

# On *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*: Pedagogy and Political Work in Cultural Studies

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Addressing those of us who locate ourselves within the project of cultural studies, Lawrence Grossberg continues his “protective and critical relationship to cultural studies” borne of a simple but vital starting point, “that cultural studies matters.”<sup>1</sup> Offering not a defense of the field but rather an articulation of future formations of cultural studies, Grossberg attempts to “produce a cultural studies capable of responding to the contemporary worlds and the struggle constituting them,” setting up “an agenda for cultural studies work” and thinking about what it means to do cultural studies “in a context where modernity is the site and object of struggle.”<sup>2</sup> As such, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* is a passionate investigation into what it means “to combine academic rigor and competence with social passion and political commitment.”<sup>3</sup>

## A Conjunctural Story

At the heart of the text and its three central chapters is Grossberg’s effort to disaggregate and deterritorialize three domains that have achieved conceptual autonomy within euro-modernity: Economy, Culture, and Politics. The project attempts to bring conjunctural analysis (as a theoretical-analytical-political practice) to these three overdetermined and seemingly disaggregated domains, attempting to understand “a concrete instance of embedded disembeddness.”<sup>4</sup>

The first section offers an impassioned and important caution about the role of economies and economics in cultural studies work. Grossberg is rightly concerned that those of us writing from a variety of critical and cultural perspectives be enabled to “take up economic questions without falling back into forms of reductionism and

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essentialism.”<sup>5</sup> Grossberg argues for a conjunctural kind of economics that involves “recognizing that the economy is not only overdetermined, but also multiple, relational, and discursive.”<sup>6</sup> A significant contribution of Grossberg’s work in this chapter is an accurate critique of the “laziness” that goes on in much cultural studies scholarship when it deploys economic concepts and models. He is right to chastise our field for its failures to demystify both economies and economics and in his call to deconstruct and pose alternatives to four commonsense academic assumptions: (1) economism, the assumption that the economy is the motor force of history; (2) capitalocentrism, the assumption that capitalism is a singular formation; (3) axiological normativity, which assumes a universal hierarchy of value (i.e., market fundamentalism) or a single, fundamental source of all value; and (4) economic essentialism, which assumes a stable and universal distinction between economic and non-economic practices or relations. Grossberg’s attempt to denaturalize the present conjuncture and address the specificity of the economic is one of the most valuable contributions of this text.

The second section attempts to disembody the domain of culture as a constitutive feature of euro-modernity. While rebuking the mistaken assumption that cultural studies is “about culture” when its real concern is contexts and conjunctures, Grossberg interrogates the category of culture in its current rearticulation and relocation in the conjunctural struggles over modernity. If, according to “common wisdom,” culture was an invention of euro-modernity, Grossberg is correct to note that its actual working—the work of culture in euro-modernity—“is rarely problematized.” Offering a fruitful opening onto those scholars who have problematized the differentiation of culture and nature, Grossberg moves to a discussion of the scholarship on affect, which is exciting in its breadth and scope, but perhaps too ambitious in its gloss of this complex field.

The explication of culture as a domain includes two very important detours for scholars interested in communication and media studies: a discussion of the conflation of media studies with cultural studies, as if cultural studies were the study of (1) media and (2) popular culture. Grossberg does crucial work disentangling these two formations from the field of cultural studies. First, he accurately notes that some critique in media studies is too limited by the fact that it constitutes a particular object, and by the fact that the category of media does not always rise to the level of a concept. He rightly observes that the continued use of a classification like “television” demonstrates that our descriptive concepts no longer capture the empirical reality of the terrain. Second, Grossberg disentangles cultural studies from the popular, whereby the former was “not attempting to construct a new disciplinary object or offer a theory or methodology for some subset of cultural texts and practices.” Citing Stuart Hall, Grossberg recalls that cultural studies, “was not attempting to create ‘popular culture’ studies”<sup>7</sup> but, rather, taking up the popular in a specific conjuncture where struggles over the popular were, in essence, ideological struggles over common sense that Hall and others described in terms of a hegemonic struggle and the rise of Thatcherism. The strength of Grossberg’s work on this topic is his relentless emphasis on the historical and conjunctural specificity of Hall’s project.

He explains that approaching “the politics of the ‘media’ in terms of traditional notions of ideology and resistance seems less and less appropriate.”<sup>8</sup> We need to ask instead: “How do we interrogate the field of ‘media’? How do we constitute the objects? What are the terms of the interrogation?” In short, we need to begin to ask how the “media” themselves are produced, in the contemporary conjuncture. Citing Félix Guattari’s assertion that we live in a post-media age, Grossberg makes a crucial point for future scholarship in this arena: “I think we will have to stop thinking about *the* media or about media worlds, and to interrogate worlds that are mediated in ways that we have yet to conceptualize.”<sup>9</sup>

The next chapter considers the place of politics within conjunctural analysis and an important concern over the “widespread tendency within critical analysis to presume the conjuncture has a singular political character.”<sup>10</sup> Grossberg’s efforts to complicate power, offering ways to think about relations between the proliferating theories of power and politics, is perhaps the least satisfactory section of the book. However, my concern here is not with Grossberg’s specific political analyses but with a larger theoretical one. The chapter on politics, like all three central analyses of the text, depends on the centrality of conjunctural analysis, a caution about which should be articulated. It may be the case that Jaafar Akiskas’ critique could be useful as a counterweight. He notes that in their appropriation of Antonio Gramsci, both Hall and Grossberg “grant priority to the conjuncture and conjunctural analysis becomes the privileged mode in cultural studies, without due consideration of what Gramsci calls the ‘dialectical nexus between the two categories of movement [the conjunctural and structural]’ should be understood as a struggle over modernity . . .”<sup>11</sup> Grossberg raises important questions about alternative imaginings of modernities that are neither redeployments nor simple negations of euro-modernity. It might be that an incorporation of Akiskas’ critique of the priority of conjuncture would enhance these valuable efforts.

The struggle over modernity/ies is a key site for the work of redefining the very notion, meaning, and value of education. Thus, my own response to this text chooses not to focus on those three deterritorialized concepts, interesting and provocative though they may be. As an academic embedded in the specific project of teaching cultural studies to undergraduates, I find Grossberg’s articulation of the trajectory and future of cultural studies most productive for thinking about the pressing questions of pedagogy and the role of cultural studies in the institutional landscape of the university.

### **Politics of Pedagogy**

Caricatures of cultural studies—as the uncritical embrace of the popular or relativist celebration of identity and marginality—still abound in academic publications and faculty meetings.<sup>12</sup>

Bashing cultural studies has become a popular academic pastime. While the field is often dismissed as mere fashion, now attacks on cultural studies are what have become fashionable. But which cultural studies? The field of study that has

appeared in recent polemics is a caricature I do not recognize. The term is thrown around carelessly by both critics and defenders of the field. Furthermore, cultural studies does not rule out all consideration of language, aesthetics, and form in favor of social and political concerns, as its opponents routinely claim.<sup>13</sup>

In response, Grossberg's introductory chapter is a particularly helpful primer, offering a useful summary of the specificity of the cultural studies project and, very crucially, clear statements about what cultural studies is *not*. Writing against "an almost empty signifier of the study of culture, which sends it back into a marketing strategy,"<sup>14</sup> Grossberg provides a succinct explanation of the radically contextualist nature of cultural studies and careful reminders that cultural studies is not "about culture . . . not the study of texts or textuality . . . is not about reading social power off of texts . . . the study of national cultures . . . a focus on mass culture, popular culture, or subaltern cultures."<sup>15</sup> Against common misconceptions of the field, Grossberg carefully describes the ways in which radically contextualist work must proceed and the ways in which articulation operates in the space between anti-essentialism and Paul Gilroy's anti-anti-essentialism.<sup>16</sup> As he explores the problem-spaces of cultural studies, Grossberg reminds us that "the point of cultural studies is not to constantly discover or assert that everything is contextual, complex, etc."<sup>17</sup> Grossberg urges that the critical questions of "politics and strategy are only available after the work of cultural studies." Situating cultural studies as a "rigorous knowledge-producing activity," radical contextuality puts knowledge in the service of politics and "attempts to make politics listen to the authority of knowledge (and hence its refusal of relativism.)"<sup>18</sup>

Because *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* positions itself in the academic institutional formation of doing Cultural Studies, it opens up consideration of cultural studies pedagogy and its future(s). As Grossberg describes the futures of cultural studies, he clarifies key problematics of theory, of method, of the object of study that are genuinely useful for those of us engaged in the work of pedagogy. Several points from Grossberg's text bear repeating as structuring curricular questions. How, for example, can pedagogy proceed such that it models the political responsibility of the intellectual "defined, first, by the effort to denaturalize the present and open up the future"?<sup>19</sup> These fundamental provocations around pedagogy serve well as a primer on the larger issues of theory, method, and interdisciplinarity in Cultural Studies.

Those of us who teach, mentor, and design curriculum in undergraduate cultural studies programs face some daunting questions about the ways in which one can teach and learn radical contextuality. How best, for example, to model for undergraduate students that radical contextuality affects every element of the very practice of cultural studies . . . which is always a context? "Consequently, the object of cultural studies' *initial* attention is never an isolated event (text or otherwise) but a structured assemblage of practices—a cultural formation, a discursive regime—which already includes both discursive and nondiscursive practices."<sup>20</sup> Thus, cultural studies' radical contextuality shapes its relationship to theory. In cultural studies, theory and context are mutually constituted and determining, desacralizing theory in

order to take it up as a contingent strategic resource. “Thus, cultural studies cannot be identified with any single theoretical paradigm or tradition . . .”<sup>21</sup> Another helpful way Grossberg frames the problematic of contextuality is by “offering a contextual theory of contexts” that avoids the sorts of universalisms and essentialism that have often characterized dominant practices of knowledge-creation. “Cultural studies has to find a way of thinking about complexity in a structured/overdetermined way, rather than as a theory of ‘the way things really are.’”<sup>22</sup>

These insights have profound implications not only for the design of undergraduate Theories and Methods courses, but also for the relationships between those courses and the rest of the curriculum. Asking the question of method succinctly, Grossberg queries: “How does one do research under the sign of cultural studies? And what is its analytic practice?”<sup>23</sup> In our Cultural Studies program for undergraduates at Columbia College Chicago, the Methods course remains our most challenging in design and delivery. This is not for some failing on the part of my wonderful colleagues who teach this course daily. Rather, this is because they dare to engage the question of method in the anti-disciplinary discipline of cultural studies which remains the most difficult moment of its efforts. The task remains to teach undergraduates to share and contextualize Grossberg’s suspicion “of the notion of methods outside of specific contexts” in which they are unlikely to be self-reflexive and likely to be mystified.<sup>24</sup>

This moves us to the challenge of an anti-disciplinary interdisciplinarity in the historical formation of cultural studies. Grossberg argues: “While everyone agrees that the contemporary world requires people who can think ‘outside the box,’ they fail to see that you do not learn to think outside the box by learning to think inside a number of boxes.”<sup>25</sup> We find ourselves facing a backlash in many disciplines against interdisciplinarity, often justified by conditions of financial retrenchment. But,

After all, cultural studies is not about teaching interdisciplinarity, but rather, relational and contextual thinking. It is about learning how to ask questions (that are not defined by disciplinary matrices, but in response to the world) and how to use—appropriate and articulate—theories, methodologies, and knowledges from various discursive formations, including the disciplines, to forge the best possible answers one can, to tell better stories.”<sup>26</sup>

Grossberg concludes on a critical note for those of us situated in academic contexts of cultural studies practice. As he points out, the university we take for granted has been reinvented several times since the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Well-publicized closings of humanities departments have circulated throughout academia. Grossberg’s comments are crucial for cultural studies programs facing a historical moment of so-called “reprioritization” in higher education, one in which technocratic rationality is reasserting itself with renewed vigor. In the United States, academic programs are being asked to justify their very existence using what many faculty members regard as corporate-style measurements of “productivity.” Following from the move in the eighties and nineties to a more corporate, managerial model, the “program prioritization process,” often coordinated by well-paid consultants from outside the university, attempts to further institutionalize a technocratic

rationality in the structuring, support, and continuing existence of academic programs.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, cultural studies programs in the United Kingdom are facing radical changes resulting from massive government “realignment” of fees, proceeding through wholesale restructuring of departments by aligning them directly to market sectors.

In this historical moment, cultural studies as a project will need to engage in struggle about the nature of intellectual and pedagogical labor. Against these escalating pressures, “cultural studies refuses to go along with the increasingly common effort to reduce all intellectual work to a single logic of productivity and efficiency (usually functionalist). . . .”<sup>28</sup> Those of us engaged in teaching and writing cultural studies need to face up to the reality that this commitment requires vigilance and struggle. As many of us have learned, that contestation is neither easy nor without cost. If, in “the contemporary conjuncture, we need to rethink the grounds and claims of academic authority, responsibility, and credibility,”<sup>29</sup> we will need to do so against competing claims of scientism, efficiency, rationality, and technocracy. We need to be honest about the fact that struggle is an integral—not optional—part of the commitment to our intellectual project, which requires not only engagement in the realm of the public intellect, but also “forms of concrete political and institutional work.”<sup>30</sup>

In the end, “the university is not about the bureaucrats and administrators, nor fund-raisers, nor the politicians who used to be its benefactors. . . . But we seem to have forgotten that, and we seem to have lost the moral courage to stand up to such misrepresentations and the practical policies that have resulted from them.”<sup>31</sup> Larry Grossberg’s *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* is an important reminder and source of renewal for those of us committed to the political intellectual project of cultural studies who share his “continuing belief that intellectual work matters, that it is a vital component of the struggle to change the world and to make it more humane and just, and that cultural studies, as a particular project, a particular sort of intellectual practice, has something valuable to contribute.”<sup>32</sup> If that commitment is to survive, “we will have to join those movements around the world that are trying to change the university as a center of research and teaching, and the even larger struggles to challenge the trajectories that locate and shape matters of culture, knowledge, and education within contested social realities.”<sup>33</sup>

## Notes

- [1] Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.
- [2] *Ibid.*, 3.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 18.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 92.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 101.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 121.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 209.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 219.

- [9] Ibid., 221.
- [10] Ibid., 227–8.
- [11] Jaafar Aksikas, “Could/Should Cultural Studies Be ‘Born Again?’” in *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*, ed. Paul Smith (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011).
- [12] Stephen T. Asma, “Looking Up from the Gutter: Philosophy and Popular Culture,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 7 (October 12, 2007): 14.
- [13] Rita Felski, “Those Who Disdain Cultural Studies Don’t Know What They’re Talking About,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 23, 1999): B6.
- [14] Grossberg, *Cultural Studies*, 1.
- [15] Ibid., 8.
- [16] Ibid., 22.
- [17] Ibid., 43.
- [18] Ibid., 25.
- [19] Ibid., 100.
- [20] Ibid., 25.
- [21] Ibid., 26–7.
- [22] Ibid., 30.
- [23] Ibid., 52.
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] Ibid., 292.
- [26] Ibid., 293.
- [27] Robert C. Dickeson, *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).
- [28] Grossberg, *Cultural Studies*, 55.
- [29] Ibid., 97.
- [30] Ibid., 98.
- [31] Ibid., 295.
- [32] Ibid., 5–6.
- [33] Ibid., 293.