Cultural Studies and History

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... somewhere in the middle of the story. There are, after all, no absolute beginnings. An old (but, of course, by no means the first) version of this argument is Marx's (1978: 595) reminder that people make history, but never in conditions of their own making: that our ability to create new stories (and, in so doing, to remake the world) is always already constrained (and enabled) by the specific social, cultural, political, economic, historical (etc.) circumstances into which we are born.[1] A more recent variation on this theme can be found in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theoretical work on the rhizome: the ever-shifting, rootless multiplicity that they offer as a counterpoint to the linear, genealogical forms of arborescent thought that have dominated (and, in their eyes, damaged) Western culture for far too long. For Deleuze and Guattari, there are no absolute beginnings or *tabulae rasae*: only intermezzos, plateaus, and sprawling networks of fluid linkages.[2] In cultural studies, this idea appears in many places and takes many forms (including ones explicitly derived from Marx and/or Deleuze), but perhaps its most elegant summation is Larry Grossberg's (personal communication, 1999) observation that the beginnings of the stories we tell are always the endings of other stories that we

have not bothered to tell. We always enter the conversation in mid-sentence. Always.

At its best, cultural studies crafts and tells the kinds of stories that differ significantly from those produced by other intellectual formations. One of the most important such differences revolves around the potentially awkward phrase – 'intellectual formation' – that I am using to describe the kind of thing that cultural studies is. There are other terms that might read more gracefully – 'discipline' and 'field' being the most obvious (and most often used) options – but those terms would also be misleading, since one of the key differences that matter here is that cultural studies is *not* a scholarly discipline unto itself. Over the past two or three decades, numerous people and institutions have tried (and continue to try) to stuff the square peg of cultural studies into the round hole of normative disciplinarity anyway (the astonishing proliferation of cultural studies textbooks over the past decade or so is the most obvious example here), but such efforts fundamentally misunderstand what cultural studies is.

A thorough discussion of cultural studies' prickly relationship to the traditional disciplines is beyond the scope of this essay (though we will return to a small portion of that argument shortly).[3] What I want to focus

on instead are cultural studies' answers to the epistemological questions at the heart of this handbook: e.g., how does cultural studies actually know what it claims to know? what does cultural studies consider to be meaningful evidence? and what does it believe that evidence actually demonstrates? To answer these questions meaningfully, however, we first need to wrestle with a more fundamental question: just what is this thing called 'cultural studies'? In part, this extra step is necessary because explaining what cultural studies is (and thus what it *thinks* it needs to know) will make it easier to understand *how* it actually goes about the business of trying to produce that knowledge. More crucially, however, there is already a great deal of misinformation about cultural studies in active circulation (even, unfortunately, among people who claim to do it themselves): enough so that it would be foolish for me simply to treat the definitional question as a given. In fact, the odds are good that what most people think they already know about cultural studies is actually wrong – though this is almost certainly not their fault. There has been a lot of 'the blind leading the blind' when it comes to cultural studies (see Rodman, 1997) and those who have been led astray can hardly be blamed for the poor guidance they have received.

Over the years, a lot of people have tried to define cultural studies,[4] and even a casual examination of such efforts demonstrates that cultural studies is a much trickier enterprise to explain than most traditional academic disciplines. Reading actual cultural studies scholarship may actually exacerbate the average newcomer's confusion since the range of such work is incredibly diverse and varied. Let us take a very quick glance at five major examples of cultural studies research (chosen not quite at random):

- Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000): a complex, thickly layered theoretical argument – with extended detours through both hip-hop and Nazi Germany – about the tight (and perhaps unbreakable) connections between the concepts of race, nation, and fascism.
- Lawrence Grossberg's *Caught in the Crossfire* (2005): an empirically grounded analysis of the ongoing (and largely unacknowledged) 'war on kids' in the US, which ultimately concludes that children have become an accidental casualty of a systematic effort by neoconservative forces to undo contemporary forms of modernity.
- Meaghan Morris' *Too Soon Too Late* (1998): a collection of essays on culture, history, media, and politics that covers topics ranging from suburban shopping centers to former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, from popular images of King Kong to a deconstruction of touristic metaphors for scholarly work.
- Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books* (1997): a far-reaching, multi-method examination of the Book-of-the-Month Club that weaves together extensive archival research, critical literary analysis of selected Club titles, autobiographical narratives, and an ethnographic study of the Club's editorial offices.
- Carol Stabile's *White Victims, Black Villains* (2006): a history of crime journalism and policy in the US that demonstrates the fundamental interrelationship of both major media institutions and law enforcement agencies in forging a cultural and legal climate that fetishizes white womanhood and demonizes black masculinity.

All five of these books are examples of important cultural studies research but, on the surface anyway, none of them appears to resemble any of the others in ways that would make it easy for someone who is not already a semi-fluent cultural studies practitioner to understand how or why they are all part of the same intellectual formation. They don't share objects, methods, disciplinary frameworks, or theoretical underpinnings in any obvious way.

To a large extent, this is because cultural studies has never centered itself around the sorts of core features that most disciplines use to define themselves: it has no primary research object, theoretical framework, or methodological approach to call its own. As a result, there is nothing that works as a 'close enough' soundbite definition (e.g., 'psychology is the study of the human mind') that might help to make cultural studies somewhat intelligible (or at least initially

manageable) to newcomers. The most common such shorthand explanations – e.g., 'cultural studies is the study of popular culture,' or 'cultural studies is a particular form of critical theory' – are ultimately more misleading than they are helpful, even by the very low standards of the soundbite genre. While a significant amount of cultural studies scholarship has focused on popular culture and/or embraced various strands of critical theory, there has been just as much (and perhaps even more) work done in the name of cultural studies for which such claims cannot legitimately be made. All five of the books mentioned above, for example, engage with 'theory' and 'the popular' somewhere along the way ... but only Radway's takes a form of popular culture as its primary focus, and only Gilroy's wrestles with intellectual abstractions at enough length to render it 'theory-heavy.'

Nonetheless, if we are going to try and engage with the question of cultural studies and its relationship to historical theory, we have to enter the territory somewhere. And so, drawing on Stuart Hall's (1992: 281) claim (itself derived from the writings of Antonio Gramsci) that the intellectual's job is both 'to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know, not just to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly' and to communicate that knowledge effectively 'to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class,' I offer the following definition:

> Cultural studies is an interlocking set of leftist intellectual and political practices. Its central purpose is twofold: (1) to produce detailed, contextualized analyses of the ways that power and social relations are created, structured, and maintained through culture; and (2) to circulate those analyses in public forums suitable to the tasks of pedagogy, provocation, and political intervention.

I do not have space here to unpack all the pieces of that definition in full (see Rodman, forthcoming), but I do want to map out four key characteristics of cultural studies implicit in that definition, with an eye on how they each help to shape cultural studies' approach to scholarly research, evidence, and analysis: (1) its overtly political nature, (2) its interdisciplinarity, (3) its constructivism, and (4) its radical contextualism.

POLITICS

Arguably, cultural studies' overtly political nature is what distinguishes it most sharply from traditional academic disciplines. Almost any discipline, after all, can boast that the best scholarship produced in its name involves 'detailed, contextualized analyses.' And most disciplines will at least claim to care about sharing the fruits of their intellectual labors with a broader public. But very few disciplines openly embrace political agendas of any sort, nor do they typically take 'political intervention' to be a common part of their disciplinary missions.[5] (For that matter, 'mission' is a far more directive, politically charged term than most disciplines would claim for themselves.) Of course, even in the most 'neutral' and/or 'objective' disciplines, there are scholars – often prominent ones – who are unabashedly open about the political stakes of their research, but such examples merely represent the ability of individuals to carve out a viable space for political work in fields that, taken as a whole, refuse to define themselves in political terms. Cultural studies, on the other hand, works the other way around: i.e., it *begins* with a strong political commitment of some sort – there is simply no such thing as a politically neutral cultural studies – and then expects individual practitioners to pursue intellectual work that is compatible with that political mission.[6]

The primacy of cultural studies' desire for political engagement is crucial here. Stuart Hall once described the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham (arguably, the earliest site where cultural studies actually traveled under that name)[7] as 'the locus to which we

retreated when that conversation [i.e., the one around the British New Left of the late 1950s] in the open world could no longer be continued: it was politics by other means' (Hall, 1990: 12, emphasis in original). Hall's words can be understood as an exhortation for cultural studies to retain a sharp political edge as it pursues its academic projects, but they are also a pointed reminder that the university was not a place where cultural studies had ever intended to take up permanent residence. If cultural studies has become a primarily academic enterprise since the CCCS was founded – and, arguably, this is the case, even if that is not necessarily a good thing – it has done so accidentally and tangentially, rather than by design.

This is not to deny the value of academic work, nor is it to suggest that cultural studies somehow does not belong in the university at all. Far from it. It is, however, a way of suggesting that cultural studies' approach to scholarship begins from a very different set of assumptions than those commonly underpinning traditional disciplines. Cultural studies is not driven by a sort of encyclopedic desire to produce 'knowledge for knowledge's sake,' or to amass an exhaustive body of scholarly information in the abstract belief that such a storehouse of research will eventually prove itself useful to somebody somewhere. It does not assume that its chosen research objects are somehow intrinsically or self-evidently worthy of study. And it is not interested in the sort of 'internal' projects that matter greatly to researchers working within a particular discipline, but not at all to anyone outside that tiny circle of scholars.[8] Instead, cultural studies is driven by the desire to intervene productively in social, cultural, and political struggles in the larger world, especially insofar as it is able to do so on behalf of (or alongside) those segments of the population who are unjustly disenfranchised, oppressed, and/or silenced.

For example, describing the major reasons that cultural studies should take popular culture seriously as a research object, Stuart Hall writes:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won and lost *in* that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply 'expressed.' But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why 'popular culture' matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it. (1981: 239)

Hall's larger argument here suggests that popular culture is *not* simply the (or even 'a') natural research object for cultural studies. Instead, the worthiness of popular culture is contingent on its role in the political project(s) at stake for cultural studies in any given context ... and, crucially, the nature of those political projects is not guaranteed in advance. In the essay cited above, Hall is most immediately concerned with constituting 'a socialist culture,' but cultural studies as a whole is not inherently or necessarily a socialist project, and Hall would be one of the first (and one of the loudest) to argue that cultural studies' relationship to socialism has always been more of a critical engagement with the Marxist problematic than a doctrinaire adherence to a party line.

This last point helps to underscore a crucial aspect of cultural studies' political nature. In much the same way that there is no predefined set of cultural studies research objects, theories, or methodologies, cultural studies' politics are not easy to predict except, perhaps, in the very broadest and most general of ways. While cultural studies has historically been a leftist – and even a radical – endeavor, that categorization does not help us very much in predicting which political issues cultural studies will actually take up in any given context, or how it will go about doing so. Cultural studies might safely be said to be committed to a variety of progressive political goals: it is hard, for example, to imagine a cultural studies worthy of the name that, taken as a whole, is not actively invested in ending racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, economic injustice, and so on. Those broad commitments, however, do not automatically

translate into predictable analyses of specific 'real world' phenomena. Partially, of course, this is because all of those large problems are themselves slippery, shape-shifting, moving targets. Racism, for example, operates in significantly different ways in different geopolitical and historical circumstances, and so what might work as a productive cultural studies analysis of institutionalized racism at a particular point in space and time (e.g., the UK in the mid-1970s: Hall et al., 1978) will not necessarily work well (or even at all) in a different context (e.g., the US in the mid-1990s: Gray, 2005). Even within a particular historical conjuncture, cultural studies recognizes that the multiple fronts on which, ideally, it would struggle with equal vigor are rarely aligned in such a way that cultural studies practitioners' 'predictable' political inclinations can actually be applied to real cases in neat and predictable fashion. A progressive intervention with respect to the politics of gender and sexuality, for instance, may inadvertently reinforce existing forms of racism and classism (see Rodman, 2006).

Implicit in this last point is the notion that cultural studies understands its political and intellectual work to be inextricably intertwined, with each informing and shaping the other in vital ways. While cultural studies necessarily 'begins' (insofar as we can pretend, for a moment, that one can identify an absolute beginning for any given cultural studies project) with questions arising from its 'real world' political concerns, it also refuses to let its politics serve as a substitute for rigorous intellectual work. The world, after all, is rarely as neatly ordered a place as our politics might tell us it is. As such, if your politics tell you the answers to your research questions in advance – e.g., you already know, before actually doing the relevant research, that Hollywood films are racist or that government policies privilege the rich – then you are *not* doing cultural studies. Put a slightly different way, cultural studies' scholarly research should serve as a genuine test of its political values and beliefs: not merely an automatic affirmation of them.

Understanding cultural studies as a necessarily and explicitly political enterprise does not, in and of itself, explain how it goes about the business of gathering, assessing, and analyzing scholarly evidence. But it *does* help us understand the kinds of research questions that cultural studies deems worthy of asking – i.e., questions that require the intellectual project to pass the 'so what?' test as it might be applied by non-specialists (and, perhaps more crucially, by non-academics) – and thus it begins to frame an answer to the question of how cultural studies determines what actually counts as legitimate evidence.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Undoubtedly, part of the reason why cultural studies is so frequently understood as just another (sub)discipline has to do with its longstanding presence within the university. The earliest example of something explicitly called 'cultural studies' was the founding of an academic unit (the CCCS at the University of Birmingham in 1964), the majority of the work done in its name since that time has been produced by professional scholars and/or graduate students, and its most widely recognized manifestations continue to appear in traditional academic settings (e.g., scholarly journals, books, conferences, departments, etc.). So it is easy to see why – especially to casual observers – cultural studies might appear to be nothing more than a relatively new form of scholarly work. It waddles like a duck, it quacks like a duck...

... or does it? Even in its academic variations, cultural studies refuses to play by the sorts of rules that traditional disciplines normally use to mark their territories. For most disciplines, one can generally apply some relatively straightforward litmus test(s) to determine what does (and does not) belong within their borders: certain research objects, methodologies, and/or theoretical frameworks are clearly on the inside, while others are just as unmistakably on the outside. Even

the fuzzy cases (and every discipline has them) often simply underscore which rules truly matter when it comes to distinguishing neighboring disciplines from one another. For example, film becomes a legitimate research object in the disciplinary context of English because of a particular set of analytic tools that treat film as a form of dramatic narrative and artistic storytelling – i.e., something akin to literature – rather than as a type of mass media (which would place film more squarely in communication's territory). So it is not so much film (as a particular kind of object) that 'belongs' to English as it is a set of theoretical and methodological approaches that places a particular kind of film scholarship within English's territory.

Given what we have already established with respect to cultural studies' unconventional ways, it is probably not surprising that one of the major things that marks it as different from 'normal' disciplinary practices is the degree to which it ignores traditional disciplinary boundaries. To be sure, few (if any) individual cultural studies scholars manage to work outside of institutional settings completely, and those settings are typically themselves shaped in significant ways by disciplinary norms: we are trained as communication scholars or historians or anthropologists (etc.), we occupy faculty positions within discipline-specific departments, and these disciplinary relationships inevitably have an impact on the types of intellectual work that we can actually do (Striphas, 1998). Scholars make research, but never in circumstances entirely of our own choosing ...

Viewed as a whole, however, cultural studies is far more fluid and variable than that. Partially, this is because cultural studies is not wholly – or even mostly – contained with any single 'parent' discipline in the way that, say 'media studies' might be considered a particular specialization within the discipline of communication, or that 'twentieth-century British literature' might be understood as a subfield of English. So all those disciplinarily situated cultural studies scholars are still scattered across almost the full range of the humanities and social sciences (though, to be sure, their distribution across that terrain is far from even), and the specific forms that their work takes vary significantly from one disciplinary context to the next. Perhaps more importantly, though, individual cultural studies practitioners who formally work in the context of specific disciplines cannot – and, if they are actually doing cultural studies, do not – view the borders of their 'home' disciplines as inviolable barriers. If anything, cultural studies has tended to question the rationales for the existence of disciplinary boundaries – why, for example, is there a sharp disciplinary separation between who studies 'literature' and who studies 'society,' as if the two do not necessarily and inevitably inform one another in significant ways? – and it has 'made the rounds' of the disciplines, 'poaching' freely and willfully from most (if not all) of the humanities (Hall, 1990: 16).

Faced with a particular research object, then, cultural studies does not simply assume that traditional disciplinary approaches to that object (assuming that those already exist) will effectively answer the questions it wants and/ or needs to ask about the object. Rather than determining (for example) what 'a good sociologist' would do and then being satisfied simply to do good sociology, cultural studies recognizes that the proper determinant of what research questions most need to be asked and which research methods are most suitable to answering those questions is *not* 'the discipline' (whatever that might be), but rather a combination of the *object* and the real world *context* in which the object is situated (neither of which is likely to be much concerned with disciplinary borders anyway). Put a slightly different way, cultural studies goes where it needs to in order to answer the questions the world poses – even if that approach forces it to cross the artificial borders created between disciplines. A cultural studies scholar working from a disciplinary base of, say, anthropology may find that her most important research questions simply cannot be answered without engaging

with economic issues ... and, if she is truly doing cultural studies, she cannot (and will not) back away from those questions solely on the grounds that she is not formally trained as an economist.

Most importantly, however, cultural studies' approach to interdisciplinary work is never cheap or easy (Grossberg, 1995). Part of what makes cultural studies' brand of interdisciplinarity *radical* is the rigor with which it approaches the disciplines that it 'raids.' Our hypothetical cultural studies anthropologist (for example) does not live up to those interdisciplinary ideals simply by sprinkling a handful of citations from economics journals into her 'ordinary' research: she needs to engage the disciplinary problematics of economics 'deeply and profoundly' (Hall, 1992: 281). At the same time, however, she cannot simply assume that, as a discipline, economics has already managed to fully answer all the questions that have led her in that direction. The disciplines from which cultural studies 'poaches,' after all, have their own blind spots, biases, and shortcomings. As such, ideally, the challenge that cultural studies poses to economics (or any other discipline) is that it might offer valuable insights about the discipline and its primary object(s) of study that are not readily achievable by scholars working entirely within the discipline's existing confines (Grossberg, 2006, 2010; Hall, 1990).

In essence, then, cultural studies' efforts at scholarly research are always attempts to do the impossible. Having located a particular research object that bears further investigation, the cultural studies scholar then asks of that object, 'what does this have to do with *everything else*?' (Hall, 2007). Cultural studies' impulse is *not* to find ways to simplify the object so that it becomes easier to analyze, or so that it can be shoehorned into the theoretical and/or methodological frameworks already favored by a particular discipline. Rather, its impulse is to examine the object in ways that, as much as possible, approximate the complex nature of its existence *and* the intricate network of mutually determining relationships with the larger world. One might say that cultural studies came away from its messy and awkward encounter with Althusserian Marxism (see Hall, 1992) by taking the notion of overdetermination more seriously than Althusser himself did. Like Althusser, cultural studies recognizes that there a variety of interlocking forces (cultural, economic, political, etc.) at play in the world that cannot simply be reduced to one another ... but, unlike Althusser, cultural studies is not willing or able to still assume that the economic (or anything else, for that matter) still manages to be the determining factor that, 'in the final instance,' somehow matters the most.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Cultural studies takes it as a given that there is a real world out there – one that exists independently of human thought and experience – but it also assumes that people have no unmediated access to that world: that everything that we think we know about the world is shaped in fundamental and unavoidable ways by the culture(s) in which we live. While cultural studies rejects – for many reasons – the notion that a completely objective and unbiased understanding of the world is possible, it nonetheless recognizes that there is necessarily a certain (if variable) level of intersubjective overlap in how people understand the world around them. All of us 'know' certain things to be true about the world because of such intersubjective overlaps (even if such overlap is inevitably imperfect and incomplete). There are, to be sure, multiple institutions and forces that contribute to that intersubjectivity: language, education, government, religion, and the family are all prominent examples (and, at various moments, past and present, cultural studies has taken all of these on as significant sites for research and analysis). In the late capitalist societies where cultural studies has been the most prominent, however, one of the most pervasive, significant, and rapidly shifting such forces over the past half century

or so has been the mass media. As such, it is not surprising that a lot (though, again, by no means all) of the work done in cultural studies engages with the media's role in giving a particular shape to the world as we know it.

In early forms of communication and media studies, the media were often treated as if they were a sort of ancillary institution that simply reported on what happened in the 'real' world: i.e., first, there is reality and then, after the fact, there are mediated representations of reality. In this paradigm, the scholar's primary job is to analyze those representations for whatever inaccuracies and/or biases may have crept into the allegedly simple process of moving information from point A to point B. What cultural studies argues (bearing in mind that this insight is neither unique nor original to cultural studies) is that this is not how media representations work at all. That, in fact, since we can never have unmediated access to the 'true' nature of reality (whatever access we have is *always* filtered through the lens of culture), we need to understand media representations as *constitutive* of reality as we know it (Carey, 1989; Hall, 1997).

Here, we might recall Hall's comments on why popular culture matters to cultural studies, and extrapolate a comparable rationale for cultural studies' ongoing (which is not to say 'obligatory') interest in mass media. Cultural studies does not analyze media texts (journalistic or otherwise) simply to figure out 'what really happened' in the world. Insofar as accurate accounts of events can be (re)constructed and/or grossly distorted representations can be unmasked for what they are, of course, cultural studies may very well be interested in taking on such tasks... but it also recognizes that the world we inhabit is *constructed* out of discourse (not just represented by it) and that, as such, an objectivist focus on 'what really happened' often misses the forest for the trees.

As such, one of the recurring research questions for cultural studies is that of *how* particular (discursive) realities come into being. In particular, cultural studies frequently

approaches this question using the concept of 'articulation': a process by which otherwise unrelated cultural phenomena – practices, beliefs, texts, etc. – come to be linked together in meaningful and *seemingly* natural ways. As it is used in cultural studies, articulation is perhaps most clearly explained by means of an analogy of a tractor-trailer truck, which the British refer to as:

> an 'articulated' lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. 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. (Hall, 1986: 53)[9]

Articulation is also cultural studies' attempt to explain how something that seems to be ethereal and ephemeral – language, discourse, media representations, etc. – can nonetheless acquire enough solidity and stability to have very real consequences in the material world. The recognition that a given phenomenon is socially constructed (rather than natural) does not obligate cultural studies to see that phenomenon as somehow 'unreal.' To the contrary, cultural studies recognizes that the strength of certain articulations – i.e., the degree to which they are repeatedly and pervasively reinforced, and thus more difficult to break – gives certain socially constructed concepts considerable material impact. Race, for example, is such a concept – there is nothing biological, genetic, scientific, or natural about the multitude of ways that human beings have imposed racial categories onto the world's population – but those discursive fictions clearly have a very real impact on the material conditions of people's lives.

RADICAL CONTEXTUALISM

I noted above that a combination of the research object and its context helps to determine the appropriate research questions

for any given cultural studies project. But that formulation – complicated as it might be – is actually still a bit too simple, as the actual relationship between object and context is far messier than that. As Larry Grossberg puts it:

> An event or practice (even a text) does not exist apart from the forces of the context that constitute it as what it is. Obviously, context is not merely background but the very conditions of possibility of something. It cannot be relegated to a series of footnotes or to an after-thought, to the first or last chapter. It is both the beginning and the end of cultural studies, although the two are not the same point. (1995: 12)

Put a bit too simply, the cultural studies scholar recognizes two key facts about 'the context' for any given research object. First, she recognizes that context matters immensely: that the object's significance depends on the specific historical circumstances in which it is produced, circulated, consumed, and so on. 'Rock 'n' roll' (for example) means something different in the US in 1956 than it does in the UK in 1963, and neither of these is the same as 'rock 'n' roll' in Iraq in 2010. But she also recognizes that 'the context' is not an objective phenomenon that is simply 'out there' somewhere, waiting to be recognized for what it is by the savvy researcher. Instead, 'the context' has to be actively constructed by the researcher. In other words (and returning to the topic of articulation from a slightly different angle), the cultural studies scholar recognizes that the very same historical facts can be stitched together to create very different stories depending on the context(s) in which the scholar chooses to place those facts ... and that there are always a multiplicity of 'legitimate' contexts available for the scholar to choose from. For example, as I have argued elsewhere:

> We can tell very different versions of 'the same' story – i.e., the tale of Elvis' rise to national prominence in 1956 – depending on which historical facts we decide to use in framing and supporting our narrative... If we're especially concerned with the racial politics of the rise of rock 'n' roll, then it might be especially important for us to pay attention to who originally wrote and recorded the various songs on which Elvis built his career, how faithful his versions of those songs were to the spirit of the originals, what the racial demographics of the audiences who bought those records were, who did and didn't receive royalty payments on sales of those records, whether Elvis' success helped boost the popularity of the black artists whose music he performed, and so on. On the other hand, if we're more interested in the rise of youth culture that rock 'n' roll helped to bring about, then we're more likely ask questions about the age of Elvis' audiences, how links were forged between rock 'n' roll and other youth-friendly aspects of the leisure and entertainment industries (e.g., soda shops, drive-ins, etc.), the rise in disposable income among post-war teens, and so on. Neither of these sets of historical questions is somehow 'wrong,' but each will nevertheless put a very different spin on the story that results. (Rodman, 1999: 41)

One of the most significant consequences of radical contextualism for cultural studies scholarship is that it frequently – perhaps even inevitably – produces genuine surprises for the researcher(s) involved. The mutually constitutive interplay between object and context means that, ultimately, both are moving targets. And so cultural studies research projects often reach conclusions that were not at all what the researcher(s) in question originally expected – or even might have imagined.

For instance, the CCCS research team (Hall et al., 1978) who set out to examine the 'moral panic' over mugging that arose in England in the 1970s began from the assumption that they were examining a pattern of politically significant distortions in media representations of (what seemed to be) a new form of street crime ... but their efforts to establish the contextual framework most appropriate to understanding that phenomenon led them in directions that transformed their project significantly. It gradually became apparent that their ostensible research object (media discourses around 'mugging') was actually one of the earliest visible manifestations of a much broader, deeper shift in

British politics – the rise of Thatcherite 'authoritarian populism' – that few (if any) political observers had actually recognized.

CONCLUSION

Stuart Hall has recently claimed (2007) that history is the one major discipline in the humanities that cultural studies has not taken seriously enough. And there is certainly a case to be made here. In 2001, for instance, the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* put out a special issue on 'History and Cultural Studies'... which was peculiar mostly because of the apparent *need* for such a thing. It would presumably have seemed unnecessary – maybe even redundant – to assemble a themed issue on cultural studies and English or communication, or sociology: not because those disciplines are somehow coterminous with cultural studies, but because, by the late date of 2001, there would have been nothing particularly novel about focusing on the relationship between cultural studies and any of those fields. And while no one has conducted a formal census of where cultural studies lives in the contemporary university, my sense is that history really is underrepresented in the list of disciplines where cultural studies scholars formally take up residence. There are undoubtedly good (or at least understandable) reasons for this gap. The specific circumstances that fueled cultural studies' dramatic growth over the past 20 years or so undoubtedly favored some disciplines and neglected others – to the point where historical accident arguably mattered as much as any 'obvious' or 'natural' intellectual fit between cultural studies and specific disciplinary formations.

That said, it is worth remembering that cultural studies' relationship to the disciplines has always taken different configurations in different national contexts. Cultural studies' extended tussles with sociology over the years owe a lot to the prominence of sociology in the British academy, and to the ways that cultural studies was often seen to be treading on sociology's turf (Hall, 1990). Cultural studies' love–hate relationship with English arguably owes a comparable debt to the latter's status as the alpha-discipline of the humanities in the US. But, as Meaghan Morris (1997) points out, in Australia, it is history, rather than English, that is generally taken to be the core discipline of the humanities, and Australian historians have generally been more willing to engage with the sorts of theoretical challenges posed by cultural studies than their British counterparts. As such, Australian versions of cultural studies have had a much closer (if not necessarily close) relationship to history as a discipline than has been the case elsewhere around the world.

More crucial, however, is the fact that, wherever it has been practiced, and regardless of whether the scholars involved have been formally trained as historians or not (and, typically, they have not been), cultural studies has arguably *always* been invested in questions of historicity, even when its ostensible focus has been contemporary culture. If nothing else, cultural studies' radical contextualism is also the characteristic that frequently makes 'doing cultural studies' look an awful lot like 'doing history.' Or, perhaps more accurately, it is the characteristic that necessarily forces cultural studies to engage with questions of historicity. And so we might actually be able to reframe cultural studies as an ongoing series of attempts to write a political history of the present: to make sense of the complexities of contemporary culture, to use that knowledge to tell better stories about the world than those we already have, and to use those 'better stories' as a way to build a better world for all of us.

NOTES

1   Arguably, what Marx means by 'history' in this context revolves around actual events in the world, rather than the stories that we tell about those events … but, just as arguably, his comments work well both ways.

2 For Deleuze and Guattari, arborescent models of the world are built around central points of origin and, as a result, 'arborescent thought' is inherently essentialist and deterministic in nature. The rhizome, on the other hand, has no singular beginning or ending, and rhizomatic thought attempts to grapple with the world as a shifting multiplicity of interconnected and overlapping forces. For more on the rhizome as it relates to questions of history and historiography, see Rodman (1993).

3 A variety of takes on this issue can be found in Nelson and Gaonkar (1996).

4 Some of the best of these efforts are collected in Grossberg (1997) and Storey (1996). Other notable examples include Bérubé (1994), Felski (2005), Hall (1990, 1992), Morris (1997), Rodman (1997), and Striphas (1998).

5 Significantly, the major potential exceptions to this rule are the various 'area studies' disciplines centered around historically marginalized populations – women's studies, African-American studies, GLBT studies, and so on: i.e., disciplines that were explicitly founded as political acts and that self-consciously took on politically charged subject matter as their core objects of analysis.

6 This fact doesn't prevent many apolitical scholars from claiming that their work is cultural studies – and, in turn, this phenomenon contributes to the broader confusion about what cultural studies actually is. I would suggest – or, more bluntly, insist – that cultural studies needs to be more diligent about calling out such claims for the misappropriations of the 'brand name' that they are.

7 Virtually any 'big' claim about the nature and history of cultural studies is subject to dispute, and pointing to 'the Birmingham school' as cultural studies' point of origin is no exception. Whatever alternate narratives one might choose to consider for where and when something that deserves to be called 'cultural studies' first appeared, however, the fact remains that the first such candidate that actually bears the 'brand name' is *almost* certainly the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. There is some evidence (Carey, 2006) to indicate that, at roughly the same time that the CCCS was getting off the ground in the UK, James Carey independently coined the term as a description for the work he was doing in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois.

8 Every discipline has its share of scholars who choose to work on questions that are entirely 'inside baseball' in nature: i.e., projects that wrestle with theoretical or methodological problems that generally only matter to other scholars working in the same field. If these projects ever truly matter outside the disciplines from which they spring, it is in a sort of attenuated, 'trickle down' fashion where (for example) clarifying what Scholar X *really* meant when s/he introduced Theoretical Concept Y *might*, at some unspecified and indeterminable future moment in time, allow other scholars to apply Scholar X's work to some 'real world' phenomenon in new and valuable ways.
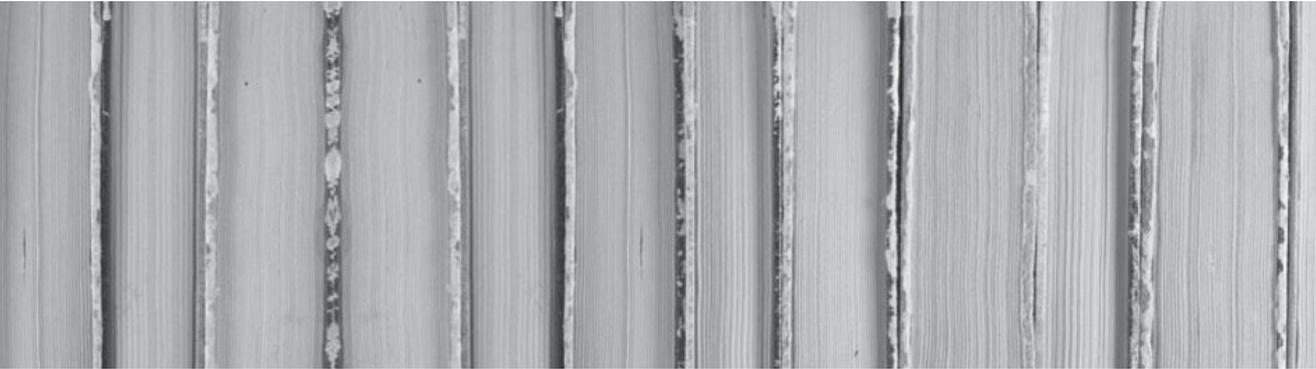
9 Also see Grossberg (1997), McLeod (2001: 12–16), Rodman (1996: 24–6, 158–60).

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