

# INTRODUCTION

## SPEAKING OF CULTURAL STUDIES

When I am introduced to someone I have not met before and give my name, I find I am then commonly asked what I do for a living. As a consequence, I am inevitably next asked, 'so, what is **cultural studies**?'<sup>1</sup> Not wanting to bore the pants off my new-found friend, I usually mumble something about it being a bit like anthropology but in industrialized cultures or liken it to the more familiar sociology, 'but with a stress on **culture**'. It never feels very satisfactory but it is enough for the **social** talk of the occasion. However, it would not be an adequate answer in the context of a more professional intellectual inquiry. Thus, from its inception writers involved with cultural studies have been interrogated as to its character and have obligingly asked themselves the same question as my acquaintance, 'what is cultural studies anyway'?

Though the asking of the question is understandable, it is to some extent misguided. I would suggest that when we ask about what cultural studies 'is' we are being tricked by the grammar of everyday English language into taking a mistaken pathway. Rather, the topic is more auspiciously pursued with the query 'how do we talk about cultural studies and for what purposes?' than by asking the question 'what is cultural studies?'. This is so because the word 'is' comes loaded with the assumptions of representationalism. When we ask the question 'what is cultural studies?' the use of 'is' implies that such a thing as cultural studies exists in an independent object world and that we can know and name it. That is, the sign 'cultural studies' actually pictures a substantive thing.

However, we cannot know what something 'is' when 'is' suggests either a metaphysical universal **truth** or an accurate **representation** of an independent object world. **Language** does not accurately represent the world but is a tool for achieving our purposes. Knowledge is not a matter of getting an accurate picture of reality, but of learning how best to contend with the world. Since we have a variety of purposes, we develop a variety of languages. Thus, in re-describing the question 'what is cultural studies?' as 'how do we talk about cultural studies and for what purposes?' we are making the switch from a question about representation to one concerning language use.

The idea that we cannot definitively say what an event 'is', and that we have different languages for different purposes, is not simply the preserve of the philosophy of language but is one shared by the 'hard' sciences. For example, at the core of quantum physics is a wave-particle duality by which all quantum entities can be treated as both waves and particles; as being in a particular place (particle) and in no certain place (wave). Under some circumstances it is useful to regard photons (quantities of light) as a stream of particles, while at other times they are best thought of in terms of wavelengths. Equally,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this Introduction, terms that appear in the body of the dictionary are highlighted in **bold** text type, and cross-references to biographical entries are set in **sans serif** type.

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in classical Newtonian physics an electron is envisaged as a particle that orbits the nuclei of an atom (protons and neutrons) while in quantum mechanics it is held to be a wave surrounding the atom's nuclei. Both descriptions 'work' according to the purposes one has in mind; physical phenomena are put 'under the description' (Davidson, 1984) of different models to achieve divergent ends.

Thus, I am recommending an approach that recasts problems away from an emphasis on representation, that is, the question 'what is...?', to the more mundane and pragmatic issues of language use, that is, 'how do we talk about X and for what purposes?'. As Wittgenstein puts it, 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)' (Wittgenstein, 1957: 373). What something 'is' becomes constituted by the use of language within specific **language-games**. This therapeutic recasting of the question 'what is cultural studies' into an inquiry about how we talk about cultural studies and its purposes enables us to see that cultural studies is not an object. That is, cultural studies is not one thing that can be accurately represented, but rather is constituted by a number of ways of looking at the world which are motivated by different purposes and values.

Historically speaking, cultural studies has been constituted by multiple voices or languages that nevertheless have sufficient 'family resemblances' to form a recognizable 'clan' connected by 'kinship' ties to other families. Thus, cultural studies can be understood as a language-game that revolves around the theoretical terms developed and deployed by persons calling their work cultural studies. In a similar argument, Stuart Hall has described cultural studies as a discursive formation, that is, 'a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about – forms of knowledge and conduct associated with – a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society (Hall, 1997: 6). That is, cultural studies is constituted by a *regulated* way of speaking about 'objects' that cultural studies brings into view and that cohere around key concepts, ideas and concerns.

Indeed, cultural studies has now developed to a stage where there is at least some agreement about the problems, issues and vocabulary that constitute the field. As Grossberg et al. have argued, there are a series of concepts that have been developed under the banner of cultural studies that have been deployed in various geographical sites. These form 'a history of real achievements that is now part of the cultural studies tradition. To do without them would be to willingly accept real incapacitation' (Grossberg et al., 1992: 8).

If, as many cultural studies writers argue, words give meaning to material objects and social **practices** that are brought into view by language and made intelligible to us in terms that language delimits, then the vocabulary of cultural studies performs cultural studies. Cultural studies is constituted by the language that we use when we say that we are doing cultural studies and can thus be understood in terms of **performativity**. That is, as we use a particular language so we name cultural studies and perform it. Consequently, this dictionary is in part an answer to the question 'what is cultural studies' while simultaneously performing it, manifesting it and bringing it into being in a particular way. This dictionary is a manifestation of the language-game of cultural studies that contributes to bringing its very object of inquiry into being.

## A CULTURAL STUDIES CREATION STORY

In describing cultural studies as a language-game I have tried to stress two things; first that the field is defined by its ways of speaking rather than by a fixed object of study and second that cultural studies is not one thing, but rather is constituted by a plurality of lineages – though they are connected by kinship ties. Indeed, I have tried within the dictionary to be inclusive of the many traditions of cultural studies. However, it is also the case that I acquired my understanding of cultural studies in a particular way and that this history has shaped the dictionary. That is, this story of cultural studies, multi-stranded though it is, has been shaped by the who, where, when and why of its ‘author’. Thus, this dictionary is ‘positioned’ where the concept of **positionality** indicates that the production of knowledge is always located within the vectors of time, space and social power.

Consequently, I shall say a little about my own cultural studies creation story even while I acknowledge there are others that could be drawn on. I was an undergraduate in the sociology department of the University of Birmingham (UK) from 1975 to 1978 during which time the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was at its high point under the directorship of Stuart Hall. I was never a member of the CCCS, but I was aware of its work; I read their papers, I attended some lectures given by Stuart Hall, I mixed in the campus political milieu in which some Centre members were active. I even secretly snuck into the occasional CCCS seminar undetected. I was somewhat in awe of Stuart Hall as he walked around the campus and thought that cultural studies was the most exciting intellectual project I had ever encountered. Later my doctoral supervisor at the University of Leeds (UK) was Janet Wolff, herself a graduate of CCCS. I have been good friends with Chris Pawling, a former Centre member and a colleague of Paul Willis at the University of Wolverhampton (UK). Thus, the so-called Birmingham School was and is *my* starting point for an exploration of cultural studies.

For me there is a line to be drawn between the study of culture and institutionally located cultural studies. The study of culture takes place in a variety of academic disciplines – sociology, anthropology, English Literature etc. – and in a range of geographical and institutional spaces, but this is not necessarily cultural studies. While the study of culture has no origins this does not mean that cultural studies cannot be named, and the formation of the **Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies** at Birmingham University (UK) in the 1960s was a decisive organizational instance. Since that time cultural studies has extended its intellectual base and geographic scope and there are self-defined cultural studies practitioners in the United States, Australia, Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe with each ‘formation’ of cultural studies working in different ways. Thus, while I do not want to privilege British cultural studies *per se*, I am pointing to the formation of cultural studies at Birmingham as an institutionally significant moment. Contemporary sociology is not the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber any more than science is the domain of Newton and Einstein alone, but it is hard to study these subjects without discussing these figures. Likewise, contemporary cultural studies is not the Birmingham School, but any exploration of the field does need to engage with its legacy.

My version of cultural studies begins then with neo-**Marxism** and its engagement

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with both **structuralism** and the work of **Gramsci**. Here the key concepts for cultural studies are those of **text**, **ideology** and **hegemony**. At the same time, cultural studies developed a stream of empirical and ethnographic work which has often been less high profile than textual analysis but with which I have sympathy. Indeed, I do not see **ethnography** and textual analysis as mutually exclusive. Later, somewhat in the wake of Stuart Hall, I embraced aspects of **poststructuralism**, and the work of **Foucault** in particular, where the concepts of **discourse** and **subjectivity** are central along with issues of truth and **representation**. In this context cultural studies and I became absorbed by questions of **identity**.

The engagement with poststructuralism has led to a re-thinking of the notions of ideology and hegemony. For example Hall, **Laclau** and Mouffe have pioneered a poststructuralist-inspired **post-Marxism** with which I have sympathy, though I now have even less use for the notion of ideology or orthodox Marxism than they do. This is a relatively straightforward Birmingham-inspired inter-subjective trajectory and one that is reflected in the construction of this dictionary. However, I shall claim with **irony** a small blow for my individuality by pointing to a departure from the main trajectory of cultural studies, that is, the influence of Richard **Rorty** and neo-**pragmatism** on my thinking and through him to the work of **Wittgenstein** (who also appears in the work of Mouffe for example).

Pragmatism shares its anti-foundationalism and anti-representationalism with the poststructuralist thinking that is currently ascendant within cultural studies. However, in contrast to poststructuralism, pragmatism combines these arguments with a commitment to social reform. Pragmatism suggests that the struggle for social change is a question of language/text *and* of material practice/policy action. Like cultural studies, pragmatism attempts to render contingent that which appears 'natural' in pursuit of a 'better' world. However, unlike the revolutionary rhetoric of many followers of poststructuralism, pragmatism weds itself to the need for piecemeal practical political change. In this sense, pragmatism has a 'tragic' view of life for it does not share the utopian push of, say, Marxism. In contrast, it favours a trial and error experimentalism that seeks after new ways of doing things that we can describe as 'better' when measured against 'our' **values**. I would argue that for cultural studies those values are, or should be, a modern-postmodern mix constituted by equality, liberty, solidarity, tolerance, difference, diversity and justice.

Overall then, my own thinking hovers between post-Marxism and neo-pragmatism, and an anonymous reviewer's description of me as a 'neo-Marxist turned postmodernist' was not without foundation. For those who are interested, this mixture forms the core of my book *Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates* (Barker, 2002). This is not to say that other streams of cultural studies inspired, for example, by **hermeneutics**, **feminism** and/or **postcolonial theory** are not important, they most certainly are. I am merely trying to assist the reader in the **deconstruction** of any apparent solidity in this dictionary by pointing to some of the influences that bore on its formation.

## THE DICTIONARY AS TOOLBOX

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This book is centred on a series of concepts that I take to be important to cultural studies. Other cultural studies writers will differ about how to deploy these concepts and about which are the most significant. I also recognize that members of the cultural studies community may well disagree with my inclusion/exclusion of certain ideas. At the same time, I would be very surprised if we could not agree that a good deal of the concepts are a necessary part of cultural studies as it is currently constituted. I doubt that we would recognize a domain of study that did not include certain words – articulation, culture, discourse, hegemony, identity, ideology, popular culture, power, representation, sign, subjectivity, texts, to name but a few – as cultural studies.

These are amongst the theoretical concepts that constitute the framework within which cultural studies writers understand the world and might carry out empirical research and interpret their evidence. Thus it is this theoretical language of cultural studies that gives it its distinctive cast. This is a toolbox that is drawn from a number of different theoretical streams and methodological approaches that constitute the field. Broadly speaking, the tributaries of cultural studies are:

Ethnography	Feminism	Marxism
Philosophy of language	Political economy	Postcolonial theory
Post-Marxism	Poststructuralism	Pragmatism
Psychoanalysis	Structuralism	Textual analysis

Consequently, it has always been difficult to pin down the boundaries of cultural studies as a coherent, unified, academic discipline with clear-cut substantive topics, concepts and methods. However, the problems of definition and disciplinary boundaries are not uniquely problematic for cultural studies nor do they pose problems of unique complexity. It is just as difficult to achieve this task for sociology, women's studies, physics, linguistics and Buddhism. Thus, in trying to establish sociology as a coherent discipline Durkheim instituted a stream of thought that has been influential across time and space. Nevertheless, he did not define sociology for all time since this particular language-game has mutated and splintered.

Cultural studies has always been a multi- or post-disciplinary field of inquiry that blurs the boundaries between itself and other 'subjects'. Further, cultural studies has been something of a magpie; it has its own distinctive cast, yet it likes to borrow glittering concepts from other nests. However, the current vocabulary or toolbox of the field suggests that cultural studies is centrally concerned with culture as constituted by the **signs, meanings** and representations that are generated by signifying mechanisms in the context of human practices. Further, cultural studies is concerned with the construction and consequences of those representations and thus with matters of **power** since patterns of signifying practices constitute, and are constituted by, institutions and virtual structures. Here cultural studies is very much concerned with **cultural politics**.

Knowledge is not simply a matter of collecting facts from which **theory** can be deduced or against which it can be tested. That is, 'facts' are not neutral and no amount

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of stacking up of 'facts' produces a story about our lives without theory. Indeed, theory is precisely a story about humanity with implications for action and judgements about consequences. Yet, theory does not picture the world more or less accurately; rather, it is a tool, instrument or logic for intervening in the world (Foucault, 1980). Theory construction is a self-reflexive discursive endeavour that seeks to interpret and intercede in the world: its construction involves the thinking through of concepts and arguments with the objective of offering new ways by which to think about ourselves. Theoretical work can be thought of as a crafting of the cultural signposts and maps by which we are guided and theoretical concepts are tools for thinking and acting in the world. As such, this dictionary can be thought of as a toolbox to help with the job of thinking.

And yet words are very slippery instruments indeed, as **Derrida** (1976) reminds us with his concept of **différance** – 'difference and deferral'. For Derrida there is no original meaning outside of signs, and signs do not possess clear and fixed meanings. Here the production of meaning in the process of signification is continually deferred and supplemented so that meaning slides down a chain of signifiers abolishing a stable signified. Words carry multiple meanings, including the echoes or traces of other meanings from other related words in other contexts. Indeed, using a dictionary is a useful way of exploring the concept of **différance**. If we look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary we are referred to other words in an infinite process of **intertextual** deferral. There is no one fixed meaning to any of the concepts in this dictionary. This is not a dictionary that claims to give definitive meanings to words. At best, given that meaning lies in use, I offer some signposts to the common uses of the concepts in the context of cultural studies.

### THE PURPOSES OF CULTURAL STUDIES

If the concepts that form the field of cultural studies are tools, then we might ask about the purposes for which they are wielded. That is, what is the nature of cultural studies as practice? Most writers in the field would probably agree that the purposes of cultural studies are analytic, pedagogic and political. In particular, cultural studies has sought to develop ways of thinking about culture and power that can be utilized by forms of social **agency** in the pursuit of change. This engagement with **politics** is, for Hall (1992), what differentiates cultural studies from other subject areas. Hence, cultural studies can be thought of as a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice.

The main direction taken by cultural studies, as enacted through teaching and writing, is intellectual clarification and legitimization. Cultural studies writers offer a variety of storytelling that can act as a **symbolic** guide or map of meaning and significance in the cosmos. As such, cultural studies has the potential to assist in comprehending and changing the world; it can act as a tool for activists and policy makers through problem solving, that is, re-definition and re-description of the world. Nevertheless, we should be careful not to confuse **writing** as a politically inspired endeavour with other kinds of civic and governmental political practices.

The prime locations of cultural studies as a set of practices are academic institutions,

for example, universities and publishing houses. Consequently, as it has become something to be taught, so cultural studies has acquired a multitude of institutional bases, courses, textbooks and students. In due course, this process leads to a certain 'disciplining' of cultural studies. The courses now offered by universities for undergraduate students constitute a broad 'definition' of the parameters of cultural studies. The textbooks that follow, including my own (Barker, 2000), reinforce this process. Many cultural studies practitioners have felt ill at ease with the forging of institutional disciplinary boundaries for the field. Professionalized and institutionalized cultural studies might, feared Hall, 'formalize out of existence the critical questions of power, history and politics, (Hall, 1992: 286).

However, although higher education is a branch of government and thus teachers are an arm of the state, higher education remains, at least within **liberal** democracies, a privileged site of critical inquiry. Writers, researchers and teachers in higher education may not be the 'organic' **intellectuals** that the 'pioneers' of cultural studies hoped for. However, they are in a position to speak with, and provide intellectual resources for, **New Social Movements**, workers in cultural industries and those involved with the forging of **cultural policy**. To some extent, cultural studies is constrained by its institutionalization, yet, it retains a critical edge. Likewise, while cultural studies is to a degree an academic discipline of the university system, it nevertheless continues to slip away from its moorings and slide across the surface of culture, its infinite object of inquiry and desire.

In sum, cultural studies can be understood as an intellectual enterprise that is constituted by a set of overlapping language-games. Nevertheless, for those readers frustrated by my evasion in refusing to define cultural studies, I shall now make the claim that an exploration of the contemporary vocabulary of cultural studies suggests that we might understand it thus:

Cultural studies is concerned with an exploration of culture, as constituted by the meanings and representations generated by human signifying practices, and the context in which they occur. Cultural studies has a particular interest in the relations of power and the political consequences that are inherent in such cultural practices. The prime purposes of cultural studies, which is located in the institutions of universities, publishing houses and bookshops, are the processes of intellectual clarification that could provide useful tools for cultural/political activists and policy makers.

Of course, the tools of cultural studies are words and concepts – hence, in my view, the significance of a dictionary.

### FEATURES OF THE DICTIONARY

This dictionary follows the format of most others, in that there is an alphabetical list of concepts that can be consulted whereupon one will find a discussion of the meanings and uses associated with that concept in the context of cultural studies. However, I have

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already argued that the meanings and uses of such terms are relational and located within a network of other concepts. Consequently, at the end of the entry I provide a list of ideas that are connected to the one that has been consulted. I have called these 'links' in the manner of a hypertext to suggest that these concepts are multi-dimensional and that one can go on pursuing their meanings in the manner implied by the notion of *différance* (above). Although here, of course, there is an arbitrary limit to the internal referentiality of a dictionary and thus to the trail of meaning.

In addition to the key concepts involved, I have also provided some short descriptions of key writers who have in one way or another been associated with the development of cultural studies. This list is in no way exhaustive and I am not wishing to provide an 'A-list' of the good and the great in cultural studies. It is more of a taster than a hearty meal. Further, some of the people involved are clearly connected with the development of cultural studies (for example, **Fiske**, **Gilroy**, Hall, Willis etc.) while others have provided important philosophical ideas to cultural studies though they have never identified their work with cultural studies *per se* (for example, Derrida, Foucault, **Giddens**, Rorty etc.).

In deciding whom to include and whom to omit I have tried to present a cross-section of writers from different times, places and philosophical stances that have influenced cultural studies, rather than a comprehensive list. I have also inevitably indulged some of my own preferences and been restricted by the limitations of my knowledge. My apologies to those who merit inclusion but were omitted. Still, I want to maintain that the core of the work is to do with thinking about concepts rather than people. I also want to suggest that the concepts in cultural studies do not belong to anyone. Rather, they circulate amongst a community of thinkers who forge and amend their meanings in the course of their work. Consequently, I have chosen not to reference ideas in the normal academic fashion but to claim them all as collective property not in need of attribution.<sup>2</sup>

As such, this dictionary is a *mélange* or **bricolage** of ideas, examples, themes etc. raided from the collective library of cultural studies – or rather, that which I have chosen to designate as cultural studies. Thus, on the one hand a dictionary such as this manifests a certain arbitrary character and yet on the other it is dependent on an interpretive community. Similarly it seeks to pin down the meaning of words while all along claiming that meaning is intertextual and resists closure. But then oscillating between individuality and community and between fixity and fluidity are key themes of cultural studies.

## REFERENCES

- Barker, C. (2000) *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.  
Barker, C. (2002) *Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates*. London: Sage.

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<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, where a line of thought has been pursued by a writer who is included in the dictionary I have maintained the practice of internal reference by highlighting their name by way of suggesting that readers might like to explore their work further.



- Davidson, D. (1984) *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology* (trans. G. Spivak). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
- 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. pp. 1–22.
- Hall, S (1992) 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies', in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 277–94.
- Hall, S. (1997) 'The Work of Representation', in S. Hall (ed.) *Representations*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 13–74.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1957) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

### RECOMMENDED READING: AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL STUDIES

For those who are relatively unfamiliar with the field of cultural studies and who want an introduction to it, the following ten books may be useful.

- Barker, C. (2000) *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Du Gay, P., Hall S., Janes, L., Mackay, H. and Negus, K. (1997) *Doing Cultural Studies*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gray, A. (2003) *Research Practice for Cultural Studies*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hall, S. (ed.) (1997) *Representations*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hartley, J. (2003) *A Short History of Cultural Studies*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jordan, G. and Weedon, C. (1995) *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lewis, J. (2002) *Cultural Studies: The Basics*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McGuigan, J. and Gray, A. (eds) (1990) *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Storey, J. (ed.) (1997) *What is Cultural Studies?* London: Routledge.
- Woodward, K. (ed.) (1997) *Identity and Difference*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

I have also provided a reference in relation to each of the named authors in the dictionary, so that constitutes another fifty texts to be going on with . . .