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Dialogue in an age of enclosure: exploring the values of cultural studies

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DIALOGUE IN AN AGE OF ENCLOSURE:

EXPLORING THE VALUES OF CULTURAL STUDIES

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'to exist, humanly, is to <u>name</u> the world, to change it . . . Dialogue . . . must not be a situation where some men name on behalf of others.'

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972, 61-62)

'the real problem . . . is that people's questions are not answered by the existing distribution of the educational curriculum.'

Raymond Williams, 'The future of cultural studies' (1989a: 160)

It is a platitude of educational reformers, on the right, the left and the old left which now claims the mantle of the new centre, that we live in a fast-changing world and education's duty is to prepare us for it. Less common is the insight that such 'change' is not definable apart from conflicts of value and therefore power, which a genuinely democratic practice of education must address. Education should not be reduced to training people to accommodate to other people's definitions of change; it must in Paulo Freire's sense be a dialogue. But it is precisely this vision of education that is currently under threat.

You can risk the whole authority of academic practice on the idea that it transcends questions of value. That was Max Weber's (1991 [1921]) vision of sociology for a world which he saw as riven by irreconcilable conflicts of value; to mix science with values or politics was to fall into 'prophecy' or 'demagoguery'. Given the compromised racial politics of academic life in Germany in the early twentieth century, we cannot dismiss Weber's vision lightly. Alternatively, you can base a subject on the belief that at certain times it is precisely commitments of <u>value</u> that academics need to make, clearly and unequivocally. It is this 'political' conception of education and intellectual work that has characterised cultural studies. In this article, I want to do two things: to explore what the underlying values of cultural studies are, and to illustrate why they matter particularly in the current state of educational politics, in Britain and perhaps elsewhere.

In exploring the distinctive values of cultural studies, a useful reference-point remains the vision of Raymond Williams, developed in Britain principally in the 1950s and 1960s. The position is complicated, because, since Williams' early writings, all questions of value in intellectual work have undergone a fundamental displacement: a decentreing of the very basis on which intellectual and scientific authority is claimed or assumed. What was primarily a conversation within the ambit of 'the West' and within a largely unquestioned patriarchal and racially specific authority must now be a conversation that is decentred, open-ended, and global. And yet a fundamental principle that Williams articulated <u>was</u> dialogue and an interrogation of power's investments in cultural value. So we need, not to jettison Williams' work, but to isolate its key principles and explore how they resonate with work done in other places and times. It was in a similar spirit, I believe, that Edward Said (1978: 28) in

one of the most devastating attacks on the intellectual authority of 'the West' acknowledged Williams' (1961) vision of transcending the 'long dominative mode' of thinking about culture.

Whatever its limitations, Williams' work kept worrying away at an essential but deceptively simple question: why does it matter that we study 'our' culture, 'ordinary' culture (Williams, 1989b) and how best can we do it within an institutional framework? This breaks down into a number of specific questions:

- What are the values embedded in, or excluded from, the cultural spaces in which I have been formed?
- To what extent can I call those embedded values my own, and to what extent should I be critical of them?
- Is that space a democratic one? If not, why not, and what might make it democratic?
- what are the conditions of a 'common culture' (Williams, 1958: 305) and what values underpin them?

These are, by definition, public questions, part of a wider dialogue. Putting them at the heart of the academic study of culture is the starting-point of cultural studies as a discipline. Unfortunately, for us as for Williams, this orientation puts cultural studies at odds with the prevailing educational logics of the day.

In the first section, I will explore what Williams meant by the 'ordinariness' of culture, and show the parallels with approaches to culture developed elsewhere: in

Kenya (the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o) and in Colombia (the work of Jesus Martin-Barbero). In the second section I discuss some of the limitations of Williams' vision and how it must be transposed, if it is to remain a useful reference-point for contemporary cultural politics. This transposition is all the more vital, I argue in the third section, given the threat to educational dialogue from its reduction to commerce; as an example, I discuss the inadequate concept of education of even a relatively sympathetic institutional reformer, Charles Leadbeater, a leading adviser to Tony Blair's New Labour government in Britain.

I then attempt to draw together the principles common to various visions of cultural studies, before reflecting in the conclusion on the connections between such abstract principles and practical pedagogy and citizenship.

The Ordinariness of Culture

'Culture is ordinary', Raymond Williams famously wrote. His point was not to replace a notion of culture (as specific, legitimated works) with a looser notion of culture as life process, but to hold both notions of culture in tension. Instead of seeing the artistic work (such as the nineteenth century English novel) in the abstract, Williams insisted on thinking about how it emerged from a much broader range of cultural practice, what he called a 'cultural formation', a shared practice of making meanings involving everyone in a particular culture.

These connections are brought out in the following passage from an essay originally published in 1958:

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expressed these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions . . . The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. . . . A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observances and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and leaning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. <u>Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction.</u> The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. (1989b: 4, added emphasis)

I have quoted this at length because it shows the direction of Williams' argument, and its originality, very clearly. As the highlighted passage brings out, it is the complex interrelation of 'textual' and 'anthropological' approaches to culture that was important to him.

This had two major advantages: it avoided abstracting cultural analysis from an analysis of the shared living conditions of that culture's time; and it introduced a necessary distance from the value judgements about cultural production (present and historical) which happen to prevail at any particular time. The second advantage is that cultural analysis (as so conceived) apply just as appropriately to <u>any</u> work, whether 'high' or 'low': there is no question of 'high' culture being more worth investigating from this point of view. As Williams once put it: 'our real purpose should be to bring all cultural work within the same world of discourse' (1968: 133).

It is easy to take this latter point for granted given four decades of cultural studies practice, so it is worth remembering how different Williams' vision was from conventional analyses of culture at that time. The distinguished American sociologist, Edward Shils, for example, commented in 1961, as if it were plain fact, that:

> [there are] three levels of culture, which are levels of quality measured by aesthetic, intellectual and moral standards. These are 'superior' or 'refined' culture, 'mediocre' culture, and 'brutal culture'. (1961: 4, quoted in Tudor, 1995: 88-9)

Can we really deny that a similar division is at work even now in the structuring of higher education and in press attacks (very common in Britain at least) on the status of media and cultural studies? Raymond Williams' point remains a radical one.

It is worth spelling out some further implications. The first is that Williams is not simply arguing that we pay more attention to 'popular' culture at the expense of elite culture. To do that would simply invert the high/low hierarchy without challenging it.

Instead Williams is arguing for a <u>common</u> culture: a shared culture based on what he calls a 'recognition of practical equality' between its members (1958: 305). Putting that into practice means a lot more than just avoiding judgements about cultural production you don't like much. It means positively valuing everyone's common experience in a shared culture, treating everyone's experience of culture as valuable (1958: 306). It was this sense of valuing each other that was missing, according to Williams, in 1950s Britain:

> an effective community of experience . . . depends on a recognition of practical equality . . . We lack a genuinely common experience, save in certain rare and dangerous moments of crisis. What we are paying for this lack . . . is now sufficiently evident. We need a common culture, not for the sake of an abstraction, but because we shall not survive without it.
>
> (1958: 304)

At the level of understanding how culture works, that meant seeing 'communication' in a much broader way than conventional literary studies allowed, and connecting with broader debates about democracy.

In <u>The Long Revolution</u> (1961), Williams argued that everyone, in making sense of the world, is an active producer of meanings, a creative interpreter (1961: ch. 1). From this he drew an important conclusion:

If man is essentially a learning, creating, communicating being, the only social

organization adequate to his nature is <u>a participating democracy</u> in which all of us,

as unique individuals, learn, communicate and control.

<div align="right">(1961: 118, added emphasis)</div>

But 1950s Britain – and Williams was very clear on this – was <u>not</u> a democracy in this

sense (1961: 339). Reversing this was what Williams meant by 'the long revolution':

'a cultural revolution [which] extend[ed] the active process of learning, with the skills

of literary and other advanced communication, to all people rather than to limited

groups' (1961: 11). Williams was writing when the hopes for the transformative

potential of television were still fresh, but the question remains a live one today, as we

address fears of a digital divide and debate even the desirability of a shared culture.

It would be a mistake, however, to see Williams' work as the production of a 'lone

genius'. One little-known part of its context is the long history of adult education in

Britain since the late 19th century, partly under the auspices of established universities

such as Oxford. The judgement of one historian of the Workers' Educational

Association for whom Williams taught from 1946 to 1961 is interesting:

We should be sceptical of portraits of Williams in the 1950s as isolated and

unassociated with mainstream academic life. . . . Put simply, Williams' work in

[the 1950s] drew on the adult [education] tradition, especially as it had been

developed in Oxford since the late nineteenth century, and may be said to have

presented this intellectual lineage and way of understanding society to a large and

receptive audience . . .

(Goldman, 1995: 291-2)

The vision of culture as 'ordinary' was the result of a sustained social debate and teaching practice in Britain lasting more than half a century. I return to this point in my conclusion.

There are also striking parallels between Williams' cultural theory and work developed outside Britain and in very different circumstances. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's book Decolonising the Mind (1986) develops a rich concept of culture, which itself grew out of debates in Kenya in the 1960s and 1970s about how literature should be taught in the post-colonial era. Just as Williams' work responded to Britain's 'expanding culture' (1958: 12), so too Ngugi's work can be seen as a response to a time of change, even crisis. Ironically, the crisis from which the Kenyan debate resulted arose from the imposition in Kenyan schools after World War II of precisely the English canon of literature whose influence Williams in a very different way was negotiating in Britain a decade or so before. It is, then, perhaps not surprising that Ngugi was aware of Raymond Williams' work early on (Ngugi, 1986: 90), but tracing 'influences' from Britain is definitely not the point. For Ngugi's conception of culture developed precisely as resistance to the imposition of British culture from the outside. Nonetheless there are interesting parallels.

Like Williams, Ngugi draws on Marx's analysis in The German Ideology (1977) of how language and culture are formed in the course of the practices of everyday material life.[1] Ngugi develops a rich notion of language as both direct means of

communication and as the carrier of a distinctive culture (1986: 15). Culture is to be seen as part of a complex lived process:

> There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths . . . Over a time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life . . . Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history.

> (Ngugi, 1986: 14-15)

These values are reflected both in a way of life and in specific works, whether of the oral or written traditions. Ngugi's notion of culture was specifically an attempt to think about his own language and culture (Gikuyu) that the British had set out to destroy by imposing an English-language based education system and literary culture (1986: 11-13). This was what Ngugi famously called the 'cultural bomb' which:

> annihilates a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves . . .

> (1986: 3)

Articulating the grounds of a common culture was, for Ngugi (1986: 103) as for Williams, a matter of democracy, but in conditions - of conflict with a dominant <u>outside</u> culture - very different from those Williams envisaged.

Another interesting parallel for the notion of culture as 'ordinary' is Latin American work on popular culture, for example that of the Colombian media theorist Jesus Martin-Barbero (1993). Here the context is not, as with Ngugi, the early stages of a post-colonial regime, but rather the long-term consequences of the Spanish Conquest: the complex process of forging national unity in Latin American nations which are complex amalgams of indigenous, European, and mixed (*mestizaje*) populations, with enormous variations of literacy and material wealth (Rowe and Schelling, 1990).

Like Ngugi, Martin-Barbero is well aware of the work of British cultural studies along with many other sources for studying the popular (history, anthropology, sociology), but, again, to trace a British 'origin' for his work is misleading. What matters is that in the particular Latin American postcolonial context a broad notion of popular culture, parallel to Williams' concept of 'common culture', was necessary. As Martin-Barbero explains:

> We are not dealing with an increase of information about popular culture in terms of statistics and factual data, but rather with a process that relocates the 'place' of the popular by incorporating it into the constitutive memory of the flow of history . . . this has begun to fragment the once monolithic concept of culture both at the level of the semantic universe and at the pragmatic level.
>
> (Martin-Barbero, 1993: 62)

Instead of a limited range of texts, culture <u>had</u> to be seen as a mass of social processes operating at many levels, in all its 'ordinary' local complexity.

Extending the Values of Cultural Studies

Parallels are important – they show that cultural studies can be seen as a coherent, but de-centred subject, not one whose narratives must retrace a Eurocentric, colonial trajectory (Wright, 1998) - but they are not enough. A radical <u>transposition</u> of the terms of Williams' vision is necessary, if we are to address today's cultural politics.

The limitations of Williams' work have frequently been noted. First, its reference-points in a sense of purely local practice, inspired by the Welsh working-class community of his youth which, even when he wrote, was largely a nostalgic vision,[2] and quite inadequate to the actual cultural complexity of 1950s Britain (Gilroy, 1987: 49-50), let alone the implications of Britain's colonial past (Said, 1990: 83). To be fair, Williams' notion of social identity and community was not completely closed, since he emphasised the need to convert a defensive solidarity into an acceptance of 'extending community' (1958: 319). But this extension of community was imagined by Williams largely in terms of class; the conflictual terrain of ethnicity was not integrated into his thinking.

Another limitation is, as Williams later admitted (1979: 148-9), that his notion of community and of culture did not recognise gender inequalities, and how these are

structured into the very organisation of cultural production. The need to correct for this is now so obvious that I will not discuss it further here.

Thirdly, if the strength and clarity of Williams' vision derives in part from a closure - around a particular historical ideal of community - it thereby ignores the problems associated with cultural 'closure' itself. In the massive complexity of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there are powerful arguments to be made (see especially Haraway, 1991) against closure, whether around a notion of culture that is ethnically or geographically exclusive, or around forms of intellectual authority that rely on hidden exclusions (the centuries-long association of the intellectual voice with the male voice), or even around a notion of 'humanity' (which may now need to be reevaluated in the light of our relationships with machines). Haraway's vision of a committed partiality may, in some respects, be a more helpful guide to a world where any debate must start out from difference and from complexity. The contrast, however, between Haraway and Williams should not be too sharply drawn. Just as Williams at the end of the 1950s called for full literacy and full participation in cultural production as a response to changing times, so too Haraway is concerned with expanding literacy in the broadest sense: for example, the need to expand critical knowledge about the cultural claims made on behalf of science. For both, cultural studies is a crucial tool in avoiding a two-tier knowledge society. In a world, however, where the pressures to absorb education into commercial technoscience without remainder are so overwhelming, Haraway's vision of a 'politics' - a 'cyborg politics' as she originally called it - that 'struggle[s] for language and . . . against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly' (1991: 218) has a particular urgency. What may matter most are not claims of unity, but

alliances <u>across</u> difference, communities of dialogue which are not simple or 'whole', but are suspicious of universalising claims on behalf of science or technological 'destiny'. This is to transpose Williams' vision of dialogue onto a different, but not incompatible, register.

We need to make a similar transposition of Williams' values in relation to issues of 'race'[3] and hybridity. Clearly Williams' concept of culture – focussed on lived experience in particular locations – is inadequate to deal with cultures formed in movement, in the course of disruptions of location, whether voluntary or involuntary. It cannot, for example, help us understand the experience of the migrant workers who have lived in the Mexico-US border region in the past two decades or so. As the Argentinian cultural theorist Nestor Garcia Canclini, who has worked a great deal on the US-Mexican border region, argues, the challenge is to think about culture in the light of '<u>the loss</u> of the ''natural'' relation of culture to geographical and social territories' (1995: 229, added emphasis), exactly the natural relation that Williams seems to assume as his ideal. At the same time, this loss of connection may be cut across by new patterns, new 'natural' relations, based on shared media experience, which reconfigure both private and public space. Canclini puts it as follows:

Collective identities find their constitutive stage less and less in the city and in its history, whether distant or recent. . . . Almost all sociability, and reflection about it, is concentrated in intimate exchanges. Since . . . even the accidents that happened the previous day in our own city reach us through the media, these become the dominant constituents of the 'public' meaning of the city . . . More than an absolute substitution of urban life by the audiovisual media, I perceive a *game of*

echoes. The commercial advertising and political slogans that we see on television are those that we reencounter in the streets, and vice versa: the ones are echoed in the others. To this circularity of the communicational and the urban are subordinated the testimonies of history and the public meaning constructed in longtime [sic] experiences.

(Garcia Canclini, 1995: 210, 212, original emphasis)

'Communication' in this context cannot now simply mean (as it did for Williams) sharing a historically continuous set of experiences tied to a separate location. The connections between space, community, and culture have become too complex (cf Couldry, 2000, chapter 5) for such simple unities to be plausible, if they ever were.

This is especially important when we think about cultures that have been formed in conflict (cf Hall, 1997). Contemporary black cultural critics in the USA address too a sense of cultural crisis, but one which does not admit of the affirmative solutions Williams imagined. Cornel West has written controversially of 'nihilism' in black communities in America:

nihilism not as a philosophical doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority [but as] the <u>lived experience</u> of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.

(West, 1992: 40, added emphasis).

Whether or not he has Williams in mind, West's emphasis on 'lived experience' turns Williams' arguments on their head. The lived experience in question is not one of

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'settled' community, but one of facing daily the 'ontological wounds and emotional scars' of living in a culture marked by racism (1992: 42). This experience cannot simply be 'affirmed'. What is needed, West argues, is 'prophetic criticism':

a self-critical and self-corrective enterprise of human 'sense-making' for the preserving and expanding of human empathy and compassion.

(West, 1993: xi)

At the very least, West argues, there must be a '<u>double</u> conciousness', that is well aware of the Euro-American intellectual tradition's implications in the material realities of imperialism and slavery (1993: xi). Nor can there be any simple affirmation of the 'lived experience' of place, given the continuance of racism. Instead, what cultural studies must address is something more like the experience of <u>exile</u> in time and space, a 'homebound quest in an offbeat temporality' (1993: xiii). Such prophetic criticism is critical of the surrounding culture at a fundamental level, challenging the very category of 'race' and asking how 'race' is embedded in discursive and cultural hierarchies (cf Gates, 1986; Gilroy, 2000).

Such criticism necessarily involves a complex <u>self-critical</u> relationship to collective experience and culture. A recent essay by David Lionel Smith expresses this powerfully:

we [black cultural critics] must have the courage to risk alienating ourselves by challenging common sense, by being true critics and not mere celebrants of black culture, and by subverting the premises that define blackness. . . .

What then is black culture? No one can answer these questions definitively, because 'black culture' is not a fixed, single thing 'out there' in the empirical world. It is, rather, a complex and ambiguous set of processes and interactions, facts, and fantasies, assertions and inquiries, passionately held and passionately contested

(Smith, 1997: 188, 192)

The 'necessity of creating a new culture' (Mercer, 1994: 3, quoting Gramsci) is a theme which runs right through black cultural criticism in the USA, black British cultural studies, and postcolonial theory more widely. It is clear, then, that if we want cultural studies to go on addressing the (changing) conditions of 'common culture' - and if we do not, what useful continuity has cultural studies as a subject to offer? - then we must transpose the terms in which Williams originally formulated the debate: a common culture, not as the reproduction of 'the same', but as an open-ended encounter with difference, framed by a commitment to dialogue.

Before formulating these values more fully – they lie at the heart of cultural studies – we need to appreciate some of the political context which makes this project, for all its difficulties, so urgent.

Empty Radicalism: Education Without Dialogue

What the different inflections of cultural studies I have discussed all share is a sense that education is more than the transmission of the already known. In a world where cultures are formed in conflict, and therefore shaped by existing imbalances of power,

education should provide a liminal space where the mutual influences of culture and power can be disentangled, and new perspectives on each generated. This is what Paulo Freire called 'dialogue': 'the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world' (1972: 61). For this dialogue to occur, education needs space, a regular sustained context. That space need not, of course, be identical to the actual spaces of educational institutions; it should certainly extend beyond them. At present, however, the spaces for dialogue that exist within educational institutions are threatened with enclosure by economically-driven ends. In this section, I want to show how even a sympathetic would-be educational reformer (Charles Leadbeater in the UK) is blind to this threat.

Charles Leadbeater is a former *Financial Times* and *Independent* journalist and writer for the now defunct *Marxism Today*. As a researcher, he has played a leading role in the think-tank Demos' close relationship with Tony Blair's New Labour, both before and after Blair's election victory. His book *Living on Thin Air* received considerable attention when first published in 1999. It was widely identified as a vision close to Blair himself; indeed it had Blair's endorsement on the dust-jacket. Its call for both 'an innovative and inclusive society' (2000: 11) was in some ways the justificatory 'bible' for which Blair's uneasy combination of globalizing and communitarian rhetoric had been waiting. Indeed, the attention it received partly reflected the fact that until then it was precisely an articulated vision that Blair's politics lacked (Marr, 1999).

Leadbeater, in fact, is harsh on old-style communitarianism for its emphasis on the stability of local, lived community; instead, he advocates new forms of trust and

social organization that can deal with accelerating global change and lives lived beyond fixed locales. This is not a crude neoliberalism, since it does take seriously the contributions which individuals make by working together both within formal organizations and beyond them, and many of its proposals for change (increasing employees' stakes in their workplace, increasing local participation in politics) are welcome. So too is his interest in issues of citizenship. Leadbeater's central idea is to encourage public sector 'entrepreneurship' whether within government, schools or the health service. In fact, Leadbeater shares with another critic of neoliberalism, Pierre Bourdieu, the concern with 'reinventing public services' (Bourdieu, 1998: 27). What I want to show, however, is that when, briefly, Leadbeater deals with education, his presumptions are incoherent, precisely because they fail to move beyond the 'autocratic technocracy' which Bourdieu insists we must challenge. Leadbeater, in other words, lacks any sense of education, except one prefigured by the economy and its power structures.

If there were more space, I could connect this weakness with other weaknesses in Leadbeater's argument: his inadequate attention to the human costs of workplace instability (Sennett, 1999), and his underplaying of the forces of concentration and conflict in the so-called 'knowledge economy', not least the inequalities of which 'knowledge workers' (including himself) are the principal beneficiaries. Yet while praising the innovation of California's Silicon Valley, he acknowledges its poor public services and its heavy reliance on imported human capital (2000: 230, 236). This leads him to a curious admission that '[Silicon Valley's] model of society driven by specialist knowledge is increasingly at odds with a more democratic model of the knowledge society' (2000: 238). While Leadbeater seems to want such a model, he is

prevented from developing one precisely because of his inadequate concept of how education can contribute to democracy. It is on this specific weakness I want to concentrate.

Even here, there are aspects of Leadbeater's treatment of education which are welcome, for example his revival of Ivan Illich's (1971) idea of de-schooling society, through making the educational resources of the school available to the wider community (2000: 112). He extends this to a notion of continuous adult education, from which people can go on benefiting as their careers develop and change (or at least – and the ageist detail is surely not accidental – 'throughout their twenties and thirties': 2000: 242). This, he argues, should be facilitated by distance learning and modularisation of courses – again, perhaps, innocuous, if it were clear that this was merely designed to <u>supplement</u> existing educational access, rather than to replace the full-time educational context that a conventional degree structure offers. But this is exactly what is unclear in his book: Leadbeater writes as he wants to replace older more 'rigid' notions of higher education with a new, more 'flexible' model, whose principal benefit is that it is more closely tailored to economic conditions.

Leadbeater hardly discusses educational <u>content</u> at all, so we are left to assume that the content which matters most in his scheme of things is that which most effectively services the economy. Without ever being explicit, Leadbeater's book, by its absences more than by its inclusions, reproduces a notion of education as mere training,[4] as 'kit', in a currently fashionable English term, for economic performance. There is no place at all for any broader notion of education's purpose, including its links with democratic debate.

This reduced notion of education as training is increasingly common and frequently elided with a notion of 'liberated' consumerism. So, for example, the director of the Education Counselling Service (an arm of the British Council) was recently quoted as saying, without qualification, that 'education is becoming a consumer good, and people will exercise the same kind of parameters in making their decisions as they do for anything else'; and a new report of the central policy making body in British higher education (the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals) predicted a shift to a 'a customer-focussed approach to education and learning'.[5] Many academics have enthusiastically embraced this new educational 'radicalism', for example the feminist Dale Spender (2000) writing about online universities:

> This is not the old distance learning, but online classroom interaction. Consumers can choose when to start and when to stop. . . They can choose the tutors, the topics, the terms. They are savvy purchasers who may want the learning so that they can do the earning or they may buy the product simply for its pleasure or leisure value.

Even if education's effects cannot immediately be translated into economic activity, the deferred economic benefit needs to be assured. So Umberto Eco, announcing the opening of his Scuola Superiore di Studi Umanistici in Bologna, anticipated students' and journalists' questions thus:

> What we say to our students in communication studies is, 'do not ask us what this degree will be useful for – between the time you enrol and when you leave so

many things will have happened that you will know what to invent while we won't'. (quoted, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 4 February, 2000, 10)

In this approach to education, there is a 'subtle conflation of the distinctive values of education with those of training' (Taylor, 2000). Modernisation is merely the guise of a thorough-going marketisation (Rustin, 1998: 99).

It is this economically driven 'vision' that dominates British government thinking on education and which Leadbeater has helped further entrench. Yet there is a void at its heart. As Henry Giroux has eloquently argued with the American case particularly in mind, but it applies equally to Britain: 'knowledge becomes capital – a form of investment in the economy – but appears to have little value when linked to the power of self-definition or the capacities of individuals to expand the scope of freedom' (2000b: 8). None of this is surprising for a Blair government that has swallowed whole the rhetoric of the 'information society', and announced its own 'Information Society Initiative'. But it is a concern that even relatively progressive social visions of public institutional reform within British government circles are blind to how marketization is distorting the very frame of educational debate.

To counter this, we need, like Leadbeater, to focus on the social values that underlie education and citizenship, but on rather different ones.

Towards Common Ground?

If the values which underpin cultural studies are under threat, it is all the more important to state them clearly. I want to set out five values, which, taken together, represent common ground on which cultural studies can stand, or fall, as a discipline. Their apparent obviousness, from the perspective of a democratic view of culture, does not make them any less important to state.

The first principle involves valuing what <u>all</u> members of a 'culture'[6] – any culture – have to say, in their own voice and not as spoken for by others, about their experience of that culture and its productions. What matters is not the achievement of one unified voice that covers over differences, but the multiplication of voices. So Donna Haraway in her Cyborg Manifesto writes of a 'dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia', a mass of different voices and languages (1991: 223). bell hooks has made the same point, but emphasising the danger that others' speech may already have been spoken for. Black cultural studies needs, she suggests, 'new ground':

> a counter-hegemonic marginal space where radical black subjectivity is <u>seen</u>, not overseen by any authoritative Other claiming to know us better than we know ourselves.
>
> (hooks, 1991: 22, original emphasis)

At stake here is much more than a universal right to speak (a tower of Babel without mutual understanding). Necessarily involved is a second principle: the obligation to <u>listen</u> to those other voices.

Cultural studies has to be a space for both speaking <u>and</u> listening. This second principle is often forgotten, but it is crucial. As the postcolonialist critic Gayatri Spivak has put it: 'for me, ''Who should speak?'' is less crucial than '''Who will listen?''' (1990: 59, quoted in Mercer, 1994: 31). This applies to politics, to academic writing, and to teaching. The classroom itself needs to be a space where each person can be confident that their voice will be recognised and valued (hooks, 1994: 186). Yet the practice of listening – of bearing witness (hooks, 1991: 133) – to each other's accounts of living inside culture is only just beginning to be theorised. There are continuities here with what Williams wrote forty years ago at the end of <u>Culture and Society</u>:

> A good community, a living culture, will . . . not only make room for but actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need. <u>Wherever we have started from, we need to listen to others who started from a different position.</u>
>
> (1958: 320, added emphasis)

This principle can apply to many different settings: from the interclass politics of 1950s Britain, to the cultural and racial politics of today's USA, to the complex negotiations in many parts of the world with globally distributed, commodified culture.

Cultural studies, however, should involve not only dialogue, but also reflexivity (this is the third principle), including reflection about the means through which all the voices in that dialogue have been formed, and the conditions which have produced the

space of cultural studies itself. That means reflecting both on ourselves and on the culture around us: does, for instance, that culture satisfy the principles of cultural democracy, which the first two principles encapsulate? <u>Critical</u> reflection on shared culture, of course, carries risks: of being misunderstood as elitist or unconstructive.[7] The risk is unavoidable, but in taking it we must, as John Frow (1995) has argued, be fully self-reflexive about the institutional power which enables us to be publicly critical. Cultural studies is the work of critical intellectuals; it is not itself part of the popular domain which it discusses, and implying otherwise is bad faith.

If such reflexivity is to be effective, it must be theoretically adequate to what it reflects upon. In looking at how voices and cultures are formed, it must adopt a materialist perspective (the fourth principle). Cultural phenomena – and this is a common thread throughout the history of cultural studies, wherever it has been practised – are always material processes, which are far from transparent. Who is represented in them, and how? Who has access to them, and on what terms? And who does not? Studying culture, then, means examining how hierarchies and exclusions, as well as inclusions, work within culture, whether those of race, class, gender, sexuality, education, age or the relations of power that exist between large-scale cultural formations (colonialism, imperialism, economic domination). These questions apply on all social and geographical scales: personal, local, national, global.

These values, while easily stated, do not yield simple answers when applied, in combination, to understanding our lives inside culture. There are dilemmas: how are we to give adequate weight to both speaking and listening, to both self-reflexivity and critical analysis? How can we develop a materialist analysis, which is respectful of the

individual voice? How can we grasp both the complex texture of difference and the large-scale inequalities of power?

Only through open dialogue, which is committed to applying these principles, which leads to the fifth and final principle. Quite simply, the first four principles have to be actively defended through the work of cultural studies itself. There is no automatic consensus in their favour. Cultural democracy, for which they are necessary conditions, is not a 'natural' state, even if we can argue for it on rational grounds. If it is to be more than fine ambition, cultural studies must be an <u>empowering</u> practice, a practice which acts directly upon the conditions of culture to change them.

Cultural studies, in whatever capacity we practise it – as teacher, student, advocate, or critic – involves an enduring ethical commitment which is no more reducible to short-term consumption choices than are the values of democracy itself. In both cases, there are, of course, powerful forces ranged to convince us otherwise, for the enclosure of education for economically defined ends is one aspect of the impoverishment of democracy itself.

Conclusion: Learning (and Teaching) from Experience

Cultural studies' values must be translated into how we pass on the subject to students and beyond them to the wider culture, especially in a commercialised culture which is hostile to those values. In this article, I have tried to radicalise Raymond Williams' vision of cultural studies' values and put it into dialogue with visions from other times and places, but in concluding I want to recall that Williams was concerned also with

the practical question of how to <u>teach</u> culture in modern societies and his writings on this still resonate today.

Important to the British adult education movement in which Williams participated was the principle that education is central to democracy, and must be responsive to the life experiences of those it teaches. Williams' explicit aim in the writings and teaching that later emerged as cultural studies was 'the creation of an educated and participating democracy' (1993a [1961]: 223). He saw democratic principles extending into the classroom:

> Popular education in any worthwhile sense begins from a conception of human beings which . . . insists that no man can judge for another man [sic], that every man has a right to the facts and skills on which real judgement is based, that, in this sense, all education depends on the acknowledgement of an ultimate human equality.
>
> (Williams, 1993b [1959]: 123-24)

This vision remains important today, for example, in the work of the educational and cultural theorist Henry Giroux.

Giroux, like many writers discussed in this article, has developed his approach to cultural studies in response to a crisis, a crisis in educational and cultural authority in contemporary multicultural America as a whole:

The emergence of the electronic media coupled with a diminishing faith in the power of human agency has undermined the traditional visions of schooling and the meaning of pedagogy.

(Giroux, 1996: 73)

Unlike authoritarian attacks on American cultural collapse, Giroux is concerned to understand the real changes in the conditions under which young people now make sense of the culture they live in (not necessarily 'their' culture):

Youth . . . are faced with the task of finding their way through a decentred cultural landscape no longer caught in the grip of a technology of print, closed narrative structures, or the certitude of a secure economic future.

(1996: 74)

In this situation, books (our books!) are just one tool among many, and often not the most relevant. Cultural studies, if is to address these cultural realities, must open up chances for cultural production by the students themselves. Doing cultural studies means, as Giroux explains, getting critical skills, demystifying the processes of representation through examining how meanings are produced, becoming aware of representation's underlying politics. It means 'cultural recovery': recovering histories that you have not heard before (1996: 89), including your own; it means finding a voice.

There are, of course, many ways of finding a voice, and academic education connects with just one of them. But, as an academic practice, cultural studies is unique in that it

treats the process of finding a voice as part of what it studies (Couldry, 2000, chapter 6). This involves, of course, teachable skills, but it is not reducible to 'training', unless we mean training to be active and critical participants in the surrounding culture, training for citizenship. Citizenship, if it is to be more than empty formalism, requires an engagement with the claims of others, with questions of justice. But, as the political philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1992) argues, justice requires always an engagement with 'the concrete other', not merely an abstract, generalised other. For justice and therefore for an adequate notion of citizenship, there must be a commitment to dialogue with concrete others.[8] If we take seriously the material constraints on others, indeed oneself, entering into dialogue and acquiring a voice, then cultural studies' reflexive work becomes part of the dialogue integral to contemporary citizenship as a whole.

Cultural studies should not just study, but embody, the conditions for new forms of democratic political exchange, 'restoring the language of ethics, agency, power and identity' (Giroux, 1996: 53). This is the true moving force of cultural studies as a discipline.[9] That means, always, listening to the experiences of others. Raymond Williams, in a letter written at the end of his work for the WEA, reflected in these terms:

> The tutor . . . may not know the gaps between academic thinking and actual experience among many people; he [the tutor, as opposed to the student] may not know when, in the pressure of experience, a new discipline has to be created. (1993a [1961]: 224).

Cultural studies was that new discipline, and yet we are a long way from achieving, anywhere, the participatory culture for which Williams hoped. Worse, cultural studies must now defend its values against prevailing educational discourses which would deny the very space of dialogue on which Williams' vision relied.

Ironically – but a hidden irony, that we must insist others confront – it is a commodified culture, whose categorical imperative is flexibility and the embracing of ceaseless change, that denies the space for making the one change that would matter: the construction of a common culture, a space for hearing each others' questions about how we belong, with no guarantee of answers. If cultural studies matters, it is because it still values the possibility of such a space.

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[1] Ngugi (1986: 11-13); cf Williams (1989: 7).

[2] As even Williams suggests (1961: 325).

[3] I use the term 'race' in scare quotes in order to register the major critique of 'race' as a socially constructed form of difference that has characterised cultural studies and other subjects in the past decade or so: see especially Appiah (1986), Gates (1986).

[4] For powerful critiques of this notion of education, see Giroux (2000 a and b), Freire (1972, 1999).

[5] Quoted respectively in *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 31 March 2000, 9, and 24 March 2000, 1.

[6] 'Culture' is in scare quotes because we need to reexamine the idea that there are such things as 'cultures', or instead something more complex (see Couldry, 2000: ch. 5).

[7] Cf bell hooks' important reflections on this issue (1991: 1-14).

[8] See also Stevenson (1997).

[9] Tony Bennett (1993) is right that cultural studies, like all disciplines, is constrained by its institutional setting, but I feel he exaggerates the point.