

From 1990 – 2004: Reflections on movements in Cultural Studies
2004 Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference
University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

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This paper contains some reflections on the 1990 Cultural Studies conference held at the University of Illinois and in relation to the 2004 Crossroads conference, some observations on where I perceive cultural studies appears to have moved or is moving. I note at the outset that I had the privilege of attending the 1990 conference as an audience member. I also note that at the 1990 conference I was fourteen years younger and more actively involved in the research and teaching enterprise of cultural studies than is now the case.

On the subject of age, on the second day of the 2004 conference, one of the presenters announced her birthdate in the course of her paper and I recall musing that she would not have been into cultural studies, or much else academic at the time of the 1990 conference, as she would have been a mere 11 years old. However, at sometime in the next decade of her life she would have become aware that there was such a field as cultural studies and become sufficiently versed in, and committed to the field so as to make at this conference, a very fine presentation of her PhD dissertation which is currently in progress. It is my observation that the relative youth of participants is a significant difference between this and the 1990 conference and this is a healthy development, it seems to me. There is on hand, a vibrant next generation of cultural studies scholars and they have through this conference, actively sought out one of the key platforms of the field of cultural studies, been given access and made excellent use of the opportunity.

The 1990 conference was by its nature a different kind of gathering to this one. I saw it as a kind of stocktake and debate about the current state and future directions of cultural studies among the leading proponents of the field in all its myriad expressions – marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, postmodern and so on, drawing from disciplines and fields of study such as sociology, anthropology, communication, media studies, history, popular culture and literary criticism.

To put what I have to say into context, at the time I attended the 1990 conference, I was working in a School of Leisure, Sport and Tourism at the University of Technology, Sydney and using a broad cultural studies framework to teach leisure studies, popular culture and research methods classes. In the research area I was using a mixture of interpretive sociology and cultural studies to inform projects inquiring into sporting riots, gambling, casino development and more recently, museums. My qualifications to do this rested on a PhD from the University of Illinois in the sociology of leisure and what were in the 1980s, popular Australian readings of the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. *Policing the Crisis, Resistance Through Rituals* and the work of Angela McRobbie were key texts to which I was introduced, to gain access to the perspective of cultural studies for, apart from programs at a handful of Australian universities, there were no clear institutional pathways to the knowledge and perspectives of cultural studies. However, readings with a group of like minded colleagues and a training in interpretive sociology were sufficient to allow a reasonable working knowledge of

cultural studies in the British perspective, transformed and adapted to the Australian situation.

In listening on Saturday to the 23 year old to whom I have just referred, using an autoethnographic approach and the work of people such as Simon Frith and Roland Barthes, she is, at a tender age, already well versed in the language, research methods, questions and literature of a particular cultural studies tradition and this I think points to one of the key developments in cultural studies since the 1990 conference. That is, that there are now more academic programs focused on, or incorporating cultural studies to allow students to pick up the perspective at an early stage in their studies and move through a series of steps to research degree status. Cultural studies has become more institutionalized in a number of different academic settings and issues associated with the institutionalization of Cultural Studies were well aired in a session on the second morning of the conference. I recall in 1990, that there were some strong voices of resistance to the institutionalization of cultural studies in the academy, as with this came the possibility of co-option or corruption of an essentially, anti-establishment cultural studies project. The discussion within the 2004 conference seemed to be about how to work within the academy - question it - but work within it nonetheless to do the varied teaching, research and consultancy work of cultural studies.

While there are now more pathways to gain access to cultural studies and research degrees for students who wish to specialize in this field, I want to make a small plea for keeping the access open to students who do not have a solid background in cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, literary analysis or social analysis more generally. I am referring here to students who are doing professional degrees in areas such as business, sport, leisure, tourism, nursing, medicine, architecture, information technology, engineering or a host of other such degrees. In my country - Australia - ten to fifteen years of retraction of government funding has led to a decline in the humanities and social sciences and an increase in programs which are instrumental in orientation and for which substantial fees can be charged. Whereas some years ago, there might have been a smattering of compulsory social science/humanities subjects in professional degrees, this is increasingly less the case. In this new environment, degree programs are pared down so that courses/subjects which are not directly relevant to the professional objectives of the program, are deleted, or moved into an elective pool. Students in such programs are of course, focused on the object of their degree in a structured way through a swag of compulsory courses/subjects. These degrees provide students with little background in the social sciences, let alone specific training in the history and perspectives of cultural studies. Students may explore different perspectives in their course, but the means of doing this is increasingly through the elective courses/subjects applicable to the program.

However, to the extent that there is a political, social action component to the cultural studies project, it seems useful to try to inject cultural studies into the elective areas of professional degrees. It is in these professional programs, at least in Australia, where the majority of students lie and the point to be made here is to try to influence from within – ‘get into bed with the devil’ – a phrase which has been used a few times in the 2004 conference.

But how to get non-cultural studies students interested in, and sufficiently enough versed with the literature for there to be some understanding of what it is all about. In my own experience, a majority of students are attracted to popular culture; their attention is immediately grasped when popular culture enters the classroom because at least the subject matter is recognizable to them. A theoretical treatise on the injustices of multi national capital, the class structure and cultural contradictions of developing nations or the suppression of a particular group, in the absence of something which is attractive to non cultural studies students is unlikely to capture their attention.

There is a point here, evident in the papers and discussion of Rosalind Brunt, Janice Radway and others at the 1990 conference, that popular culture – television, music, film, magazines – provides a ready made vehicle to capture the attention of different audiences and begin a critical inquiry into issues associated with the particular popular vehicle in question. Meghan Morris's keynote presentation at the 2004 conference was a good example of the use of the popular – expressive culture – as a relevant and 'attention grabbing vehicle' to say something serious about geopolitical events at a particular place and time in history. The future cultural studies computer programmer, who embeds a cultural studies perspective into computer games such as *Diablo*, *Counterstrike* or *Battlefield*, or whatever the current 'hot' computer games are, will make a great advance in the pedagogy of cultural studies, and he/she will make a dollar as well! Here is another reason to keep open the dialogue with the professional areas. As several presenters have announced in the last few days, the current forms of communication through media such as video/computer and interactive devices are powerful in the extreme and academics and teachers of all ages have a difficult task to compete with the entertainment sway of the new media.

In favouring the popular, I don't wish to deny the use and analysis of elite forms of culture which by the way were the object of analysis in at least three papers in the 1990 conference (Shakespeare, aesthetics and art history, Grossberg et al 1992:11) but in my experience, there is a better chance of capturing the attention of non cultural studies students through pedagogy which uses popular culture as the means to the particular message. Some presenters in the 1990 conference presented examples of the media which were the subject of their analyses (Crimp, 1992: 117 – portraits of people with aids; Mani, 1992: 392 – eyewitness accounts of widow burning; Chabram-Dernersesian, 1992: 81) but they were relatively few in comparison to the many cultural forms used in this conference to both illustrate the phenomenon under study and also to convey a message or argument. We have in this conference been exposed to standard paper reading, poetry, song, drama, dance, autoethnography and no doubt other expressive forms of presentation. This I think is a big shift from the early 1990s – the exploring of new ways to present ideas and engage audiences. It certainly makes for a much more interesting and culturally rich conference.

At one of the sessions on the first afternoon of the conference, a man in the audience made a comment in the discussion period. He first indicated that he had wandered in off the street, that he was not at the conference and wasn't a cultural studies person. His question was "How can cultural studies translate what it says into something which can be understood by people outside of cultural studies?" Perhaps this was a set up, but the question is entirely relevant and if 'our man off the street' was authentic in pursuing his question and paid his fees to go along to the sessions of the conference, I believe that he would have heard a number of presentations which would have been

immediately accessible to him – and which would have moved him as he seemed to like what he heard in the session he attended.

In 1990 I recall a small uprising of delegates partway into the conference. The conference had been organized to facilitate the production of the 1992 book titled *Cultural Studies* and the organizers had wanted to capture on tape, all of the discussion which followed each paper, in order that the book would carry some of the flavour of the conference (I believe it carries a lot of that flavour). I don't recall clearly the details of the disquiet but some of the delegates became restless and wanted more say and participation in the conference. As I recall, those who spoke out also didn't want to have to deal with the strict microphone etiquette used in the discussion period. I recall Larry Grossberg being called upon to speak to these issues which included accusations of favouring the keynote speakers, of organizing the conference in an imposing, terrorizing space and of using surveillance like technology to record sessions. I don't recall the outcome of the interchange however the 1992 *Cultural Studies* collection is a widely used and landmark text in the area.

And what about the comparison with the 2004 conference? Has cultural studies evolved in its capacity to deal with conflict and opposing views? On the second last day of the conference, there was also some expression of disquiet and disappointment in the plenary session, 'Contesting Empires' held in the Krannert Center. Following the three plenary papers, a question was raised as to whether this was a genuine international conference and whether it suffered from a domination by North American issues. After the question was raised, what followed was a passionate exchange from different sides, a robust advancing of positions on colonialism, racism, imperialism, poverty, effecting change from within, ways of organizing conferences and several other themes. From my perspective, that the debate occurred and played itself out with such commitment was in itself a remarkable and I think mature accomplishment. There were other such debates and challenges in some of the sessions I have attended these past 3 days and again, coming from an Australian culture which I don't believe handles conflict well, the liveliness and passion of the debate at the 2004 conference is something of value. I should also point out that the debate at the 1990 conference was also robust as is clearly evident in the discussion sections which follow each paper (see Grossberg et al, 1992).

To return to developments since 1990, the political project of cultural studies was certainly evident in the papers presented fourteen years ago and the discussion which followed each. There was an extremely strong feminist voice, present in many papers and most discussions of the conference. There were voices for gay rights, different expressions of class issues and a strong set of voices speaking out against racism in its various guises. There were voices for a critical pedagogy, for policy action and many other matters. But while the articulation of the political implications of the various analyses was clear and consistent in 1990, it was my impression, with some notable exceptions that the actual political project which might be undertaken was somewhat understated.

From my perspective, what stands out between 1990 and the 2004 conference is the clear and upfront statement of the political project and in some cases, social action which should follow from the analysis. This has been expressed in more than a few plenary and parallel sessions of the conference. The problematic current historical

moment – conjuncture? – has influenced this 2004 conference: the events of September 11 and the aftermath events including the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan; the bombings in Bali in 2002 and elsewhere in the world and the ongoing war on terror and all that has been done with regard to civil rights in the name of defending against terror. These radical events call out for something more than a mere theoretical analysis.

At the 1990 conference, Stuart Hall had something significant to say about theoretical analysis. In his paper titled ‘Theoretical legacies,’ Hall (1992: 280) invoked “a metaphor for theoretical work: the metaphor of struggle, of wrestling with the angels. The only theory worth having (says Hall) is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency.” And he goes on to speak against what he says is ‘the astonishing theoretical fluency of cultural studies now’ (i.e. 1990).

So, to conclude, as Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler (1992: 6) say in the introduction to the book of the 1990 conference, ‘cultural studies is never just a theoretical project,’ and this is clearly apparent in this 2004 conference.

Grossberg, L., Nelson, C. and Treichler, P. (Eds.) 1992, *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, New York.

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