

The Conference

Cultural studies is "booming." "But a boom isn't a fad," says Lawrence Grossberg, a leading American exponent of the postmodern wing of cultural studies. Grossberg argues that booms have "sustainable lives." The question facing cultural studies, he says, is simply "what the substance and direction of its life will be."

That question was much on the minds of those who attended the highly publicized conference, Cultural Studies Now and in the Future in early April of 1990. The five-day international conference was organized by Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treicher, and other members of the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Among the 32 guest speakers and 570 registrants were several of the most prominent scholars in cultural studies, including Stuart Hall, Simon Frith, John Fiske, Iain Chambers, Tony Bennett, Meaghan Morris, Andrew Ross, Constance Penley, James Clifford, Donna Haraway, Emily Martin, Cornel West and Janice Radway. Among the Canadian participants were Martin Allor and Jody Berland of Concordia University, and

Elsbeth Probyn of the University of Montreal.

"We wanted to bring in some of the top people, especially from the English-speaking countries, in order to define what the focus of the boom will be in the US," Grossberg explained.

Several of the British visitors had been members of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies when Stuart Hall was director in the 1970s, provoking one non-Birmingham British speaker to dub his fellow Brits "the Birmingham diaspora." Grossberg had studied in the early 70s with Hall at the Birmingham centre (recently merged with Birmingham's sociology department to become an official university department). Notably missing from the list of invited guests was Richard Johnson, current department head at Birmingham.

The celebrity speaker program, the advance publicity, and the strong turnout for the conference generated an air of excitement, which was tinged later with keen disappointment when expectations were not met. In all these respects the conference gave a fair picture of the state of cultural studies in 1990. With 16 sessions featuring panelists and video artists from the US, Britain, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Finland and Italy, the conference covered a diversity, indeed sometimes a disconcertingly wide and puzzling range, of topics — e.g., portraits of people with AIDS, porn written by women and featuring *Star Trek* heroes as gay lovers, ethnographies of Indian widow-burning rituals, analysis of New Age technoculture, a postmodernist reading of Salman Rushdie, a history of nineteenth-century British missionaries, a discussion of reproductive politics and popular representations of primatology, a critique of the early postwar politics of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and much, much more.

Cultural Studies and the Culture of Academe

A strength of the conference was that no sessions ran concurrently. This allowed for continuous audience adaptation by speakers, who could gauge the changing mood of the conference as a whole. Speakers recalled and developed points raised in previous sessions, secure in the assumption that most audience members had heard the earlier panelists. As the conference progressed, however, shared frustrations also emerged, fuelled by the discontent of many listeners who believed that the radical spirit of cultural studies was being tamed before their very eyes.

Problems of Definition

What is 'cultural studies' anyway? Richard Johnson asked the question in his much-discussed 1987 article in *Social Text*. The Illinois conference gave a bewildering array of answers. A theoretical "style"? An intellectual-political tradition of Marxist criticism? An academic discipline? A critique of the diverse aspects of everyday life? An interdisciplinary perspective on the human science? A postmodernist discourse about embodied experience? A "new politics" focussed on feminist, ecological, gay, and Third World issues? A critique of the "disciplining of knowledge"? A euphemism for the word "radical"? A new opportunity for *engaged* academics to influence public policy?

Scholars working in cultural studies have recently characterized it in all these ways and others. Most of the Illinois

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speakers, however, did not take up Grossberg's invitation to address in their presentations the "focus" of the "boom." Indeed some of them worry that even preliminary efforts to "define" cultural studies will prompt attempts to police its boundaries. And yet, they acknowledge that cultural studies can't be "just anything," that it does have a tradition whose insights will be lost if its history is forgotten. Some panelists pointed out that cultural studies possesses a variety of traditions in the plural – national, regional, ethnic, linguistic, theoretical – and noted that these particular, unstable formations necessitate that cultural studies be understood not as a tradition or theory, but as a dynamic, evolving project. On this view, cultural studies becomes a series of intellectual engagements within various historical conjunctures – ranging from Hungary and the New Left to Thatcherism and postmarxism.

It may be unwise to talk about a "general future" for culture studies. Graeme Turner of the University of Queensland argued that future work should be local and comparative, and so the agenda must be specified according to circumstance and place. While British cultural studies from Raymond Williams to Dick Hebdige had been explicitly and unapologetically English, cultural studies is no longer a British export. Cultural studies must now stress, not gloss over, national and other differences. Turner suggested that the development of cultural studies in Australia, which is on the margins of the developed world yet affiliated with and drawn to the centre, could help stem both "Birmingham imperialism" and the rise of any new universalism.

Stuart Hall argued at the conference that cultural studies must "stake out a wager" because it "must rule out some

things if it is to matter." Overall, the general dilemma consisted in negotiating alternately the desire to stake out a wager and the refusal to "close things off." Concerns about a Popular Front hodgepodge on one side were met by fears about litmus tests for political correctness on the other. By its choice, the conference seemed to refuse to close *anything* off. The inclusion within cultural studies of AIDS studies, Third World studies, feminist studies and black studies was presented by the organizers as a sign of productive difference. But it was sometimes impossible to see, beyond a few ritualistic radical gestures, what numerous talks had to do with one another. Too many of the presentations instead appeared merely to meet some unstated quota system for representation. The unhappy result was a collapse of key intellectual distinctions in a relativistic muddle.

The Marxist Legacy and the Cultural Studies Intellectual

IF there was one potentially unifying thread, it was the Marxist heritage of cultural studies. But the celebration of Birmingham's distant past, along with the absence of any current Birmingham faculty at the conference, did not so much provide a focus as lend the proceedings an air of nostalgia. It was as if many of the

older speakers, even as they dutifully mused on the future, were lamenting a lost radicalism and intellectual vitality. (One frequent criticism of Birmingham under Richard Johnson has been the achievement of institutional success at the price of intellectual drift, since Birmingham has arguably spawned no significant theoretical innovations since Hall's encoding/decoding model in the late 70s.) In a moving, backward-looking address titled "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," Hall himself (now at the Open University in London) seemed, perhaps inadvertently, to give the green light for deradicalization when he described Marxism as one of the "historical moments" of cultural studies, since superseded by feminism and race.

One speaker, however, who insisted on "reinserting a Marxist dimension" into cultural studies was John Fiske, of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. If Stuart Hall was the saintly guru of the Illinois conference, Fiske seemed the lightning rod for criticism – or perhaps the scapegoat for audience disgruntlement. Whereas Hall stressed the relevance of race and gender issues for cultural studies, Fiske emphasized class. Yet both Hall and Fiske raised one issue that many speakers preferred to ignore: the role of the cultural studies intellectual. Author of *Television Culture*, *Reading Television*, and *Understanding Popular Culture*, Fiske developed his now-familiar themes. He urged students in cultural studies to recognize that while middle class scholars are "distanced" from their cultural theories, the culture of everyday life of "ordinary" people is an immediate, concrete, materialized, lived practice. Because intellectuals



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prefer to theorize and "can't take 'ordinary' cultural practices" – like supermarket shopping – and put them in a library, they escape us," Fiske said.

Fiske's sharp distinction between the intellectual and "ordinary people," and between the critic and the fan, outraged many listeners. "I cringe when he says 'us,'" said Constance Penley of the University of Rochester. Although she herself is a *Star Trek* fan, Penley stressed that one can take up various positions in relation to cultural objects, and the "critic" and "fan" are only two choices; furthermore, the academic intellectual can be not only a person who theorizes about, but also one who enjoys, "ordinary" culture. Other listeners argued that Fiske's optimistic talk represented a reductionistic pseudo-populism, which ventriloquizes "ordinary" people and panders to them by proclaiming reassuringly that they invariably "resist" capitalist exploitation. On this view, Fiske naïvely celebrated shopping, Madonna, TV – whatever the object of popular culture happens to be. Some of this criticism is fair. Fiske tends to dichotomize the intellectual and the popular. Opposed to Left critiques of mass culture as mass opiates, he sees popular culture as endlessly manoeuvrable. He emphasizes that the popular can resist and even overcome capitalist forces. So the accent of his work falls on celebrating popular culture rather than criticizing capitalism.

Fiske's appeal to reintroduce Marxism into American cultural studies was subtly at odds with Hall's talk, and it may have been that Hall's warning about glib "theoretical fluency" was directed not only at the postmodernist/postmarxist turn in cultural studies but also at Fiske. Hall worried that postmodernist cultural studies (apparently represented by Grossberg, Andrew Ross, and Iain Chambers) risks formalizing politics and history into matters of language and textuality. Fiske's similar problem with postmodernist cultural studies is that it reduces oppression to a "play of images" and disdains a larger collective politics, thus amounting to little more than aestheticized postmarxist pessimism. Fiske emphasized the need to reinject a Gramscian, rather than an Althusserian Marxism into cultural studies, i.e., a critical self-reflexivity rather than a structuralist Marxism. And yet, though Fiske is concerned with concrete particularities and hegemonic practices, Fiske's Gramsci is not the Gramsci Hall embraced in the 1970s. Fiske's "Gramscian Marxism" stresses the body and the "body-habitat" rather than the subject. It is strongly filtered through Foucault, Bourdieu, de Certeau, and the Laclau and Mouffe of *Hegemony and Social Strategy*. Ulti-

mately his call is to reinsert not a critical Marxism, but an affirmative postmarxism.

So has the moment for Marxism and cultural studies passed? Cultural studies in Britain arose from arguments about class. The American versions seem to be developing along status lines. The conference provoked many attendees to worry about the American commodification of cultural studies itself.

The Institutionalization of Cultural Studies

Increasingly visible, increasingly influential," wrote the Illinois organizers in a pre-conference promotional letter, cultural studies "is also in the process of being more widely institutionalized and commodified." The conference was designed "not only to reflect on these events but also to intervene in them. We have brought together many of the most well-known people in the field and encouraged them to write papers that can help define the core aims and commitments of cultural studies work."

Unfortunately, many of the "most well-known people" were invited on the basis of their status – which owed to their scholarship. So they gave displays of that scholarship, often from works-in-progress on special topics, which in most cases did nothing to help "define the core aims and commitments of cultural studies work." As a result, rather than quell charges from Right and Centre that cultural studies is just the newest umbrella term for "Left eclecticism" (in Frederick Crews's phrase) or a trendy slogan for an incoherent Marxist cum feminist cum post-structuralist *mélange*, some of the papers left just that impression. Disappointingly, except for Hall, Fiske, Turner and Simon Frith, few speakers even took up explicitly the large question of cultural studies "now and in the future." This led some chag-



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rined observers, many of them graduate students who had never before attended a conference organized by the Left, to append a question mark to the conference's title.

The simmering dissatisfaction finally erupted on the fourth day. Several visiting students distributed a document, "Hypocrisy in Cultural Studies," parts of which were read aloud during the discussion after Stuart Hall's talk by Alexandra Chasin, a Stanford University graduate student. It complained about the "terrorizing" and "policing" of "subordinated voices" by a "ruling elite." The outburst was a release of pent-up frustration: the conference didn't seem so different from most others. (Equally upsetting for otherwise contented subordinate voices was the simple fact that the popular didn't think they were learning very much from the elite.)

Thus the hyperbole of the manifesto disclosed an important fact about the current state of cultural studies. American cultural studies is *already* institutionalized and commodified. The "star system" format of the conference provoked a response to the anxieties mentioned in the Illinois promotional letter. The student manifesto served as the "intervention" which the celebrity speakers had failed to make.

And yet, the non-speakers were arguably no less "hypocritical" than the organizers or speakers: after all, most of us had come to see and hear "the stars." Many disaffected listeners fumed (justifiably) that there were no caucuses for informal conversation, or just opportunities for more give-and-take between guest speakers and audience members, or at least one panel which dealt with pedagogical aspects of cultural studies. Yet as one of the Illinois organizers put it, "We certainly couldn't have persuaded this university to put up \$80,000 for a showcase conference if it were going to feature classroom approaches to cultural studies or several caucuses of grad students and junior faculty." Nor, one assumes, could they have persuaded Routledge to contract for an essay collection based on the proceedings. (It will resemble the widely-read volume which emerged from the 1983 Illinois conference, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*.) A book-driven conference, which advertises radicalism and yet gives preference to celebrity speakers even on opportunities for asking floor questions (since these too are to be printed by name in the proceedings), inevitably risks charges of hypocrisy.

So the "elitist" format exposed the contradictions of cultural studies as a radical practice. Cultural studies claims to be practically synonymous "with the word 'radical.'" Yet only the stars spoke. The "star system" reproduces the university's and the publishing world's hierarchies. Yet the Illinois organizers couldn't get the funding or the turnout or the book contract without the stars. And so on.

Constance Penley acted as fan and critic of *Star Trek* fanzines



But if you can't keep 600 people with a shared intellectual formation together for even five days without having them balkanize into numerous factions, how can you possibly build a broad movement? The conference hubbub thus pointed out the larger problem of the relations between activism and the academy. It's hardly a new question. But it's one which has been raised with reference to the structure of Left academic practices only intermittently since the early 70s.

The Culture of Academe

Cultural studies aspire to be a mode of academic work that is activist in a way different from established disciplines.

And yet, what was conspicuously missing from the conference was a critique of academic culture.

Why the avoidance of a self-critique? Perhaps precisely because so much of American academic life, including conferences on the Left, is market-driven. It's about careerism, not excepting the professionalism of the tenured Left. Other countries, including Canada and Britain, are not so professionalized. It's not that they're morally superior (*vide* David Lodge's novels). They just don't have the numbers: money, universities, faculty, and students. They don't have the resources within universities to fly in dozens of guest speakers from abroad. Nor the huge book market to publish conference proceedings profitably. Nor the healthy job market to attract hundreds of graduate students to conferences (even at the Illinois conference, most attendees were graduates), students who see graduate study from the outset as preparation for a likely career, need sponsorship, and form a sizable ready-made pool of disciples. And it's hardly a secret that many non-American Left academics speak

in the US (or accept jobs) for economic and status reasons.

So an analysis of Left academic culture may well strike too close to home. To study academic stratification risks academic statuses. Indeed it was revealing that most objections from the floor at the Illinois conference had little to do with political issues outside academe. They were status claims. They dealt with issues of generational, ethnic, gender or regional status. They were claims to victim status — as grad students, blacks, women, gays and Third World, or other representatives. But this is not surprising. On the contemporary academic Left, given the political capital to be won, the urge to claims for professional ethnic, postcolonial, or some other marginalized status often proves near-irresistible. For the title of "Oppressed" may confer privileged, almost gnostic standing.

But if cultural studies is supposed to be activist and interventionist, why no discussion of political developments in Eastern Europe or Latin America? Or current debates about the "end of History" and the advent of postmarxism? Or, for that matter, Canadian biculturalism? A total silence also prevailed on Northern Ireland, despite the presence of numerous British participants. What about the "worldliness" of cultural studies? It was all further testimony to the depoliticizing of the American academy and the blithe detachment of the academic Left.

One panel, titled "The Politics of Cultural Studies" illustrated how narrowly institutional, provincial, and self-indulgent the "politics" of cultural studies sometimes is. (It also showed how non-Americans succumb to the Americanization of cultural studies.) Speaking on "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt," Homi K. Bhabha of the University of Sussex spoke in an impenetrable poeticized jargon about the recent calamities which have befallen Salman Rushdie, utterly obscuring them. When he was asked in the discussion session if he was bothered that almost nobody in the audience had understood him, he replied, as if he were appealing to an Arnoldian saving remnant, that if only two or three listeners had comprehended him, he was satisfied. (One doubted even that many had grasped much of the talk.) Nominally addressing herself to "Money and Real Estate: The Limits of Cultural Studies," Meaghan Morris, an independent Australian writer currently at Illinois as a visiting professor, emoted a rambling mini-autobiography of personal anecdote. Bhabha's and Morris's presentations were two models of the star speaker syndrome often encountered at conferences: the "work-in-progress" talk, delivered regardless of its relevance to the occasion; and the "wing-it" talk, delivered

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in the belief that content is secondary since listeners really seek to bask in the celebrity's presence.

Toward a Radical Pedagogy?

The argument about how the Illinois conference should have been structured was, of course, a debate about pedagogy. And what *is* a radical pedagogy, anyway? With all the conference talk about public intellectual, or Gramscian organic intellectuals doing committed scholarship with social influence, one might have thought that speakers would have addressed themselves to the classroom as political arena. And yet, amid all the breast-beating about the potentially "imperialistic" designs of British cultural studies upon other national traditions, nobody asked any of the British participants about their roles as teacher-activists or about the success of the eleven UK cultural studies departments (in nine polytechnics and two universities). Concerns about pedagogy would have been practical, since most audience members were university teachers and students. But several speakers worried that a concentration on pedagogy would reinforce a prevalent American misconception about cultural studies: that it amounts, *à la* the apolitical Bowling Green tradition, to a study of pop-art icons since 1945. These speakers argued in interviews that cultural studies should focus its energies outside the university. For non-academic AIDS activists like medical writer Jan Zita Grover of San Francisco, the struggles outside the university are far more important than those within it.

Most participants seemed to think that cultural studies activism for academics meant two things: as scholars, a radical critique of the politics of representation and of mass-mediated communication; and as teachers, efforts to combat racism, sexism and homophobia in the classroom. Other participants added that the Birmingham tradition of collective work was valuable. Following the example of Tony Bennett on Brisbane museum policy, however, Left-liberal pragmatists might also intervene by advising government on cultural policy. But there was little practical advice for academics seeking to align with a political movement. Asked what academics could do *as academics* in the face of the AIDS epidemic, Grover answered: "I have no idea."

Cultural Studies Now and in the Future?

Within the academy, what should the future of cultural studies be? Should it aim to become a "discipline," thereby imparting a set of skills to students and perhaps

reconstructing the university, yet probably capitulating to the forces of deradicalization and institutionalization? Should it remain instead a program or centre, thereby regaining its radical edge, yet probably remaining highly eclectic and peripheral within the university?

Various combinations of two leading alternative scenarios can thus be easily envisioned for the next decade. Either the year 2000 witnesses the rise of American and Canadian university departments of cultural studies, perhaps along the lines of the British models, or similar to Peter Robinson College at Trent University. Or, continuing present American trends, more programs and centres for cultural studies develop, organized as interdisciplinary concentrations and staffed by different departments, like the centres at Illinois, Miami, University of Ohio and the University of Pennsylvania. If there are to be departments, they need to have a concrete vision, a distinctive critical pedagogy, a program of study, degree requirements, etc. If there are to be programs or centres, cultural studies may survive as a critical voice within the university.

Cultural studies faces the challenge which confronts all radical academic projects. The question is how it will assert itself. If it adopts chiefly a postmodernist language, it will probably be marginal – or it will be elitist. Paradoxically, suggested pop music critic Simon Frith, one road to future success might be that cultural studies becomes so institutionalized that it loses much of its distinctiveness. Its success could then be to have no "future," because it will dissolve as it transforms academic culture in its image. If it becomes departmentalized, it operates like other departments, but changes the university more than the university changes it.

For now, that scenario is panglossian. Cultural studies will never transform the culture of academe if it does not criticize its own place within it. Any intellectual history of cultural studies must attend to the institutional settings and academic politics which have constituted its formation. That includes the pressures for the emerging American cultural studies intellectual to be merely another academic specialist with a disciplinary discourse and with no public voice. So far, the American Left has abdicated the task of a broadly accessible critique of academic culture, leaving it to prominent neoconservatives, who have delivered influential, widely-selling trade books like Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, Charles J. Sykes's *ProfScam* and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*.

The academic Right glorifies "making it." So its elitist pseudo-humanism is less susceptible to charges of hypocrisy. Given our moral and ideological pretensions, however, we on the academic Left and liberal-Left must hold ourselves to a higher standard – and yet resist the impulse to self-righteousness and heroic posturing. Rather, if cultural studies is to face the charge of hypocrisy from within and without, it must interrogate itself about

the role of intellectual celebrity and of the academic entrepreneur in its own evolution. It must address the claims raised by conservatives that cultural studies is just an agenda of popcult canon-bashing, just a failed Marxism with a postmodern face, just a surrogate mode of play for New Leftists in refuge from street politics, or just the newest style of radical chic consumption by "slumming" intellectuals immersed in popcult as a pathetic way of identifying with the underclass. It must, therefore, overcome a different, yet arguably more crippling, "theoretical fluency" than that which Stuart Hall explicitly warned against: the facile evasion of open debate about political positions, achieved by disguising arguments about specific issues with ideological abstractions (or with punk haircuts and black suits).

The problems of definition and identity are inseparable from the perils of sectarianism. And this means, once again, that the Left must learn to respect yet not enshrine difference. Differences within cultural studies are productive. But differences which spin off in all directions ("the future of cultural studies is what I do," said one panelist) and congeal into demands for conformism are not. In developing an oppositional discourse and a counter-disciplinary praxis, the cultural studies intellectual must resist the impulse both to celebrate difference for itself and to conflate difference with inequality. At one pole lies the risk of an "anything goes" farrago. At the other is the more-radical-than-thou ultimatum for intra-sect solidarity.

The line between productive differences and between differences which generate calls for party-line purity is, of course, hard to draw except in particular cases. But Kobena Mercer of the British Film Institute wisely drew attention to the danger of the "race, class, gender mantra" of cultural studies. That mantra threatens, on the radical side, to mire and fracture cultural studies in parochial squabbling, and on the liberal side, to turn it into just another approach to multiculturalism. Neither to fall into a stance of exclusivity and moralistic judgement, nor one of an all-comers Pollyanna pluralism is the challenge of the near future. If cultural studies is to become more than just another university game or a marginal academic activity, one of its tasks must be to embrace contentiousness as a way of affirming an inspiring, if sometimes troubling, heterogeneity. ♦

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