FROM BIRMINGHAM TO ANGKOR WAT: DEMARCATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

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Abstract
The radical inspiration of Cultural Studies has been betrayed, declares E. San Juan, Jr. In this timely essay, he argues that this betrayal springs from the postmodernist temperament, the “metaphysical turn,” of contemporary Cultural Studies. By exaggerating “the possibility of liberation over the established fact of domination,” Cultural Studies has abandoned fundamental categories such as class and nation in favor of race and gender, among others. The frivolous has overcome the political: commercial icons and rituals are now fantasized to topple the very system that makes their condition possible. “In what sense can this still inchoate and contested terrain called ‘cultural studies,’ distinguished for the most part by formalist analysis of texts and discourses, be an agent for emancipation, let alone revolutionary social transformation, of the plight of oppressed peoples around the world?” In this essay that politicizes as rigorously as it historicizes, San Juan critiques the critics and criticisms of contemporary Cultural Studies whose avocations swing back and forth between the ludic and the ludicrous. With this necessary polemic, San Juan strives to give back to Cultural Studies, as an heir to a radical tradition, its truly radical aspiration.

Keywords
anthropology, contemporary cultural studies, history of cultural studies, postmodernism, travel and tourism

About the Author
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Times would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not the quality of goods and utility which matter, but movement; not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there.

–C. L. R. James

One survivor of the conflicts of the current “culture wars” in the North is the discipline or field of inquiry called Cultural Studies (hereafter CS). Since the intervention
of CS in the academy began with violating the conventional protocols, I start with a similar transgression by a preface of travel notes. Last March my wife and I attended a convention of the National Association of Ethnic Studies in Orlando, Florida, where we encountered the tourist holiday crowd in full force. Among the attractions disseminated by hundreds of publicity paraphernalia is the Salvador Dali Museum located in St. Petersburg, Florida. The Museum’s brochure describes the place in six languages (German, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Dutch); the English version reads thus:

World-famous, the Salvador Dali Museum ranks as one of the top attractions in Florida receiving the highest rating by the Michelin Green Guide— the only such attraction on the west coast to be so honored. Daily tours of the museum’s fascinating collection will educate, yet entertain you, about one of the 20th century’s greatest artists—Salvador Dali. Bewildering double images and incredible paintings will surprise; sculptures, holograms and art glass will amaze; and early impressionist-style paintings and melting clocks will delight you. You are assured of finding something special. Be sure to include time for the Dali Museum in downtown St. Petersburg in your plans.

No doubt the Museum has been competing with such popular favorites as Epcot Disney, Universal Studios, Sea World, Wonderworks, and a thousand other diversions— from ethnic restaurants, boutiques galore, art galleries, curio shops, and diverse simulations of Disney World iconography in numerous malls. We visited the Museum for verification. The reality was not far from the media hype. Shopping at the Museum, with surrealist-art mementoes and assorted merchandise— zapping for pastiches and visual language-games—summons to mind Michel De Certeau’s tactics of make-shift creativity and historiographic place-making. Welcome to Dali-land! Shift to another CS venue. Later in March, I participated in an international conference organized by the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences at Chiba University, Tokyo, Japan. The theme of the conference was “Searching for the Paradigm of Pluralism: Cultural and Social Pluralism and Coexistence in South and Southeast Asia.” Scholars from Thailand, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka came; the plenary lecture was given by a leading Japanese scholar, Prof. Mitsuo Nakamura, who spoke about “Islam and Civil Society—Hope and Despair.” My topic for the opening keynote address was “The Paradox of Multiculturalism: Ethnicity, Race, and Identity in the Philippines.” Mindful of the Japanese Empire’s goal of building a “Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” during World War II and the peculiar ethnic homogeneity in Japan, I
remarked that the dialogue was a good start in exploring the transformative potential of “multiculturalism” which, initiated in the West as a theme, genre, policy, and disciplinary orientation, can be recontextualized in the Asian setting and merged with the larger research projects of intellectuals, government officials, and other protagonists in the public sphere.

There is some distance, of course, between these initiatives and CS. Disneyworld, Dali, and Japan are coeval in the frame of my diasporic experience. How do we connect both the Dali Museum and the Japanese interest in pluralism, and my position as a Filipino scholar based in the US as constituent elements in the field of CS? Given the fact that the analytic and synthesizing practice called “cultural studies” has acquired a distinct temper at every case of “situational appropriation,” one can call both the placing of the Salvador Dali Museum in the tourist-shopping cosmopolis and the multiculturalist conference in Chiba, Japan, as innovative points of departure for reflection on the plight of CS. As a comparative literature scholar from the Philippines, and also a specialist in ethnic studies in the US academy, I consider myself a conjunctural site for the encounter between various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, between “third” and “first” world cultures, and between popular/plebeian layers of culture and the mainly Eurocentric discourse of the academy. Obviously I may be an exceptional case, analogous to the situation of Taipei, Taiwan—an emergent global city—which has become one venue for the exchange between Western CS and its local practitioners.

The trajectories of traveling ideas do not, of course, immediately translate into a neat geopolitical calculus. So in what way is this encounter productive of knowledge and pedagogical practice that can be used for undoing the hegemony of “transmigrant” capital? Can the critical apparatus of concepts, idiom, rhetoric, and style be imported or transplanted from Birmingham and Chapel Hill, USA, to Asian, African, and Latin American milieus without reinforcing postcolonial hegemonies? How do we negotiate, for example, the tensions between World Bank/International Monetary Fund imperialism and the subjects of CS as stratified heterogeneous movements?

SOUVENIRS OF OVERDETERMINATION

In the postscript to the now orthodox textbook Cultural Studies, Angela McRobbie celebrates the demise of Marxism—the reflectionist and mechanical kind she attributes to Fredric Jameson and David Harvey—as an influence on the field and its replacement by
deconstruction. Although she notes with it the disappearance of the “organic intellectual” (in Gramsci’s sense) and of any social class as the agency of emancipation, she claims nonetheless that the essays in the anthology demonstrate “a mode of study which is engaged and which seeks not the truth, but knowledge and understanding as a practical and material means of communicating with and helping to empower subordinate social groups and movements” (721). In what sense can this still inchoate and contested terrain called “cultural studies,” distinguished for the most part by formalist analysis of texts and discourses, be an agent for emancipation, let alone revolutionary social transformation, of the plight of oppressed peoples around the world?

A brief background may provide an orientation to my critique of contemporary orthodox cultural studies. When the field was initially outlined in Britain by its first proponents–Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson–it was originally intended to critique the elitist and anti-democratic methodologies and traditions attendant upon the study of cultural expression. The immediate post-World War II milieu was characterized by the triumph of liberal democracy over fascism, the installation of the welfare state, and the beginning of the Cold War. Cultural criticism reflected the progressive impulses of that period. Instead of replicating the class divisions that separated the canonical works from the artifacts of mass culture, CS conceived of the whole of cultural production, including texts and all signifying or discursive practices, as its open-ended domain. Thus advertising, popular genres like thrillers and romances, films, music, fashions, and so on can be read (like literary texts) as communal or social events, and no longer as aesthetic icons removed from their contexts of production, circulation, and consumption.

Culture thus signifies not just beliefs and values but patterns of behavior and symbolic action. It is a layered complex of dispositions and institutions which Bourdieu distills in the concept of habitus embracing both objective structures and mentalities. By theorizing cultures as historically shaped “designs for living,” whole ways of life, the early practitioners of CS engaged themselves with the critique not only of activities and artifacts in “civil society” and private lives, but also with their ideological resonance and the political implications they have for the total social order. Put in a dialectical idiom, culture may be conceived as the mode in which the social relations of a group are structured and shaped; “but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted” (Clark 10). The pioneers of British CS crafted their practice as an intellectual-political engagement with the realities of power and inequality in late-modern capitalism.
After the founding of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the seventies, the field underwent a tortuous growth in the ferment of the sixties youth revolt, the civil rights and anti-war struggles in the US, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the revival of “humanist Marxism.” It proceeded from the empiricism of its initiators to a structuralist phase, then to an Althusserian/Lacanian one, followed by a Gramscian moment, up to its dissolution in the deconstructive post-structuralism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Because the field was committed not only to institutional analysis but also to ideology critique, the classic problematic of the relation between subject and object, traditionally formulated as the relation between consciousness and society, reasserted itself as the opposition between culturalism and structuralism. One must recall that both Thompson and Williams reacted against a positivistic Marxism which insisted on the strict determination of thought and action by economic forces. Within a generally Marxist perspective, they shifted the emphasis to the experiences of everyday life as creative interventions of social groups in the making of history.

The first director of the Center, Stuart Hall, although inspired by his socialist mentors, laid the groundwork for the questioning of culturalism and its empiricist predisposition. The adoption of a structuralist problematic derived from Althusser enriched the analysis of ideology as the prime cultural mediation whereby individuals were interpellated as subjects (in a process of misrecognition, as though they were free agents). The subject was thus theorized as a subject-position defined by historical coordinates and, with a Lacanian inflection, biographical circumstances. Empirical truth was displaced by meanings and interpretations within determinate contexts. The Cartesian self, also called the transcendental ego of science, was displaced by the concept of a subject-position produced as an effect of textuality, more precisely, of discursive practice. Instead of experience as the key category, representation via the mass media and other technologies of disseminating information became the privileged locus of investigation.

Culture then began to be construed as the production of meanings and subjectivities within discourse and representation. Since the subject was an effect of signifying processes, it was then easy to move to conceptualizing politics as a struggle over representation. Not only is the subject an identity or position constituted by social and historical structures, it was also an actively experiencing subject, thanks to the paradigm lent by Gramsci. Although the Italian communist was construed through revisionist lenses, it was Gramsci’s crucial interpretation of hegemony as the securing of consent by a historic bloc struggling for domination and moral-intellectual leadership that provided the means for re-ascribing
to the subject-position (constrained by Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses) some degree of agency. In the study of youth subcultures, for example, Dick Hebdige argued that working-class youth were not passive and unreflective consumers of American mass culture; rather, they transformed the meanings of what they consumed, rearranged images, styles and vocabularies of American popular culture as forms of resistance to middle- and upper-class cultures. What was omitted was Gramsci’s belief that the class-conscious leadership of the working-class, together with its cadre of organic intellectuals, would lead the hegemonic struggle of the toiling masses against the oppression and exploitation of capital. Because of this drastic alteration of the paradigm, it might be instructive to review Raymond Williams’ problematizing of culture and its interpretation to place in perspective later developments in the field.

**RE-COGNITIVE MAPPING**

By consensus Williams is considered the inventor of “cultural studies,” at least in its British exemplification. His two books, *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, followed by *Marxism and Literature* and *The Sociology of Culture*, may be regarded as foundational documents enunciating axioms, theorems, and hypotheses that need to be explored, qualified, and further elaborated. A fully responsible cultural studies, he suggests at the end of his 1981 summation, needs to be “analytically constructive and constructively analytic” in dealing with “altered and alterable relations” in both cultural forms and social circumstances. I take it that if there is any coordinating vision to this project, it is the principle that a historical, processual and relational view of the social totality be applied in order to achieve a democratic, socialist conception of culture. The phrase “cultural materialism” has been often used to designate Williams’ theory and practice of cultural analysis, his distinctive framework for critical analysis and interpretation.

In *The Long Revolution*, Williams sums up his observations on the limits of the British culture-and-society tradition (examined earlier in *Culture and Society*). With a synoptic stance, he describes “culture” as the site where crucial questions about historical changes in industry, democracy, class, and art as response to these changes, converged. Against the traditional emphasis on ideas or ideals of perfection divorced from material social life, Williams defines culture as the pattern of society as a whole, the differentiated totality and dynamics of social practices. Culture is a constitutive social process, an expression of general human energy and praxis. This goes beyond the ethnographic, documentary
definition of culture as “whole way of life” (325). Art in this framework is no longer the privileged touchstone of the highest values of civilization; it is only one special form of a general social process in the exchange of meanings, the development of a common “ordinary” culture. So literature and art, the artifacts of high culture, are simply a “part of the general process which creates conventions and institutions, through which the meanings that are valued by the community are shared and made active” (The Long Revolution 55). All social relations, including the formal rules for symbolic exchange and their structural constraints, need to be investigated as actual practices and “forms of human energy” whose full range no given system of domination and subordination can totally exhaust.

In The Sociology of Culture, Williams rejects the idealist understanding of culture inherited from the bourgeois-artistocratic tradition and modifies the mechanical materialist version. He underscores the fact that cultural practice and production are not simply derived from a constituted social order but are themselves constitutive. His new approach envisages culture as the signifying system “through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (13). Cognizant of the “culturalist” deviation, Williams posits as fundamental the axiom that meaning is always produced under determinate empirical and existential conditions. Language is “a socially shared and reciprocal activity, already embedded in active relationships, within which every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so” (Marxism and Literature 166). In a fully historical-materialist position, the use of signs–utterance or speaking as social practice–becomes “notations” for performance. Money, for example, like any sign, becomes a notation performed under certain historically limited conventions. The dichotomy between signifier and signified is thus displaced in Williams’ thesis that language is not a sign system but “notations of actual productive relationships” (170). The term that covers the performance of notations in changing circumstances is “communication,” a network of practices which engenders “variable societies” comprised of the acts of communal affiliation or solidarities.

For Williams, then, signification concerns language in history, the chief theorem of a dialectical-materialist semiotics. Inspired by Bakhtin/Voloshinov, Williams stresses the vocation of cultural studies as the analysis of the social and historical production of signifying systems, systems which are constituted and reconstituted modes of formation. Concretely particularized in The Country and the City—“the analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production” (210), this approach is defined by Williams as “cultural materialism.”
Williams’ method of analyzing ideological/intellectual formations may be considered as his distinctive mode of tackling the classic problematic of the relation between the economic base and the superstructure. We confront once again the problem of articulating in a non-reductive way the complex articulation between consciousness and reality, the claims of immanence and signification, as registered in the social categories of thought and in the ongoing dialectic between knowledge and material power-relations. How do we grasp the connections between social existence and mentalities without the reduction of complex group/individual experiences to their spiritual essences or static social forms? Williams recommends this guiding axiom: cultural analysis begins with “the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships” (The Long Revolution 63). By studying “a general organization in a particular example,” the cultural critic seeks to discover “patterns of a characteristic kind.” By connecting the separate activities of art, trading, production, families, and politics, cultural inquiry seeks to grasp how interactions between practices and patterns are lived and experienced as a whole.

Williams’s overall research project concerns the dialectic of form and content, of intentionality and the occasions of realization—that is, “all the active processes of learning, imagination, creation, performance.” In his inquiry, the object of knowledge is no longer just the individual but the communities of form, the collective subject that is realized in active processes of self-definition: “it is a way of seeing a group in and through individual differences: that specificity of individuals, and of their individual creations, which does not deny but is the necessary way of affirming their real social identities, in language, in conventions, in certain characteristic situations, experiences, interpretations, ideas” (Problems 28-9). Cultural criticism is concerned with grasping “the reality of the interpenetration, in a final sense the unity, of the most individual and the most social forms of actual life” (Culture 29). To accomplish this, we must go beyond isolated texts/products to investigate “[their] real process—[their] most active and specific formation” (Culture 29). We engage again the pursuit of determination in terms of the levels of institutions and formations articulated with material means of cultural production, actual cultural forms, and modes of reproduction.

How are the grammar and syntax of history woven into Williams’s method? To capture the configurations of interests and activities that distinguish a historical period and at the same time register the “actual living sense” of a community that makes communication possible, Williams deploys the term “structure of feeling”: “We learn each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was
in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole” (The Long Revolution 47). In the practice of cultural historiography, Williams was engaged in tracing historical patterns, especially the actively lived and felt meanings and beliefs which of course mix with “justified experience” or systematic world-views. In analyzing formations, Williams spelled out both the fixity of “structure” and the spontaneous flow of (for want of a better word) sensibilities. Instead of describing patterned wholes, Williams sought to apprehend “forming and formative processes,” “practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity,” through this conceptual device of a “structure of feeling” which captures accurately the dialectic of the social and the idiosyncratically private or personal (The Long Revolution 47). The subtext to this interpretive strategy is easily discernible: Williams opposes the assignment of ideas, meanings, and experience to the domain of the received notion of the superstructure which, being merely reflective of and determined by the economic base, has no autonomy or social effectivity of its own. Culture cannot be simply folded into the realm of ideology in the sense of “false consciousness” or Althusser’s “imaginary relations.”

One way to illustrate how “structure of feeling” functions as a mode of historical accounting of signification is to focus on Williams’s series of essays on modernism in The Politics of Modernism. In one essay, Williams begins with a juxtaposition of two strands of events in a unique historic conjuncture. In Zurich in 1916, a cabaret of Dadaism was being performed in Number One, Spiegelgasse, while in Number Six of the same street lived a certain Herr Ulianov (Lenin). One of the founders of Dadaism, Hugo Ball, reminisced how Lenin must have heard the artist’s music and tirades, their quixotic and “unpurposeful” counterplay to the Bolshevik “thorough settling of accounts.” Williams remarks that within five years of Dada’s launching, a revolutionary avant-garde theater appeared in the newly founded Soviet Union, Europe’s periphery. Williams sums up by observing that the emergence of modernism from metropolitan experience marks the peculiar confluence of residual, dominant, and emergent cultural trends, often overlapping and contrapuntal, from both the metropoles and the patrolled borderlands of the empire.

The concept of “structure of feeling” as a heuristic instrument for elucidating the social history of forms also informs Williams’s extended inquiries, in particular The Country and the City, as well as his chapters “The Social History of Dramatic Forms” and “Realism and the Contemporary Novel” in The Long Revolution and Television: Technology and Cultural Form. In this latter book, Williams stresses the desideratum that technology, its application and responses, can only be understood “within the determining limits and pressures” of particular historical periods in specific societies (21). Seen thus, television for him began to
manifest its cultural form as a response to the specific crisis of industrial capitalist society, especially the conjunction of the social complex of the privatized home and mobility. The sequence or flow in television programming embodies, for Williams, both residual, dominant, and emergent trends in the history of communication.

Meanwhile, in *The Country and the City*, Williams charts the vicissitudes of tone and feeling toward the mutable and metamorphosing spaces of city and countryside. He warns us not to reify images or memories, to be sensitive to the immense actual variation in our ideas about lived spaces, and to register the confluence of persistence and change: “For we have really to look, in country and city alike, at the real social processes of alienation, separation, externality, abstraction … experiences of directness, connection, mutuality, sharing, which alone can define, in the end, what the real deformation may be” (298).

Through his notion of “knowable communities,” which links epistemological realism and utopian speculation, Williams qualifies “totality” as a mode of communication and transaction among diverse practices. His accent is on relations, not autonomy of spheres of activity. According to Alan O’Connor, “knowable community” describes “a strategy in discourse rather than immediate experience or an ‘organic’ community” (68). In other words, there is no such thing as an organic, seamless community where experience is not discontinuous, fragmentary, in need of a connecting intelligence or sensibility. The connections are fashioned by artistic works and by critical analysis. In the course of this historicized aesthetics of place, Williams reminds us again of the dialectic between social consciousness and needs. He underscores the imperative of openness to the changing objective world in which the critic is “always already” imbricated: “For what is knowable is not only a function of objects–of what is there to be known. It is also a function of subjects, of observers–of what is desired and what needs to be known” (*The Country* 165). And so the concept of determination operates in the sense of “limits and pressures,” introducing levels of effectivity into what would otherwise be a monolith of “indissoluble practice” that is identical with sensuous, socially-constituted praxis.

Williams returns to the issue of determination in a substantial essay, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” where he answers his critics’ refutation of his organicist stand. Williams assents to the layered architectonics of any cultural conjuncture. He refines his notion of a manifold totality founded on social agency and the class organization of society: “the principles of this organization and structure can be seen as directly related to certain social intentions [connected to] the rule of a particular class” (156). This intentionality is given more precision by reappropriating Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Hegemony for Williams refers to our experienced or lived reality, the “whole
body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and his world,” the “common sense” which legitimizes the existing social system of distribution and hierarchy of power (157). But no sociopolitical order can exhaust the full range of human practice, energy, and intention because “modes of domination select from and consequently exclude the full range of actual and possible human practice” (161). Ultimately, then, determination is uneven and can only be formulated as a sense of limit and pressure, not control or strict causality, allowing for prefigurative and utopian experiments in mapping a redeemed future—something that evokes Ernst Bloch’s teleology of critical phantasy and a practice of inheritance to welcome the “Not-Yet.”

We can now gauge the distance CS has travelled from Williams’ “cultural materialism.” Conceived as a mediation of subject and object, the concept of “structure of feeling” has been reconfigured if not discarded by the postmodernist fetishizing of representation and its articulation of the decentered neoliberal subject. Not only is the dialectic of differentiating complex formations jettisoned for a microphysics of dispersed power and its local narratives, but the polarity of subject/object is construed as merely an effect of the “conditions of operation of the enunciative function,” with knowledge itself being an effect of a generalized will to power (Foucault 117). From Williams’ cultural materialism, we move on to the time of “anarcho-Nietzscheanism” which denies in effect the possibility of objective knowledge and social emancipation. CS protean transmigrations and wayward metamorphosis may be tracked by the inventory of its various trends and tendencies.

CUNNING OF CONJUNCTURES

The omnibus collection Cultural Studies edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler has established a consensual doxa about the discipline. We can now appreciate CS as a superior form of bricolage, context dependent but both anti-/post/multi-disciplinary, pragmatic, strategic and self-reflective, with a tradition and lexicon that defy codification, affording no guarantees of validity or authoritativeness and stimulating endless self-reflexive interrogation. It is a contentious field crisscrossed by diverse positions and trajectories, putatively open-ended. What does bricolage mean? It encompasses textual analysis, semiotics, deconstruction, ethnography, interviews, phonemic analysis, psychoanalysis, rhizomatics, content analysis, survey research, and so on—a carnivalesque bazaar for any handyman!
The British CS expert Richard Johnson describes the three models of CS in terms of “production-based,” “text-based,” and “studies of lived cultures” (107). While claiming that there is no single narrative or definition of CS, Grossberg and his colleagues cite the double articulation of CS: cultural practice and production as the ground on which analysis takes place simultaneously with political critique and intervention. Investigating the historically grounded practices, representations, languages, and customs of specific formations, CS also studies the contradictory forms of “common sense” or commonplace understandings which presumably provide resources to fight the constraints of the social order. Grossberg and colleagues write: “It is nevertheless true that from the outset cultural studies’ efforts to recover working-class culture and history and to synthesize progressive traditions in Western intellectual history had had both overt and implicit political aims” (5). But what are the concrete consequences and implications of terms such as “political critique,” “progressive,” and “intervention”?

The overt and implicit political aims turn out to coincide with language and sign systems. Post-structuralism has resurrected formalist idealism. From here on, the reduction of the ideological component of cultural production to discourse and knowledge-power (to borrow the Foucauldian term) and questions of representation has become routine. In 1992, Hall reaffirmed the primacy of discursive and textual processes over political economy: such processes are “not reflective but constitutive in the formation of the modern world: as constitutive as economic, political or social processes [which] do not operate outside of cultural and ideological conditions” (“Race, Culture” 13). It is one thing to say that economic and political processes “depend on meaning for their effects and have cultural or ideological conditions of existence”; it is another to conclude that textuality or representation, in tandem with economic and political forces and in isolation from them, construct the social and political system we inhabit. The subsumption of relations of power to relations of discourse or cultural practices returns us back to a one-sided culturalism that Hall originally wanted to move away from, even though now a theory of discursive articulation is introduced to anticipate such critical objections of reductionism and of idealist formalism to what pretends to be an improvement over vulgar Marxism.

This crux was already prefigured in the entire trajectory of Williams’s wrestling with mechanical materialism and also with Lucien Goldmann’s sociology of culture. His attempt to resolve the disjunction between theory and practice resulted in the highly nuanced category of “structure of feeling” enunciated in many works, in particular *Marxism and Literature and Problems in Materialism and Culture*. But here I would like to address the latest reconstruction of the problematic of cultural studies which has been quite influential,
namely, the theory and method of articulation of various levels of significations embodied in forms of cultural representation, a problematic first elaborated by Stuart Hall.

Hall tried to clarify his research orientation and agenda in a 1985 interview:

An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So the so-called “unity” of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary “belongingness.” The “unity” which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. (Grossberg 141-2)

This approach reformulates the Althusserian idea of interpellation. It seeks to disentangle the elements of any ideological complex from their class roots or association, endowing the new ensemble with a power to “discover its subject” and enable that subject to make intelligible its historical situation without “reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position” (142). What this implies is that an ideology like Thatcherism, while anchored in Tory conservatism, entails a politics of positionality contrived by juxtaposing ordinary commonsense beliefs of the masses with a class-based worldview. Elucidating this hegemonic drive requires a theory of discursive articulation to reveal the principle whereby diverse elements have been organized to promote a neoliberal political platform.

**TRAJECTORY OF DESIRE**

How parts are assembled together rather than their substance or import commands priority. Translated into the grammar and syntax of CS, the theory of articulation becomes almost a methodological dogma. Hall states: “An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions …
From Birmingham

The ‘unity’ which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse [composed of elements without any necessary ‘belongingness’] and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected” (Grossberg 141). Hall stresses the a priori contingency and ad hoc transitoriness subtending the practice of articulation. One suspects that whoever commands enough political clout can alter the contingent to the necessary.

Indeterminacy unfolds its seeming opposite: opportunist Realpolitik. Beginning as a reaction against determinism, the reduction of ideology to political economy, this theory of articulation betrays itself as a pragmatic epistemology of explaining social change as arbitrary, even gratuitous, susceptible to the dictates of who commands the most power. When Hall illustrates this CS modus operandi by using the Rastafarian movement as an inflection of disparate ideological elements along certain historical tendencies, he gestures to the need to take into account “the grain of historical formations.” However, the move is aborted. What transpires is a return to the primary thesis that religion, like any ideological complex, operates like a language or discursive enunciation open to a wide range of experimental play. So ideology (if that is still a viable notion), which interpellates individuals into political agents, is not given necessarily in socio-economic structure or in objective reality; in short, “the popular force of an organic ideology” is “the result of an articulation” (Grossberg 144).

I rehearse part of the debate here in this question: Can all cultural practices then be reduced “upward” as discourse or language, and all subjectivities or subject positionalities be conceived as discursively constituted? Hall registers a limit to the theoretical reductionism of Laclau/Mouffe and its extension in psychoanalytic exercises. He instructs us to locate cultural/discursive practices “within the determining lines of force of material relations, and the expropriation of nature…. Material conditions are the necessary but not sufficient condition of all historical practice,” but such condition need to be thought of “in their determinate discursive form” (Grossberg 147). This notion of practice approximates the materialist dialectic of object and subject conceived as an interactive process of being and becoming.

Hall is cognizant of the abuses of a theoretical bricolage influence by Realpolitik pragmatism, as found in some applications of Foucault and the deconstructionist archive. Unfortunately, such abuses are fostering by the inadequacy of articulation theory: it cannot comprehend the internal relation of parts within a dynamic whole since its level of abstraction refuses to grasp the internal impulses and potential within the elements being articulated, the unity and contradiction distinguishing them, as the force that shapes the
way in which the whole galaxy of forces is configured. What is lacking is the dialectical unity of the continuous and discontinuous which generates dynamic coherence. Further, the internal transformation of each articulated moment—the categories of mediation within the totality—remains obscure if not mystifying. While Hall acknowledges that Rastafarianism centers on the “determinations of economic life in Jamaican society,” its status as a product of discursive articulation, as a unified force with a non-unitary collective subject, originates elsewhere (Grossberg 144). Rastafarianism is conceived as the unifying ideology that subsumes economic determinations and constitutes its bloc of social/political forces in a non-holistic way through negotiations, compromises, and other realignments. But exactly how that ideology materializes, remains mysterious.

Whatever our wishes may portend, the real world has proven itself more recalcitrant and intractable. CS pundits are discovering it everyday. As the sociologist Jorge Larrain has shown, the old Marxist concept of ideology would suffice to enable the critique of Thatcherism as a “return, with a vengeance, to the old and quintessential principles of bourgeois political ideology which had been progressively obscured by years of social democracy, welfare state and Keynesianism” (66), the old ideological values of a mythical “free market”—freedom and self-interest based on property. But this time, the conjuncture of the eighties does not replicate the Victorian conflation of Bentham and Mill. Hence the Thatcherite emphasis on authority, law and order, family and tradition; patriotism is invoked to hide the real origins of the capitalist crisis, a crisis whose symptoms are unemployment, poverty, racist discrimination, criminality, new forms of violence, national and regional divisions, intensified class conflicts, and so on. Such populist authoritarianism is neither arbitrary nor contingent. To counter its effects, we need the framework of the organic crisis of the capitalist system without which a method of articulation can only discover short-range opportunism and even a deceptive liberalism in Thatcher’s agenda.

Viewed as a programmatic formation (in Williams’s sense), Hall’s theory of articulation responds to a new historical-political development which I think resists elucidation by this semiotic maneuver. What Hall is addressing is not so much the novel features of bourgeois hegemonic rule but the need to recognize the political economy of class interfaced with race, gender, nationality, and other “new social” movements. Class is, to be sure, not just another banal aspect of identity. For these movements to interact, it is necessary to understand what background totality would enable them to dialogue and form alliances, to forge the “chain of equivalence” that Laclau and Mouffe believe is the catalyzing element for radical democracy.
Poststructuralist fallacies prove damaging here. By valorizing the moment of articulation and even reifying it, Hall tends to occlude the larger epochal background which functions as the condition of possibility for making sense of conjunctural particularities. To use Williams’s terminology, the moment of “lived experience” overshadows again the category of formation (residual, dominant, emergent), the structuring modality of “feeling” with which cultural analysis is preoccupied. Fredric Jameson considers articulation or mediation (to use the philosophical term) as “the central theoretical problem” of cultural studies. He views it as “a punctual and sometimes even ephemeral totalization in which the planes of race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality intersect to form an operative structure” (“On Cultural” 269). Although Hall states that articulation names the unity of a discourse with social forces under certain but not necessary conditions in history, he is careful to point out that the result is an “articulated combination” and not just a “random association—that there will be structured relation between its parts, i.e., relations of dominance and subordination” (qtd. in Slack 115).

What concerns me here is the way such a theory of articulation has been deployed in contemporary CS. The problem may be a replay of the anxieties over the reimposition of class reductionism or economism as a reaction to identity biopolitics and the anarchism of local narratives. Earlier I have alluded to the recurrent concern of CS practitioners that in foregrounding social history and political economy, the matter of agency is sacrificed. One scholar, for example, contends that women’s consumption of Hollywood cinema, or any object of cultural exchange for that matter, does not simply illustrate “the power of hegemonic forces in the definition of women’s role as consumers; rather, consumption “is a site of negotiated meanings, of resistance and of appropriation as well as of subjection and exploitation” (qtd. in Strinati 218). Taking passive consumption as an autonomous activity, populist-oriented CS ignores the aestheticization of commodity production itself, mistakenly attributing to the form of value (exchange) instead of the real value (use) the source of pleasure and agency. Meanwhile, the division of manual and mental labor born of commodity-exchange and bourgeois property relations continues to hide the historicity of images, codes, artifacts, and *habitus*—culture remains naturalized, opaque, and instrumentalized.

Can we renew the radical inspiration of CS? Stuart Hall constantly reminds us of the core problematic of CS at its foundational moment: culture (meaning, symbolic forms, signifying practices, discourses) situated in the context of mutable social relations and the organization of power. The analysis of semiotic and discursive practices—the linkages between language/literature and political economy/mode of production—includes
with it the examination of the position of collective subjects in history, generating a critique of those practices and positions. Hall comments on a later development: “A formal deconstructionism which isn’t asking questions about the insertion of symbolic processes into societal contexts and their imbrication with power is not interested in the cultural studies problematic” (Osborne 390). CS then is distinguished by its disclosure of how cultural practices are enmeshed in networks of power. But is it enough to insist as a desideratum of legitimacy for this new approach the linkage of discourse, society, and power? What does “power” signify here? How is it related to political economy and the complex dynamics of social relations? Isn’t this by itself a formula, a game of empty abstractions, since there is no investigation of purpose, agenda, or historical direction? Isn’t this a rehashing of the rudimentary empiricist demand that ideas be framed in social and political contexts?

All commentators agree that a version of Marxist reductionism, otherwise known as economism, triggered the revolt against the left. What happened in the reaction to a caricatured “actually existing” Marxism? Despite claims that the rebels were reinstating agency and freedom to the subject, a swing to atavistic ideology and obscurantist reaction occurred. I believe the correction offered, namely, the over-emphasis on a formalist methodology conflated with organicist (Leavis) or nihilistic assumptions (post-structuralism), resulted in the unwitting cooptation of CS. It was never radical enough to destroy the logic of capital and the ideology of quantifying concrete-use values into abstract equivalents (the cash nexus), the law of laissez-faire exchange which governs the market. Eventually CS has become an Establishment organon, or an academic “ideological state apparatus” preventing even the old style of Kulturkritik to function. Terry Eagleton calls our attention to the crippling flaw in both Kulturkritik and modern-day culturalism in their lack of interest in “the state apparatus of violence and coercion” (43).

VULNERABILITIES

One of the most astute diagnoses of this decay is by Francis Mulhern. In utilizing Gramsci’s complex notion of hegemony to ascribe more freedom to the subject, postmodernist CS exaggerated the possibility of liberation over the established fact of domination. Both subordination and resistance are found in popular culture, the impulses of resistance embedded in relations of domination and imperatives of commodification. Rejecting totality, according to Mulhern, CS has ignored elite cultural forms and elevated
popular/mass culture as intrinsically subversive of the exploitative mode of production, thus overlooking “the overwhelming historical realities of inequality and subordination” that condition both (34). In privileging commodified recreation and subsistence activity found in marketed “life-styles,” Mulhern argues that the “spontaneous bent of cultural studies is actually conformist—at its worst, the theoretical self-consciousness of satellite television and shopping malls” (35).

Pierre Bourdieu has argued convincingly that culture legitimates social inequality, with consumption fulfilling the function of legitimating social differences. Taste itself is a profoundly ideological discourse, a marker of class. Enforced by schools and other institutions, a “cultural arbitrary” inflicts symbolic violence by inculcating a *habitus* of misrecognition: cultural hierarchies appear rational and so justify economic and political domination. No doubt we need an adequate theory of cultural politics. If the culture of everyday life is politicized and all difference regarded as immediately emancipatory, Mulhern contends, this dissolves the “possibility of culture as a field of political struggle.” Why? Because politics is a deliberative and injunctive practice that seeks to determine the character of social relations while culture, whose major function is to produce meanings, does not have for its chief purpose the determination of social relations by deliberation, injunction, and coercion. The two realms should not be collapsed nor conflated. Political judgment and cultural judgment are distinct and do not coincide, as Gramsci taught us.

Mulhern concludes that orthodox CS treats all differences as absolute, whereas politics aims for united fronts and tactical alliances in pursuit of specific ends. By eliding that distinction, dissolving politics into culture, CS abandons the search for political solidarities and freezes “the particularisms of cultural difference,” of varying cultural practices as political in themselves. Mulhern perceives CS as bankrupt in accepting without criticism the bondage of the masses to consumer capitalism—the ironical end-result of their will to resist all determinisms: “There is no space, and in fact no need, for struggle if all popular culture, abstracted from ‘high’ culture and from the historical realities of inequality and domination, is already active and critical, if television and shopping are already teachers of subversion” (40). One needs to discriminate between culture as universal value and culture as specific life-forms. This has also been sharply formulated by Neil Larsen in his critique of the populist brand of CS advocated by John Fiske. Fiske simply reads off the popular as “immediacy, as the ‘everyday’ while the ‘aesthetic’ is quarantined in idealized transcendence, the antinomial ideology of modernism itself, but here with its normative polarities reversed” (Larsen 91).
Apart from the historical misfortunes of the radical left in Britain, the post-structuralist “exorbitation” of language and semiotics contributed to what I would call a “metaphysical turn” in CS. Socioeconomic determinants shaped its immanent vicissitudes. The evolution from cultural empiricism to Althusserian structuralism ended in a neutralist if not counter-revolutionary revision of Gramsci. The concept of ideology was purged and hegemony replaced ideology-critique. Entirely overlooking the distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself already found in Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire and other works, Laclau interpreted the Gramscian concept of hegemony hinging on working-class moral/intellectual leadership as equivalent to the “historic bloc.” This bloc constructs political subjects (working class, women, environmentalists, etc.) by the figure of equivalence—in short, politics as “articulation.” A heterogeneous bloc serves as the stage for performative, disingenuous “free play.”

Immanence displaces transcendence by tergiversation. While Laclau and Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy grant that the collective will of such a bloc is forged by organic intellectuals, a will expressed in the politics of compromise uniting the bloc, they argue further that there is not just one hegemonic center in society but many. A field of “articulation” is posited in which society is no longer a totality sutured together, but an open field; “the openness of the social as the constitutive ground or ‘negative essence’ of the existing, and the diverse ‘social orders’ as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences” (95-6). Rejecting the notions of “mode of production,” “social formation,” “overdetermination,” and the like, Laclau and Mouffe claim that all social reality is constructed by articulatory practices which establish identities of elements through relation. Thus, “all identity is relational…. There is no essence, no structure, which underlies the signifier, social identity is symbolic and relational, not fixed independently of any articulation,” although temporary nodal points in the symbolic field for fixing meanings are conceded (113). But what rationale or purpose lies behind articulation? Unaffected by the elements it articulates, what is the direction of articulatory practice? I submit that the motivations and ends of this research programme, however, are not obscure: they are geared to legitimizing the indeterminacies of post-Keynesian “market” fluctuations, privatization of socially produced knowledge, and the sublimation of irreconcilable contradictions in every society wracked by the profound crisis of the capitalist world-system.
CARNIVALESQUE CLOSURE

The imperative of contingency and indeterminacy becomes almost fetishized in the work of Lawrence Grossberg, a disciple of Hall and editor of the chief institutional organ of CS. In surveying current theories of identity, Grossberg refuses what he calls the logic of modernity founded on difference, individuality, and temporality. He proposes an alternative logic of otherness, production and spatiality for a theory of human agency and historical change. Agency, for Grossberg, is defined by “the articulations of subject positions and identities into specific places and spaces … on socially constructed territories” (Questions 102). Constructionism thickens with the entailment of conventions.

Mystifications based on nominalist relativism pile up amidst triumphalist CS rhetoric. Grossberg upholds a notion of singularity underlying a community envisioned by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. It is somewhat of a puzzle that Grossberg endorses Agamben’s view that the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstration in China instances the singularity of belonging without identity; ultimately, it’s the place, the exteriority of locale, that constitutes the singular community. What is egregiously tendentious is the praise of spontaneous action that supposedly characterized the urban insurrection in Beijing, a false premise based on ignorance of the facts of the case. Ignoring the actual circumstances, the tautology Grossberg indulges in to convey what he thinks is profound—“it was the fact of belonging that constituted their belonging together”—serves as proof that anomic, ephemeral accidents, an anarchistic valorization of the happenstance and contingent all acquire foundational import that becomes a warrant for novelty in CS (Bringing It All 372).

The cult of vernacular experience substitutes for all-rounded historical analysis. Perhaps the style of adhoc extrapolation of the significance of a major historical event may not be as trivializing as the prodigious dissertations written on pop stars, TV talk shows, public spectacles (sports, media events), and beauty pageants which argue that such commercial icons and rituals are counterhegemonic ruses to overthrow the system. Or, more soberly, what harm can a treatise on Dali among the dolphins in Disneyland do? Nothing except that they legitimize the way things are: cash registers ring merrily while service workers in hotels, restaurants, and carnival grounds sweat it out for corporate capital and its instrumentalities to reproduce themselves and, with it, the unequal division of labor and the theft of social wealth amassed on the damaged bodies of millions of workers, peasants, women and children around the world.

Now, surely, CS from the outset aspired to displace the centrality of victimization with the praxis of resistance, opposition, people’s democratic initiatives. From object to
subject—this underlines the trajectory of the critique of determinism and the search for new forms of subjectivity launched by Williams, Thompson and Hall. But on the way to utopian pleasure and empowerment of the fissured subject, its own internal contradictions exploded. Relativism and nominalism undermined the goal of integrating theory and practice. The imperative of rhetorical mastery, compounded with the individualist ethos of “free-trade” theorizing for privileged academics, channelled any oppositional or critical impulses into the invention of aplogias for neoliberal multiculturalism. CS becomes a scholastic game for careerists accumulating venal symbolic hoards.

At this point, we need to scrutinize the more insidious irony at work in CS when poststructuralist ideas of resistance become a framework of describing the ordinary practices of exploited people. Sheer heterogeneity reflecting the fragmentation of commodity culture infects the subject to the point where everything becomes relative. Nietzschean perspectivism prohibits the critic of Cartesian rationality from appealing to a normative framework for criticizing that rationality and its power. It is through the social conditions of fragmentation and dispersal that power, discursive and otherwise, prevail. Can a positivist description of epistemic structures be conjoined with “modalities of moral self-constitution” (Dews 234) to offset the preponderance of institutional power? Can ethnographic verisimilitude dear to the connoisseurs of the particular discover the “weak links” in the social structures that repress the human potential?

ACCIDENTS OF NECESSITY

With the deepening crisis of the global market system in the seventies and eighties marked by populist authoritarianism (Thatcher, Reagan), ludic pragmatism and poststructuralist nominalism have begun to dictate and narrow the parameters of intellectual exchange. Anti-Marxism culminates in the blanket prohibition against essentialism, teleology, meta-narratives, and all claims to find truth with historical grounding; in fact, “totalizing” comprehension is equated with totalitarianism. Since the invocation of material conditions summed up in the term “political economy” is stigmatized as terrorism of the left and branded as “political correctness,” CS practitioners are often left with the choice of doing positivist ethnography intended to validate any popular activity as somehow authentic and liberating.

One illustration may be cited here. Abandoning critique and exploration of possibilities negated by the market system, John Fiske celebrates bricolage as the mark of
popular creativity. He extols the ethnography of an extra-discursive activity of producing quilts, diaries, or furniture arrangement, as well as routine practices of daily life. One example is the urban poor’s employment of television to “enrich and further densify the texture” of quotidian life. Another example is the use of photographs, plastic flowers, and other commodities in which “lost kinship webs are reasserted, reformed through bricolage” (156). The logic of this pattern of accommodation is spelled out by Fiske in this way: “The construction, occupation, and ownership of one’s own space/setting within their place/arena, the weaving of one’s own richly textured life within the constraints of economic deprivation and oppression, are not just ways of controlling some of the conditions of social existence; they are also ways of constructing, and therefore exerting some control over, social identities and social relations” (160). Coping and other forms of daily adjustment to the dictates of the social order are taken as life-enhancing indices of agency. Everyday life thus becomes validated as affording scenarios for performing the ludic politics of cultural difference.

Clearly, this “take” on CS is both disingenuous and self-incriminating. It actually abstains from any task of “empowering” the oppressed and exploited by confining popular creativity to accommodation to the status quo by means of an “everyday tactical dissembling” now described as politically progressive. The model of peasant resistance cited by Fiske and other ethnographers of this persuasion reveals their conformist bias and defeatist inclination. This approach resembles the aleatory “matterism” of Foucault and his followers that Teresa Ebert condemns as obscuring the material relations in which discourses and practices are produced, an influential “protocol of ludic reading—this genealogy or eventalization—to mask the rigid divisions of class struggle” (228; see also Cotter).

The stress on consumption and leisure over production/work may account for the hermeneutic turn in CS. It may also explain the emphasis on random, arbitrary differences over determinate social practices with ascertainable intentionalities. Symbolic representation often becomes privileged apart from concrete structures of domination. But it is CS’s shifting of the point of gravity toward gender and race, away from class and nation, that sheds light on the downgrading of the political economy of cultural practice. Ignoring the processes of commodity production and exchange, the international division of labor, unequal trade, and racialized labor market, CS rejects the problem of “false consciousness,” of ideology in general. It casts all popular practice as positive resistance to domination, trivializing the possibilities of revolution and emancipation. Nicholas Garnham correctly insists that CS should focus on the core characteristics of the capitalist
mode of production—waged labor and commodity exchange as necessary conditions of existence—if it wants its liberatory stance to signify more than a gesture of sympathy for the underdogs. Garnham argues that “one cannot understand either the genesis, forms, or stakes of the struggles around gender and race without an analysis of the political economic foundations and context of the cultural practices that constitute these struggles,” conditions that “shape in determinate ways the terrain upon which cultural practices take place—the physical environment, the available material and symbolic resources, the time rhythms and spatial relations” (502). Political economy, needless to say, is a point of departure, not the dogmatic center or end-point of any CS inquiry.

Nor is this a matter of substituting an abstract schema of political economy for an exorbitant culturalism. When the sphere of culture becomes inflated and universalized to function also as politics—call it “cultural politics” or subaltern resistance—then cultural studies becomes nothing else but an apology for commodity fetishism. This also applies to the aestheticization of all practices in ethnographic cultural studies like those of Fiske, Clifford, Grossberg, and other scholars, in which culture immediately becomes oppositional so that ideological struggle within it is elided. Actuality and possibility are conflated, resulting in a conservative standpoint (for a philosophical framework, see Jameson; Hebdige). Francis Mulhern warns us against this trend: “There is no space, and in fact no need, for struggle if all popular culture, abstracted from ‘high’ culture and from the historical realities of inequality and domination, is already active and critical, if television and shopping are already theaters of subversion” (40). Celebrating the market in “life-styles,” commodified recreation, and subsistence activity, CS abandons critique and submits to the dictates of what W. F. Haug calls “commodity aesthetics.”

Deployed in cultural inquiry, the concept of everyday life can be articulated in a pragmatic and reformist direction, as Fiske does, or in a historical-materialist one, as exemplified by Henri Lefebvre and Agnes Heller. In her book Everyday Life, Heller points out that “the use of means of consumption is determined by custom and tradition…. I construe ‘consumption’ as the appropriation of any meaningful object in which the key role is played by the relay of social meaning (or social import)…. In the mere use of things, man (as person) can only realize himself via moral mediation” (149-50). Precisely here lies the problem of ethnographic cultural studies that evacuates any reference to historical “organic” structures in favor of the “slice of life” empiricism: the “moral mediation” of the Western commentator insinuates itself to endow recorded performances and scenes with meaning and import, a significance larger than the semantic horizon of particular routine details of lived experience. We are back to the problem of authority and explanatory
validity that has afflicted cultural studies when it rejected a dialectical mediation of structure and experience.

VOYEURISTIC RUPTURES

Let us now consider anthropology’s refraction of CS. In our postcolonial millennium, one would have expected that a new sensorium of spatiality would compensate for the damage wrought by temporal distancing on colonized indigenous peoples. Johannes Fabian has demonstrated how the denial of coevalness and the scientistic cartography of progress legitimized Europe’s “civilizing mission” over the barbaric natives. The ideal of progress served to apologize for the genocide of “peoples without history,” justifying by extension the white supremacist evangelism of CS itself and its postcolonial hubris. But now, if the metropole is becoming a wasteland, why not travel to the periphery?

One example of this is James Clifford’s intriguing essay “Traveling Cultures.” Clifford is engaged in exploring and purportedly displacing “exoticist anthropological forms” inhabiting the domain of comparative cultural studies: the diverse, interconnected histories of travel and displacement, exile, diaspora, tourism, and immigration. While preoccupied with the theme of intercultural hermeneutics, “how cultural analysis constitutes its objects—societies, traditions, communities, identities—in spatial terms and through specific spatial practices of research” (97), Clifford is arguably intent on rehabilitating neocolonial anthropology.

The technique of salvaging what is useful can be an astute exercise in self-reflexivity. One strategy for retooling anthropology pivots around the effort to redefine “fieldwork” as less a concrete place of research than a methodological ideal, a communicative competence. The issue of representation is, for Clifford, concerned with “the portrayal and understanding of local/global historical encounters, co-productions, dominations, and resistances, [consequently] one needs to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted native ones.” Clifford expands on this topic:

In tipping the balance toward traveling as I am doing here, the “chronotope” of culture (a setting or scene organizing time and space in representable whole form) comes to resemble as much a site of travel encounters as of residence, less a tent in a village or a controlled laboratory or a site of initiation and inhabitation, and more like a hotel lobby, ship, or bus. If we rethink culture and its science, anthropology,
in terms of travel, then the organic, naturalizing bias of the term culture—seen as a
rooted body that grows, lives, dies, etc.—is questioned. Constructed and disputed
historicities, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction, come more sharply
into view (101).

Not a believer in nomadology or nominalism, Clifford seems earnest in proving
that he can discriminate between the privileged and the disadvantaged, between the
missionary West and subjugated natives, between oppressor and oppressed. He disavows
linear history and its telos of progress. But he is passionately driven to do comparisons
and analogies. He states that while there is no ground of equivalence between Alexander
von Humboldt travelling through South America as a scientist and the Asian indentured
laborer in California, “there is at least a basis for comparison and (problematic) translation”
(107). He believes that a comparative cultural studies would be interested in knowledge of
the Asian laborer’s view of “The New World” as a potential complement or critique of Von
Humboldt’s. But what is the basis for such comparisons?

Clifford favors itineraries, returns, and detours, “a history of locations and a location
of histories.” He is obsessed with migration, exile, transitions, diasporas, movements
here and there. Borderlands fascinate him, cities where artists sojourn and pass through.
But what is peculiar is that the cities he concentrates on are European ones, Paris in
particular, “a site of cultural creation,” where Alejo Carpentier, Aime Cesaire, and a host of
African and Latin American intellectuals learned a “post-colonial habitus,” a “discrepant
cosmopolitanism.” Symptomatic of an aesthetic-driven agenda, Clifford does not mention
Ho Chi Minh, Chou En-lai, or Frantz Fanon who also travelled through Paris, literally and
metaphorically: Ho and Chou witnessed and rejected the Eurocentric chauvinism of the
French communists while Fanon experienced the gamut of racism in his encounter with
psychoanalysis and existentialism. Unbeknownst to Clifford, the problematic of travel
thus contains the positive in the negative, opposites uniting and separating in diremptive
motion. Contrast Clifford’s exhibitionist travelogue with a historical-materialist delineation
of places by David Harvey. Adopting the framework of “militant particularism,” Harvey
points out that the “dialectics of space and place” implies a process of remembering
activities of “place creation and dissolution” (29) rooted in class consciousness and political
action—“structures of feeling” (Raymond Williams’ term) without which encyclopedic
travel, albeit sophisticated and anti-ethnocentric, is nothing but blind and empty motion of
atoms in space.
Clifford’s broad agenda is “to rethink cultures as sites of dwelling and travel” (105). In a time when transnational capital, with its new modalities of “flexible accumulation” and niche marketing, is uprooting millions of “third world” peoples and converting them into “transnational” workers, Clifford has the leisure to craft a strategy of aestheticizing this planned mobility for a refurbished ethnography of cultural mapping. An obvious symptom of this aestheticizing of migration is his agreement with CS practitioners who believe in the extinction of the nation-state. For example, he agrees with the sociologist Orlando Patterson’s idea of a postnational environment in the United States, a country now possessing “borderland culture areas, populated by strong, diasporic ethnicities unevenly assimilated” into the dominant culture. No mention here of the role of “buffer races,” labor-market segmentation, pauperization of gendered labor, and so on (see Martin and Schumann; Hoogvelt). Instead, Clifford emphasizes that “travel,” encompassing the historical resonance of other terms like migration, pilgrimage, safari, and so on, is a translation term to be used “for comparison in a strategic and contingent way” (110). Dense with connotations of gender, class, and race, “travel” harbors a “certain literariness” which allows semiotic free-play. But of course, the play of representations, images, and texts inventoried by the ethnographer is always contrived and classified by the power of authorities who also command material, political, and economic resources/properties.

Postmodernist CS scholars make the familiar idealist move of projecting into the object of inquiry a particular “way of understanding” (Eagleton 219) which, contrary to their original motivation, becomes spontaneous dogma. While Clifford urges self-critical awareness that we are using “compromised, historically encumbered tools,” he himself (like his fellow anthropologist Constable) does not reflect deeply enough on his own spatial politics. As a result, his survey flattens contradictions of class, nationality, race, and gender into a homogeneous cluster whose utility as ethnographic source material for knowledge is its most indispensable virtue. Significantly he treats tourism as something marginal, when in fact tourism, a form of commodified travel, reveals the function of travel as an allegory of bourgeois modernity, not a form of raw experience or unmediated consciousness but a virtual translation of socioeconomic institutions.

It is relevant to remark that Clifford’s “travel” as a pedagogical technique requires the acquisition and deployment of substantial cultural capital. Travel becomes a means of exchanging knowledge, ostensibly for enriching knowledge of one’s self, but ultimately for reaffirming mastery of the few privileged Westerners able to engage in leisurely self-reflection. Travel seeks to domesticate Otherness (personified here by migrants, exotic cultures, diasporic artists and intellectuals). In this connection, John Frow points out the
dangers entailed by the ideology of travel when he comments on the touristic role of the Other:

The commodification of reciprocal bonds, of the environment, and of culture are moments of that logic of contemporary capital which extends private appropriation and ownership from material to immaterial resources, and whose paradigm case is the commodification of information....The logic of tourism [as of travel considered as a form of aestheticized knowledge] is that of a relentless extension of commodity relations and the consequent inequalities of power between centre and periphery, First and Third Worlds, developed and underdeveloped regions, metropolis and countryside. Promising an explosion of modernity, it brings about structural underdevelopment (100-1).

The seeming equalization of societies imposed by Clifford’s spatial politics of translation may impress those who are already die-hard crusaders of business pluralism. But I think it is one-sided and misleading in trying to remedy the chaotic fragmentation of life in late capitalism by detaching culture from its contradiction-filled matrix. Its project of breaking down national boundaries, like the aim of technocratic modernization theory still sponsored by the World Bank/International Monetary Fund, is premised on that same reality of unequal development that reproduces center and periphery under the aegis of universalized capital accumulation. As Doris Sommer remarks, “Time-lag decries inequalities, against the drone of pluralism and multiculturalism” (78). Postmodernist travel underwrites such inequality and reinforces the asymmetry of the globalized status quo.

**SCHIZOID MOBILITY**

Postmodernist anthropology has made a crucial intervention in CS by proposing a free-wheeling ethnography in opposition to bureaucratized, cybercultural development discourse. One of the most militant proponents is Arturo Escobar who rejects World Bank/International Monetary Fund modernizing formulas. He argues for “a new reading of popular practices and of the reappropriation by popular actors of the space of hegemonic sociocultural production” (223), in short, for ethnographies of cultural difference and local alternatives that would serve as a transformative force for re-figuring the Third World. But
From Birmingham

such countermodernist alternatives suffer from the very same neoliberal assumptions that vitiate Clifford’s project. Vernacular experience by itself cannot offset the inroads of the coercive “free market.”

With the abandonment of metanarratives, teleology and any provisional working conception of social totality, ludic CS practitioners have succumbed to relativist and nominalist paralysis. Their pretense to radicalism has been compromised by an indiscriminate, self-serving, sometimes cynical, stance. In order to salvage some claim to intelligibility if not “truthfulness,” they resort to “thick description” (according to Clifford Geertz), ethnographic notations of exotic cultural performances (with emphasis on bodily pleasure, performative desire, subjectivity), and playful speculations on surrealist contingencies that produce “truth-effects.” In his engaging survey of the field, Fred Inglis jettisons “analysis of institutional power” for what he considers the more suitable terrain for CS: the study of language games. While upholding Wittgenstein’s stress on “how we mean anything” (87), Inglis fetishizes methodology, even though he still clings to a residual “reference” (in Frege’s construal) underlying the polysemy of “sense.” Consequently he endorses Geertz’s essay on the Balinese cockfight as “our model” for CS.

Aesthetics trumps epistemology in the process of hierarchical discrimination. Geertz’s fieldwork artifice/artifact, however, is seriously flawed by the problems of translation when it claims to register “the social history of the moral imagination.” The confinement to narrow empirical environments and uncriticized common sense—the postmodernist dilation on surface, spatial intensity, and the eternal present—returns us back to the limits of functionalist empiricism that deconstruction vowed to transcend in its initial appearance. Vincent Crapanzano’s comment on Geertz is scrupulously on target: Geertz “offers no understanding of the native from the native’s point of view,… no specifiable evidence for his attributions of intention, his assertions of subjectivity, his declarations of experience” (67). Erasing completely any historical perspective—e.g., Indonesia as a neocolonial formation subject to US imperial diktat, Geertz’s ethnography (according to Crapanzano) presents “little more than projections or blurrings” of the American anthropologist’s constructions of constructions.

Interpretation needs to be grounded in social reality. CS as an emancipatory discipline producing testable knowledge cannot go beyond textualism without rejecting methodological individualism and its framework of idealist metaphysics. Linguistic analysis needs to be supplemented with a critique of ideological structures. Instead of hypostatizing the arbitrary character of the sign, Anthony Giddens reminds us, we should develop instead “a theory of codes, and of code production, grounded in a broader theory
of social practice, and reconnected to hermeneutics” (48). This has been cogently argued by previous materialist critiques of poststructuralist deconstruction (see Wolin; Hodge; McNally).

On balance, CS has accomplished its initial aims. One can say that there already exists a consensual appreciation of CS’ call to valorize the texts and practices of everyday life—the populist agenda of mainstream academic CS—as an antidote to bourgeois elitism and the commodification of high art. But the substitution of a populist program to validate routine behavior as in itself a form of resistance or transgression trivializes the call to pay attention to the intentionalities of subaltern actors and local knowledges. Despite its virtues of empathy and sensitivity to nuanced textures, ethnographies of quotidian life are plagued with errors: they confuse social structure with visible social relations. The ethnographic cult of intertextuality mistakes interdependence for causality, focusing on the specific gravity and efficacy of fragments. Further, postmodernist ethnographers unwittingly focus on a normative equilibrium of details, thus occluding contradictions that defy closure. They substitute a mere succession of events and density of circumstances for historical change; in fact, history is converted into Heideggerian temporality, flux and process of “worlding,” substituting itself for a historically-informed critique (Bloch). Ethnography of this kind that mirrors its condition of possibility cannot resolve the problems brought about by new forms of reification and inequality of power/resources that the protracted historical crisis of globalized capital makes possible.

The difficulties of salvaging the old humanistic disciplines like anthropology have been acknowledged by mainstream CS scholars. The problem is associated with the postmodernist dogma on the “celebration of a radically relativized Difference,” the “effectivity of surfaces” predicated on “unity in difference.” Such formalist concepts replicate the anarchy of the market, anomie, and alienation (Jameson, *The Cultural*). To remedy this predicament, Slack and Whitt have proposed an “ecocultural alternative” that tries to mediate between a holistic ecosystem and the integrity of constituent individuals that are supposed to overdetermine the whole. But this alternative still clings to a dualistic metaphysics, assuming that “life is conducted in discursive conditions not of our own making” (585). The CS program centering on biotic interdependence, with an eclectic bricolage of various pragmatic strategies for survival, is charged with abundant moral messages. But unfortunately it lacks a history in which subject and object dialectically interact. Silent on the contradictions destabilizing the welfare-state consensus in advanced capitalist societies, ecoculturalism colludes in reproducing social inequality. Echoing Frankfurt Critical Theory’s attack on instrumentalism, it dismisses the complicity of
the systemic accumulation of capital using a moralistic attack on fascism. Its communal utopianism renders the whole program a panacea for the neoliberal’s guilt-stricken conscience.

I am only rehearsing here a judgment already elaborated by others (see Katz; O’Connor). Implemented in a dispersed, eclectic manner, CS works to help capitalism manage the ongoing crisis of the old humanist subject by what Samir Amin calls “culturalist strategies” (66) impotent to challenge the havoc wrought by the universalizing effects of finance capital in its new forms. Because cultural practice is conceived as inherently indeterminate, contingent, infinitely plural, and shifting, CS cannot theorize how new identities or subject positions can really transform social institutions. These identities begin and end with the testimony of everyday experience taken as irreducible and meaningful in itself, unmediated by any normative critical framework. Defined as one-dimensional and atomized aspects of identity, the categories of race, class, and gender are mechanically repeated without any determinate content. Instead of being viewed as new forms of collective labor power that intensify the contradictions in racialized bourgeois polities, CS regards class, race, and gender as abstract counters—so many incommensurable language games, articulations of the flux of some ubiquitous power which remains enigmatic, eventually assuming the guise of the incomprehensible postmodern “sublime.”

It is not just a matter of shifting the focus from the now disreputable metanarratives of modernity to the quotidian *habitus* of postmodern consumers. The collapse of CS’s radical challenge to the reign of capital stems chiefly from the nominalist subjectivism and discursivism adopted from poststructuralist doctrines. Critique is abandoned for a rhetorical assertion that certain practices, which turn out to be simply survival techniques, are inherently emancipatory or liberating. The reduction of history to a series of conjunctural moments, of identity to temporary positionalities, and positionalities to symbolic chains of equivalence, has eliminated not just lived experience but also the determinants of location and the geopolitics of place. More starkly, it has expunged class struggle. While postmodernist simulacra, pastiche, and extra-territoriality have compelled us to pay more attention to surfaces and spatial dispositions, this has not translated into a serious engagement with the geopolitics of the “global assembly line,” NAFTA and MASSTRICHT, the internationalization of migrant labor comprised primarily of women of color, and other mutations of the global marketplace.
COUNTERINTUITIVE INSCRIPTIONS

An alternative can be sketched here as a heuristic provocation. Of various possible routes, I can point to one rather obscure counter-example to Clifford’s style of doing CS that is fully conscious of the internal contradictions that define any historical moment. This example takes into account the political economy of cultural practice and production, apprehending culture as an ensemble of agencies that produce and reproduce the totality of social relations with its specific hegemonic articulation. What Jameson suggested as a cognitive mapping based on the imperative “simultaneously to grasp culture in and for itself, but also in relationship to its outside, its content, its context, and its space of intervention and of effectivity” (“On Cultural” 47), has been pursued with lucid and impassioned eloquence by Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle in their now classic ethico-political intervention, *Angkor: An Essay on Art and Imperialism*.

Myrdal and Kessle, committed Swedish intellectuals, travelled through Vietnam and Cambodia in the days of heavy U.S. bombing of the region in the late sixties. They preface their historical and topographical survey of the architectural ruins at Angkor, Cambodia, by transvaluing their experience into social awareness and transformative critique:

You stand face to face with the stone faces of Angkor. Beyond a border there is a war. But when you yourself face this stone then the “beauty” becomes a concrete reality. These faces of stone were hewn by sweating men in a bloody time of repression and revolt.

To write about Jayavarman VII and get beaten up by the cops; to stand in the midst of the dirt and violence writing fiction; to collect money for the striking mine-workers and lecture on Strindberg; to publish the secret Swedish army regulations on the use of gas against “rioting” strikers and to demand back all of history and all the millennia—that is to take part in the razing of the load-bearing walls of imperialism. To write on Angkor is a necessary part of the struggle for liberation (4-5).

For Myrdal and Kessle, culture as a mode of production is articulated in the way that Japan during the conference I mentioned at the outset articulated itself for me as a place of collision and confrontation, not a place one simply travels through. Unlike Clifford, our joint authors do comparative cultural studies by juxtaposing testimonies and ethnographic accounts of Western travellers and the sites surrounding Angkor. They discuss not only...
climate, local history, topography, tribal customs and rituals, but also carry out a subtle analogizing of distant events: twelfth-century Angkor Wat interfaced with the Italian Renaissance, Hellenism, Count Gobineau, Livingstone, and of course French colonialism. Andre Malraux (famous author of *Les Conquerants* and *La Voie Royale* set in IndoChina) is inserted here as someone who plundered the temple of Banteay Srei in December, 1923, but was later acquitted because the monuments were not considered “protected” by the colonial government. This militant ethnography is guided by a consistent historicizing of social forms and cultural practices, thus materializing the nuanced coevalness of cultures, times, and places for judgment. Alterity is not fetishized but rendered concrete and practical within a project of building solidarity with anti-imperialist forces.

What distinguishes Myrdal and Kessle’s travel through history and concrete geopolitical space is not its erudition nor its meticulous scrutiny of how culture and power are imbricated. Rather, it lies in the dialectical intelligibility of its discourse. This depends on its inquiry into both “the causally generated presentation of social objects and their explanatory critique—in terms of their conditions of being, both those which are historically specific and praxis-dependent and those which genuinely are not” (Bhaskar 128). While respecting the relative autonomy of art, Myrdal and Kessle situate Angkor in a constellation of political, economic, and ideological forces that determine its history. It is a mode of CS that proceeds from the materiality of signification to the political constitution of subjectivities, sublating rhetoric and textuality into a field of conflicting forces where control/access to knowledge and resources are at stake both for past and present protagonists. Mindful of the people’s war of national liberation against the West often inspired by Marxism-Leninism, these European observers implicate themselves in what they are studying: they question the ideal of detachment and neutrality. They are partisans of the popular forces that built Angkor in the past and those fighting imperialist bombs at the time of their writing.

Partisanship demands sensitivity to relations, processes, movements. Employing a dialectical method of analyzing the unity of opposites, Myrdal and Kessle are grappling with symptoms of reification in the discourse of bourgeois aesthetics and history. They succeed in penetrating the surface of empirical data, of personal experience, to register the movement of conflicting tendencies. Surfaces reveal fissures, underneath the joints are rhizomatic cracks. What caused Angkor’s decline? Not wars or shifts in religion, as the official textbooks say, but the internal contradictions immanent in society:

The whole history of Angkor was a history of incessant revolts, of unending social struggle.... Angkor grew up as a centralized state, in which, by exploiting new techniques, oligarchy has been able, at the people’s expense, to create for itself immeasurable wealth. This state existed in a chronic state of war. Just as the temples were not just religion or mere ostentatious waste, but the very mechanism by which the oligarchy could absorb the people’s labor, so these wars were an inevitable form in which the state’s organization could exist.

The most comprehensive building period in Angkor’s history coincided with—and was an expression of—the inner crisis which shook the state.... With Angkor as with the Roman Empire, the internal contradictions tore the state asunder.... This social collapse [of the nobles and wealthy merchants]–the collapse of intensive irrigational agriculture (thus of the centralized state)–was a liberation (Myrdal, and Kessle 158, 164).

In bold strokes, Myrdal and Kessle delineate the pattern of dialectical exchange between milieu and art, between objective constraints and subjective capacities, ideas and material culture, in order to mobilize an audience for anti-imperialist intervention.

What Myrdal and Kessle exemplify is not wholly alien to CS’s original project, as I have reviewed earlier. Orthodox CS experts have repeatedly stressed the uniqueness of CS in bridging theory and material culture, contextualizing intellectual work with real social and political problems, with cultural and political power and struggle. At present, the question of AIDS, for example, is an urgent testing ground for ideological contestation: “What cultural studies must do, and has the capacity to do, is to articulate insights about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 7). This certainly responds to local academic needs. But is that all the strategic intervention CS can do?

The limits of CS stem, I suggest, from the lack of an alternative, counter-hegemonic view of capitalist society. Conjunctural analysis and the theory of articulation are privileged because they are “embedded, descriptive, and historically and contextually specific” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 8). Myrdal and Kessle go beyond the conjunctural by transposing the lessons of Angkor’s past into the war-torn landscape of Vietnam in the sixties. They emphasize the need to grasp the historical relations of political forces in order to act intelligently and effectively. They understand Lenin’s insight that
national liberation struggles (such as those of the Vietnamese and Cambodian peoples) are forms of revolutionary subjectivity generated by capital’s uneven and combined development (Lowy; Anderson). From this perspective, the stone temples of Angkor should not be read simply as symbols of gods or abstract ideas; rather they embodied power. Myrdal and Kessle assert these challenging propositions:

All aesthetic problems connected with Angkor are wrongly put…unless connected with the hierarchy of social classes…. Prayers and ceremonies. Sacred texts and learned men. All were merely the form in which the rice crop was collected from the peasants and distributed among the rulers…. The construction of these immense temples was conditional upon the majority of the people being called brute beasts. In the night, when Gun slept and the fan squealed, I thought of Manhattan. Of Paris. And London. Walk down these streets a thousand years from now. How much will remain? (167)

Myrdal and Kessle’s writing, to my mind, exemplifies a form of CS that intervenes across the boundaries of popular and elite cultures. While dealing with the fabled ruins of an Asian kingdom studied by art historians and anthropologists, Myrdal and Kessle succeed in making its history intelligible for lay persons without any prerequisite of technical knowledge. What is required is a knowledge of how culture is tied with human labor and the organization of social energies, the entire “field of cultural production” (Bourdieu). Canonical CS today avoids talk of exploitation of labor, property relations, and the whole field of political economy that embraces the conditions of possibility for both elite and popular culture; for overlapping residual, dominant, and emergent tendencies in the realm of ideological class-struggle.

INVESTMENTS AND DISAVOWALS

What needs more critical engagement is the task of how this mediation of history and textuality as shown in Angkor can be accomplished in cultural studies. Antony Easthope’s guidebook *Literary Into Cultural Studies* is one such illustration. In the process of formulating his approach, Easthope demonstrates that the discipline of literary studies no longer exists as such; it has evolved into cultural studies as soon as it attends to “the materiality of its own construction as a discourse of knowledge” (174). This has been foreseen by literary scholars like Jeffrey Peck, for example, who envisaged the
reconstruction of literary scholarship as a “critique of institutions and disciplines” (52), a view inspired by the work of Edward Said. Said’s redefinition of culture refines those of Williams and Hoggart by accentuating the problem of power, ethnicity, and identity: “culture” signifies “an environment, process, and hegemony in which individuals (in their private circumstances) and their works are embedded, as well as overseen at the top by a whole series of methodological attitudes,” including “the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases belonging to or in a place, being, at home in a place” (8). This is a considerable amplification of experience compared to which the revitalization of aesthetics or the endorsement of rarefied biography (by Fred Inglis, for example) is a return to the iniquitous realm of a feudal division of labor.

I venture a provisional conclusion here. The crisis of contemporary cultural studies inheres in its historical origin from contradictions in social relations tied to changing modes of production. Disjunctures between social actors/agents and the material circumstances pervaded by class, gender, race, nationality, and other categorizing frames of experience have reproduced the classic problem of subject/object dualism in epistemology and ethics. Consequently, the politics of culture tends to be viewed from either an idealist and subjectivist optic, or from a deterministic prism. What results in intellectual practice is either the voluntarist ideal of the “civilizing mission” or the bureaucratic-technocratic resignation of the modernizing expert whose patron-saint is Max Weber (Wood). Having forsworn historical materialism and dialectics, CS succumbs to the miasmatic polarities of metaphysical idealism.

We confront a familiar dilemma. How do we mediate the antinomies of thought that reflect in oblique ways the real-life historical contradictions in which the thinkers are embedded? Do we suspend our inquiry until we resolve first those contradictions, or do we need to register impulses of change in paradigm-shifts that catalyze problem-solving strategies? Indeed, the educator needs to be educated; theory and practice needs to be synthesized.

Unless we wrestle with both horns (philosophical realism or idealism) of the dilemma anchored in the historical process, we will end up in the “vertiginous abyss” of textual and discursive speculation. Not a salutary prospect, by any means. For praxis-oriented practitioners in CS, I would recommend as a way out of this impasse the practice of David Harvey in his recent work, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. In chapter 12 of his book, Harvey uses a historical event—the fire that gutted the Imperial Foods plant in Hamlet, North Carolina, on September 3, 1991, and killed 25 and seriously injured 56 of two hundred workers—as a point of departure for his research program. In his account,
Harvey not only presents a “thick description” of the political and economic circumstances surrounding the tragic event, but he also explores the question of social justice and “the political geography of difference”—notably, issues of race/ethnicity and gender—in its embeddedness in place and modalities of cultural discourse and expression. Harvey modifies the genre of traditional ethnography by interrogating its hidden assumptions, articulating the organic “permanences” of U.S. social history with the conjunctural differences of racism, sexism, and national oppression specific to North Carolina and to U.S. capitalism within the global parameters of systemic crisis. I believe that Harvey’s methodology of dialectical linkages of several levels of analysis conforms to the spirit of Gramsci’s magisterial vision of “critical understanding of oneself” (*The Modern 69*) founded on the moment of “catharsis” as the passage from the base to the superstructures (*Gramsci Selections* 181), the union of theory and practice, attained through stages of mediating elements of social life and directed to fashioning a coherent and critical comprehension of history and one’s place in it. Without this informing vision, CS cannot claim to be emancipatory or liberating—except in a gestural self-serving sense.

Problematising CS, I submit, entails a reinscription of such dichotomies as elite/popular in the dialectical coupling of mode of production/social formation. Notwithstanding all the talk about intervention, CS reveals its own compromised situation when Grossberg and colleagues pontificate: “Cultural studies does not require us to repudiate elite cultural forms—or simply to acknowledge, with Bourdieu, that distinctions between elite and popular cultural forms are themselves the products of relations of power. Rather, cultural studies requires us to identify the operation of specific practices, of how they continuously reinscribe the line between legitimate and popular culture, and of what they accomplish in specific contexts” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 13). Apropos of this formalism, Easthope remarks that “it would be a form of logocentrism, the old vision of speculative rationalism, to believe that an intellectual procedure necessarily leads to a particular politics” (178). Evidently CS cannot operate as an autonomous institutional force separate from the demands of the ideological-political field. Just as “reason develops and transforms itself in the practical field” (Godelier), CS acquires value-filled import in engagement with crucial public issues affecting entire peoples and societies, as Patrick Brantlinger ably demonstrated in his synoptic survey of CS, *Crusoe’s Footprints*. The contexts are decisive, as Ioan Davies has shown in the case of Canada and in the person of Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiongo; and Jon Stratton, Ien Ang, and Kuan-Hsing Chen for the rest of the world (for the Australian scene, see Turner; for Taiwan, see Liao 2000).

Proposals for renewing CS usually invoke a pastiche of topics such as sameness-
in-difference, multidimensionality, return to the “cultural-in-the-economic” (Morley 49), syncretizing racialized ethnicities, “deracinated subaltern subjects, heterodox traditions” (Leitch 182), postnationalist ethics of hybridity, transcultural cosmopolitanism, and the like. For a start, I would like to endorse Barbara Epstein’s always timely advice: “In the United States it is impossible to take our understanding of race, gender, or questions of social division and disintegration further without acknowledging the fact of class polarization” (136). Space constraints prevent me from being able to elaborate further my view that a historicist “cultural materialism” first outlined by Williams can be renewed by recovering and adapting to new contexts the principles of “national liberation struggles” espoused by Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, Lu Hsun, Amilcar Cabral, Che Guevarra, Aime Cesaire, and others. CS practiced by those committed intellectuals can be a revolutionary way out of the current impasse.

Besides denaturalizing CS, we need therefore to historicize its thematics, methods, and objectives. Mindful of Williams’ advice to think through the history of conflicted ideological formations, Hall recently urged the concentration of CS on problems of “racism today in its complex structures and dynamics” arising from “the terrifying, internal fear of living with difference” (“Race, Culture” 17). Obviously the resurgence of racism in the UK and elsewhere in the last two decades precipitated this call to arms. There is no cause for premature alarm—unless apocalyptic investments persist in attributing a messianic mission to CS in the hope of revitalizing a civic but still patriotic humanism beloved by Rorty and fellow neopragmatists. Jameson in fact celebrates the utopianism of CS as a “project to constitute a historic bloc” (“On Cultural” 251) of progressive academics. However, because of its current fixation on articulation, contingency, indeterminacy, and local power resistance, CS will continue to perform at best a polite and loyal-opposition role, reinforcing that affirmative culture which Herbert Marcuse once described as the realm of freedom and happiness—“universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realisable by every individual for himself ‘from within,’ without any transformation of the state of fact” (95). Unwittingly, mainstream CS promotes this affirmative culture offering temporary anodyne to the inhabitants of an administered racial polity. Far from the cacophonous din of Disneyland surrounding Dali’s enigmatic masterpieces in St. Petersburg, Florida, this veritable utopia is the not so clandestine object of desire for the contemporary high priests of Cultural Studies whose complicity with predatory capital, no doubt unpremeditated and even resisted, will surely be the object of “enormous condescension by posterity.”
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