D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

Critical Commentary

“Something nasty down below”: Stuart Hall and the contradictions of “so-called Cultural Studies” in the multi-crisis era

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> *"Thus, running alongside my literary and critical interests… there were these other, deepening, historical, social and political questions. The two refused to stay in their respective boxes"* (Stuart Hall in Hall and Schwarz, 2017, p. 234).

Introduction: Cultures and Conjunctions

At the 2018 Union for Democratic Communications conferral of the Dallas Smythe award Sut Jhally highlighted a quote from Stuart Hall that I want to return to as we consider what cultural studies might have to offer us in the coming turbulent years: "I'm dwelling on the 'dirtiness' of it: the dirtiness of the semiotic game, if I can put it that way. I'm trying to return the project of cultural studies from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below" (1992, p. 278).

This "something nasty down below" is always with us, but in the first decades of the 21st century it erupted in multiple manifestations: terrorism coming home to roost in the United States, U.S. invasions in Asia and the Middle East, accelerating climate change, severe and increasing economic inequality, the bold resurgence of White nationalism and authoritarian populism (a term I take from Hall, 1979) around the globe, widespread exposure of endemic misogyny and sexual abuse, the ongoing murders of Black people by police and vigilantes leading to a massive uprising in the streets, a raging and seemingly endless global pandemic, surreal conspiratorial thinking motivating both loud resistance to public health measures and a White supremacist assault on the U.S. Capitol, and the reestablishment of centrist neoliberalism as a supposed lifeline to a more stable but ever receding future.

These intertwined events, incidents, occurrences, and trends demand the sort of conjunctural analysis that Hall, borrowing from Gramsci, saw as fundamental to a cultural studies that could directly engage with the world outside of the academy, contributing to a transformative project of more than just theoretical pondering. Hall's use of the concept of historical conjuncture frames it as "a strikingly condensed and contradictory moment of political struggles, victories, defeats and transformations" (2016, p. 156). Carley notes that "Conjunctures represent political opportunities that emerge out of short-term circumstantial responses to social problems. Conjunctures provide opportunities for groups to raise consciousness, organize, mobilize, and combine… Conjunctures, in short, posit the conditions through which it becomes more than merely possible but, rather, necessary to begin to think otherwise about the world" (2021, pp. 53-55). This necessity of thinking otherwise requires an approach to critical analysis that is not wholly owned by cultural studies, but cultural studies has been one of the key movers of the sort of conjunctural analysis that Gilbert defines as the examination of "convergent and divergent tendencies shaping the totality of power relations within a given social field during a particular period of time" (2019, p. 6). Obviously, that type of approach, exemplified in early British cultural studies by the landmark *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, Et. al, 1978/2013), is not an easy research task, as it demands a broad-based interdisciplinary approach and the ability to devote significant amounts of time and labor to in-depth analysis. Crucially, it also requires a willingness to take a stand on issues of power and politics. Lehtonen (2016) points out that "Contrary to… positivist ideas that see the researcher as a neutral observer, conjunctural analysis supposes such researchers are politically motivated" (p. 213).

We Are All Cultural Studies Now

Despite the challenges, there are signs that since the 1960s cultural studies has made a significant impact around the globe, influencing how politics and culture are imagined and discussed in both academic and popular venues. Looking over the landscape of convergences and divergences at the beginning of the 2020s, it might even seem that cultural studies has "won," albeit while many other things have been lost. Some, both sympathetic and hostile to cultural studies, have lamented its failures to change the world in any significant or measurable ways. After all, neoliberalism still dominates in many places around the globe and authoritarianism is once again on the rise. But, as Lehtonen (2016) argues, "cultural studies is in a special position to address these problems with its stress on the importance of the symbolic dimensions in producing current power structures and identifications" (p. 216). And it's nearly impossible to take a thorough view of popular culture, artistic practices, and social activism in the twenty-first century without seeing at least traces of a cultural studies sort of mindset in their creation, methods, and purpose.

Popular texts that demonstrate a type of meta-awareness of the political power of culture, like Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* series of films, Hannah Gadsby's stand-up comedy routines, Bong Joon-ho's award-winning *Parasite*, David Byrne's Broadway show *American Utopia*, the late Greg Tate's cultural criticism, Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*, Zadie Smith's novels and essays, Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*, Dave Zirin's sports columns, and the *Slate Culture Gabfest* and *Still Processing* podcasts, alongside social movements like Stop Asian Hate, MeToo, and Black Lives Matter, along with many, many other examples, all seem to be at least touched by the lessons of six decades of cultural studies that have slowly been absorbed into the cultural environment. Connell and Hilton (2016a, 2016b) and Littler (2016) point to the "mainstreaming" of cultural studies and its ongoing impact both in the academy and beyond: in the arts, popular media, publishing, journalism, and activism.

Since the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in 1964, countless numbers of students and others have encountered cultural studies and many of them have gone on to become artists and activists whose projects have been seen, read, heard, and experienced by millions all around the globe. For example, the filmmaker Isaac Julien has discussed Hall's direct involvement with various British film and television productions (Julien and Nash, 1996), and McRobbie (2016) looked back on Hall's consultations with Black and Asian artists during the 1980s. By way of another example, Kimberly Pierce, the director of *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), a film that certainly deals with the "something nasty down below" of violence directed at queer people, specifically identifies a class she took with Lauren Berlant as an important influence on that film (Tsoi, 2011). More recently, while it is true that a documentary film like Ava Duvernay's *13th* (2016), about the racialized history of mass incarceration in the United States, does not use *exactly* the same methodologies as *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, Et al., 1978/2013), we would be foolish to not see any connections whatsoever between the theoretical, pedagogical, political, and transformative possibilities of both.

In opposition to those who would balk because none of these examples are produced in strictly academic contexts, I see this as a mostly positive development. As Rodman (2015) writes, cultural studies "needs to purse, 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, non-profit organizations, policy centers, political movements, think tanks, and so on" (p. 54).

Rodman (2010, 2015) has also argued that cultural studies is ordinary: "A project that can be—and is—practiced by a much broader spectrum of people than is usually understood to be the case" (2015, p. 61). To be clear, not all examinations of culture can be considered fully ensconced in the traditions and commitments of cultural studies. Cultural journalist Douglas Wolk's (2021) deep dive into the history of interconnected narratives in the Marvel comic book universe is fun and interesting for fans like me, but I wouldn't call it a work of cultural studies. Wolk does touch on issues of representation, identity, and power, but these are not his core concerns in this book. So perhaps we need to think of examples like this as being, at most, cultural studies adjacent. And I see this as a tribute to how far cultural studies has come in influencing the larger public discourse. As Turner (2012) argues, "it is notable how many concepts that originated in cultural studies have become part of the way culture is now talked about in the media, in politics and in policy frameworks" (p. 7). Many activists, cultural critics, and even growing numbers in the general public, now take for granted key notions such as: representation and the practices of everyday life matter; old hierarchies between the "high" and popular arts are arbitrary distinctions; ideology is complex and always at play; meaning can never be fully fixed; both incorporation and resistance are possible; identities are unstable, contextual, contradictory, and intersectional; knowledge is subjective and contested; pleasure is meaningful; and power is discursive, diffuse, and simultaneously personal, collective, economic, political, and cultural.

Culture Wars Are "Back" (They Never Went Away)

Consider the manufactured controversy over the withdrawal from publication of a few Dr. Seuss books as a recent example of how all of this plays out in the confluence of culture and politics. When the Seuss estate in early 2021 decided to stop reprinting a handful of books that included demeaning racial stereotypes, Republican politicians and Fox News tried to make this into the dominant narrative for political purposes (to distract from the popularity of Democratic-led initiatives in the early days of the Biden administration). There is a temptation for some on the left to say that in a time of democracy under siege, a public health crisis, climate collapse, intersectional injustice, and ravaging inequality, thinking about children's books, of all things, was nothing but a distraction from the serious work of politics. But the work of cultural studies should remind us that representation does indeed matter, and centuries of egregious stereotypes in popular culture, including culture created for children, do indeed play a role in the manufacture of hate. People are not assaulting those they think are Asian on the streets solely because of economic anxiety, just as many Trump voters were not purely motivated by that reason either. They are also not assaulting Asian people *because* of Dr. Seuss books. The influence of culture is much subtler and more complex than that and it is never about any one particular image or text. Every racist act that may seem, on the surface, to take place in a singular moment, actually bears the traces of centuries of culture, what Hall (2021b) called a "very ancient grammar" (p. 109).

Race-baiting in politics, and then reframing the hate produced as a question of economic anxiety, is also not a historical anomaly. As the cultural critic Ellen Willis (2014) points out, the German working class in the 1930s actually had the opportunity to vote for existing Communist and Socialist parties but a large number supported the Nazis nonetheless, driven not by economics but by culture, by propaganda, by a history of intolerance bred by religion and other cultural

institutions. Lesson one from cultural studies, that the Seuss estate seemed to understand: Culture matters. Culture has, literally, life and death implications. As Rodman points out: "Donald Trump… did not become the Republican nominee for the 2016 presidential election on the strength of his legislative triumphs (he has none), his insightful public policy proposals (ditto), or his economic genius (double ditto). He has, however, successfully tapped into the xenophobic, homophobic, logic-phobic *cultural* values of the US far right" (2016, p. 395, emphasis in the original).

As I finish this essay in the dwindling and sad days of 2021, culture is indeed being taken seriously by all but the dreariest among us at this point. And the political right might get this more than the left. During the 2021 gubernatorial campaign in Virginia, the same party that had recently expressed outraged over the "censorship" of Dr. Seuss, turned to motivating White voters by attacking schools that assigned Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to AP English classes. The result of this attempt to turn Morrison into the latest Willie Horton? A Republican victory, with 57% of White women, 66% of White men, and 76% of White voters without college degrees, voting for Glenn Youngkin, who promised to protect parents' "rights" to choose what books their children would read in school. To be clear: Culture and a series of dog-whistle advertisements were certainly not the *only* factors in this race, but it would be foolish to dismiss the significant role they played in the outcome.

Hall's Complicated Relationship with Cultural Studies

So cultural studies has made a real impact in putting culture on equal analytic footing with economics and politics, but even a true believer in the promise and power of cultural studies like Rodman starts his book length critique with: "Once upon a time, there was this thing called 'Cultural Studies'" (2015, p. vii). The construction of this sentence suggests, at the very least, the air of an elegy. An intuition that might make some of us feel like Tony Soprano when he said, "It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that and I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over."[i] Is that where we are in terms of cultural studies?

Perhaps the dispersion and popularization of some of the key ideas brought to the fore by cultural studies also creates risks for cultural studies as a political project. As the novelist Philip Roth wrote: "Instead of being taken seriously as a threat, a man [sic] is effectively silenced by being made popular" (2017, p. 47). Perhaps in a world where everything *might* be cultural studies (or at least Cultural Studies Lite), nothing is cultural studies. At a conference in 2004, Stuart Hall, of all people, uttered the disturbing phrase "so-called Cultural Studies" (Hall, 2019, p. 305). And many others find themselves in agreement with this disparagement. Tomaselli (2016), for example, argues: "To some extent, CS has been re-imagined and tamed by the neo-liberal enemy it sought to expose" (p. 222), and he calls out the large number of journals devoted to porn studies, celebrity studies, consumer culture, and fashion studies, even while admitting that at least some of this work positions itself as critical in its approach. There are many inside, next to, and outside of cultural studies who believe much of what we have now is a diluted version of an approach to cultural studies devoted to challenging, and attempting to transform, what Hall referred to as "the dirty outside world" (1990, p. 12) and "the something nasty down below" (1992, p. 278). But this is not just a recent trend. In a different moment, Hall (2016) both acknowledged the importance of Raymond Williams's 1958 book *Culture and Society* as a founding text and criticized it for not

adequately dealing with issues of domination, struggle, and resistance. This critique is at the heart of what Hall found lacking in much of what would come to be considered cultural studies.

My argument in this essay is that an engagement with Hall's legacy is essential for the future of the sort of politically engaged cultural studies that his life and work embodied. Farred (2016) asks us to consider how we might take Hall's "spirit" and "repurpose [it] for addressing the particular difficulties of our conjuncture… in what kind of intellectual and political 'borrowing' will we engage… to understand the necessary incompleteness of his projects so that it becomes possible to see how his work might be continued" (p.658). Gilbert (2019) notes that Hall "was not the only thinker to enjoin upon us a duty to consider the world in all its complexity, to think power and its operations at various speeds, or to think across disciplines, across epochs across theoretical boundaries. But… it was his injunctions, his methods and his examples as much as any other that have inspired us to undertake the task" (p. 37). Yes, and… at the same time, I want to avoid promulgating a new version of the problem that Hall (1988) once attributed to some Marxists, when he insisted that we need "a much more careful and evidenced argument than the simple reiteration that, since this is what Marx said and we have thought, it is and will ever be so" (p. 5). Substituting "Hall" for "Marx" in this quote, readers of this essay can decide for themselves whether I successfully avoided this trap or not. Like Turner (2012), my intent is neither to attack cultural studies nor to offer a "nostalgic call for a return to some golden age" (p. 2).

Furthermore, I am aware that Hall always insisted on the specificity of history, arguing that we cannot simply lay the templates of previous struggles on top of the current moment and trust that they provide all of the answers. "The distinction between one conjuncture and another matters profoundly to me," Hall says in his memoir (Hall and Schwarz, 2017, p. 45). So, while it is tempting to ask "What Would Hall Say?" about moments of intense change and conflict such as the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020, or the political challenges of the pandemic, or the violence of January 6th 2021, I will also attempt to avoid that pitfall. Hall always insisted that his story of cultural studies was just that, *his* story (Grossberg and Slack, 2016; Hall, 2016). He never intended to prescribe for all others what cultural studies should be. In a lecture over three decades ago he said: "I don't want to talk about British cultural studies (which is in any case a pretty awkward signifier for me) in a patriarchal way, as the keeper of the conscience of cultural studies, hoping to police you back into line with what it really was if only you knew" (1992, p. 277). But at the same time, he could also be dismissive of work that he thought was missing the mark. Just a moment later in that same lecture he said:

> Now, does it follow that cultural studies is not a policed disciplinary area? That it is whatever people do, if they choose to call or locate themselves within the project and practice of cultural studies? I am not happy with that formulation either. Although cultural studies as a project is open-ended, it can't be simply pluralist in that way… It does matter whether cultural studies is this or that. It can't be just any old thing which chooses to march under a particular banner. It is a serious enterprise, or project, and that is inscribed in what is sometimes called the "political" aspect of cultural studies. (1992, p. 278)

What I am interested in, therefore, is not providing a taxonomy of work that Hall would or would not approve of, but rather in the overall political possibilities of cultural studies in the current historical conjuncture. Beginning to explore this question, I believe, necessitates an open engagement with the lessons, ways of thinking, examples, and possibilities that Stuart Hall modeled for us.

Power, Difference, and Culture

To begin, Hall thought of both power and difference as central to social relations and, looking at the current political moment, it is hard to argue that both are not at the core of the crises we are facing: Proud Boys vs. Black Lives Matter, neoliberal governments and corporations vs. environmentalists, Zionists vs. the Palestinian liberation movement, we could go on and on listing these conflicts without drawing false equivalencies between progressive and reactionary forces and worldviews. But again, in all of these struggles, culture matters. Culture matters deeply, profoundly, materially. In a 2007 interview Hall pointed out that if we want to understand "how difference operates inside people's heads you have to go to art, you have to go to culture—to where people imagine, where they fantasize, where they symbolize" (cited in Loudis, 2017).

This emphasis on "talking culturally about politics and politically about culture" (Hall and Schwarz, 2017, p. 242) is perhaps the greatest contribution that cultural studies offered the world. And even before CCCS, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Hall was writing for and editing newly founded leftist publications, it really was an innovation; it really was, if not a complete break, certainly a transformation of research and analysis. Putting culture on equal footing with politics, economics, and social theory, seeing them all intertwined, with no one of these taking precedence or being more foundational than the others… this is what cracked open the door to understanding society in new, exciting, and potentially transformative ways.

Consider this excerpt from Hall's memoir, where he reflects on Jamaican independence in 1962:

> Here, paradoxically, vernacular lived cultures spoke more powerfully than—and as a substitute for—formal politics. Popular religion and urban culture became proxy symbolic resources in which poverty, social discontent, people's disaffiliation from the system, class interest, racialized divisions and political differences found expression. The 'revolution' which Independence set in motion was cultural, not political. The slow, subterranean emergence of a black Afro-centric consciousness, of the Rastafarians, of Black Power and of reggae, was the principal vehicle of this profound transformation. (Hall and Schwarz, 2017, p. 42)

In this passage Hall seamlessly points to the entangled articulations of economic, sociological, political, and cultural developments at that particular historical conjuncture. None is primary, none is secondary. All are mutually constitutive. This is at the heart of conjunctural analysis which "underlines that 'economic', 'political' and 'cultural' aspects have to be examined as dimensions of the complex wholes of overall social reproduction, embedded in complex social formations and determining each other in contextually specific ways… It is a way to analyse what role cultural

dimensions have in economic and political practices—and vice versa… The conjunctural approach does not argue that everything is culture. Instead, it underlines that all social practices depend on and relate to meaning and sees [the] cultural dimension as one of the constitutive elements of any practice" (Lehtonen, 2016, pp. 210-211). The mutually constitutive nature of the political, the economic, and the cultural is what Hall (1997) referred to as a relationship of neither simplistic unity nor separation but complex articulation.

"So-Called Cultural Studies"

In the years subsequent to CCCS, Hall also became troubled by his belief that cultural studies had eventually reached a point in its development where the tendency was to valorize culture too much. Johnson (2016), like Lehtonen (2016), reminds us: "Culture is everywhere but it is not everything, nor is it separate from the structures that undergird everyday living and its practical exigencies" (p. 188). Did cultural studies, broadly considered (perhaps inadvertently, perhaps not), make culture into everything, the primary force, in much the same way that reductionist versions of Marxism shrank everything to the economic dimension? We know that Hall said, more than once, that he could not read any more textual analyses of *The Sopranos*. And I think it is worth tracing for just a moment what he meant by that. We can begin with Hall's reminder that "to work in Cultural Studies does not necessarily mean that you think the entire world can be explained from a cultural point of view… so much of what one requires to understand cultural relations is not, in any obvious sense, cultural" (2016, p. 4).

In addition to pointing out that digging even deeper into *The Sopranos* wasn't of any interest to him, Hall also used the eye-opening phrase "so-called Cultural Studies." Yet he would also express admiration for Jhally and Lewis's (1992) *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*, which explores audience responses to *The Cosby Show*. Well, what does that mean? What are the differences between this real book that Hall found worthwhile, and the imagined, but very real, Platonic ideal of an interpretive essay on *The Sopranos* that he was simply tired of because of its (imagined) lack of engagement with the dirty political world that culture grows in?

I have to take a little side road here, by way of a biographical anecdote. In doing so, I am following the example set by one of the original CCCS participants, Tony Jefferson (2016), who, in his own reflection on his journey into cultural studies and beyond, points out the "inevitably idiosyncratic" nature of any reflection of this sort (p.111). My own discovery of cultural studies was by accident. Maybe that is true, more or less, for everyone. I was working on a Master's thesis on race, class, and gender politics in Spike Lee's films. I had gone to the university library to pick up a book I needed and spent a little time browsing the stacks nearby. This was back in the day when we did that instead of just searching online. There was always the possibility of serendipity then that we may have now lost sight of in some ways. I stumbled across that Jhally and Lewis (1992) book on *The Cosby Show*.[ii] Honestly, I was astonished. Maybe I was a little naïve or it was just an earlier time, but I remember thinking: You can write in a scholarly way about a television sitcom? This is something that can be done? You can take this twenty-two-minute bit of frivolity set in an upscale home and explore it politically? Sociologically? You can take it seriously? I found myself interpellated, in an Althusserian sense, as if the book called to me from the shelf: Hey, you! Look at this! Open me and enter a new subjectivity. Keep in mind, I was writing about Spike Lee, but

you know, that was *film*. Cinema was Serious. You could approach cinema like literature. But a sitcom? And to think about it in terms of ideology? Race? Power? The American Dream?

Because that's the point. The Jhally and Lewis (1992) book wasn't just about *The Cosby Show*. It was about the *political and social influence* of *The Cosby Show*: How it was interpreted ideologically by Black and White audiences, and how it played a role in both shaping and responding to their perceptions about racial equality and power in America. It's in the phrase in the subtitle, *The Myth of the American Dream*, that I think we can see the clearest connection to Hall's insistence that the beginning of British cultural studies was "a response to a very concrete *political* problem and question: What happened to the working class under conditions of economic affluence?" (Hall, 2016, p. 5, emphasis in the original). Brunsdon (2021) points out that "Hall both is and isn't interested in specific texts and media forms. Underlying… particular projects is a wider, more general political concern with the role of the media in constituting the frameworks through which governments govern, politics is debated, and everyday life is lived. His interest in a particular text is always part of a larger project: nothing less than an anatomy of the balance of forces, the vicissitudes of power and resistance, in a particular context…" (pp. 2-3).

In other words, Hall's work models the importance of *contextual* analysis, rather than settling for isolated textual analysis, when grappling with media, culture, power, and resistance.[iii] The aforementioned, *Policing the Crisis* still stands as an exemplary achievement in exactly this sort of politically engaged contextual/conjunctural analysis. In their introduction, the authors highlight their solidarity with activists fighting against racism and what would come to be widely known as the prison-industrial complex: "We hope… that what we have written may help to inform, deepen and strengthen their practical struggle. We hope they will read it as we have tried to write it: as an *intervention*—albeit an intervention in the battleground of ideas" (Hall, Et al., 1978/2013), p. 4, emphasis in the original).

It isn't entirely fair to make a broad claim that cultural studies as a whole is not currently doing that kind of politically engaged work dealing with struggle, power, and resistance. Although, that argument has often been made. We can look to Turner (2012) for one example and for a summary of others. But there is scant empirical evidence to support the contention that cultural studies has completely abandoned politics. I echo Turner's (2012) confession that "there are important specificities… in how cultural studies has played out around the world and I can't pretend to be well informed about all of them" (p. 5). (There is probably a better case to be made that cultural studies in general has given short shrift to economics, while political economy in general has given short shrift to culture, but that is an old argument and I don't really have anything new to contribute to it). However, the argument that I do think is supportable, is that those of us who are invested in cultural studies should always be mindful of not looking away from the political, the sociological, the economic, and the concrete problems facing communities both around the globe and just outside our office doors. And that ongoing reminders and debates about cultural studies being *inherently* political, and if it is not political than the work is something other than cultural studies, are healthy, are needed, are important. Even if we feel like we do this over, and over again (Rodman, 2015). Because self-reflection and internal criticism should be central to what we do.

So, when Hall said he didn't want to read about *The Sopranos* anymore (you probably didn't think I would ever find my way back to that), I don't think he meant that there is nothing important to

be said about television, or narratives in general for that matter, anymore. That certainly would not be consistent with the rest of his body of work. I think he meant that he, personally, wasn't interested in analysis of popular culture that didn't deal with the political, the sociological, the economic, the uses and abuses of power: the "something nasty down below." As Turner (2012) notes, Hall was objecting specifically to textual analysis of popular media that ducks the crucial task of "accessing deeper structural, cultural and political tendencies" (p.173). Forty years ago Hall (1981) wrote that popular culture is "one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the area of consent and resistance… That is why 'popular culture' matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it" (p. 239). And, Scarlett, he meant it, sticking with that position throughout his life as an intellectual.

Personally, I do give a damn about popular culture.[iv] I love pop music, television dramas, NBA basketball, stand-up comedy, films and books, and film and book reviews. All of this brings a lot of pleasure to my life. But popular culture and cultural studies are not synonymous. When I am watching a basketball game, reading a movie review, people watching at a local mall (before the pandemic), or posting my musings about a new TV show on social media, I don't think I am doing cultural studies. (Although each one of those things *could* become the basis of a cultural studies project because there are questions of power, questions of identity and difference, and political, economic and sociological implications inherent in all cultural artifacts and practices.)

And again, I know this is, at least partially, an old argument. For example, over a decade ago, in an initially controversial piece, Bérubé wrote:

> Since its importation to the United States… cultural studies has basically turned into a branch of pop-culture criticism… The result is that cultural studies now means everything and nothing; it has effectively been conflated with "cultural criticism" in general, and associated with a cheery "Pop culture is fun! " approach. Anybody writing about *The Bachelor* or *American Idol* is generally understood to be "doing" cultural studies, especially by his or her colleagues elsewhere in the university. (2009, n.p.)

But I want to insist on the importance of revisiting this argument every so often because, just like a nation's roads, bridges, broadband, water, hospitals, schools, and daycare centers, we should pay ongoing attention to the infrastructure, if you will, of cultural studies. Hall was "always rethinking, always in the business of renewing" cultural studies (Farred, 2016, p.652). And, as Rodman (2015) notes: "…given the fluidity and variability of Cultural Studies across both space and time, these moments of self-definition need to happen with some regularity" (p. 12).

The Importance of the Contextual: A Short Case Study

I noted an example above, of Wolk's (2021) analysis of Marvel comics, that I wouldn't really consider an example of cultural studies in Hall's terms. But let's consider another contemporary example of how popular culture might be examined through a cultural studies lens that focuses in on questions of power, domination, and resistance. There was some public discourse in 2021 about *Them: Covenant*, which is a controversial television horror series about White supremacy and

violence. The controversy stemmed primarily from extremely graphic depictions of violence being inflicted on Black people, and the subsequent questioning of Black creators who choose to focus on Black trauma and death for the gaze of primarily White audiences. One of the lessons of cultural studies is to not dismiss this program as unworthy of analysis simply because of its genre or commercial appeal. But, I would also argue that there is no way to provide an adequate cultural studies analysis of a text like *Them* without talking about *contextual* issues. Without talking about "deeper structural, cultural and political tendencies" (Turner, 2012, p.173). Without talking about domination, struggle and resistance (Hall, 2016, p.30). Without talking about the realities of White supremacy in America, structural inequalities, micro and macroaggressions directed at Black people, and the ongoing murders of Black people by official or ad hoc representatives of the state. Without also talking about the show's streaming service, Amazon, and its labor practices and domination of the cultural sphere, and what that means in relationship to our consumption of its products. Without talking about the changing, and not changing, race and gender inequities in the cultural industries. Without talking about what it means socially and politically to build entertainment that focuses on Black trauma and death. A television show like *Them*— its conditions of production, its textual content, and its reception by audiences— is important precisely because, as Hall (2016) points out, "Cultural politics and ideological struggle are the necessary conditions for forms of social and political struggle" (p. 190).

I'm not going to offer a position on whether *Them* is "good" representation or "bad" representation, harmful or empowering. Nelson's (2021) recent work on freedom in art and other dimensions of culture and society effectively explores the complexities behind notions such as harm and vulnerability or autonomy and empowerment. Hall (1993, 2013) consistently rejected any sort of binary thinking about media representations, and his highly influential encoding/decoding model of television discourse (Hall, 1980) pointed out that meaning is not inherent in the text but is formed in a complex process of articulation among production processes, the text itself, and audiences; who have the capability to respond in multiple and contradictory ways. Furthermore, in a lecture delivered in 1983, Hall said:

> I want to resist the notion that one can permanently ascribe cultural forms to particular positions. I reject that type of formal analysis of cultural fields which sorts the world into progressive and nonprogressive forms because I am struck by the number of nonprogressive forms that actually progress and the number of progressive forms that do not seem to progress anywhere, the progressiveness of a particular form or practice is not given within the culture itself. (2016, p. 191)

In that lecture, Hall used rock music and religion as his primary examples, pointing out that rock is not inherently revolutionary and religion is not inherently conservative (and vice-versa): "There is no guarantee of the intrinsically progressive or regressive nature of particular cultural forms" (Hall, 2016, p. 194). Nelson (2021) has made a similar point about art: "Its capacity to mean differently to different viewers… will always complicate any judgment that pretends certainty about any given work's meaning, or that purports that meaning to be self-evident and fixed" (p. 21). And, of course, the same can be said about the commercial television industry and its products. This is precisely what Hall (1980) took up in the encoding/decoding essay despite rejecting the

notion that cultural forms and popular texts are completely open to *any* sort of interpretation at all. Meaning is structured by the text but not locked down by it. This is consistent with his insistence that representation and difference are both, in his words, "slippery, and therefore, contested" (Hall, 1996, p. 447). So, while we might easily dismiss the notion that various audiences of *Them* (or any text) will read the series in exactly the same ways, we should also be suspicious of arguments, like some I encountered online, suggesting there are little to no differences between the imagery of a complex text like *Them* and those representations found in White supremacist media constructions.

The Political and Positional Alignments of Cultural Studies

Of course, when considering commercial culture, as in the example above, in addition to the complexity of meaning in textual production and audience reception, there is also the problem of potentially transformative material becoming subsumed by the hegemony of the industries that dominate cultural production. Thus, related to the notion of losing sight of the political commitments of cultural studies, Hall (2016) points us also to the danger presented to any oppositional stance by incorporation into the dominant ideology. We might consider what happened in 2020 when corporations like Wal-Mart began selling Black Lives Matter as just another brand of merchandise, while issuing public relations messaging around "support" for the movement (without, by the way, changing very much about their corporate practices). This is quite easy to criticize, but we should also ask whether cultural studies itself has been incorporated to the extent that it cannot offer any real resistance to the dominant politics in both higher education and the larger structures of power throughout the nations in which it ever had any purchase at all.[v]

Turner (2012) addresses this question in his critique of the emergence of an overly optimistic approach to so-called "convergence culture" in the early 2000s. From Turner's perspective this development represented an abandonment of the transformative mission of cultural studies by adopting a corporate-friendly perspective that made grand claims for the democratizing potential of new media technologies, and the power of fans and independent producers to use media just as they saw fit, while emphasizing a pedagogical imperative to train students in the technical skills and approaches valued by the very industries that cultural studies aims to critique. While the convergence of media industries and technologies is now taken for granted, this cozy alignment with capitalist aims is still evident in the work of scholars who view this as a natural and unproblematic direction for cultural studies in the twenty-first century (see, for example, Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2018).

Our general commitment to cultural studies being a relatively open project cannot extend so far that *any* work whatsoever can be considered cultural studies simply because it *touches* on issues of culture in one way or another. Rodman argues that "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" (2015, p. 40). This itself is a Gramscian position, as Jefferson (2016) points out when stating that there is "no escape from the politics of intellectual work; to deny this reality, to suggest that this [is] not the case, [is] itself a political act" (p. 113).

Because politics can never be disarticulated from the pursuit of power, analysis of power should be understood as central to cultural studies. Said (1994) noted, "Politics is everywhere: there can be no escape into the realms of pure art and thought or, for that matter, to the realm of disinterested

objectivity or transcendental theory" (p. 21). I want to go out on a limb just a little here and suggest that if a researcher or writer is not critiquing power, they are not doing cultural studies. I know that sounds very prescriptive. It doesn't seem controversial to me, but I know it might to others. And I am not suggesting that what they are doing is useless or not interesting or unworthy. It might be excellent literary analysis or something else, but it is not cultural studies. I've made similar arguments about the term media literacy (Yousman, 2016). We have to insist on *critical* media literacy that seeks to analyze and transform the power of media and not just a corporate-friendly version of media literacy that teaches the differences between a close-up and an extreme close-up, throws in a dollop of "how are the girls and boys in this ad depicted differently?" and then goes home for the evening. Perhaps it is time to explicitly distinguish between *critical* cultural studies and cultural studies, but I actually hope not, because I believe the critical should be baked right into the cake. I don't want to have to start talking about the differences between delicious cake and cake. I want all of the cake to be inherently delicious.

And by delicious, I mean leftist. Hall (2021a) wrote, in a piece originally published in 1983, that "The *problem* of ideology is to give an account, within a materialist theory, of how social ideas arise. We need to understand what their role is in a particular social formation, so as to inform the struggle to change society and open the road towards a socialist transformation of society" (p. 136, emphasis in the original). These two sentences are crucial to understanding what Hall and CCCS were all about. The key words of *problem*, *struggle*, *change*, *socialist*, and *transformation* mark how cultural studies differed from the dominant academic disciplines of the day. Put simply, albeit polemically, I agree with Rodman (2015) that cultural studies, rightfully understood, is and *should be* a leftist project. Certainly, we can see that in its theoretical roots, but in addition I think we have to insist on a continuing commitment not to any particular party or leftist orthodoxy, but to an intellectual and political project that stands for care for humanity, animals, and other parts of the natural world; people over profit; democracy not authoritarianism; egalitarianism rather than hierarchy; standing with the oppressed not the oppressors. Turner (2012) argues that what distinguishes cultural studies is "a critical mission that has a political and moral purpose, which is about the public good before economic development, and which addresses the issues of the cultural distribution of power as a core concern" (p. 12).

By way of example, one of the hallmarks of cultural studies has been a critical examination of questions of identity, including gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, dis/ability, and more. These sorts of questions are always articulated to questions of power, domination, and resistance, whether this is acknowledged or not. Using cultural studies research and theory to deepen their understanding of anti-Blackness could therefore be highly productive for scholars writing about, or activists aligned with, the Black Lives Matter movement (Yousman, forthcoming). On the other hand, it should be unimaginable to consider a cultural studies project devoted to helping corporations create advertising and public relations materials that can target Black consumers more effectively.[vi] Media representation is obviously a central concern for cultural studies, as is the role of advertising and PR as forms of capitalist propaganda, but putting this in the service of corporate marketing campaigns should be recognized as antithetical to the project of cultural studies, even to those of us unwilling to assign any sort of rigidly doctrinaire vision of what cultural studies can and can't be.

Furthermore, cultural studies is an intellectual project, certainly, but not a project of intellectualism disassociated from any commitment other than abstract, disembodied, theorizing. Grossberg sounds very much like his former teacher, Hall, when he writes: "in my vision of cultural studies, theory is always in the service of the concrete, enabling one to produce the concrete in more productive ways" (p. 2). Said (1994) framed this as an active and unavoidable process of constant decision making: "The intellectual always has a choice either to side with the weaker, the less well represented, the forgotten or ignored, or to side with the more powerful" (pp. 32-33). And, despite the propaganda of authoritarian nationalists and right-wing pseudo-populists, taking a stand against the powerful entails a leftist orientation, even if that is broadly imagined. Rodman (2015) puts it like this: "Cultural Studies' leftism isn't monolithic—largely because the left itself isn't monolithic… 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" (p. 48).

To put it somewhat crudely, this notion doesn't suggest that cultural studies as a mindset would push one to support a specific political candidate or party, but it does mean that a cultural studies project *on behalf of* Thatcherist, Reaganist, Clintonist, Trumpist, Netanyahuist, Modiist, Orbánist, or Bolsonarist ideals is nonsensical. Rodman (2015) again: "Cultural Studies' politics have never simply been an open-ended free-for-all, where the entire spectrum of political positions have been actively in play" (p. 49). Conservative or far-right political humor doesn't land well (yes, that's my far from objective opinion) and neither would conservative or far-right cultural studies. In fact, the very notion should instantly trigger the oxymoron signal in our brains.

Does this seem like an elitist, condescending, leftist argument? A critique of stances like the one I am taking as being close-minded and patronizing to conservatives (and just plain wrong) has been made before. Grossberg (2010) passionately argues for a sort of humble political indeterminacy for cultural studies, writing: "there can be and in fact is conservatively inflected cultural studies" (p. 99). This is consistent with his earlier position when he wrote this about Thomas Frank's (2004) well-known book, *What's the Matter With Kansas*:

> In my argument, the answer to Frank's question – what's the matter with people living in the so-called 'red' states?— is – nothing. The fact that they disagree with progressives does not mean there is something wrong with them. On the other hand, there may be something wrong with people in the so-called 'blue' states if they think that there is something 'wrong' with conservatives (in Kansas) simply because they vote or think differently. (2006, p. 26)

Grossberg (2010) also argues that cultural studies is not "defined by a concern with any particular politics" (p. 2). I think it is time to ask if this particular claim is still useful, or if it ever was. Looking at his point about Frank's (2004) position, I find myself in the present conjuncture asking: It's *more* wrong to think that there is something wrong with right-wing ideology than it is to believe what very large numbers of Republicans believe in this moment? Does this include the people who stormed the Capitol on January 6th, 2021? Does it include the guy wearing the "Camp Auschwitz" sweat shirt? Or Confederate flag guy? Or the proudly Islamophobic members of Congress? Does

it include all of those who still refuse to accept the results of the 2020 election? What about the QAnoners who believe that Democrats are socialist Satan worshippers feasting off the blood of the Gentile babies they have hidden in secret basements? Or those whose "thinking differently" includes thinking that there are Jewish space lasers igniting forest fires, and that Bill Gates is microchipping us and altering our DNA with Covid vaccines, which are both poisonous and worthless because there never was a global pandemic anyway.

Forgive my sarcasm here, but I wonder if Hall would have said there was "nothing wrong" with Enoch Powell's racist followers and the far-right National Front in Great Britain in the 1960s and 70s. Certainly *Policing the Crisis* (1978/2013) never came close to that sort of sleight of hand. I don't think it is unheard of that one might simultaneously analyze the complexities of *and* find fault with reactionary movements. Having said that, I do agree with Grossberg (2010) when he says "it is not my job—as a critical scholar—to tell people what they should be or desire" (p. 97). I also cede his point that: "We are not priests! We don't get to tell people how to live their lives!" (quoted in Turner, 2012, p.160). However, I believe taking an unabashed political stance is not the same as merely moralizing about individuals' desires or life choices. We have to be able to conduct critical research with the goals of political transformation, making a "contribution to the public good" (Turner, 2012, p. 6), without this being dismissed as simply shaming those who disagree with us. Shouldn't we be working toward the analysis, refutation, and dismantling of "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2004, p. 17) rather than embracing an "anything goes, so you do you" kind of approach?

This is not meant to be read as a wholehearted defense of that Frank (2004) book. I agree with the critics of its overstatements and oversights, but it's also important to note that Frank would never have said that he was working in the paradigm of Gramscian cultural studies. In fact, he has demonstrated overt and ongoing hostility to cultural studies, albeit from the left rather than the right (Frank, 2002). And here it is important to note that I am also not arguing that all cultural studies must follow in lockstep with the sort of Gramscian cultural studies that Hall, and others at Birmingham, built.

Chen (1996a), Connell and Hilton (2016a), Rodman (2015), Sardar and Van Loon (2010), Turner (2012), and many others, have pointed out that cultural studies has taken on many differing forms in various times and places. Hall himself, of course, was a "diasporic intellectual" (Chen, 1996b, p. 484), and it may very well be that the most robust presence of cultural studies in the twenty-first century is in various locations other than the U.K. and the U.S. (Turner, 2012). And yet, without romanticizing the early days of the CCCS, and in opposition to the straw person argument that Frank (2002) has put forward, I believe that in the present conjuncture Hall, and his colleagues and their descendants, still matter. Rodman (2015) puts it like this: "I still want to make a *strong* claim for the importance (which, to be clear, is distinct from "the centrality") of Birmingham to a proper understanding of Cultural Studies, both historically and in the current moment. It should be possible, after all, for us to recognize that the CCCS played a vital role in the growth, development, and global spread of Cultural Studies, without also treating it as some sort of perfect and immutable model for how Cultural Studies should be practiced forevermore" (p. 123, emphasis in the original). This is, admittedly, a difficult task of not reinforcing Eurocentrism while simultaneously not dismissing the importance of the CCCS to the history of the type of cultural studies I am concerned with in this essay.

Speaking of the early progenitors of the Birmingham School, like Leavis, Hoggart, Thompson, and Williams, Hall (2016) reflected: "We are the beneficiaries of people who have struggled with thinking difficult things for the first time on ground which is unprepared for that kind of thought" (p. 53). And I think those in the here and now can also benefit from that type of critical reflection on the work of the Birmingham scholars (especially Hall, who never lost sight of his complicated and contradictory ties to his birthplace in Jamaica), even as we recognize this as only one manifestation of the global and multifaceted project of cultural studies.

Looking Back to Look Forward

What I take from continually going back to Hall, and those who influenced him and came after him, is the belief that there are two central mandates that should guide the work of those invested in cultural studies. These do not include remaking the world exactly as we want it to be for once and for all. That is too much. It is a Sisyphean task doomed to create frustration, exhaustion, and despair. Rodman (2015) reminds us that "Cultural Studies will not singlehandedly save— or even change—the world… but it *can* contribute in unique and valuable ways to a broad range of efforts to make the world a better place" (p. ix). And, despite my objections to a particular stance of his just above, I appreciate the way Grossberg (2010) puts this in temporal terms: "Cultural studies matters because it is about the future, and about some of the work it will take, in the present, to shape the future. It is about understanding the present in the service of the future. By looking at how the contemporary world has been made to be what it is, it attempts to make visible ways in which it can become something else" (p. 1). And if we want to play a small role in making the possibilities of transformation visible we do so by (1) being as knowledgeable as we can possibly be about what we are confronting and (2) communicating what we learn as widely as possible. Gray, et al. (2007) called this "marching on two fronts. Not only being at the forefront of the theoretical positions that were emerging at the time, in a sense to be ahead of the academic 'game,' but also having a responsibility to transmit those ideas outside of the ivory towers of the academy" (p. 7). Gramsci (1971) wrote about these twin responsibilities as first knowing more than your opponents and then being able to communicate and spread that knowledge effectively.[vii]

Although some of us "in" cultural studies might get tired of our Groundhog Day tendencies, most of us agree that it's important to periodically reflect on how well we are doing what we think we should be doing. Connell and Hilton (2016a) point out that, from the first days of the CCCS, Hoggart and Hall were committed to continual self-reflection on the mission and work of the Centre. And we have seen an almost endless parade of reconsideration, re-examination, rethinking of various aspects of cultural studies as "a field of inquiry rather than a conventional academic discipline" (Connell and Hilton, 2016a, p. xii). Hall mentioned, in one of the last interviews toward the end of his life, that he never wanted cultural studies to be reined in as a discipline, that it should be a "constantly moving target" (Hall and Connell, 2016, p. 303) open to ongoing criticism.

So here we go again, as I continue to look back to Hall to think about what cultural studies is doing now, why we are doing whatever that is, and who we are doing it for. I think it is possible to question the "what" (do we really *need* more textual analyses of *The Sopranos*, or *The Bachelor*, or *Squid Game*, even if they can be fun?), but in particular, I think we should really be questioning the "why" and the "who for." Rodman (2015) puts it like this: "If a vital part of Cultural Studies' mandate involves communicating the knowledge that it produces with a broader public, then it is

crucial for Cultural Studies scholars to conceive of that public in more expansive terms than just a combination of the students who take our classes and the professional colleagues who read our published prose" (p. 83). Hall (2019) talked about this as the need to "take responsibility for speaking [truth] to wider groups of people than are simply involved in the professional life of ideas. To speak it beyond the confines of the academy" (p. 322). Brunsdon (2021) reminds us that Hall put this imperative into practice for himself as his "understanding of his responsibilities as a citizen and an intellectual led him to engage in public discussion and policy advocacy, and this means broadcasting, speaking at meetings, writing to newspapers, giving evidence to commissions, and contributing to a wide range of ephemeral publications" (p. 2). Like Hall, we who are involved in cultural studies should write more widely. Speak more widely. Use more forms of media. Broaden our audiences.

By way of example, I will briefly indulge in another personal anecdote. In February 2021, just after the death of Rush Limbaugh, I received an email from a producer for *Bill O'Reilly's No Spin News*. They were inviting me to appear as a guest: "We are looking for someone who can discuss how the country has changed in recent years and hatred is now widely accepted by a lot of people. We are looking for someone who can explain what has shifted in our culture, what is now culturally different."

Without suffering under any illusions that this is actually a real news outfit, rather than a far-right purveyor of propaganda and deceit, I was tempted to accept this offer in order to get a leftist perspective in front of a right-wing audience. But I was also a bit wary of how it would actually enfold, being fully aware of the potential pitfalls of going into this particular space where I would have no control over the framing, editing, time limits, etc. I posted about my ambivalence on social media and I was surprised by how many of my academic friends were fiercely adamant that I should not even consider doing it. (Interestingly, my journalist friends took exactly the opposite position).

I ended up deciding to be consistent with my belief that we need to write and speak more widely, but I made a foolish blunder. I wrote back with complete honesty about what they should expect from me if I were to appear. They had asked me to provide a brief summary of how I would respond to this question: "How the country has changed and explain why hatred is now widely accepted by many people (i.e., react[ions] to Rush Limbaugh's death), what is culturally different?"

This is what I wrote back:

> Well, my quick response is that hatred has been part of the American experience right from the very beginning. This is a country with a long history of hatred-inspired violence being enacted on indigenous people, Black people, women, LGBTQ people, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, etc.
>
> What has changed? We are just coming out of four years of the most blatantly hate—filled presidency of the modern era. There was a top down message that hatred was okay, indeed something to be celebrated.

> Regarding the passing of Rush Limbaugh: Sure, a lot of people made light of it, or you could even say celebrated it. But I think it is ironic to focus on reactions to his death if we are going to ignore *why* people reacted the way they did. Limbaugh made a career out of spreading hate. In fact he got very rich from demonizing women, people of color, gay people, people from other nations. So if we want to talk about why hate seems to be more widely accepted now, I think Limbaugh is actually a good place to start. He helped to create a culture that used hatred as nothing but entertainment and a ratings strategy.
>
> Still want to have me on?

Two days passed with no response. So, I wrote them again asking if they were still interested. I received this message from the producer: "I'm sorry for my delayed response. We have changed our show topic for Monday so we will not be conducting the interview. I will keep your contact close and we'd love to have you on in the near future. In the meantime, if there is ever anything we can do for you—please let me know."

Needless to say, as of this writing, months and months later, I have yet to hear back from them. As I say, I think I made a silly mistake. In retrospect I believe I should have sent back a blandly neutral response in order to not show my cards, to get a chance for at least a few moments to challenge their narrative. Many of my academic friends disagree. They were convinced that appearing would have been a terrible mistake and I would have damaged my reputation while gaining nothing. But I wasn't interested in gaining anything for myself. I was interested in getting critical ideas in front of a public that normally would never hear them. Even for just a moment, even if the hopes of this succeeding were minimal, and even if there was some risk involved. Hall (1992), while arguing for why cultural studies should be wary of becoming defanged as an institutionalized academic discipline, said "dangers are not places you run from but places you go towards" (p. 285). The public intellectual Noam Chomsky, never known for shrinking from an argument, would agree. He has pointed out: "For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us" (2017, p. 16).

Having Fun But Not Seeking Comfort

Critical work will always come with some risks if we are really trying to accomplish something transformative. "Cultural studies is supposed to be controversial. It's supposed to make powerful institutions uncomfortable. It's supposed to pose smart, provocative challenges to the status quo" (Rodman, 2015, p. 167). If we accept this list of suppositions than the motivating impulse of cultural studies is akin to that which Said (1994) prescribes for the intellectual mindset in general: "It is a spirit in opposition, rather than in accommodation, that grips me because the romance, the interest, the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups seems so unfairly weighted against them" (p. xvii).

We who work in, or even adjacent to, cultural studies can benefit from always being reflective about *why* we are doing what we are doing. Not for fame and fortune (certainly!). Not even, to paraphrase Marx, simply to understand the world, but to play a small part in transforming it. This is certainly challenging but it does not have to be dreary labor. In fact, *it can't be* if it has any hope of fully engaging ourselves and others. Notice that Said uses the words romance, interest, and challenge, in addition to struggle. McRobbie (2013), reflecting on her initial attraction to cultural studies, wrote about: "the chaos of politics, a prolonged love affair with Marxism, feminism and anti-racism which promised a life of passion, excitement, danger, and collaboration" (p. 829).

Said also discusses the need for dissenting intellectuals, or what he calls intellectuals in exile, to be "ironic, skeptical, even playful—but not cynical" and reminds us that:

> Intellectuals are not required to be humorless complainers… Witnessing a sorry state of affairs when one is not in power is by no means a monotonous, monochromatic activity… It involves a sense of the dramatic and of the insurgent, making a great deal of one's rare opportunities to speak, catching the audience's attention, being better at wit and debate than one's opponents… self-irony is therefore more frequent than pomposity, directness more than hemming and hawing. But there is no dodging the inescapable reality that such representations by intellectuals will neither make them friends in high places nor win them official honors. It is a lonely condition, yes, but it is always a better one than a gregarious tolerance for the way things are. (1994, p. xviii)

Despite his exhortation that intellectual work is a "deadly serious matter" (1992, p. 286), if you watch and/or listen to any of Stuart Hall's lectures or interviews, his sense of humor and self-deprecation are abundantly obvious. They are there in his tone of voice, his sly verbal constructions, his wry facial expressions, his easy laugh. Describing the clips of Hall used in John Akomfrah's documentary, *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), Farred (2016) says: "Hall's eyes are twinkling with that wonderful intelligence, his face almost always, it seems, on the verge of a captivating smile, even as he is making the most incisive and sometimes damning political point" (p.653). Hall was a serious intellectual, a committed activist, a passionate scholar, but not a dour human being.

There are many others, of course, who we could point to as touchstones for the type of politically engaged and compelling cultural work that Hall embodied. We might briefly consider one person who is only occasionally mentioned alongside the leading figures in cultural studies yet manifests both the commitments and methodologies of critical cultural analysis and activism.

Angela Davis, a name widely known around the world, a person who evokes strong passions from both supporters, and opponents, has lived the type of fiercely engaged intellectual/activist struggle that cultural studies students and scholars can learn from. Many of us are familiar with her story. Fighting on the frontlines of the Black Power and feminist movements, a one-time Communist Party USA vice-presidential candidate, placed on the FBI's most wanted list, unjustly imprisoned by the U.S. government, and then becoming a leading intellectual of critical social thought and a

scholar/educator/activist whose work has resonated far outside of academic circles. She has shifted back and forth, virtually seamlessly, from academic to popular contexts. A critic of the American Empire, a prison abolitionist, and a voice for Palestinian justice, Davis has appeared in numerous public forums, documentary films, popular magazines, and television programs. Her many books are written in an accessible style and sold in bookstores frequented by the general public, not just shelved in academic libraries where they might be occasionally assigned to students who may or may not read them. Her work has always embodied intersectional understandings and critique, and the praxis of intellectual analysis and political action. And, whether the audience embraces or rejects her challenging ideas, she has been a force that must be reckoned with. Cornel West wrote:

> Angela Davis is one of the few great long-distance intellectual freedom fighters in the world. From the revolutionary mass movements of the 1960s to the insurgent social motion in our day, Angela Davis has remained steadfast in her focus on the wretched of the Earth. In stark contrast to most leftists in the academy, her structural analysis and courageous praxis have come at a tremendous cost in her life and for her well-being… She remains—after more than fifty years of struggle, suffering, and service—the most recognizable face of the left in the US Empire. (2016, pp. vii-viii)

Although her work and ideas have been noted in some cultural studies articles and books, and she herself has taught and written about popular music, photography, art, fashion and consumerism, whether you see Davis as clearly situated in cultural studies, adjacent to cultural studies, or outside cultural studies is irrelevant. If we hope to reach a wider audience, we cannot be that prescriptive or proscriptive about whether particular individuals "belong" to the project. The point is that Davis's work, her impact, embodies what cultural studies can be in the 21st century. We can't all be Angela Davis. But we can look to people like her and Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, the recently departed and sorely missed bell hooks, and of course many others, for inspiration. For courage. For knowledge. For learning how intellectual work and political struggle must always be intertwined.

Decades later we still find ourselves in a position that is not far from Hall's conceptualization of the location of cultural studies at the beginning of the Birmingham experiment: "…the first task that Cultural Studies had to do turns out to be the last task as well: to do some work in conceptualizing culture more adequately than had been done in the traditions which were available" (Hall, 2016, p, 19).

But also, not separate in any way, part of the same task, embedded within it, is doing that work not just in college classrooms but everywhere that culture is… which is everywhere. Johnson (2016) points to the potential power of using "expertise and creativity in art, new media and culture to disrupt and supplant the dominant public discourses" (p. 194). Rodman (2016) makes an aspirational comparison to the influence that Marxism and feminism have had both within and beyond the academy: "Both Marxism and feminism have long managed to encompass a variety of different spheres of activity within their normal scope of operations: critical theory, scholarly research, 'popular' criticism and commentary, classroom-based pedagogy, community activism,

grassroots organizing, public policy work, etc. Cultural Studies can and should do the same" (p. 397).

This work should be understood as necessarily ruffling feathers, attacking sacred cows, not letting sleeping dogs lie, and any other animal metaphors related to disrupting power that you might like to employ. Said (1994) points out: "Every intellectual has an audience and a constituency. The issue is whether that audience is there to be satisfied, and hence a client to be kept happy, or whether it is there to be challenged, and hence stirred into outright opposition or mobilized into greater democratic participation in the society" (p. 83).

The Responsibilities of Cultural Studies

Doing a better job than other traditions of conceptualizing the place of culture in the dirty worlds of power and difference that we all inhabit, and challenging that power in the name of liberation, equality, justice, and democracy: These are the first tasks, the last tasks, the ongoing tasks. There is a responsibility that comes with choosing to do critical intellectual work. Chomsky (2017) reflects: "As for the responsibility of intellectuals, there does not seem to be to be much to say beyond some simple truths. Intellectuals are typically privileged—merely an observation about usage of the term. Privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities. An individual then has choices" (p. 23).

Over three decades ago, Hall publicly wrestled with his own tensions over focusing on culture when the world is in turmoil and so many were suffering. At the University of Illinois in 1990 he ruminated:

> AIDS is one of the questions which urgently brings before us our marginality as critical intellectuals in making real effects in the world. Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies? What is the point of the study of representations, if there is no response to the question of what you say to someone who wants to know if they should take a drug and if that means they'll die two days later or a few months earlier? At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don't feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook (1992, pp. 284–285).

Rodman (2016) believes that reading these words can "make it seem as if Hall has given up entirely on both cultural studies and the politics of representation," (p. 395) but that we have to continue reading to appreciate Hall's subsequent thought:

> On the other hand, in the end, I don't agree with the way in which this dilemma is often
>
> posed for us, for it is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just people

> dying out there. The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not? (1992, p. 285)

Rodman (2016) suggests we could substitute the example of police brutality and racial profiling for Hall's example of AIDS and arrive at many of the same conclusions: that material suffering cannot be disentangled from the cultures it is embedded in, that culture does indeed shape why we take one group's pain seriously while coldly turning away from another's, that there is no "real world" that exists completely independently outside of culture, that cultural studies can indeed play a role in attempting to transform matters of life and death. I would contend that as we move forward into the turbulent 21st century we might also think culturally and politically about Covid-19 and understand why some nations and communities experienced much more severe harm than others, and the role that representation and culture played in making these differences invisible and irrelevant to many, including, sadly, some on the left who continue to this day to deny the inequitable ravages of this deadly virus.

Gilbert (2019) points out that Hall "didn't always claim to be able to derive political prescriptions from analyses such as that offered by *Policing the Crisis*. But whenever possible, he wanted to think, and wanted his readers, students and interlocutors to think, about what the active political implications of their observations might be" (p. 37). Hall also understood that culture is not all there is to political struggle of course, but culture does indeed matter: "Questions of power and the political have to be and are always lodged within representations… they are always discursive questions" (Hall, 1992, p. 286), even when dealing with the "something nasty down below" of destruction, inequality, suffering, and death.

Over a decade ago Grossberg (2010) called back and called out: "In general, the history of cultural studies has been a history of mixed results. I presume that this is as it must be and will always be the case. But it seems to me that in the contemporary moment, we might become more self-conscious of the project, and to take it up again" (pp. 66-67). Over a decade later this plea is still relevant. Perhaps it *always* will be relevant for the ongoing project of cultural studies. Flawed, sometimes bewildered, and lost, intermittently insightful, occasionally brilliant, we who consider ourselves articulated to this project in any way still have choices to make, responsibilities to face or shrink from, a role to play. Many things look horrid to be sure, but everything is not over, the future hasn't already been closed. In a lecture delivered almost twenty years ago, recently published and released as a video, Hall (2019) said "I do not believe… in 'the laws of history.' There is no closure yet written into it. And to be absolutely honest, if you do not agree that there is a degree of openness or contingency to every historical conjuncture, you do not believe in politics because you do not believe that anything can be done about it" (p. 313).

And now we are here in the Roiling Twenties… whether we like it or not.

> When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no 'going back.' History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment. You have to attend, 'violently,' with all the 'pessimism of the intellect' at your command, to the 'discipline of the conjuncture.'
> (Hall, 1988, p. 162)

Will cultural studies recognize the new conjuncture of the 2020s? Will "we" respond or retreat? Cultural studies is dead. Long live cultural studies.

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[i] This is not the last time you will encounter *The Sopranos* in this essay.

[ii] How many of us in days past discovered something life changing in this sort of accidental way? In his memoir, Hall (Hall and Schwarz, 2017) writes about first discovering Marxism by coming across a copy of *The Communist Manifesto* in a library. (Not that I am comparing the historical impact of *Enlightened Racism* to that of the *Communist Manifesto*, as fine as both books are.)

[iii] Also see Jhally and Lewis (2006), for a similar call for contextual approaches to media literacy.

[iv] And, honestly, so did Hall. Brunsdon (2021) points out: "Stuart Hall engaged with media throughout his life. He read newspapers, he watched films and television, he listened to the radio. He loved doing this, even if he didn't always like what he saw or heard" (p. 1).

[v] I can go on Amazon right now and buy a t-shirt bearing Gramsci's likeness, but I shudder to think what Gramsci himself would have thought about that.

[vi] If that sounds ridiculous, keep in mind that some critics of cultural studies, like Thomas Frank (2000), have drawn explicit comparisons between cultural studies and the marketing and advertising professions. And cultural studies scholar Henry Jenkins, in addition to spreading the "convergence culture is wonderful" gospel, has also been a consultant for profit-centered corporations, including Amazon.

[vii] For an excellent recent demonstration of Gramsci's imperative to know more and understand better, what Hall called the requirement to "be smarter than 'them'" (1992, p. 281), I recommend this video of Marc Lamont Hill explaining the differences between critical theory and critical race theory to a person who is clearly unprepared for Hill's depth of knowledge: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJObwe259CQ&t=96s