabilities. Some conjunctures may be characterized by a profound – organic – crisis while others are characterized by smaller uncertainties, imbalances and struggle and still others may appear to be settled or at least characterized by more 'passive revolutions'. Similarly, conjunctures have differing temporal scales: some are protracted and some are relatively short in duration.¹¹

However, such conjunctural analyses cannot be understood as totalizing projects (in which everything is connected to everything else). Conjuncturalism as an analytic commitment must, like contextualism, be taken practically. For example, Hall makes it clear that he is 'not driven to a general philosophical proposition that conjunctures are all that we can study . . . There are many other different forms of working. Not all histories . . . need be conjunctural histories'.¹² But it is at the level of the conjuncture that Hall believes that knowledge can be most usefully and concretely articulated to political struggles and possibilities.

Conjuncturalism (again, like radical contextualism) does not deny the importance of abstract categories, such as commodification. This is simply not the level of analysis at which critical work has to be done. While an abstraction like commodification may tell us something about what distinguishes capitalism from feudalism, it does not necessarily help us distinguish capitalism from other forms of market economy, and it does even less to help us understand historical and geographical differences amongst specific configurations of capitalism, precisely what we need to understand if we hope to imagine new futures, and new strategies for realizing them. The same might be said of any abstract category such as racism or colonization.

Conjunctural analysis (as analytic practice) poses at least two key interrelated problems: The first is a task of 'judging when and how we are/are not moving from one conjuncture to another'. That is why the primary question for cultural studies is always 'what is the conjuncture we should address'.¹³ The second, closely related, demands that every analysis must try to get the balance right – between the old and the new (or in Raymond Williams' terms, the emergent, the dominant and the residual), between what is similar and what is different, between the organic and the conjunctural (and the accidental).¹⁴

Thus, the appeal to certain logics or processes that seem in some way to escape the conjuncture is not necessarily a retreat from radical contextualism but a demand for further analysis of the complexity of the conjuncture in terms of both spatial scale and temporal duration, expanding the possibility that the analysis of a conjuncture opens onto a multiplicity of overlapping contexts, of contexts operating at different scales, and of what we might call embedded contexts. At the very least, this enables us to recognize that while conjunctures are largely constituted as national formations, they are increasingly and deeply articulated into and by international, transnational and global practices, relations, processes and institutions.¹⁵ Additionally, we must never forget that abstractions and concepts are themselves always contextual, and have their own material conditions of possibility.

I began with this sense of the radical contextuality and conjuncturalism of cultural studies because I think it has four absolutely crucial implications: cultural studies is supposed to be hard; cultural studies is supposed to be surprising; cultural studies has to avoid allowing either theory or politics substitute for analysis; and cultural studies is supposed to be modest. Such radical contextualization interrupts any desire that we speak before we have done the work, for then we are likely to abandon the commitment to complexity, contingency, contestation, and multiplicity, that is a hallmark of cultural studies. Too often, in the face of seemingly urgently felt political necessities, even cultural studies scholars may too easily embrace the very sorts of simplifications, reductionisms and essentialisms to which cultural studies is supposed to stand opposed. Intellectual work does not always operate with the same temporality as political action and bad intellectual work (bad stories) makes bad politics.¹⁶

Too often, as intellectuals, we are unwilling to start by assuming that we do not understand what is going on, that perhaps what worked yesterday over there will not work today over here. Instead, we carry with us so much theoretical and political baggage that we are rarely surprised, because we almost always find what we went looking for, and that what we already knew to be the explanation is, once again, proven to be true. Cultural studies is, I believe, committed to telling us things we don't already know; it seeks to surprise its producers, its interlocutors, its audiences, and its constituencies and in that way, by offering better descriptions and accounts – again, accounts that do not shy away from complexity, contingency and contestation – to open up new possibilities.

Cultural studies has to avoid two increasingly seductive discourses which in a sense let the analyst off the hook. The first takes its own political assumptions (however commonsensical they may be) as if they were the conclusion of some analysis, which is always assumed to have been completed somewhere else (but always remains absent). Political desire trumps the possibilities of complexity and the demand for concreteness. At its extreme, partisan political journalism

(sometimes deteriorating into rants) substitutes for intellectual work. Cultural studies has to combat the self-assurance of political certainty, by recognizing that whatever the motivations, hopes and assumptions that brought one into a particular study, politics arrives at the conclusion of the analysis. The second, to paraphrase Derek Gregory (2005), assumes that the world exists to provide illustrations for our concepts. Instead of a detour through theory, it substitutes theory for social analysis, as if theoretical categories were – by themselves – sufficient as descriptions of a conjuncture. It conflates – to use Heidegger for a moment, fundamental ontology, regional ontology and conjunctural analysis. Cultural studies requires that one bring the conceptual and the empirical (although obviously the separation is never so clear cut and both terms need to be rethought in the light of a radically contextual materialism) together, with the possibility that the latter might actually disturb the former even as the former leads to a new description of the latter. It is this possibility that seems to often recede in some versions of contemporary critical work. Moreover, cultural studies has to deny theory any sacred status; it is a tool the utility of which can only be measured contextually.

This is the significance of the ways Hall (1997a, p. 152) eloquently refuses to claim the mantle of theorist:

I have a strategic relation to theory. I don't regard myself as a theorist in the sense that that is my work. I am interested always in going on theorizing about the world, about the concrete, but I am not interested in the production of theory as an object in its own right. And therefore I use theory in strategic ways . . . it's because I think my object is to think the concreteness of the object in its many different relations.

For Hall, this defines a different practice of theory: 'This may be theoretical work of a seemingly loose kind, porous but not unrigorous. It is always connected to the specifics of a concrete moment'.¹⁷ And this particular relation to theory is somehow at the center of cultural studies: 'cultural studies . . . can only really work by moving from historical conjuncture to historical conjuncture using an evolving theoretical framework which is not conceptually purified'.

Such radical contextualization also cuts short any assumption that the questions we ask, the challenges we face, are somehow universal – as if the whole world were always driven to answer the same – our – questions. Too often we act as though there were no limits to the pertinence of the debates in which we are involved, the theories that we find useful, and the conditions or circumstances that have conditioned them. Such forms of 'parochialism', including its contemporary cosmopolitan forms, can make it difficult if not impossible for us as critical social and cultural analysts to come to terms with the complexity of the contemporary struggles and thus, undermine our

own ability to join into broader discussions and to help imagine alternative futures.

How did cultural studies get so f***** boring?¹⁸

I want now to suggest that, in many instance (and most commonly in the United States), cultural studies has failed to live up to this contextualist project – and it has failed to relocate its project in relation to the pressing conjuncturalist struggles. This would require not only doing cultural studies conjuncturally but also reinventing cultural studies itself – its theories and its questions – in response to conjunctural conditions and demands. It is for this reason, I think, that cultural studies (along with many other critical paradigms and practices) has had surprisingly little to contribute to the analysis of the very significant struggles and changes taking place within many national formations as well on a transnational scale. Without an understanding of what is going on, cultural studies cannot contribute to envisioning other scenarios and outcomes, and the strategies that might take us down alternative pathways. I realize that this is, in some senses, an impossible judgment, given how dispersed and diverse cultural studies is (especially but not only in the United States).

Yet, as dispersed and diverse as it is, I still think one can talk about its 'center' if you will, which is to say that certain kinds of questions, assumptions and theories are dominant, pull all sorts of researches into their orbit, at least within the influential Anglo-American and European axes of cultural studies if less so elsewhere. The question is whether that center is appropriate to the present context (conjuncture), and whether it is effective as a political and intellectual practice. I do not mean to deny that there is a lot of interesting and important conjunctural work being done around the world, and also in the United States, Britain and Europe. Nor do I want to suggest that all work done under the sign of cultural studies must address itself to these issues. I do want to suggest, to repeat myself, that the continued existence of a particular center as it were, pulls a lot of work into its orbits, posing questions, offering theories and validating methods that may not strengthen our engagement with or our ability to address questions to, the current conjuncture.

That center, maintained increasingly by the institutional power of the academy and by the growing tendency to fold cultural studies back into disciplines, is built upon a certain limited ambiguity of the concept of culture, as cultural studies moved out from Williams' famous dichotomy: (1) culture as a limited set of signifying and textual activities – sometimes referred to as aesthetic or expressive culture; and (2) culture as a whole way of life, as a material organization of practices. But this second meaning of culture has its own ambiguity for it can also refer to both the experience of that organization and to the way that organization (and its experience) is expressed, that is, to

the meanings, values and ideas embodied in the whole way of life (or what Hall regularly calls the 'maps of meaning').¹⁹

As this center took shape, a number of things happened: First, culture in the first – narrowest – sense is not only put on the agenda, it becomes the object of cultural studies. Cultural studies was organized to look at 'texts', often especially popular (as opposed to high) and media culture. Thus Hall (1971) had to acknowledge, in one of the early CCCS reports that Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* was read, 'such were the imperatives of the moment – essentially as a text about the mass media . . . The notion that the Centre, in directing its attention to the critical study of 'contemporary culture' was, essentially, to be a centre for the study of television, the mass media and popular arts . . . though never meeting our sense of the situation . . . nevertheless came by default, to define us and our work'. Strangely, Hall never describes an other 'sense of the situation' or the 'imperatives of the moment'. Consequently, cultural studies was taken as a hermeneutic project and as a result, it had to 'take on' and significantly transform – along with various allies – the obviously cultural or textual disciplines.

Second, Williams' argument that any particular cultural text could only be understood in relation to the social totality, a totality that is simultaneously material, experiential and meaningful, was largely abandoned in favor of a very different model based on: (1) An epistemology that put all of its weight down on the cultural construction of reality, with the result that often, culture seemed in a sense to be more important and real than the material or experiential dimensions of the totality. (2) Culture as the universal mediating process of signification and subjectification, which meant that cultural relations were always structured around a 'communicatively' determined opposition between textuality and audience (ethnography). On the one hand, cultural studies could read everything and anything as a text, leading its practitioners to constitute all sorts of new things to be interpreted – ideologically or discursively, as if their politics were subsumable within culture itself. On the other hand, cultural studies was initiated into a constant search for the ethnographic reality – what the audience does with the texts – that would anchor the effects of the texts outside of its own readings. This ethnographic reality was almost always understood in terms of the relation of subjectivity and identity (thus bringing it back under the sign of the text and ideology). This communicative move went against Hoggart's (1969, p. 18) argument that cultural studies asks 'not what do people do with this object but 'what relationship does this . . . complex thing, have to the imaginative life of the individuals who make up its audiences'.

Finally, the center of cultural studies was framed by an assumed otherness of the different (i.e. by difference constituted at the level of subjectivity), thus too often dragging behind it the colonial legacy of anthropology and the logics of colonization, imagining they could be overcome by simply giving voice to

the other (or even just discovering the difference and even the othering of the other) (Morris 1990).²⁰

These three moves respond, it seems to me, to three different political problematics²¹ within the conjuncture: an epistemological problematic of understanding change; a political problematic of theorizing resistance; and a phenomenological problematic of theorizing domination. The first problematic poses the problem of culture as an attempt to respond to the inability of existing paradigms of knowledge production to understand the nature and forces of contemporary social change. The second poses the problem of culture as a political refusal of theories that assume a simple opposition between domination and subordination, the former having the potential (if not actually success) to completely 'colonize' and render passive the former. The final problematic poses the problem of culture as an effort to rethink the processes of domination in terms of the production of experience, consciousness and subjectivity.

I want to suggest, with Norbert Elias, 'culture becomes a matter of general concern only at certain historical moments when 'something in the present state of society finds expression in the crystallization of the past embodied in 'the words'' (quoted in Kuper 1999, p. 23). While I might want to take exception with Elias' overly narrow and unequivocal notion of culture, and while I might want to emphasize cultural politics rather than culture itself, I do believe that the emergence of cultural studies (in the UK and the US at least, following the Second World War) and its self-organization around the space of the center I have just described, was predicated on a – I think correct – assumption about the conjuncture: that culture, both specifically as aesthetic or expressive texts and more generally as language or communication – had emerged historically as a crucial domain in which history was being made, and resistance was being, at least possibly organized. Again, Stuart Hall (1981, p. 239) made it quite explicit in a too often ignored statement:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged . . . It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why 'popular culture' matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it.

Or perhaps more accurately, culture as text and discourse – as a structure of cognitive or semantic mediation – was where the lived experience of historical change was being constituted. It was where people lived and gave meaning to – and thereby constituted – the historical and political changes and challenges of their lives. In Williams's terms, textual culture was the constitutive and

constituted locus of the emergent structure of feeling. In Althusser's terms, the level of culture was becoming dominant.

This may partly explain why the humanities themselves were in crisis – a crisis that made them 'relentlessly hostile' and yet vulnerable to the appearance of a critical practice – cultural studies – that actually took culture seriously. As Hall (1990, p. 12) describes it, they were 'deeply suspicious of it and anxious to strangle, as it were, the cuckoo that had appeared in its nest'. Yet this crisis also 'called forth and enabled the emergence of cultural studies in the 1960s and 70s'. It was for this reason that cultural studies had to undertake the task of unmasking what it considered to be the unstated presuppositions of

the humanist tradition itself. It had to try to bring to light the ideological assumptions underpinning the practice, to expose the educational program (which was the unnamed part of its project), and to try to conduct an ideological critique of the way the humanities and the arts presented themselves as parts of disinterested knowledge. It had, that is, to undertake a work of demystification to bring into the open the regulative nature and role the humanities were playing in relation to the national culture. From within the context of that project, it becomes clear why people wrote us rude letters (Hall 1990, p. 15).

This emerging importance of culture was evidenced in the growing concern in the academy (and elsewhere) with language and culture as what Foucault and others would call 'control at a distance', and in the growing public concern for questions of propaganda, subliminal messages, the mobilization of ideas, the dispersion of education, etc.²² This was the moment when communication and culture (as human processes and sites of contestation) moved to the center of public life (building on their earlier appearance as largely theoretical concepts involved in the critique of ontology on the one hand, and positivism on the other), the moment of the so-called linguistic turn as a new dominant paradigm (manifested in the concern for mass culture, ideology, etc).

Of course, to say that culture was becoming dominant is not to say that it was determinant, and the new visibility and role of culture were no doubt the result, in complex ways, of the particularities of the post-war settlement in political and economic terms (e.g. the corporate compromise of 'liberalism', the cold war, etc), but also of the contestations (including the rise of both the new conservatism and the counterculture, the civil rights movement, feminism and identity-politics more broadly, moral panics around youth culture). The cold war itself was, of course, played out as an ideological war, in cultural and political spaces (as in the very visible forms of McCarthyism and popular anti-communism), unlike the war on fascism.²³

In making culture both central and omnipresent, and by identifying it as the primary locus of the experience of historical change and struggle, this

context – and the center it helped to call into existence for cultural studies – has had profound and positive consequences for our understandings of power and politics. It emphasized the mediated nature and the representational aspects of power. It ‘discovered’ the cultural construction of political economy (state and economics). Unfortunately, while never denying the importance of these material and discursive condensations, it too quickly and for too long bracketed them, only to have them return as its own repressed. By decentering the state, it not only pluralized the sites of power (so that power like culture was everywhere) but also, too often treated power as disembodied and disconnected from the material relations of inequality and domination that are its anchor in everyday life. It pluralized the dimensions and domains of politics, opening power up (with numerous allies here) to new differences and new practices. It not only made visible the politicization and politics of culture (e.g. ideology, the culture wars) as fundamental questions, as the necessary locus of the basic question of why people seem to act against their own apparent interests, it also pointed to the increasing culturalization of politics.

The struggle over modernity

What I am calling the center of cultural studies got into trouble, although without losing its dominant position, in the 1980s, as a result of at least two developments. First, new practices, organizations, relations and geographies of politics and economics challenged much of the framework within which cultural studies had formulated its questions. Globalization, regionalization, financialization, the rise of new conservative political alliances of various sorts around the world, the end of the cold war, the political interventions of multinational corporations, the growing power of religious formations – all made the organic crisis obvious and defined a changing conjuncture to which the center of cultural studies seemed unable to respond. Second, it became increasingly clear that cultural studies as a project had come into existence in a wide range of different geographies following the Second World War, each drawing on their own traditions and each formulating unique questions for a politics of culture. While this diversity of cultural studies reinforced the notion of the dominance of the cultural, it also called into question the particular formation that had come to dominate the Anglo-American tradition as its center.

This challenge to the center was presaged by *Policing the Crisis*, which in many ways, went against the grain of that center. Its key notion, hegemony, is not a cultural category, but a concept at the limit of the cultural. Hegemonic politics are not only or even primarily a matter of culture although they necessarily involve cultural work. *Policing the Crisis* refuses, in the most absolute terms, to reduce hegemony to either a cultural struggle or a formalist

organization of the social structure.²⁴ Hegemony is about the relations of culture, politics and economics. It signals, in a very real sense, a turn for cultural studies, from the cultural to the political (and economic, although not quite to political economy). It proposed a turn in the very questions that drove cultural studies by returning, albeit in a new way, to the questions that had been bracketed in earlier work. Hegemony points to the struggle to capture the state by a certain alliance of economic interests which carries on a war of positions (of temporary alliances at multiples sites of struggle) through which the hegemonic bloc continually attempts to win consent to its leadership and to its efforts to reorganize the political locations, allegiances and power of various fractions of the population – all in response to a national – organic – crisis (which is of course discursively constructed).

In fact, if in its earlier formations, British cultural studies was largely concerned with taking up the challenge of sociology (in a project, however unintended, of reconstructing both the humanities and social sciences), attempting to do sociology better than the sociologists, it now seemed as if they had heard Gramsci’s claim that ‘all the essential questions of sociology are nothing other than the questions of political science’. At the very least, *Policing the Crisis* made it very clear that struggles taking place within culture, and even those struggles that were about culture, had to be located in a larger and more complex context of hegemonic struggle. Cultural struggles are understandable only when their articulation to the hegemonic struggle is made clear. In a new form, *Policing the Crisis* rediscovered what had always been an implicit assumption of cultural studies: that you cannot talk about culture apart from the totality of its social and material relations.

Policing the Crisis pointed to an organic crisis that had shaped Britain at least since the 1960s. As I have said, a conjuncture is a specific articulation of the social formation as a context. In the case of the Centre’s work on Thatcherism, race, and their articulations, the specificity of the conjuncture was defined by the existence of what the Centre, following Gramsci, called an organic crisis. Let me quote Gramsci (Gramsci, n.d.) here:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity).

Roger Simon (n.d.) takes up the argument:

If the crisis is deep – an organic one – these efforts cannot be purely defensive. They will consist in the struggle to create a new balance of political forces, requiring a reshaping of state institutions as well as the formation of new ideologies; and if the forces of opposition are not strong enough to shift the balance of forces decisively in their direction, the conservative forces will succeed in building a new system of alliances

which will re-establish their hegemony. Beneath the surface of the day-to-day events, an organic and relatively permanent structural change will have taken place.

There are, no doubt, problems with using a vocabulary of crisis, which seems to imply a normative moment of stability and implicitly, an organic unity. Still there are moments when the instabilities and contradictions appear at almost every point of the social formation, and when the struggles become visible and self-conscious. *Policing the Crisis* argued that Great Britain was in the midst of an organic crisis; the analysis of 'mugging' that is the empirical starting point, pointed to that crisis, and yet it was only in the context of that crisis that one could even identify mugging as a problem. The author's saw the organic crisis as part of a longer history of the post-war social formation, and argued that 'no adequate conjunctural analysis of the post war crisis yet exists on which we could hang our more immediate concerns' (Hall *et al.* 1978, p. 218). There is good reason to assume that the United States, as well as other formations, has been in a somewhat similar organic crisis, although the periodizations and forms are no doubt different geographically. I think it is also the case that we too do not have an adequate conjunctural analysis on which to build a critical diagnoses and strategy in the United States (if not much of the world).

Organic crises are not easily settled once and for all, nor is there a single settlement that continues to re-establish itself. Rather, any number of temporary and unstable settlements may be offered or tried, until finally, the crisis is resolved, often through radical reconfigurations of the social formation itself. But even if the result is a period of relative structural stability, it is still always both unstable and temporary. While Thatcherism ('neoliberalism') provided a sort of resolution to the organic crisis of the conjuncture, nevertheless many of the features and elements of that conjuncture have continued to characterize the ensuing conjunctures, which must nevertheless be understood to define a radically different conjuncture.

This crisis (or more accurately, a continually rearticulated set of crises) has been continuous, and surprisingly, has enabled only the most unstable and short-lived settlements, even as the very terrain on which the crisis plays itself out has been continuously and significantly transformed in particular directions. It is a crisis that we (in the US) and many others (in many parts of the world) continue to live through. It is a crisis, in part, of economics — defined by a series of struggles and transformations within capitalism (often dated from circa 1973). The crisis is in part a hegemonic struggle to control the state by reconstituting the possibilities of social alliances and allegiances (a war of positions).

Yet I think when you consider the breadth of the sites of struggles in the US — only some of which I have indicated above — as well as the specificity of those sites, how deeply they cut into our habitual ways of living and our most

basic common sense assumptions, we might conclude that something 'more' is going on, that the concept of hegemony is necessary but not sufficient for making sense of the almost epochal 'feeling' of the contemporary dislocations. In the United States (the only location of which I can speak with some confidence if not authority), I would describe the struggles that have been taking place for half a century as part of a larger struggle against the specific configuration of modernity — what I call liberal modernity — that had developed and come to dominance within the United States between Reconstruction²⁵ and the 1950s. The establishment of this 'liberal modernity' was neither linear nor evolutionary, and it was perhaps never complete or uncontested, but it did largely come to define the United States in the twentieth century. The struggle against this liberal modernity is at least as complicated and uneven as was the struggle to establish it; it is being waged from the left and the right against the liberal center; it involves cultural, political and economic fractions and formations in unequal and unstable alliances. I do not think any settlement, any balance in the field of forces, has been reached during the past thirty years, although it is clear that certain fractions have been gaining power steadily and have a sometimes disproportionate power to shape the possible futures from which the society must choose. Yet, I do not think we can say what the outcome is going to be; whatever the coming modernity, the emergent reconfiguration of modernity, is going to be, it will not be the simple realization of any one project, although again, it is clear that over the past three decades, the so-called New Right (comprising various new conservative fractions, various religions fractions, and various corporate-capitalist fractions) seems to be exerting the most powerful determining pressures and pushing the country (if not large parts of the world) in particular directions.

Let me offer some of the early and tentative conclusions of my own researches on this conjuncture: In economic terms, the emerging settlement (or at least the trajectory into a reconfigured modernity) seems, contrary to all-too-common claims from the left, not to entail the reduction of all value to economic value, but a transformation of economies based on a devaluation of labor and the celebration of various competing definitions of entrepreneurialism and financial capital (so that investment is more important than labor as a source of wealth). Moreover, as many commentators have pointed out, this is accompanied by various efforts to shift the burden of (all sorts of) risk from social and corporate entities onto individuals and families. The discursive formations of the economies have given a new and privileged place to economic discourses that celebrate the market and price as the new logic of rational choice, eliminating — at least as a goal — any appeal to common value and public good. This also displaces a set of goals defined by a vision of economic mobility that pointed to an admittedly imaginary classless (i.e. middle class) society. In this context, it is the right that has recognized that

markets are more than merely economic relations; they entail both cultural and social relations as well (although the various capitalist fractions of the right deny the work needed to both create and maintain them as competitive). We are witnessing a new and powerful public re-articulation of economy and religion, resulting in the patriotic celebration of a particular understanding of markets (as de-socialized, individual exchange) and of free trade/markets not as competitive but as deregulated. The result of these varied struggles and transformations is only misleadingly described as neo-liberalism, which is, I think, better understood as the ideology of a particular alliance of capital fractions.

In political terms, there is a clear struggle over sovereignty – a complex and multiple relation – taking place. And we can clearly see the multiplication of modes of governance and governmentality (e.g. the increasing use of litigation and regulation, the increasing importance of corporate cultures) with the result that the 'state' is becoming less educative (although under the current regime, it is increasingly involved in moral regulation). But there is more happening. There is, on the one hand, a complex and contradictory disinvestment from state electoral politics (and in many cases, from politics more broadly), increasingly understood to be either purely ideological or purely managerial, as if as if there were a desire not to know, not to be involved, as if Fromm's 'escape from freedom' had finally come to be realized. If these changes are taking place 'in the center', if you will, there is also an increasingly affective and powerful investment on the part of some groups (on both the left and the right) around certain issues and organizations of power. Here ideology is more a matter of maintaining alliances, and public opinion becomes a sophisticated and increasingly affective medium in its own right, to be manipulated and used in any number of ways, but rarely simply as a means of gauging or mobilizing public support. As the sides in the battle become increasingly polarized (and affectively engaged), compromise and even dialogue become less possible and even less desirable as a political necessity, to say nothing about its value as a democratic strategy. Hence, party and ideological discipline become more important. The balance between political discourse and discourses of morality/religion is changing, as are the relations between consent and force, and the relations between the center and the extremes of political life.

In the field of culture, the emergent modernity is being built upon a serious and effective attack on secularism and education, and the reconstruction of the discursive formations of authority and knowledge. One result of an increasing political fanaticism is the almost complete collapse of institutions and practices of adjudication over competing knowledge claims – not only interpretive but even 'factual', if you will allow me a gross but pragmatic oversimplification. New conceptions of space and spatial identities, at every level (global, regional, national, state and local) fuel all sorts of affective and

military actions. New modes of individualization (in terms of identity communities, and corporations, to say nothing of the implications of biotechnological developments), new structures of social belonging (new relations of the demos and ethnos), and very real transformations of the very notions and experiences of history and temporality (these are absolutely crucial in the effort to imagine alternatives and organize change!), are all transforming the very structures of social life and reality.

Finally, I think the relations among the state (and politics more broadly), economies and cultures are themselves being reconfigured (Clarke 2004). On the one hand, we might say that culture has collapsed into politics and economics – and hence, some people argue that culture matters less. And yet at the same time, we can with equal credibility say that both politics and economics are being culturalized – and hence, some people argue that culture matters even more. So what is going on? In a little while, I will suggest that the fact that both are true points to the need to rethink the Althusserian-modernist notion of the social totality as a relation among a number of relatively autonomous levels. But first I want to suggest that it is not so clear – and it certainly cannot be assumed – that culture continues to be dominant in the current conjuncture or in the emerging settlement. More accurately, textual culture (both high and popular) is not playing the same central role that I think it did in the decades following the Second World War (the decades that saw the emergence of cultural studies globally). Culture is not where change is being organized and experienced, and it is not where resistance is being viably organized. There is a growing disparity between the apparent vectors and effects of textual culture and the leading edge of political and economic transformation. This need not be taken to mean that culture does not matter but that the ways in which it matters – and hence, its effects – have changed in ways that we have not yet begun to contextualize or theorize. I think this is true across media – including film, television and music and, I might suggest, entertainment more generally.²⁶

I might even take this argument one step further and suggest that it is the dominance of culture even more broadly understood – as the signifying, the mediating, the representation, the ideological, the semiotic (or whatever term one prefers) that is being displaced. This is not to say that human reality has somehow escaped its discursive construction but that certain dimensions of the discursivity are no longer defining the locus of historical experience and change. It is to say, again, that the ways in which culture matters are themselves changing, and our work has not kept up with it. For example, I have argued for some time that politics is increasingly defined, in the first instance, affectively rather than ideologically. (Let me be clear again that I am talking primarily about the context of my own research – the United States – and its related territories of pertinence.)

I am tempted to say that the significant locus of the constitution and experience of change is moving into the realms of politics and economics (which are themselves of course definable as discursive formations or apparatuses), yet I do not want to create such a stark opposition because I do not think we are dealing with a rupture that might simply relegate culture to a secondary role. Moreover, as I shall argue, I do not want to reproduce this division of the social formation as if it were comprised of separate levels or domains. Rather, I prefer to say that we are in the midst of a conjunctural crisis in which culture itself is being rearticulated and relocated, and in which the 'center' of culture as it were has moved. In other words, while the emergent structure of feeling is constituted within and constitutive of the domains of politics and economics 'directly', these domains are absolutely inseparable from culture (largely understood in both discursive and technological terms), increasingly foregrounding matters of what we have to call political and economic culture (but not as these have been so inadequately conceptualized within their respective disciplines). At the same time, let me add that this emergent structure of feeling involves a significant reconstruction of the most powerful and determining affective or mattering maps, organized around at least the three poles of fear, humiliation and sentimentality.

Although I do think these conjunctural struggles and changes are 'signs' of, even parts of, a larger rearticulation of modernity that we are living through, it is not an epochal shift, not a rupture in which all the changes and struggles somehow correspond to each other, so that everything can be described in or ascribed to a single logic. It is a war of positions; changes have to be articulated together. Different changes and struggles begin at different times, have different speeds, emerge from different projects, encounter different resistances, and operate at different social locations. Yet, taken together, they constitute a struggle – from both the left and the right – over the very formation of modernity itself that we have come to take for granted over the past century (and even longer for some of its elements). It is in this spirit that Hall (1995, p. 67) claims that we are living in 'a highly transitional moment, a very Gramscian conjuncture . . . between the old state that we can neither fully occupy nor fully leave, and some new state toward which we may be going, but of which we are ignorant. What it feels like in that transitional state is to be 'post', living *in the moment of the post*'. This lovely, somewhat Hegelian, imagery suggests that we are in the midst of a rather prolonged organic crisis, what I have described as a war of positions among competing conceptions and configurations of modernity, with all the complexity it embraces. And this poses a very serious challenge to cultural studies, as Hall (1998, pp. 193, 194) admonishes:

Cultural studies has got a lot of analytic work to do . . . in terms of trying to interpret how a society is changing in ways that are not amendable to

the immediate political language . . . Cultural studies requires a huge bootstrap operation to lift itself out of its earlier agenda . . . so that it can come face to face with these much larger, much wider, much broader, more extensive social relations. I am struck by how much potential work there is, and I feel that cultural studies is not aware of its new vocation. It could be called on to act as the leading edge of measuring new ways of both understanding and implementing social and historical change.

This is the challenge – to wake cultural studies out of, to borrow a phrase from Kant, its 'dogmatic slumber'.

Remaking cultural studies

Part of the challenge we face in trying to come to terms with this struggle over modernity (in its various scalar manifestations) is to find ways to interrogate how the political, economic and cultural are articulated both as different and as a unity in their conjunctural specificity. I do not think this can be accomplished by following the path of political economy, even when it tries to take the cultural turn seriously, which is rare enough.²⁷ In the end, it sees culture as a medium into which the economy is translated and through which it moves, but which has no real effects of its own. Hence, political economy always assumes a universal privilege (and a decontextualized singularity) of the economy over politics and culture. Nor do I think this project can be realized through notions of governmentality, where economic forces have no determining power whatsoever but are merely the background to governmental shifts, and where culture is merely assimilated into the governmental.²⁸

This political/theoretical task is necessary I think in the context of a struggle over modernity, which is partly describable, but only in the first instance, as a complex set of projects aimed at universalizing, but in significantly differentiated ways – economic practices, relations and discourses on the one hand and moralized religious/political concepts on the other.

One practical way of taking up such a task might involve turning our attention to the two disciplines that have most successfully avoided the cultural turn, and at the same time, have become the most influential, under the sign of science, in helping to shape public policy and social imagination. Cultural studies – albeit not by itself – needs to interrogate these disciplines as it has already helped to transform other disciplines in the humanities and the interpretive social sciences, and this cannot consist simply of rejecting the scientific pretensions or quantitative methods they use. It must understand their power as an effect of their place within the larger discursive formations that define – even that are – the realities of the multiplicity of economies and politics. Recognizing the efforts of those both within and outside the disciplines

already engaged in such a project, cultural studies should help to take up and reconstitute the objects of these disciplines – the state, governance, economies, markets, etc – as overdetermined, i.e. relational, contingent and discursive. To quote du Gay and Pryke (2002, p. 1):

The sets of processes and relations we have come to know as 'the economy' appear no longer as taken for granted as perhaps once they were. Many of the old certainties – both practical and academic – concerning what makes firms hold together or markets work seem less clear-cut and our knowledge of them feels less secure. Yet among these proliferating uncertainties has emerged – or better, re-emerged – a belief that something called 'culture' is both somehow critical to understanding what is happening to, as well as to practically intervening in, contemporary economic and organizational life. This 'cultural turn' takes many different forms depending on context and preferred projects.

This is in part a call back to interdisciplinarity, but in order to accomplish it, cultural studies scholars will have to fight against three increasingly visible tendencies. First, there is a tendency to think that one can create a 'new economics' without engaging with the discipline, pulling it as if by magic out of the theoretical mouth of one's favorite writers. One might read the occasional economist, as long as his or her positions are theoretically and/or politically resonant with one's own. Somehow the enormous diversity of academic economics (what is often referred to within the discipline as heterodox economics), to say nothing of other (extra-disciplinary and even extra-university) forms and sites of the production of economic knowledge, simply disappears. Even more frightening is the tendency for theory to overwhelm and displace any effort to analyze the concrete complexities of economic life, relations and discourses in ways that might challenge theory. Interdisciplinarity has to fight against the tendency to assume that theory is, automatically, an adequate (i.e. the most useful) description of contexts. As Hall (1990, p. 16) recounted it:

What we discovered was that serious interdisciplinary work does not mean that one puts up the interdisciplinary flag and then has a kind of coalition of colleagues from different departments, each of whom brings his or her own specialization to a kind of academic smorgasbord from which students can sample each of these riches in turn. Serious interdisciplinary work involves the intellectual risk of saying to professional sociologists that what they say sociology is, is not what it is. We had to teach what we thought a kind of sociology that would be of service to people studying culture would be, something we could not get from self-designated sociologists. It was never a question of which disciplines would contribute to the development of this field, but of how

one could decenter or destabilize a series of interdisciplinary fields. We had to respect and engage with the paradigms and traditions of knowledge and of empirical and concrete work in each of these disciplinary areas in order to construct what we called cultural studies.

In order to do economics better than the economists, one has to engage with both the multiple disciplinary discourses, knowledges, and authorities, and what for the sake of convenience I will call the empirical 'realities', in all their complexity and sophistication.²⁹

The second tendency is the propensity, under conditions of financial retrenchment and an increasingly conservative environment in the academy, to retreat into one's own discipline as if one could be interdisciplinary inside the discipline. The results are, I am sorry to report, usually very thin and while often imaginative, not very useful. Instead, we need to re-animate and rethink the possibilities of collaborative and interdisciplinary research, even as we rethink the organization and meaning of expertise. The third, equally problematic tendency, is to unreflectively privilege the forms of academic knowledge and knowledge production. We need to think more about our relation as knowledge producers to those who are producing knowledges outside the academy. We need to help create translation practices that might enable us to constitute new forms of dialogue, analysis and criticism, and we need to do this internationally and globally.³⁰

Doing a different kind of – conjunctural – economics involves recognizing that the economy is not only overdetermined, but also multiple, relational and discursive. For example, if we are to demystify both economies and economics, we probably need to recognize at least four distinct problematics: (1) economism, or the assumption that the economy (whether understood as a mode of production, class conflicts, entrepreneurialism, technology, finance or markets) is the motor force of history, has to be criticized with the concept of overdetermination; (2) capitalocentrism – or the assumption that capitalism in a singular and singularly ubiquitous formation, has to be replaced with a recognition of the multiplicity, not only of capitalisms but also of economic practices and formations (Gibson-Graham 1996); (3) productivism or the assumption that production is the essence of economies and therefore, the fundamental or even the only real source of value, has to be replaced by a recognition of the dispersion and contingency of value; and finally, (4) economic essentialism or the assumption that there is a stable and universal distinction between economic and non-economic practices or relations, has to be replaced by a recognition, not merely that economic relations are themselves partly discursive, but also that the economic is always a relationally produced category.

Therefore, the economy (and economic categories like capitalism or labor) are never merely economic, but always social, political and cultural as well.

Capitalism as an abstract category does not describe a form of economy, but a set of possibilities for the organization of social formations (viewed from a particular perspective that can only be understood conjuncturally). One has to look not only at the articulations, but the forms of articulation among the various discourses and practices and the relations among them – negotiation, distanciation, compromise, marginalization, etc. One has to look at economic relations and practices, concretely, located along particular trajectories, and at particular geographical and institutional sites. As a result, one also has to look at the relations among the various actors, institutions, practices and discourses at the intersection of political, economic and cultural life. That is, one has to study the social formation in its concrete apparatuses (discursive formations) and its conjunctural totality.³¹ And one has to be open the possibility of multiplying economies with the spaces and places of people's lives.³²

As much as one needs to rethink economies and economics, I think it is also necessary to take up the questions of political science within cultural studies. This involves not only re-theorizing power but also the narrower concepts of politics, state and governance.³³ Too often, we rely on questionable models of state apparatuses and governance, of civil society and jurisprudence, for our understandings of crucial issues such as rights, collectivities, and political organizations. Many of the same caveats and complexities that I alluded to above for economics will apply equally to the effort to rethink those 'objects', relations and apparatuses over which the discipline of political science has claimed sovereignty, another concept by the way that needs further cultural and contextual reflection. Again, I do not mean to deny that important work on these questions is being done. I want to embrace it. I am arguing that they must move into the center of cultural studies, that we must both narrow and expand our sense of what is to be included in the future formations of cultural studies.

I am not suggesting that we abandon our researches on media, popular and other forms of textual culture. In many places, these forms of culture still matter deeply – and often, in many of the same ways that cultural studies, at its best, analyzes. But in some places, I do not think they matter in just those ways anymore and therefore, I am suggesting that the ways we interrogate cultural practices and texts, the questions we ask of them, the categories (concepts) that enable or disable particular questions, and the theoretical and critical tools we bring to bear upon them (always ways of managing complexity and contingency) may not be particularly useful responses to culture in the contemporary conjuncture. We may need to be asking different sorts of questions – recognizing that the culture wars are not in the last instance about ideology, and that ideology has become largely a matter of the internal management of political alliances; recognizing that culture is no longer the unique and uniquely important site of subjectification and identification; recognizing that, in simple political and economic terms – the media lie and

they keep getting caught, that people seem to be choosing in some sense to act like cultural dopes (they act like they believe the lies even while knowing that the media lie); recognizing that the media are thoroughly integrated into corporate capitalism even as the relation of politics and culture (public and private, information and entertainment, etc) are being redefined; that the nature of and investment in cultural identity are changing, even as its articulation to political and economic identities – and the conditions of possibility of agency – are themselves being thoroughly reconstituted.

Given the radical contextuality of cultural studies, it is odd to find that it has often congealed into a set of assumptions about the effectivity of popular culture and the media, and their place in the social formation and everyday life. Is it always necessary that people relate to culture through texts and that its effectivity is always through processes of signification and subjectivity? Are the media always screens upon which images of an external reality are projected, as a theater of representation? I am not denying that this has been, in particular contexts, a dominant mode of their operation, but I do not think it has always been so, or that it is so any longer.

Huge sectors of culture have become so ordinary, they have been so absorbed into everyday life, that they have become residual, insignificant in Lefebvre's sense. This is not a cooptation into politics or economics but a relocation that undoes cultures' identities, mattering force and effectivity. I am not saying that culture is being integrated into a military-industrial-entertainment complex (although this may well be true) but that, as a result of a new locus of relationality, as part of an emergent structure of feeling, its very existence as a (set of) discursive formations is being reconstructed, even as it is involved in a reorganization of everyday life. It seems to me that media and popular culture are becoming both less important – in terms of questions of ideology, or identity (ethnos), or as meaningful sites of agency, and more important in other, as yet largely unexplored, ways.³⁴

Yet we must do all this without giving up the advances we have made!!! We must never agree with those who would argue that questions of culture and identity were – and continue to be – somehow unnecessary distractions from the real work of understanding and transforming the contemporary context.

Conclusion

But it is clear that even this call does not go far enough, just as my own descriptions of the contemporary struggle over modernity (above) have failed to question some of the very (modern) categories that constitute my own common sense, both as a cultural studies scholar, and as a particular sort of modern subject. I have been trying to suggest that the real task of cultural

studies is not the analysis of economic, political or even cultural events, but of a conjuncture, and in particular, of the war of positions in which we are already implicated, and the complex struggles to transform – to rearticulate – an other modernity. But recognizing that cultural studies involves conjunctural analysis requires us to rethink the very categories we deploy – categories as fundamental to our work as ‘the economic’ and ‘the political’. How does one do cultural studies without reifying such categories, treating them as things out there or as real and discriminate levels – as I have unfortunately but clearly done? This is of course as true for the concept of ‘culture’ as it is for the economy. As the Colombian anthropologist Eduardo Restrepo put it, ‘culture is the deepest and most solid rock of our common sense’.³⁵ This is the beginning of my effort to understand the theoretical challenges facing cultural studies in the contemporary conjuncture. This might suggest, not only a post-anthropological cultural studies (as Paul Gilroy has suggested) but also even a post-cultural (or at least, a post-culturalist) cultural studies.

But equally important, cultural studies must revisit the question of how one theorizes the social totality (and the differences that are articulated within it) within the practices of cultural studies, starting with the assumption of contextuality or relationality (postulating not only that any ‘term’ is defined only as the effect of the relations that constitute it but also that the relations precede and are more real than the terms). That is, the question of the totality, of an articulated unity or of unity in difference, is the question of context itself.

We may agree that contextualism dictates that an event is not anything by itself. It is what it is – for example, an economic practice, and an economic practice of a particular sort – only within a set of relations. In that sense, all events, all practices are condensations, articulated unities, overdetermined realities. We have to start with the contingency that is the consequence of a radical contextuality. But we also have to start with the recognition of the necessary discursivity of the context, of the social totality, and of every element (context, formation or apparatus) within it. All events and formations are heterogeneous contexts, all the way up to the social formation itself as an articulated unity.

It still may be the case that the concept of context itself has not been adequately conceptualized, in a contextualized way.³⁶ We have not reconciled two deeply structuring assumptions about the nature of context: on the one hand, context is spatial, defining a territory; on the other hand, context is relational, constituted always by sets and trajectories of social relations and relationalities. If contexts are always both relational and spatial,³⁷ there is no way to define a stable differentiation of inside and outside, and yet, at the same time, we have to be cognizant of differentiated spaces of pertinence, of circles of relevance, even as such spaces are always related. That is, we cannot simply identify contexts with the local and place, as if these were defined by an

immediacy and interiority. Contexts are not islands of order and meaningfulness in the midst of empty space. As Doreen Massey (2004, p. 11) asks: ‘If the identities of places are indeed the product of relations which spread way beyond them (if we think space/place in terms of flows and [dis]connectivities rather than in terms only of territories), then what should be the political relationship to those wider geographies of construction?’ This ‘Deleuzian’ vision of space and place, emphasizing their relationality, connectivity and above all, multiplicity, surely has serious consequences for thinking about context as an analytical as well as a political category.

To think context contextually means that, as cultural studies engages in part theoretically with the complexities of the current conjuncture, it might need to rethink the possibilities of talking about the social formation as a totality, in order to get beyond the limits of the current reading of Althusserian theory of the social formation insofar as the latter reproduces, in many crucial ways, the very assumptions or constructions of older forms of modernity.³⁸ Althusser’s effort to think overdetermination and totality together resulted in his falling back onto a model of the structure in dominance and relative autonomy – which is constantly threatening to fall back into a model of essentialized and isolated levels, leading some of those who followed him into an endless search for universal specificity. The threat of chaos and radical uncertainty that the concept of overdetermination brings with it had to be compensated for with the notion of a structure comprising already identified pieces. One might of course argue that the distinctions among the various levels are only analytic – but it seems to me that that precisely reproduces the practice of the very Euro-modernism that is being struggled over from all sides. Instead these distinctions – and the specificities they implicitly carry with them as well as the totality into which they are articulated – have to be understood conjuncturally. Not only is the establishment of a distinction between economics and culture conjunctural, but also what it means for a practice to be economic (and hence, where any practice might be located in the social totality) is itself also conjuncturally defined. Or perhaps the very desire to ‘name’ and locate every practice, to assign it its proper effectivity, is itself an expression of the very modernity that is being challenged in the contemporary conjunctural struggles.

What I have implicitly suggested in this paper is that the concept not of modernity but of alternative modernities may be a fruitful way of trying to rethink the complex and fractured unity of the whole, a way of rethinking articulations of the discursive (e.g. Williams’ structure of feeling) and the non-discursive. Alternative modernities is, I propose, a conjunctural theory of the social totality. And so, I return to the beginning – context and conjuncture.³⁹

It is also time we started collectively contributing to the public debates based on our work as cultural studies intellectuals and scholars, about what is going on, and the possibilities for a better future. I emphasize ‘our positions as

intellectuals and scholars' because I believe it is our responsibility to get a better understanding of what is going on, and that means being willing to put aside our own taken for granted interpretations and political conclusions in order to open ourselves to the possibility of finding that we are wrong – intellectually and/or politically, in order to help find a different path into a better future. I have intentionally avoided advocating for 'public intellectuals', because I do not want to pre-judge the various and effective forms that such interventions might take. I am not assuming that we should all start writing books for a general public, or become media presences. It may be more effective to form new kinds of alliances with other sites of knowledge production and political activism. I am only advocating that this discussion take place.

In conclusion, let me explain the subtitle of my paper – 'What's the matter with New York?' I am gesturing to Thomas Frank's 2004 book, *What's the matter with Kansas?* which unfortunately often stood in for a critical progressive analysis both before and after the US election of 2004. In my argument, the answer to Frank's question – what's the matter with people living in the so-called 'red' states?⁴⁰ – is – nothing. The fact that they disagree with progressives does not mean there is something wrong with them. On the other hand, there may be something wrong with people in the so-called 'blue' states if they think that there is something 'wrong' with conservatives (in Kansas) simply because they vote or think differently. Political struggles cannot be reduced to a simple choice between right and wrong, as much as we may, in our everyday political and moral common sense, believe it. As political intellectuals, we have to find ways of moving forward, both in our work and in the public realm.

I end with David Scott's (1999, p. 223) eloquent encapsulation of the challenge of our current position of political intellectuals and call to embrace other possibilities:

That dream is over. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves . . . whether we want to continue to pursue this line of preoccupation . . . We have to ask ourselves what the yield will be of continuing to deepen our understanding of a conceptual space whose contours we have now become so familiar with, and whose insights are rapidly on their way to becoming a new orthodoxy. We have to ask ourselves whether it might not be more useful to try to expand the conceptual boundaries themselves by altering the target of our criticism. This, it seems to me, is the challenge of our present . . . a new domain in which a new set of preoccupations become visible, a set of preoccupations defined not so much by the politics of epistemology as by a renewal of the theoretical question of the political.

Notes

- 1 This paper was first given as the keynote at the Fifth Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference, Urbana, Illinois 2004. Some of the ideas are elaborated in my 'Stuart Hall, cultural studies and the philosophy of conjuncturalism', delivered at the University of the West Indies (Jamaica) in the summer of 2004 and to be published in Brian Meeks (Ed.). *Culture, politics, race and diaspora: The thought of Stuart Hall* (Kingston: Ian Randle 2006) I would also like to thank Stuart Hall, Eduardo Restrepo, Doreen Massey, John Erni, and Rainer Winter for their valuable critical responses to earlier drafts as well as my colleagues (John Pickles, Arturo Escobar) and graduate students for ongoing conversations.
- 2 I have in mind here such things as audience studies, consumption studies, subculture studies, etc, but also, various reifications of identity politics.
- 3 I use this phrase to both signal a connection with and a distance from the project of Foucault. Although I do think Foucault is a radical contextualist, his theory of the context – and the level of abstraction on which he operates – is significantly different from that which I will present here as the practice of cultural studies. To put it simply, Foucault does not operate at the level of the conjuncture but rather at the level of what we might call, with a nod to Heidegger, the epoch – although Foucault's epochs are not quite the same as Heidegger's.
- 4 See Laclau (1996).
- 5 Although I am primarily drawing upon the work and words of Stuart Hall, I believe this commitment is visible generally in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, as well as in other cultural studies figures such as Raymond Williams. Let me be clear here. I am not claiming that Williams, or all the early people involved at the Centre were self-consciously radical contextualists. I do think that this is what the practice was pointing towards, although the vocabulary to describe it may not have been there. And of course, the commitment may have been more or less strong (and more or less conscious) in different practices and practitioners. But as Stuart Hall recently told me (personal conversation 10 April 2005), 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale'.
- 6 I do not see much evidence that much of what claims to be cultural studies, not only in the US but also in many of the other North Atlantic (Euro-modern) parts of the world, has gone through this moment of self-reflection. Instead, all too frequently, critical work has forged another kind of insularity by making self-reflection into a form of self-involvement, becoming too inward looking and personal. As Doreen Massey has observed (personal conversation, 18 April 2005) it has become too easy for critical intellectuals to focus on questions of personal – internal – identity and memory, on the West and the cities in which the authors live.
- 7 Stuart Hall, personal conversation, 10 April 2005.

- 8 This may be slightly different than Foucault's notion of the relations of a non-relation.
- 9 The conjunctural model of cultural studies that I am alluding to here is commonly associated with the work done in Britain, around the twin poles of race and Thatcherism, by Hall (1988), Gilroy (1987), Clarke (1991) and others, in such important and exemplary works as *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (Centre 1982). Of course, there is much more to the Gramsci invented by this reading than just a conjunctural model of cultural studies' contextualism; notions of hegemony, common sense, organic intellectuals, etc also played an important role in transforming cultural studies, and its approach to contemporary political struggles.
- I must add that too often, Foucault is read without the key concept of articulation (and as a corollary, the differentiated unity [or totality]). See Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); and Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003).
- 10 Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, unpublished interviews, 2004.
- 11 Theories, like conjuncturalism, which assume a fractured sociality, have to face, it seems to me, the question – explicit in Marx, Weber, Durkheim, etc – of how society is possible without the assumed unity guaranteed through notions such as mechanical solidarity or the commonality assumed in images of community. How is society possible if one assumes difference, dissensus and even a certain limited relativism. Presumably one would want to avoid both the violent revolutionary utopianism of certain readings of Marx, and the self-legitimizing narratives of organic solidarity (the contractual basis of social relations) or bureaucracy. How is a society built on dissensus without perpetual violence, possible?
- 12 Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, unpublished interview, 2004.
- 13 Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, unpublished interview, 2004.
- 14 This offers the possibility of conjuncturally rethinking the particular/universal dichotomy.
- 15 We need to investigate the emerging form of what Carl Schmitt called the 'nomos' of the world. See Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- 16 I am not suggesting any necessary relation between knowledge and politics here, but rather mean to point to the possibilities of their articulation. I am grateful for Eduardo Restrepo for pointing this out to me.
- 17 Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, unpublished interviews, 2004.
- 18 I realize that much of what I am ungenerously describing as boring is not boring to many other people. What I mean by boring is: politically irrelevant, oversimplified, built on intellectual and political guarantees, lacking the unique articulation of theoretical and empirical work that characterizes the best of cultural studies, and hence, work that fails to cut into the concrete complexities of the conjuncture.

- 19 It is unclear what happened to the 'feeling' in Williams' notion of a structure of feeling.
- 20 This has opened up recently into an emergent – and interesting – alternative center for cultural studies, one more engaged politically, built at the intersection of social movements and community activism, although in the end, for the most part, I do not think this formulation escapes the problems I am describing here.
- 21 In an Althusserian rather than a Foucauldian sense.
- 22 I am grateful to Charles Acland for sharing with me some of his ongoing researches that seem to lend credibility to this hypothesis.
- 23 Might this help to explain why the US continues to be so strongly and deeply anti-communist, while it seemingly allows articulations of fascism to exist within its political and geographical spaces?
- 24 As in Laclau and Mouffe's notion of a frontier, or in terms of a logic of difference (or incorporation) and the threat of transgression. Such formalist solutions are simply examples of a broader tendency to assume that social analysis can be replaced by philosophical and/or aesthetic categories, as if the social world simply exemplified our theoretical solutions.
- 25 See Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880*, New York: Free Press, 1992.
- 26 For example, my research with youth suggests that kids today organize their musical relationships differently. If in previous moments since the Second World War, kids tended to define themselves by the necessity of certain exclusive definitions of their musical tastes, kids today seem to have more flexible, fluid and eclectic tastes apparatuses. And so, being an aficionado totally devoted to and defined by a single musical form or genre has become increasingly 'uncool'. I do not claim to know what this means, but it does seem to challenge much that we have taken for granted about how music matters and works.
- 27 Bob Jessop's work on 'cultural political economy' is a good example of the limits.
- 28 At its best, in the work of Tony Bennett, James Hay, George Yudice, Toby Miller, etc
- 29 Let me assure you that I am not assuming empirical stands opposed to discursive. I just mean that the empirical cannot be reduced to the discursive, that it exceeds the discursive.
- 30 There is a lot of interesting and sophisticated analysis taking place outside the academy, around the Social Forum movement, the Global Justice movement, the precariat movement, etc This journal is hoping to publish translations of some of the work around the notion of the precariat soon.
- 31 Recently, the EU announced that companies would be allowed to submit their financial reports according to the accounting requirements of the United States rather than those of the EU under certain circumstances. Oddly, no one I asked understood what this meant, or what its consequences might be, or how to talk about it in cultural studies terms as it were.

Some of this work is already in process – in economics, heterodoxy flourishes, whether in the various Marxist schools, including regulation school, and the Rethinking Marxism group, or various institutional and social economics (including followers of Veblen, Polanyi and Braudel), feminist economist, economic geographers, post-autistic economics networks, postmodern and complexity economics, various histories of economics, and various autonomous movement groups, etc. Not surprisingly, much of this work is marginalized within the disciplines. But we should have always and already known that the apparent unity of disciplines usually hides rich diversity.

Also not surprisingly, much of heterodox economics is unhelpful for cultural studies. Within cultural studies and affiliated disciplines (anthropology, geography, etc), there are also many people who have already begun to do some of this work. There are also interesting developments in business schools (e.g. work on the history of accounting as discursive formations).

- 32 See the important work of Gibson-Graham here.
- 33 Some of this work is already in process – within the disciplines of political science by people as diverse as: Jodi Dean, Mike Shapiro, Wendy Brown, William Connolly, Etienne Balibar, etc.
- 34 I might offer the trivial example of how changes in book distribution (and publishing) have transformed the terrain of political possibilities.
- 35 Eduardo Restrepo, personal conversation, May 2005. For the beginnings of such a project, see my 'The Victory of Culture, part 1 (Against the Logic of Mediation)', *Angelaki*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1998), pp. 3–30.
- 36 We have not yet had the conversation about how we are using context – and we have not debated the relative merits of the various philosophical elaborations of context (and nominalism): Marx's historical specificity (and mode of production, or Jameson's cognitive mapping), Foucault's discursive formation (and diagram), Deleuze and Guattari's milieu (and machinic assemblage), pragmatism's situation (and symbolic action), etc. It remains an open question whether each of these views is equally useful for cultural studies and what the consequences or implications of adopting each would be for cultural studies.
- 37 Consequently, a commitment to relationality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a commitment to radical contextuality.
- 38 See the important work of Warren Montag on rereading Spinoza.
- 39 Here, one might look at the exemplary work embodied in the InterAsia project, or in the work of various networks operating in Latin American cultural studies, including the Coloniality/Modernity group. A future issue of *Cultural Studies* will present some of the work of this latter group.
- 40 The 'red states' refers to those in which the electoral majority supported Bush over Kerry in the election. Closer examination of the voting patterns completely contradicts the assumption that there are red states and blue states (the latter being those that voted for Kerry). Not only does the

assumption ignore the multiplicity and complexity of electoral results (citizens voted for more than just president, often in complicated patterns), it also demonstrates that there are red and blue areas within every state.

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