Don't Worry (About Racism), Be Happy (on The Cosby Show). By Michael Hochsman

The Cosby Show allows white people the luxury of being both liberal and intolerant. They reject bigotry based upon skin color, yet they are wary of most (working class) black people. Color difference is okay, cultural difference is not.

The resurgence of 'Cultural Studies', this time on the North American continent, has offered a compromise for both a reflection on, and a re- vision of, the project of cultural political criticism articulated in the British context. At last, the newly emergent U.S. cultural studies has moved towards the rethinking of the vertical axis of British Cultural Studies' class-criticalness. Perhaps this levelling comes with the territory, occurring, as Andrew Ross points out, in a culture where "popular culture has been socially and institutionally central," and where "the popular sovereign goes forth in a more modest, recuperated garb, and demands a less expensive, carbonated version of the \lavor of life\" (1989:7-14). More significantly, however, the movement of cultural studies in the U.S. towards a more horizontal, if unevenly developed, axis of analysis signals the (tenuously) "artificial" nature of criticism's "invention of social movements of the past thirty years. The result of this shift for cultural studies is to move into "a traditional focus away from the conflict between dominant and popular cultures, conceived as unified blocs, [to] turn its attention to the axis between central and marginal cultures, conceived as pluralities" (Ross, 1990:28).

This shift allows, or requires, that social change be seen as an uneven, often contradictory, process. At worst, however, cultural studies in the U.S. is emerging as a type of "moderate" response to the media of the overlaid by sometimes impermeable dose of high theory. As the "Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future" conference (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, April 4-5, 1990), Stuart Hall stated that though he did not want to close or police the field, he was nonetheless concerned about "the overwhelming textualization" of theories of power, politics, race/class/gender, etc. says Hall. "Culture will always work through its textualities, but textuality is never enough" (284). What is vital for Hall is that theoretical and political questions are kept in permanent tension, that one will always "irritate, bother, and disturb the other." And this ultimately requires not confusing, "the politics of intellectual work (by) substituting intellectual work for politics" (286).

One of the original strengths of British Cultural Studies was the recognition of the limits of abstract study, and the consequent valorization of 'other' voices than those of the traditional intelligencists. The method of "choke points" at the universities to the streets of everyday life was ethnography, which offered both a gauge of popular 'common sense' knowledge and an index of the intelligentsia's strategy for its new political agendas. The ethnographic work of scholars such as Paul Willis and Angela McRobbie offered a "counter-ideology" to popular consciousness, often with very surprising results. Of course, ethnography does not provide some pre-given route to the truth, nor does it permit the ethnographer to pop the bubble of 'false consciousness.' However, while textual readings of everyday production offer an economic analytical efficacy, created in the scholastic solitude of the 'genius' intellectual, ethnography provides a vital, though not guaranteed, 'way in' to how Gramsci's 'mass of people' are led to think coherently about the real present world (1985:225). And if ethnography does not necessarily provide all of the answers, it does seem to raise the right questions.

Had Stuart Hall and Justin Lewis continued themselves to a textual study of The Cosby Show, they would have written a very different book. Enlightened Racism is the product of an ambitious research project which looks at how white and black audiences react differently to the Cosby Show, and how, within these two groups, socio-economic status affects audience reaction. At the outset of their research, the authors were generally well-equipped to play the role of the dominant, two classes of black people are still over-represented in association with drug use. In this context that Bill Cosby has decided to make a "black family acceptable" and respected — among the majority of TV viewers (who are white). Thus, The Cosby Show "has been pivotal in redéfining the way African Americans are depicted on television in the 1990s." According to Jaffe and Lewis, the show's impact on the show's mean turning toward a "newly\r\n\n[(c)2008 Border/Lines]