

Chapter 2

Cultural Studies: What It Is

My goal in this book is to focus on the *why* of cultural studies, but it is difficult to address that question seriously without wrestling with the sticky “what” question as well. As I argued in the previous chapter, defining cultural studies is an exceptionally tricky (and invariably controversial) task. And, as I will argue in more detail in Chapter 3, one of cultural studies’ most debilitating problems is the degree to which a broad range of people and institutions—from both outside and (allegedly) inside the project—continue to misappropriate, misuse, and misunderstand the label. While one expects (and hopes) to find a significant amount of variation in cultural studies over both space and time, the range of projects that currently travel under the “cultural studies” banner is too diffuse—and too mutually incompatible—for most of the people claiming the term for themselves to actually be speaking about the same project.

Why Cultural Studies?

Put bluntly, an awful lot of people who claim to do cultural studies (or at least who attempt to speak about it with authority) don't actually understand the project anywhere near as well as they think they do. More crucially, however, outlining my own sense of what cultural studies is (or at least what it's supposed to be) is vital to the task of explaining why the project matters enough to be worth struggling over—but I need to preface my own definition of the project with four brief caveats.

First, the articulation of some “true” definition of cultural studies—my own included—is just a single step (and a relatively small one at that) in a larger effort to nurse the project back to health. Many people, after all, have responded to prior “hijackings” of cultural studies by trying to define it more rigorously. Obviously, even the smartest of such efforts has not been enough to stem the tide, and I have no reason to believe that, all by themselves, another few thousand words of prose will magically succeed where prior efforts have failed. If nothing else, the need for cultural studies to remain flexible and open-ended enough to *redefine* itself—as local circumstances change, as it travels from one locale to another, or as new versions of it emerge independently in new locales—makes it impossible to prevent misuse of the label entirely. Nonetheless, it is still important to make efforts—however provisional, temporary, and ineffective those might be—to define cultural studies as clearly as possible. After all, cultural studies will not simply take care of itself, except insofar as those of us who actually do cultural studies commit time and energy to that sort of oversight—and asserting a clearer sense of what the project is (and what it isn't) is a vital part of such efforts.

Second, what appears to be a fairly straightforward definitional query—“what is cultural studies?”—is actually two

very different questions that need to be distinguished from one another. The first of these is largely descriptive: it begins with the recognition that there is already a broad range of activity taking place under the sign of “cultural studies,” and it tries to account for what those various activities actually are. This version of the question seeks to build a definition around the apparent characteristics of whatever calls itself cultural studies at any given point in time. The second question is largely prescriptive: it begins with the recognition that much (though by no means all) of the work covered by the first question derives from various attempts to live up to some sort of idealized vision of what cultural studies should be, and it goes on to map out what that “best practices” model of cultural studies might look like. This version of the question aims to build a definition around a vision of what cultural studies is supposed to be.

While these two questions are closely related, they are not simply interchangeable. One of the major mistakes that many people make in trying to define cultural studies is to assume that the vast majority of people, projects, and institutions who have claimed the label for themselves have, in fact, done so accurately—when this is not necessarily the case at all—and then to draw on those misconceptions of the project as evidence for why cultural studies “needs” to be understood in particular ways. An especially common version of this mistake is when commentators point to the long history of professional academics who have claimed to do cultural studies as sufficient “proof,” in and of itself, that cultural studies *must* be understood as a primarily—if not exclusively—academic project (Nelson 1996; Smith 2011; Storey 2010; Turner 2012). As significant (and real) as such articulations may be for understanding the history of cultural studies (or at least one version of it), this sort of *post*

Why Cultural Studies?

facto logic is something that no reputable cultural studies practitioner would accept in most other contexts. The long history of (mostly) white men who have been President of the United States, for instance, doesn't prove that neither women nor people of color can (or should) hold the office. The long history of capitalism as the dominant economic practice of the West doesn't prove that capitalism will (or should) always enjoy such a central position. And so on. With this in mind, then, the definition of cultural studies that I offer in the following pages is unabashedly prescriptive, as I am more concerned with what the project should be than I am with simply describing (and settling for) whatever rough shape it currently takes—or, worse, whatever hodge-podge of phenomena happen to be (mis)using the name this week.

Third, there are a number of good definitions of cultural studies already in existence (many of which are helpfully collected in Storey 1996, though also see Bérubé 1994, 137–160; Grossberg 1997a; 2010, 7–55; Morris 1997; and Sterne 1999), and the definition I offer in the following pages is intended as an extension of those efforts, rather than an attempt to supplant them. All these definitions (my own included) try to walk a thin and treacherous line between two potential pitfalls: (1) being too open-ended (which risks the further dilution of the “brand”) and (2) being too narrow-minded (which risks excluding legitimate examples of cultural studies from the project). My definition attempts to balance those conflicting needs in slightly different fashion than many other efforts, but not (I think) in ways that are entirely incompatible with most of them.

Fourth, cultural studies is too multifaceted to be adequately summed up in a pithy sentence or two. Any short answer one might give to the “what is it?” question is ulti-

mately only as good as the long follow-up explanation that fleshes out that too-brief response more fully. The problem is not that it is impossible to craft plausible soundbite-sized definitions of cultural studies, but that the usefulness of any such definition is extraordinarily limited. I could, for instance, suggest that “cultural studies examines relations of power within culture,” but this is only marginally more helpful than claiming that “quantum physics is the study of exceptionally tiny particles.” It is the sort of definition that might satisfy an audience that didn’t *really* want or need to delve any deeper into the question (e.g., your seat-mate on a short plane flight), but it is completely inadequate for anyone who actually hopes to do cultural studies—or even just to help people recognize legitimate examples of it when they come across them. The definition I offer below is not short enough for a bumper sticker slogan (or even for a broadcast-friendly soundbite), but it is still far too brief, taken all by itself, to serve as a proper definition of cultural studies. If my short definition works well at all, it’s only because the more detailed discussion that follows adds appropriate layers of nuance and complexity.

So what *is* cultural studies? Drawing on Stuart Hall’s (1992a, 281) claim (itself derived from the writings of Antonio Gramsci) that the proper role of the intellectual is to know more than “the other side” and to communicate that knowledge effectively to others, my definition of cultural studies looks like this:

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

Why Cultural Studies?

public forums suitable to the tasks of pedagogy, provocation, and political intervention.

Let me unpack the various pieces of this definition in five modest steps.

Both...And

Cultural studies is *both* an intellectual *and* a political project. Neither half of this equation is optional. Perhaps more crucially, neither takes precedence over the other. Instead, these two spheres of activity are mutually constitutive of one another. Cultural studies' politics are not simply an afterthought. If political questions only surface when you are writing up your conclusions at the end of an otherwise "objective" or "neutral" scholarly project, the resulting book or essay may still be smart, insightful, and important—but it is *not* cultural studies. At the same time, cultural studies' political agendas never guarantee in advance the end results of its analyses. If your politics tell you the answer to your research questions before you have even begun the intellectual work of your project, then (again) you are not doing cultural studies. Done properly, cultural studies always remains open to the possibility that its politics may lead it into unexpected intellectual territory—and that its intellectual work may lead it to take unanticipated political positions.

Put a different way, cultural studies is not interested in the abstract production of knowledge for knowledge's sake. From the very outset of any given cultural studies project, the intellectual questions at that project's core derive from

“real world” political concerns of one sort or another. As Hall describes it:

It was not possible to present the work of cultural studies as if it had no political consequences and no form of political engagement, because what we were asking students to do was to do what we ourselves had done: to engage with some real problem out there in the dirty world, and...to spend that time usefully to try to understand how the world worked...So, from the start we said: What are you interested in? What really bugs you about questions of culture and society now? What do you really think is a problem you don't understand out there in the terrible interconnection between culture and politics? What is it about the way in which British culture is now living through its kind of post-colonial, posthegemonic crisis that really bites into your experience? And then we will find a way of studying that seriously. (1990, 17)

At the same time, however, cultural studies' efforts to intervene in those “real world” concerns depend on its practitioners working from a position of knowledge about the situations and the contexts where they hope to bring about change. There is little value, after all, in un(der)informed activism, and the most effective forms of political intervention depend heavily on having reliable maps—that is, theoretical models informed by empirical analysis—of the terrain on which one is struggling.

While both the intellectual and political aspects of cultural studies matter, however, in the current context, it is the political side of the project that most needs to be reemphasized. After all, there is very little work currently being done in the name of cultural studies that does not

Why Cultural Studies?

somehow understand itself as an intellectual project—it is unlikely that anyone who claims the label for him- or herself believes that cultural studies has somehow failed to engage in scholarly analysis and critique—but a surprising amount of work that calls itself “cultural studies” seems happy to treat politics as if it were a secondary concern. Perhaps even as if it were optional. And, in some cases, even as if it is a sphere of activity that cultural studies should abandon altogether (Gitlin 1997; Storey 2010). Whatever intellectual merits might actually be found in academic work that takes such a stance, if it lacks a political purpose, then it is—at best—nothing more than smart interdisciplinary scholarship. There is, of course, nothing wrong with smart interdisciplinary scholarship. But being smart, interdisciplinary, and scholarly is not enough to make something into a genuine example of cultural studies.

It is also worth noting that cultural studies’ conception of what counts as politics is not limited to what we might call “big-P Politics”: that is, the official spheres of governmental policy and activity, or the formal practices associated with elections and campaigning. Cultural studies is not unconcerned with that form of politics—not at all—but it also doesn’t assume that professional politicians are the end-all and be-all of “real” politics. On the contrary, cultural studies recognizes that much (perhaps even most) of the actual work that goes into creating, maintaining, and transforming the social order (and the hierarchical systems of power associated with that order) takes place *outside* of the traditional political sphere. The proverbial hearts and minds of “the people” (whoever we might imagine them to be), after all, are generally won (or lost) in contexts far removed from legislative debates or electoral campaigns—and it’s those “hearts and minds” that are essential to

keeping enough of the populace happy enough (or at least complacent enough) that they don't rise up and overthrow the existing powers that be. It is *this* understanding of politics that leads Hall, writing about popular culture, to describe it as

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 or 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 caustic (and oft-quoted) closing line is his way of underscoring the centrality of politics to cultural studies, and how *some* sort of political investment needs to serve as the motivation for the intellectual projects that cultural studies chooses to take on.

To the Left

Cultural studies is not merely political in some vague and open-ended way, however. Its politics are not guaranteed in advance, and they will vary across space and time—and even across different projects that come out of the same location and moment—but the overall range of cultural studies' political investments places it squarely in the territory of the left. If one knows anything about the history of cultural studies—in almost any of its multiple variations

Why Cultural Studies?

(see Chapter 3 for more on these)—this should not be a surprising or controversial point at all. And yet it is.

Even the best definitions of cultural studies frequently dance around the question of the project's political leanings. They will claim that cultural studies is political, and they will describe its major characteristics in ways that make it difficult to imagine a comfortable fit between cultural studies and conservatism, but they rarely come right out and say that cultural studies' politics are *necessarily* leftist in nature. In spite of such evasions, however, for as long as there has been a set of practices clumped together under the name of "cultural studies," the project's political claims and practices have consistently placed it somewhere on the progressive end of the political spectrum—and typically far enough to the left that "radical" (or even "revolutionary") has often been a more accurate label. Cultural studies has always been far closer in spirit to socialism and marxism than to supply-side economics or free-market capitalism, far more in tune with scathing critiques of patriarchy and racism and imperialism than with celebratory narratives of the Western canon or British imperialism or American exceptionalism. Cultural studies practitioners frequently speak and write in ways that clearly assume that the most sympathetic members of their audiences already self-identify as leftist in some capacity. They will make claims about what the left needs to do better (for example) in ways that suggest that the speaker and his/her intended audience clearly want the left to succeed and the right to flounder (even if the precise nature of those political camps often remains un[der]defined). They will champion causes—feminism, environmentalism, anti-racism, and so on—that have historically been articulated to the left. They will name villains and enemies—Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher,

the Moral Majority, and so on—that make it difficult (if not impossible) to understand their projects as anything but leftist in nature. And so on.

And yet, even in its most self-reflexive moments, cultural studies is still surprisingly shy about openly naming itself as a leftist, progressive, or radical set of projects. In such contexts, commentators will sometimes imply that there is such a thing as a right-wing cultural studies—though I have yet to see enough in the way of citations or specific examples to put some tangible flesh on those hypothetical and peculiarly shaped bones. Offhand comments that, for instance, Thatcher managed to do cultural studies better than “we” did (e.g., Carey and Grossberg 2006, 221) come across as acknowledgments that the right won some crucial political struggles, rather than as substantiated claims that whatever Thatcher did counted as a legitimate example of “cultural studies.” Such comments also serve as implicit claims that cultural studies is not really (and can’t be) a right-wing project: there would be no sense of surprise or dismay at Thatcher’s “cultural studies,” after all, if cultural studies were something that we could genuinely imagine to take place anywhere and everywhere along the political spectrum.

The fraught relationship between cultural studies and marxism is a good illustration of the tensions at stake here. On the one hand, much of the work to come out of British cultural studies during the 1960s and 1970s was frequently—and not completely implausibly—read as a form of marxist scholarship. It took marxism’s focus on class politics, economic forces, and hierarchical power relationships very seriously. It drew heavily on the writings of major marxist thinkers (e.g., Althusser, Gramsci, and, of course, Marx). It made frequent use of various marxist

Why Cultural Studies?

analytical concepts (e.g., ideology, hegemony, capital, labor). And so on.

And yet many of the major figures of early British cultural studies steadfastly refused to label either themselves or their work as “marxist”—even as they openly worked within clearly marxist frameworks. Raymond Williams, for instance, once claimed (1958) that he’d learned three important things from the marxists, and then discarded the rest—even while declaring, in more or less the same breath, that he wanted England to be a socialist democracy. Stuart Hall has insisted more than once (e.g., 1986, 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 2013) that the CCCS took marxism seriously enough to work within its problematic (e.g., it acknowledged that marxism put a lot of vital and legitimate questions onto cultural studies’ agenda), while simultaneously insisting that cultural studies’ various projects could not (and should not) simply be reduced to a program that was necessarily or exclusively marxist in nature. Christopher Pawling and Rosalind Brunt insist that, under Hall’s leadership, the CCCS made a deliberate and explicit point of avoiding sectarian affiliations for its version of cultural studies, even as it wrestled quite openly with specifically marxist understandings of power (2013, 712–714). Similarly, John Clarke notes that the CCCS “was already politicized in a very peculiar way, and we thought it ought to be. . . . But I think that is not the same as saying that it was driven by specific political motivations or engagements” (2013, 733).

One might read this sort of ambivalence towards “the M-word” as a reflection of the plurality of marxisms—as if British cultural studies gingerly tiptoed around the label in order to distinguish itself from particular versions of marxism that it found unappealing—except, of course, that cultural studies *didn’t* negotiate these sorts of difficulties

either by specifically declaring its allegiance to more palatable flavors of marxism, or by claiming to stake out a new brand of marxism of its own. Instead, cultural studies skirted around the edges of marxism—from both the inside and the outside—for two major reasons. From an intellectual perspective, cultural studies never believed that marxism—in any of its permutations—was sufficient to the task of explaining and analyzing the full range of the issues that cultural studies felt needed to be addressed. While marxism gave cultural studies a powerful set of tools for critical intellectual work, by themselves, these were never enough to answer all (or even most) of the questions that cultural studies needed to wrestle with. Not all questions of cultural politics, after all, can be adequately answered through an analysis of the economic forces in play.

Meanwhile, from a political perspective, British cultural studies was never interested in tethering its work to the agenda(s) of a specific party or movement—especially at moments when politically repressive regimes that wore the mask of marxism were making international headlines in eastern Europe. What mattered to British cultural studies was the *integration* of intellectual and political work—and the ways in which each helped to mutually constitute the other—rather than privileging one side of this equation over the other in advance. To declare up front that cultural studies was inherently and necessarily marxist would place a particular set of political issues at the axiomatic base of its various projects—and thus place any set of intellectual questions that fell outside of that framework (or that couldn't be cleanly pulled back into its orbit) too far outside of cultural studies' purview for it to address them.

By way of contrast, to insist that cultural studies is necessarily a leftist project does not force any particular

Why Cultural Studies?

intellectual questions onto (or off of) cultural studies' agenda, nor does it place firm limits on what specific political issues cultural studies can (and can't) engage—not in the same way that articulating cultural studies to marxism (in any of its variations) would give economic issues a place of primacy. Cultural studies' leftism isn't monolithic—largely because the left itself isn't monolithic. At the very least, the range of political issues that the left has embraced (and continues to embrace) is broad and varied enough to guarantee that the left will routinely struggle with itself almost as much as it will struggle against “the right.” Leftist labor activists and leftist environmentalists, for instance, will come to loggerheads over what to do about working class communities whose economic survival depends on turning old growth forests into lumber. Leftists concerned about the power of the state to suppress and restrict free speech will often be at sharp odds with leftists concerned with protecting women and/or people of color from the harmful impact of hate speech and public bigotry. And so on. For cultural studies to declare itself leftist may make it possible to predict particular causes that the project will *not* embrace, but it offers no guarantees about which causes it actually will align itself with, or the specific stances it will take on the issues related to those causes.

Cultural studies' political openness has always involved choosing from various strands of leftist politics: enough so that even when it has been castigated for (allegedly) failing to be progressive enough, these critiques have still framed the problem as an internal dispute between people who ostensibly share a broader political sensibility. The problem that some progressives have with cultural studies is not that they see the project as an ideological foe on “the other side” of political battle lines, but that they see cultural studies as

a sort of unwitting, yet real, betrayal of the left from *within* its ranks by people whose political inclinations should lead them to know better.

Political economists who attack cultural studies (e.g., Garnham 1995; McChesney 2002; Murdock 1989), for instance, don't do so in the belief that ridding the world of cultural studies will somehow manage to produce a more just and equitable distribution of wealth and resources. While they may believe that cultural studies plays into the hands of the right (and that it therefore needs to be challenged vigorously), they are not so misguided as to believe that cultural studies is somehow a phenomenon produced and controlled by the right—much less that cultural studies somehow manages to wield political and/or economic control over, say, the global mediascape in the way that Rupert Murdoch or Mark Zuckerberg do. In the eyes of such skeptics, cultural studies may remain a serious problem, but it is a villain modeled more on a traitorous Judas than on an inimical Pontius Pilate. So while it is fair to say that cultural studies' actual politics have never been guaranteed in advance—they have always been flexible enough to be responsive to the constraints and possibilities available within the particular contexts of its specific projects—it is also necessary to recognize that cultural studies' politics have never simply been an open-ended free-for-all, where the entire spectrum of political positions has been actively in play.

Purposeful

Though the details will vary from one localized version of the project to another, cultural studies understands itself to

Why Cultural Studies?

have some sort of central purpose—and this, in fact, is one of the major things that distinguishes it from more traditional forms of intellectual work. Scholarly disciplines, for example, are typically defined by their core objects of study—or, perhaps in some cases, by a particular theoretical or methodological paradigm—but they rarely have goals by which the success or failure of the discipline as a whole can be measured. It may still make sense to discuss a discipline’s internal achievements in such terms—for example, its success in navigating a major paradigm shift, its failure to take advantage of new government policies that change its funding opportunities—but there’s little (if any) meaningful room to speak about the overall “success” or “failure” of the field. A discipline may rise or fall in terms of how it ranks in the informal hierarchy of academic prestige (e.g., philosophy holds less sway than it did half a century ago, while newer disciplines such as communication have more stature now than they did at their inception). It may wax and wane in its production of “cutting edge” research and theory and critical insights. It may expand or shrink in size as the numbers of new graduate students attracted to it ebb and flow, or as departments come and go. But as long as the discipline itself continues to exist, it doesn’t fail as such, even if it falls on hard times.

Cultural studies, on the other hand, has wrestled with the question of its own success and/or failure for most of its history—and the nature of this concern has only rarely been about purely internal achievements (e.g., its successful navigation of “the turn to Gramsci”) or its surprising growth (e.g., its success in garnering programmatic status at multiple universities around the globe). Instead, the question of cultural studies’ success has primarily revolved around how well it has fulfilled its ambitions of making meaningful

political differences in the world around it. To be sure, this particular benchmark for measuring cultural studies' success has produced a number of harsh assessments of the project. Cultural studies, after all, has "failed" to bring about an end to racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, colonialism, or capitalism (to name but a few of its potential targets) even on a local level, even for a short period of time. As such, many of its critics—both inside and outside the project—have looked at cultural studies and found it to be wanting.

And yet, the very question of cultural studies' potential "failure"—be that real, potential, or imagined—is an implicit recognition that there is something fundamentally different at stake for the project than is the case for traditional academic fields and disciplines. The very notion that cultural studies *could* fail (regardless of what that might look like, much less whether it has actually happened) suggests that the defining principle of cultural studies is more about agendas than it is about objects: that the real question at hand isn't "what?" (i.e., is the object in question within the appointed territory of the discipline?), but "so what?" (i.e., does the work being done here actually matter to anyone else—especially people outside of the immediate social and professional circles in which the cultural studies practitioners in question travel).

This is not to say that cultural studies has a single purpose that is somehow fixed for all times and all places. But cultural studies is always driven by a need to answer the "so what?" question in ways that extend beyond the idiosyncratic interests of individual practitioners (e.g., this is what interests me) or the abstract "needs" of disciplinary-based knowledge (e.g., this is a hole in the field's literature that somebody needs to fill). This is one of the main

Why Cultural Studies?

reasons—even in the context of purely academic forms of cultural studies—why it makes sense to think of cultural studies as a “project” or a “calling,” rather than as a “field” or a “discipline.”

To emphasize the goal-driven nature of cultural studies as a practice is not to argue for evaluating its worth (much less its success) by its actual ability to defeat its various foes and forge a lasting global utopia. To use that high a standard is to play a sort of “all or nothing” game that becomes impossible for anyone to win. By this standard, after all, few (if any) political projects—on the left or the right, from above or below—can ever be called fully successful. Capitalism, for example, has not completely erased socialism from the face of the earth. Patriarchy has not managed to squelch feminism once and for all. (Or, in both cases, vice versa.) Instead, my emphasis on cultural studies as an agenda-driven project is intended to mark a crucial difference in desire between cultural studies and other forms of intellectual work: a desire to make the production of knowledge serve something other than the platonic ideal of “knowledge for knowledge’s sake”—or, even worse, to help prop up some institutional corner of the corporatized state.

Breadth *and* Depth

Cultural studies’ approach to the production of knowledge—its ongoing quest to know more than “the other side”—needs to be simultaneously broad *and* deep, and it needs to be driven forward by questions arising from “real world” political struggles of one sort or another. Any given cultural studies project should have more at stake than simply filling some hitherto unfilled gap in the broader body of human

knowledge. When faced with the “so what?” question, cultural studies practitioners need to be able to explain what the broader value of their particular project is, and why that project should matter to people who aren’t already invested in the topic at hand.

The question of breadth is often framed as a need for cultural studies—at least in its scholarly variants—to be interdisciplinary: that is, for its objects, methods, and theories to straddle the borders that divide traditional areas of academic specialty from one another. Understood this way, cultural studies should never limit itself to working within the boxes defined by the scope of whatever “home” discipline its academic practitioners might claim for themselves: that is, a sociologist who does cultural studies can’t be limited by whatever the outside edges of sociology might be perceived to be. When she or he asks research questions that lead into other disciplinary areas (and this should be a given for any cultural studies project worthy of the name), then she or he should not shy away from such border crossings, whether they take her or him into nearby disciplinary neighbors (such as anthropology) or more intellectually distant fields (such as physics). As David Morley puts it, “cultural studies is interdisciplinarity or it is nothing” (2013, 836).

I’m happy to embrace interdisciplinarity as an important facet of *academic* cultural studies’ need for breadth—but framing the question as one primarily centered around “disciplinarity” also isn’t good enough, regardless of what prefix (e.g., inter-, multi-, trans-, non-, anti-, post-) one chooses to attach to cultural studies’ inflection of the concept. Such a frame still necessarily assumes that “the disciplines” are at the heart—but also, more significantly, at the outer limit—of what cultural studies does. If cultural

Why Cultural Studies?

studies needs to push beyond the limitations of disciplinary borders—and it does—it needs to do so even more seriously with respect to the borders of the university. It needs to pursue, create, and embrace the production of knowledge in sectors outside the traditional circuits of academic life: in activist groups, alternative media, arts quarters, community centers, galleries, museums, nonprofit organizations, policy centers, political movements, think tanks, and so on.

A slightly more expansive way to phrase this—one that also puts the question of depth back into play—is that cultural studies is “radically contextual” (Grossberg 1995; 2010). It insists that the relevant context for whatever phenomenon is at the heart of any given project can never be known in advance (or, worse, be tacked on to the final product after the fact): that the context and the phenomenon are mutually constitutive of each other, and that one of the principal tasks of the cultural studies practitioner is to identify—and even construct—suitable context(s) for his or her project.

Stuart Hall captures the essence of this practice by claiming that the question that must “haunt” (his word) our work in order for it to be considered cultural studies—the question that we must ask of our objects of study—is: “What does this have to do with *everything else?*” (2007, emphasis mine). Answering this question completely is, as Hall goes on to acknowledge, an impossible task, but his point is not that cultural studies “fails” if it doesn’t manage to encompass and explain the entire world every time it takes on a new project. Rather, he is claiming that cultural studies must aspire to see the full range of relationships between its central objects of analysis and the world at large, even if those articulations pull us far outside our normal frames

of reference. Cultural studies must embrace the situated complexity of whatever phenomena it chooses to examine—and expand its own vision of its thought and practice accordingly. It is a task that recognizes that even those phenomena that appear to be transparent, simple, and well-bounded are inevitably stitched into a broad and tangled web of relations—social, cultural, political, economic, and so on—and that a truly broad and deep understanding of those phenomena will attempt to bring as many of those multiple relations as possible into focus.

Speaking Up, Speaking Out

Finally, perhaps the most often overlooked part of cultural studies' task is the need to communicate effectively with broader constituencies about both the knowledge and the analyses that it generates. This task involves more than just finding ways to transform conventional scholarly monographs into "crossover" books that reach lay audiences, and it involves more than cultural studies scholars occasionally being quoted as "experts" by mainstream journalists. Such efforts, of course, are not to be rejected or sneered at—they can, after all, be some of the most vital ways for cultural studies to engage "ordinary" people where they live and breathe—but they are also never sufficient unto themselves when it comes to realizing cultural studies' broader communicative goals.

Cultural studies is ideally both a pedagogical *and* an interventionist project. Insofar as cultural studies concerns itself with the production of knowledge, it always assumes that the knowledge it produces should be useful

Why Cultural Studies?

in some relatively direct way. This is not to say that cultural studies understands its intellectual labors to be entirely functionalist or utilitarian in nature: cultural studies does not merely produce intellectually rigorous, politically motivated “how to” manuals. It is, however, a reminder that cultural studies’ primary goal is not to produce knowledge on some arcane topic that will—maybe, perhaps, someday—eventually “trickle down” into the hands of someone else who can actually put that knowledge to use in some practical fashion.

Of course, it is impossible to predict or control how intellectual work (from cultural studies or anywhere else) will actually be used. Legend has it, for instance, that Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture* (1979) became required reading for several years at major advertising firms in both the United States and the United Kingdom, because his analysis of subcultural style as a form of working class political and economic resistance (however tenuous and imperfect such resistance actually was in terms of changing the material circumstances of people’s lives for the better) could also help marketers be more effective at selling new consumer goods and fashions to otherwise “resistant” youth markets. This is a willfully antagonistic reading of a text that Hebdige certainly never intended to be used in the service of capitalism or consumer culture—and yet there is nothing that he could have realistically done to guarantee that his work would not be so wildly misappropriated.

Cultural studies’ need to communicate with a broader public should not be interpreted as some sort of vanguardist or evangelical dissemination of “truth” to “ignorant” masses. This is not to say that cultural studies discounts the value of its own research (as if it has nothing to teach anyone else), nor that it automatically assumes that “the people”

(whoever may be implied by that too-loose, too-vague shorthand) understand the “real” truth of their circumstances better than anyone else could. Instead, cultural studies’ need to engage a broader public requires it to approach that public with both modesty and openness. In attempting to meet people where they are, it needs to accept that “the people” (whoever they may be in any given context) may have needs, interests, and/or desires that cultural studies hasn’t anticipated, and it should be prepared to engage those needs in an open and respectful dialogue. In this sense, cultural studies’ pedagogical ambitions are very much in line with Paulo Freire’s (1970/2003) arguments about critical pedagogy as a radical, liberatory, and (most crucially) *dialogic* process between “teachers” and “students.”

Additionally, cultural studies is not simply a “reactive” form of public intellectual work. While it is certainly important for cultural studies practitioners—especially those whose daily routines do not normally provide them with opportunities to speak to a broad-scale public of some sort—to take advantage of suitable opportunities to reach a larger audience (e.g., by saying “Yes” to journalists looking for “expert” commentators), this is also never enough. If nothing else, such scenarios offer little (if any) real opportunity for cultural studies practitioners to do anything more than respond to agendas crafted by powerful institutions.

Put a different way, cultural studies’ politics are not limited to the simple espousal of particular political positions in the various texts that cultural studies practitioners produce. Instead, cultural studies’ politics require its practitioners to try and find ways to put our critical insights into play in the broader world in (hopefully) productive fashion. Though this is (perhaps obviously) more easily said than

Why Cultural Studies?

done, ideally, cultural studies is *proactive* in trying to *create* spaces and opportunities where it can productively engage with broader publics.

What It Ain't

Having tried to flesh out my short definition of cultural studies a bit, I want to offer a few comments on what is not found in that definition. Many existing definitions of cultural studies are built around a series of negative tropes: “cultural studies is *not* X,” “cultural studies is *not* Y,” and so on. This rhetorical strategy is often important—and necessary—as a way to fend off some of the more persistent misconceptions of the project, but it also often makes it hard for newcomers to get a clear sense of what cultural studies actually *is*. The definition I have offered attempts to avoid this pitfall, but a few words about what cultural studies is *not* will (hopefully) help to make it easier to understand what it is and to recognize examples of it in the world when one happens to encounter them.

First, my definition does not assume that cultural studies necessarily has a particular—or even a primary—object as the focal point for its analytic work. One of the most widespread misconceptions of cultural studies is that its main focus is the analysis of popular culture and/or the mass media. Insofar as “the popular” remains an important site where hierarchies of power and social relations are produced, it also remains an important site for a broad range of cultural studies work (Grossberg 1992; 1997b; Hall 1981). But not all (or even necessarily most) cultural studies work focuses on popular culture and/or media phenomena—and

it is even more false to assume that the equation might work the other way around: that is, that any and all analyses of “the popular” count as cultural studies.

The problem here is not so much that cultural studies has nothing to say about popular music or romance novels or Hollywood movies (or what have you), but that there’s no automatic or necessary connection between cultural studies and any specific object of study. People can study popular culture without doing cultural studies at all, and people can do cultural studies without having any particular interest or expertise in popular culture. The crucial questions at the heart of defining “cultural studies” are those concerned with “why” and “how” cultural studies practitioners go about their work, rather than with “what” it is they’re working on.

Second, my definition doesn’t assume any particular theoretical or methodological center to cultural studies, even in its purely academic flavors. To be sure, at different points in space and time, cultural studies has affiliated itself with certain theoretical schools of thought and/or methodological approaches, and some of those affiliations have been strong enough to suggest that “doing cultural studies” obligates one to make use of particular theories and/or methods. Such affiliations, however, have always been contextually specific, unevenly distributed, and highly impermanent.

The work of Louis Althusser, for example, was one of the more important bodies of marxist theory associated with British cultural studies in the 1970s. Nonetheless, there was nothing preordained about Althusser’s ascendancy in cultural studies’ bibliographies, not all British cultural studies practitioners of the era bothered “wrestling with [bloody]

Why Cultural Studies?

Althusser" (Hall 1992b, 280 [Hall said "bloody" quite emphatically during his actual talk, but the word was edited out of the printed version]), and the "turn to Gramsci" taken by many (though not all) cultural studies practitioners effectively moved Althusserian-flavored cultural analysis closer to the margins of the terrain. Gramsci, in turn, has been displaced in some (though, again, by no means all) cultural studies circles by Foucault, usually because the latter's conception of power seems to fit the specific analyses being undertaken better than the former's does. At any one of these moments, however, it would have been (and still is) impossible to use the mere presence or absence of any particular theorist in somebody's project as a way of determining whether that project was (or wasn't) a legitimate example of cultural studies.

Third, my definition doesn't assume that the primary (much less the only) path for cultural studies runs through the university. To be sure, the university has been a crucial—perhaps even *the* crucial—site where cultural studies work has been produced for nearly half a century, and it continues (at least for the moment) to be an institution well suited to many (though by no means all) of the practices associated with cultural studies. Nonetheless, the basic tasks performed by cultural studies—even those that have historically had clear links to academic life—are not the exclusive province of professional scholars. Nor should they be. A broad range of people besides academics—activists, artists, bloggers, filmmakers, journalists, and so on—routinely produce politically engaged cultural analysis and criticism for public distribution. It would be going too far to claim that all these people are doing cultural studies simply because they produce cultural commentary of one sort or another. But it would also be going too far to limit the ter-

ritory of cultural studies to professional academics, solely because of where they produce their cultural commentary. Put in more positive terms, my definition assumes that cultural studies is “ordinary” (Rodman 2010): that is, that, for all of its complexity and nuances, it remains a project that can be—and is—practiced by a much broader spectrum of people than is usually understood to be the case.

A Calling

Arguably, one of the recurring problems with attempts to define cultural studies is that they too frequently focus on the (relatively) simple questions—that is, the pragmatic, operational issues of the various practices that one needs to embrace in order to do cultural studies—while giving short shrift to the messier, muddier, yet ultimately more important questions of *why* cultural studies matters enough for anyone to do it in the first place. I suspect that one of the chief reasons why so many commentators steer clear of the “why” question is that it is difficult to approach it seriously without slipping into the sorts of clichéd, open-ended mystifications that cultural studies so frequently skewers when other people invoke them in other contexts. Particularly in pedagogical contexts, I often find myself reduced to saying things like “cultural studies is a way of being in the world” or “cultural studies is a calling, rather than a profession or a specialization.” And while I firmly believe these things to be true, I also know that their truth does not make such statements any more helpful (or any less mystifying) as a way of helping cultural studies newcomers understand just what the project is, or how they can participate in it themselves.

Why Cultural Studies?

It is not a coincidence that few (if any) of the recent crop of cultural studies textbooks—whatever their other strengths (or weaknesses) might be—even pretend to address the “why?” question in any detail. It’s profoundly difficult and awkward, after all, to offer an instruction manual on how to adopt a new “way of being in the world.” Perhaps not surprisingly, the clearest such “manual” that I know of (at least with respect to anything that might readily be understood as cultural studies) is a volume that doesn’t actually present itself as such: Edward Said’s *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994). He never mentions cultural studies by name, but his discussion of the proper function of the intellectual stands as a succinct summary of the ethos at the core of cultural studies’ practice:

the intellectual does not represent a statuelike icon, but an individual vocation, an energy, a stubborn force engaging as a committed and recognizable voice in language and in society with a whole slew of issues, all of them having to do in the end with a combination of enlightenment and emancipation or freedom. The particular threat to the intellectual today, whether in the West or the non-Western world, is not the academy, nor the suburbs, nor the appalling commercialism of journalism and publishing houses, but rather an attitude that I will call professionalism. By professionalism I mean thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behavior—not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and “objective.” (73–74)

What Said describes here is by no means an easy ideal to embody. If anything, Said bends over backwards to emphasize the ultimate impossibility of being simultaneously engaged with the world in a vibrant, active, politically significant fashion, while also remaining sufficiently detached, unaligned, and unaffiliated so as not to become overly beholden to the interests of a movement, a political party, an institution, or a nation-state. Nonetheless, he insists (and I agree) that the intellectual must always aspire to something more like a calling than a mere job: that the difficulties of the task and the pressures imposed by the institutions in which we are all necessarily situated are *never* a sufficient reason, in and of themselves, for cultural studies to let go of the pressing need to engage with the world and its problems in a robust, rigorous, and passionate fashion.

To take cultural studies on as one's calling, then, is to attempt to live up to Said's idealistic model of the intellectual as

someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwilling, but actively willing to say so in public. (23)

As is often the case with cultural studies, the fullness of these ambitions almost always outpaces anyone's ability to put them into practice completely. As such, the question of whether someone is actually doing cultural studies should not—*can* not—be adequately measured by how well one manages to live up to this all but impossible ideal. Rather,

Why Cultural Studies?

the measure of any true cultural studies practitioner should be whether he or she actively embraces this ideal as an ongoing aspirational practice. To do anything less is to reduce cultural studies to just another profession, just another specialization, just another job—which, ultimately, evacuates cultural studies of all the things that make it worth doing in the first place.

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Cultural Studies: What It Is

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