

CULTURAL STUDIES: CAN WE/ SHOULD WE REINVENT IT?

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Abstract

This short article returns to an original sense of the term ‘cultural studies’, that is, a subject which needed to be invented to supplement a democratic deficit in established humanities and social science disciplines. It reviews reasons why something like cultural studies needs to be reinvented again today (converging crises in democratic systems and culture, deriving from new social and political ecologies, linked to technology), but also reasons why, right now, this is particularly difficult. Addressing this challenge requires a modesty as to what can be done, but also an urgency opening up a space where the threats to democracy’s future can honestly be faced in a cross-disciplinary dialogue.

Keywords

Cultural studies; reinvention; democracy; crisis; solidarity;

Cultural studies was, for me, never *only* about studying culture. How could it be, when the very term ‘culture’, as James Clifford (1988: 10) noted three decades ago, is deeply problematic, even if somehow indispensable, and when ‘the production of meaning’ (the definition of cultural studies’ ‘object’ on which both the original and the new editors of this journal agree: Hartley 1998: 5; Gray et al.: 2019: 4) promises an effectively infinite, and not easily differentiated, domain of investigation?

Yes, there *is* point in affirming the study of meaning (hermeneutics) when the humanities and social sciences are increasingly dominated by regimes of counting (from the digital humanities to ‘social physics’: Pentland 2014). But affirming the hermeneutic perspective, by itself, does not get us very far in clarifying *why* hermeneutics can and must be defended. That question of ‘why?’ (why the study of meaning? for example) cannot be evaded when hermeneutic approaches are markedly under attack, indeed at risk of being written out of funding and other institutional agendas in the medium term. So, it is important – and not merely self-serving – to return, as I will in this short piece, to the question: *why* cultural studies?

For Raymond Williams, cultural studies was the space of sustained enquiry (not just by researchers and writers, but in teachers in the classroom too) where people could come together for different kind of encounter. As such, it was a subject that he felt had to be invented (Williams 1961: 10). Thinking of working-class participants in adult education in Britain in the 1930s to 1950s, he wrote:

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

The challenges of post-World-War-II Britain seem a universe away even to those who happen today to live in Britain, and it would anyway be absurd to claim special privilege for perspectives from this imperial nation in seemingly terminal decline. But the point of quoting Williams is only to show that, for him, while cultural studies *involved* the study of meaning in ways that challenged many of the limits of established disciplines like ‘literary studies’, the goal of such study – and indeed the creation of something like a new discipline – went far beyond that. The goal, rather, was to achieve ‘an ethic of reciprocity, a mutual practice of both speaking and listening, which is inextricably tied to taking seriously the complexity of cultures’ (Couldry 2000: 5). Something about politics was at stake in thinking, talking, and listening well about culture: something about democracy, more specifically, the possibility of *building* a genuine democracy in a society that, notwithstanding its recent founding of a welfare state, was still, in Williams’ view, very far from being an actual democracy in the sense of a participatory form of life. The point of the subject ‘cultural studies’, for Raymond Williams, was as a practice of exchange and mutual recognition, aimed at a better, a more inclusive, way of life.

If this still captures the aim of cultural studies, whatever actually constitutes cultural studies today (and I defy anyone to say that formulation of cultural studies’ goal is today), then we need to reassess what that aim might mean today.

The challenge of relevance

The specific reasons for this re-examination may already be clear (I will come to them in a moment), and they are in no way overridden by the two most obvious differences between the situation today and the situation Williams confronted when he wrote his most famous texts *Culture and Society* (Williams 1958) and *The Long Revolution* (Williams 1961). First, that, in some form or other, though not always under the label ‘cultural studies’, the disciplinary practices that Williams hoped for already exist, indeed they have long since been institutionalized. Second, that, particularly over the past 20 years, the field of academic work in cultural studies has been broadly internationalized, with the *IJCS* being an excellent example. Yet there are strong reasons for asking once again, and indeed urgently today: *why cultural studies?* Why might it (or something like it) be needed again now?

The reasons are the crises that beset culture and politics today everywhere. At the risk of oversimplification, those crises are threefold. First, there are the acute practical and ideological challenges to *democracy* as a way of doing politics (Runciman 2018). Second, and emerging within the first crisis, there are widespread conservative attempts across all continents to *reverse* half a century or more of social, cultural and political reform, with gender being an important, but of course not the only, faultline (Banet-Weiser 2018). Third, and subtly linked to the first two, there is the corporate drive, through an emerging transformation of the social fabric by processes of datafication, to directly annex to capital the very spaces of the social and the production of meaning (Couldry and Mejias 2019). It is as if, in some historical version of snakes and ladders, the more progressive forces for which, from his very particular perspective, Williams hoped to speak in the 1960s, have now slid down a huge snake, to land somewhere very near the start of the democracy game, several squares *below* where Williams started, and with a reverse momentum. We cannot any more, therefore, afford Raymond Williams’s optimism about politics now, even though the academic institutions that Williams hoped for exist and for now, in many places, seem secure.

The question – ‘why cultural studies?’ – reminds us of something that it is tempting to forget: that, whereas cultural studies was invented under societal and political conditions which, in many ways, were auspicious for that project, any attempt today to ‘renew’ (Grossberg 2019: 856) or, as I would prefer, ‘reinvent’ cultural studies faces a different challenge: how to reverse what amounts to almost a ‘hostile environment’ for democracy.¹

From this, three immediate challenges follow: to acknowledge the genuine bleakness of the current situation for democracy (I therefore respect the honest pessimism of Lawrence Grossberg in his farewell essay as editor of *Cultural Studies*: Grossberg 2019); to grasp that ‘going on doing cultural studies’ cannot possibly be sufficient to address these intersecting crises which, taken together, uproot the long-term political environment from which cultural studies emerged as even imaginable; and finally, to insist that these crises are global in scale, which means that ‘solutions’ cannot any longer be comfortably nurtured within the safe boundaries of the nation-state (the limitation, always, of Williams’ vision). One reason for the last point is the accelerated movement of capital, people and meanings, which itself has been a key precondition for the current turbulence in political structures and cultural settlements. Another is that ‘above’ the three crises just mentioned towers the overarching crises in the earth’s environment and the current failure of political cultures and systems to generate adequate responses to that crisis *anywhere*.

The basic question ‘can we reinvent cultural studies?’ can be reframed, more practically, as a different question: *what is missing* from the now interdisciplinary field of which cultural studies is just one part (including critical race studies, critical data studies, queer studies, sociology of culture) that, *if added*, would constitute the *beginning* of a response to these intersecting crises? Which suggests a second question: what will be the consequences for cultural studies, and perhaps many other forms of critical academic work, if that missing element cannot be found?

The second question may be easier to answer than the first, at least prospectively. Suppose we were to abandon the attempt to answer the first question: deciding in advance that it cannot be answered, and that academic work has no way of fashioning a larger response to the emerging crises of democracy, culture and datafication. That would mean abandoning the idea that academic work has a distinctive contribution to make to social and political development, condemning it to the status of mere conduit for implementing corporate solutions. Unless we really want that, we must at least take the first question seriously.

So what might be missing from academic work in the field of cultural studies and the other fields of critical work to which it is contiguous? In attempting to answer this, I will not be offering proposals for a ‘new cultural studies’, or for the reform of existing cultural studies. For, as should already be clear, the cultural studies we have today is the solution, long since institutionalized, to problems that are 50-60 years old. Answers to today’s crises are likely to take institutional forms that we cannot predict, although, for the purposes of this short essay, I will assume those solutions at least pass through the academy. Even so, they are unlikely to map neatly onto the contingent historical limits of cultural studies as an academic practice. But that does not rule out journals such as the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* being a site for debate about those solutions, wherever they bear most fruit.

An Inventive Path

In that spirit, let me approach the first, and daunting, question that I just posed. Perhaps I should rephrase it: where and how might work start in the academy towards identifying starting-points for addressing the *triple* democratic deficit that I mentioned?

Note it is not a single, but a triple, crisis that today's societies face. It is a triple crisis that combines *institutional* factors (the decline of parties, political and electoral systems, and structures for recognising voice more generally) with *cultural* factors (an increasing war over cultural and social inclusion and the measures taken historically to extend it) and with *sociotechnical* factors (the datafication of the social fabric with profound implications for the registering, over the long-term, of anything like voice in decision-making on any scale).

As soon as we reformulate the question this way, it becomes obvious why, until now, even an excellent global journal like IJCS does not have a regular stream of articles queuing up to answer it. Like the question 'Is democracy possible here?' (to recall philosopher Ronald Dworkin's brilliant title: Dworkin 2008), the question of what working towards reinventing cultural studies would mean today is one we would all rather avoid, not only because it is daunting but also because, for those who have benefited from the success of the original cultural studies project, it is rather embarrassing and bewildering. (Has 50 years of cultural studies really achieved nothing lasting in the social domain? At least that is what we may secretly fear) And yet it is the question which must be asked.

I cannot, of course, pretend to have neat ready-made answers. We are not yet far down enough down the sort of path that could generate a new subject, in the way that, for example, Williams' dissatisfaction with British democracy and Stuart Hall's or Ngugi Thiong'o's dissatisfaction with the consequences of the British Empire generated versions of cultural studies.

In addition, the balance of problems today is very different from what obtained at those earlier historical moments: less the ossification of academic subjects or cultural elites, and more that unexpected *new social and political ecologies* (new developments *within* democracies) are emerging that are truly toxic for democratic participation over the longer term. Clearly academic work cannot by itself do all the heavy lifting here: recall that Williams developed his vision for a new subject against the background of his own experience of working as a teacher for some years in Britain within the Workers Educational Association, as well as a trade union and political party environment much healthier than that today. And yet the new civil society institutions that might support today's academic work to contribute positively to a renewal of democracy do not, it appears, yet exist.

At best therefore, right now, academic work can contribute towards addressing today's urgent democratic deficits in three rather more limited ways:

1. By bringing the issue of today's democratic deficit into the clearest possible focus, drawing on as many other disciplines and aspects of the crisis as possible, to build a larger view of trends, underlying dangers, and geographical variations.
2. By going in search of new practices that, in spite of everything, are working to sustain democratic values and building bridges, not divisions, between people (even a quick glance at the titles of IJCS papers in the past 12 months suggests that the seeds of this work are already present).
3. By reflecting seriously on what academic work would look like that tried to offer practical and intellectual resources to those new democratic practices, drawing of

course on cultural studies' historic achievements, but also fashioning new resources and new thinking for today's unique cocktail of crises.

None of these tasks are going to be easy. As I recently brought together a collection of essays from across my career dealing very broadly with the challenges that I associate with the historic project of cultural studies (to be published as Couldry 2020), I suddenly realised quite how daunting are the challenges of this current conjuncture.

But an advantage we have today which was not available in the 1950s and 1960s is numbers: there are many of us, networked more effectively, widely and globally than was imaginable then, and able to draw on a large and still-expanding archive of work committed to listening to the production of meaning and the struggles for democracy from across the world.

Perhaps the IJCS might become the place where large numbers of us, deeply troubled and puzzled by the directions recently taken by culture and its political reference-points in many places, might come together to ask the questions about democracy's future that for now we can't answer. In coming together around that focus, perhaps we might find a certain solidarity in not giving up on the idea that voices have value, and that writing about and listening well to culture can play a role in building societies where that value still counts for something.

Better this at least than silence, and the hopelessness it harbours. 'Hopelessness', as Paul Freire wrote, 'is a form of silence, of denying the world and feeling from it' (1972: 64). Just now, I suspect, none of us can afford the luxury of silence.

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¹ I use the term 'hostile environment' to recall the official designation of the UK government's truly disgraceful recent fostering of a regime for managing and, if possible deporting, non-white migrants, and even descendants of non-white migrants, under the leadership, originally, of the UK's former Prime Minister, Teresa May, while she was Home Secretary.