

Critical Commentary

Doing Cultural Studies: An Observation on Its Politics, Methodologies, and Histories

Robert F. Carley

An earlier version of this commentary was presented at the 2021 Union for Democratic Communications conference (held virtually, June 23-25) during the closing plenary, “A Return to Sut Jhally’s 2018 Dallas Smythe Keynote Address: Stuart Hall’s Legacy for Media Studies: Conjunctures, Critique, and Political Projects.”

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, Conjunctures

I follow a line of argument that as cultural studies demonstrate effective interpretations, analyses, and critiques of popular culture it generates its history. A history that demonstrates what has been both conceptually effective and different from the way that other disciplines, fields and areas of study think about culture. Central to this “difference” is cultural studies reliance on conjunctural analysis. Where my argument differs (from the ways that it has been posed by others before me) is that I claim that it’s the methodology (the concepts in use in a conjuncture) that tells the story of cultural studies. Further, I claim that the political project of cultural studies is its methodology.

One cannot speak of a history of cultural studies without, at the same time, discussing its methodologies and concepts. In fact, in the introduction to *Cultural Studies* (1992), Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg define the concepts, theories, and methods indispensable for “doing” cultural studies as its history. Since cultural studies work is always conjunctural or “embedded, descriptive, and historically and contextually specific” it is, they argue, concepts and their use that comprise “a history of real achievements that is now *part of the cultural studies tradition*” (Grossberg et al., 1992: 8, *my emphasis*). Cultural studies does not accumulate knowledge in the ways that “traditional” disciplines do (more on this later). The “doing of” cultural studies makes its history, on the one hand, and this historical process constitutes its persistent renewal (and its inevitable transformation) of work in cultural studies across time and space (a global register).

Additionally, this also suggests that although the ways that concepts inform cultural studies’ analyses of conjunctures *become* a part of the history of cultural studies—they renew and expand it—at the same time, the introduction of concepts may require contesting the direction or the “consolidation” of cultural studies work. The production of cultural studies’ conceptual repertoires is always a collective and, at times, a contentious effort. Cultural studies, in conversation (and in argument) with itself, is central to the intellectual production of its history. This, in short, makes it different from a discipline or even, possibly, a field. The nature and the stakes of the conversation are a part of what makes cultural studies differ.

What brings concepts in a relationship to cultural studies’ history; what’s the dynamic? Cultural studies has repeatedly been referred to as a “conversation” as opposed to a discipline, area, or field. The use of the word conversation amplifies an openness to intersections-in-context in ways that are different from other formal categories that imply the compartmentalization and accumulation of research and scholarship. The contexts for cultural studies as a conversation are pedagogical, theoretical (pertaining to scholarship, research, etc.), and political. As a general principle—general in the sense that such a principle is abstract enough to pertain to each of the contexts described in the previous sentence and principled in the sense of a political proposition—the notion of a conversation in cultural studies

...is not merely the liberal conversation of pluralism (teaching the debates) or the postmodern conversation of sheer multiplicities. It is a conversation embodying the democratic principle that all voices have a right to be heard, but qualifying that principle insofar as it recognizes that not all voices are equal or have equal authority, and that such judgments have to be made contextually by balancing the

claims of various experiences and forms of expertise. (Grossberg 2019: 27)

Something, however, provides to cultural studies foundations and directions, both a “grounding” and a “compass” that goes beyond pragmatic considerations of authority, judgement, experience, and expertise. Something connects these conversations together. What, I wish to claim, gives cultural studies foundations and directions are its methodological approaches or *the ways that it uses* concepts.

Methods are theories or concepts-in-use or they are concepts demonstrated through their use. One way of explaining this claim is to return to the quotation in the first paragraph. A concept that is embedded, descriptive, and contextually specific demonstrates, through analysis, the real achievement garnered through use. Significant *studies* are recalled; their achievements illustrate the use of a concept or the ways in which cultural studies is methodologically sound in its analysis of features of a conjuncture.

This brings us to analyses of conjunctures. Any thesis or hypothesis about what is going on is, put simply, political. The authors of *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (2013) analyze the conjuncture in Britain, in the 1970s, where a moral panic around “mugging” seems to emerge from out of thin air. They are clear about their methodological approach. Differentiating their book from social sciences, studies of deviance, and criminology they state that

We put it that way specifically to counter the view that the way books about ‘social problems’ are written is that investigators simply walk into the streets, their heads utterly void of any preconceptions about crime or society, look the ‘empirical facts’ in the face and write about whatever ‘problem’ happens to sneak up behind them and hit them over the head.... We doubt whether books of that order of innocence can be written about society.... (Hall, et al. 2013: 1)

The authors assert their approach and argument, explaining that

More important is why British society *reacts to mugging*, in the extreme way it does at that precise historical conjuncture.... It is why a study of ‘mugging’ has led us inevitably to take the general ‘crisis of hegemony’ in the Britain of the 1970s. This is the ground taken in this book. Those who reject the logic of our argument must contest us *on this ground*. (Hall, et al. 2013: 1-2)

The analysis of the conjuncture, then, is political. It is a challenge to both the politics of knowledge and politics more generally. As it concerns the politics of knowledge, the challenge that *Policing the Crisis* proffers is to the study of (what sociologists of deviance at this time call) “social problems” as nothing other than “social problems.” As it concerns politics more generally, the assertion of a political argument *is based on the methodological guidelines necessary* to render a conjuncture concretely.

Analytically, conjunctures illuminate hegemonic work done (by the state alongside of actors in civil society) in the throes of a crisis. In *Policing the Crisis* the conjunctural approach exposes the

emerging neoliberal ideology of the British state (specified through the panic around the “mugging crisis”) by showing how ideology gets applied, through political means, to societies (in order to maintain and—necessary in the context of a crisis—to change, in order to “save,” the hegemonic features of the British state and civil society).

The analysis of conjunctures *always serves a political purpose* otherwise it wouldn’t be concrete, it would fail to offer, at minimum, a perspective on the circumstances in a conjuncture. In the example from *Policing the Crisis*, the circumscription of the moral panic around “muggings” as the opening salvos in a neoliberal “revolution” and a “restoration” of social order, is an analysis (“a study of ‘mugging’ has led us inevitably to... the general ‘crisis of hegemony’ in the Britain of the 1970s”) that self-consciously gives rise to the political struggle over what mugging actually signifies (“This is the ground taken in this book. Those who reject the logic of our argument must contest us *on this ground*”).

The analysis of a conjuncture is a response to politics as (un)usual. The “mugging crisis” is exposed as a “red herring” used to amplify an emerging neoliberal and conservative order. If conjunctural analysis is a method, it is also, always, a political strategy. It looks at the status quo or *what is being done* as always insufficient and it asks: what is to be done? Politics are baked into the methodology of conjunctural analysis.

Conjunctural analyses are described by Antonio Gramsci as the concrete analysis of the relations of force in society at a given moment in time. Gramsci explains how conjunctural analysis is also, at the same time, always purposefully political. Not just a political analysis but, specifically, the necessary prolegomenon to any political strategy. He states that

The most important observation to be made about any concrete analysis of the relations of force is the following: That such analyses cannot and must not be ends in themselves (unless the intention is merely to write a chapter of past history), but acquire significance only if they serve to justify a particular practical activity, or initiative of will. They reveal the points of least resistance... they suggest *immediate tactical operations*; they indicate how a campaign of political agitation may best be launched.... (Notebook 13, §17; Gramsci 1971: 185)

There are several competing perspectives on the political project of cultural studies. Each of these *are perspectives*, they have real value, and they have been supported in different ways. I summarize them as “neutral,” “politically progressive,” and “politico-methodologically progressive” (Grossberg 2019; Rodman 2019; Carley 2021).

However, if one of the “real achievements” that cultural studies can boast of is conjunctural analysis and if these analyses of the cultural and political expressions of different social contradictions at given times comprise a living and theoretically viable history of cultural studies then they also, at the same time, acquire significance through their political value or how they express the political project of cultural studies. That is to say, simply, the progressive postures of cultural studies are demonstrated through the uses of cultural studies concepts, through methodologies.

Put differently, I cannot think of any study or text attributable to cultural studies that, in using conjunctural analysis, has contributed to a non-progressive project. Maintaining a societal status-quo, the pre-eminence of an ideological position, a policy platform, or the structure of a political party that is invested in the reproduction of its own authority would require, by force or coercion, the disavowal of both the crisis producing the conjuncture and, by extension, the conjuncture itself.

I want to end by noting that Stuart Hall in “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’” (1981) identifies the politically progressive project of cultural studies as *the arduous work of constituting* a new socialist culture as, in part, an antidote to the instrumentalism of populism. Ending the article, famously, by saying “That is why popular culture matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it” (1981: 239).

Reference List

- Carley, R. F. (2021) *Cultural Studies Methodology and Political Strategy: Metaconjuncture*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (eds and trans). New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Grossberg, L., Nelson, C., and Treichler, P. (1992) “Cultural Studies: An Introduction,” in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler (eds) *Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Grossberg, L. (2019) “What Did You Learn in School Today? Cultural Studies as Pedagogy,” In: J. Aksikas, S. Andrews, and D. Hedrick (eds) *Cultural Studies in the Classroom and Beyond: Critical Pedagogies and Classroom Strategies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 19–55.
- Hall S. (1981) “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” In: R. Samuel (ed) *People’s History and Socialist Theory*. London: Kegan Paul—Routledge, pp. 231-235; 237-239.
- Hall, S. et al. (2013) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. London: Springer.
- Rodman, G. B. (2019) “The Impossibility of Teaching Cultural Studies,” In: J. Aksikas, S. Andrews, and D. Hedrick (eds) *Cultural Studies in the Classroom and Beyond: Critical Pedagogies and Classroom Strategies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 99–114.

Robert F. Carley (carley@tamu.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of International Studies at Texas A&M University.