

Arriving late to the party: histories of cultural studies as resources of hope

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In recent years, there has seemingly been no shortage of state-of-the-field interventions into, meta-commentaries on, and histories of the academic and political project of cultural studies (see for example Grossberg 2010; Turner 2012). Two recently published books now join these ranks; both are highly conscious of the somewhat crowded field into which they are entering, and both are acutely aware of the political, intellectual and personal risks of doing so. They are two books that contend with the complex relationship between cultural studies' history, present and future, albeit in extraordinarily different ways.

Cultural Studies 50 Years On: History, Practice and Politics, edited by Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton, is a collection of essays that emerged from a 2014 conference exploring the legacy and influence of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. *Why Cultural Studies?* is a searing, single-authored polemic by Gilbert B. Rodman on the current state of cultural studies, and a rallying call to reinvigorate the project by resuscitating its leftist impulses. This, Rodman suggests, will arise in part through its practitioners having a better understanding of its particular histories and radical traditions. In this short review article, I consider what these two books might offer in the way of intellectual, political and emotional resources for hope in the contemporary conjuncture; the ways that the books negotiate the inevitable partiality and the hidden personal politics of their own narratives; as well as the ways they implicitly invite personal, subjective reflection about one's relationship to the histories and traditions of cultural studies. I end with a reflection about the challenges, but also the generative value, of revisiting painful and difficult debates within the field.

***Why Cultural Studies?* by Gilbert B. Rodman**

Why Cultural Studies? is written by Gilbert B. Rodman, an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota, the Chair of the

Association for Cultural Studies and the founder of the CULTSTUD-L listserv. It is undoubtedly this standing within the field that contributes to the (sometimes breath-taking) sense of confidence with which he writes on the subject. There is a brief aside where he confesses his own sense of discomfort at staging this intervention (pp.17-19), but because this runs so counter to the overall tone of the book, it is a moment that is easily lost amidst the overarching assuredness. This is a fairly slim volume; in terms of its form, its provocative yet conversational tone means it is not a dense or difficult read. Its *content*, by contrast, it is deliberately discomfiting. It will offend many of its readers - and it knows it. It is even prefaced with warnings to 'brace yourself' for a 'bumpy ride' (p6). Its five chapters each hinge on a sharp, frank question or edict: Cultural Studies: What's the Point?; Cultural Studies: What It Is; Cultural Studies: What's Wrong; Cultural Studies: What It Was; Cultural Studies: What Next?.

Rodman's book is explicitly pitched as an 'impassioned polemic' that is precisely designed to galvanise and/or provoke cultural studies scholars into a more politicised practice; it is 'unapologetic' and 'unabashed' in its manifesto-like intentions. Readers are thus cued in from the get-go to its intentionally provocative stance and strident tone. For the most part, I found the intensity of its style and its explicit intention to rejuvenate the political underpinnings of cultural studies genuinely exhilarating. The last chapter particularly so - it sets out nine specific suggestions for how cultural studies can revitalise itself, including number 2: 'Cultural studies needs to embrace its leftism more openly', which I found especially cheering. While the broadness and looseness of such pronouncements inevitably leaves them wide open to critique - for example, that this is merely stating the obvious, repeating what has been said a thousand times before, or that 'leftism' is not an *a priori* category that can simply be signed up to - there is still something very valuable about these utopia-tinged interventions. In an era where avowedly leftist cultural studies research is less and less possible within university spaces (because it is unlikely to attract state funding, and because of the highly constraining Research Excellence Framework - I write from the UK context), it is possibly more important than ever to have such voices coming through loud and clear, reminding us that the *political* dimensions of cultural studies are just *non-negotiable* - and that they cannot simply be prised

apart from its intellectual dimensions for the sake of careerist compromise (Rodman has little patience for those more interested in professionalization and personal advancement within the structuring, corporate logic of university institutions).

The tone of the book is for the most part good-humoured, sometimes joyous, and even laugh-out-loud funny. However, at other times it seems to be quite openly spoiling for a fight - in ways it is difficult to see as helpful. For example, he addresses those who might feel they have a 'deep understanding' of cultural studies scholars in the following way:

one of the major problems facing cultural studies today is that much of the work being done in its name isn't actually cultural studies at all. And it's possible that your "deep understanding" of the project may, in fact, be deeply flawed [...] There's been a lot of "the blind leading the blind" when it comes to cultural studies, and if you're one of those unfortunate souls who has been led astray, you can't be blamed for the poor guidance you've received. (pp. 6-7)

As you might be able to see, it's difficult not to feel patronised and condescended to at least once while reading this book – but you get the sense that Rodman wouldn't be too bothered if you were. His goal is ultimately to effect radical change within cultural studies practice, and a few bruised egos along the way are, perhaps, a price worth paying. But, as Graeme Turner (2016) recently pointed out in his review of *Why Cultural Studies?*, many of the sweeping claims in the book are under-evidenced, and what Rodman identifies as the problematic tendencies of cultural studies are rarely attributed to any specific people or publications.

It strikes me that this particular kind of hat-in-the-ring, willing-to-take-a-hit, tonally cavalier mode of writing is both deeply necessary and yet also only really available to those with certain kinds of privilege and status. Could a woman risk writing this, I found myself wondering, without being savaged?

***Cultural Studies 50 Years On: History, Practice and Politics*, edited by Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton**

50 Years On marks the half-century since the opening of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in 1964. This collection of chapters arises from a conference held in 2014 to reflect on this historic moment, the significance of the Birmingham Centre and its relationship to other locations where cultural studies has been practiced, and – inevitably – its final, painful, abrupt closure in 2002. In stark contrast to Rodman's intervention, this book is extremely careful, even perhaps anxious at times, in its approach to the history of cultural studies; and it is shot through with affects of loss, grief, and resentment. This overall tone is produced from the deep ambivalence that so many of its authors clearly feel about participating in the project – both the conference and the book – which, in marking a fifty-year 'anniversary', perhaps cannot help but seem either reductively celebratory or oddly commemorative. The book's synopsis openly seeks to avoid the charge that it knows must be coming – and so it clearly states that it is not reducing cultural studies 'to the work of a single, now defunct institution', and points instead to its desire to 'take stock of where it has come from and to explore where it might be going'. This is clearly difficult ground to operate on.

The fact that the conference was hosted at the University of Birmingham, the institution that had so suddenly closed down cultural studies (a story of breathtaking institutional callousness that is powerfully recounted in Ann Gray's chapter, pp.58-60; see also Gray 2003) meant that the whole occasion was inevitably painful for many participants. For Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, it felt like 'a rather disturbing return to the scene of the crime' (p.199). While Richard Johnson understands the need for a history, for him the CCCS is still an '*uncompleted story*' – and because 'it feels unfinished, I hesitate to consign it to the past' (p.185). Elsewhere, Charlotte Brunsdon (2015) has reflected on her attendance at the conference and the profound strangeness of 'being made history'.

Despite the palpable ambivalence that runs through the book, and a certain, persistent doubt about its own agency and ambitions, it is nonetheless a

quite extraordinary resource that for me was a genuine joy to read. It is replete with narrative richness and nuance, about the wider social and political contexts from which cultural studies emerged and developed (postwar consumerism, the New Left, the adult education movement, the women's movement, anti-racist politics, student protest, 1968, etc., etc.); about the quotidian experience of life at the Centre; about its beginnings, when it was temporarily housed in what were known as 'the huts' on the campus periphery, vividly underscoring its marginal status within the university (p.64); about its radical pedagogic practices that so subverted institutional norms and hierarchies; about the intensely generative nature but also the painful and often personally-felt difficulties of collaborative work; and very much more.

The book is divided into six themed sections: 1. *Situating the Centre* (with chapters by Dennis Dworkin, Geoff Eley, Ann Gray, Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton); 2. *Pedagogy and Practices* (Rosalind Brunt, John Clarke, Tony Jefferson, Lawrence Grossberg); 3. *Politics* (Gregor McLennan, Maureen McNeil, Jackie Stacey, Richard Johnson); 4. *Trajectory and Boundaries* (Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, Mikko Lehtonen, Keyan Tomaselli, Huang Zhuo-yue); 5. *Dialogues and Practices* (Chas Critcher, Dorothy Hobson, Becky Conekin, Jo Littler), and finally part six, which is the transcript of an interview with Stuart Hall that was video-recorded in the late summer of 2013. Stuart Hall died in 2014 a few months before the conference, as did Richard Hoggart. A long shadow of grief was thus cast over the proceedings, and this sense of deep loss also travels into the writings in this book.

Arriving late to the party

I attended the conference at Birmingham in June 2014, at a time when I was mid-way through a PhD in television studies at De Montfort University in Leicester. It was only at doctoral level that I had seriously engaged with cultural studies; I had briefly skirted along its edges during my undergraduate degree in English Literature in the 2000s at Cardiff University (via a handful of modules taught by

members of the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory¹). Later on, within some academic and activist circles, I occasionally encountered outright hostility to the very idea of cultural studies as something that was complicit in the undoing of the left – and it should be said that these accusations most often identified the study of ‘feminine’ popular cultural forms as the problem. After these faltering starts, I came to engage with cultural studies seriously, and to begin to make sense of it, during my PhD - specifically via feminist television studies. I was supervised by Helen Wood who herself had strong connections to CCCS.² I realised that these reductive, deeply gendered criticisms that I had heard of cultural studies, as being apolitical or even actively depoliticising, were based on a narrow definition of what constitutes the ‘political’, and that the analysis of popular culture is not – or should not be - antithetical to political engagement. Rather, it is absolutely crucial to any understanding of politics, power and inequality.

In cultural studies, then, I had found what felt like my academic ‘home’, and as I travelled to the conference, I anticipated an occasion for great excitement - one where I would get to see and hear some of the scholars whose work I so admired, and witness a historic reunion of erstwhile members of CCCS. As it turned out, I felt for the large part like I was intruding on private grief. It was only through reading Jackie Stacey’s account of the conference in this book, nearly three years later, that I began to see how the complex layering of the relationships of the people present meant that I never really could have understood the intense affective charge in the lecture theatre on those two days:

The very different constituencies present at the event added to this heightened charge: people whose lives had continued to be intertwined (intellectually, domestically, sexually, politically) for nearly five decades; others who had fallen out with each other bitterly and not seen each other for as long; some people who had never met and would only be known to each other through their publications; others who had lost their jobs when the department was dismantled by the same university now hosting this event; then there would be those who would not be there, either

because they couldn't or because they did not want to be, or because the Centre's history was simply irrelevant to their lives now. (p. 169)

Of course, I was part of another constituency: those who had never been at the CCCS or any other centre or department of cultural studies; those postgraduate students who had yet to make a mark or stake out a space within cultural studies; and those who perhaps now felt a sense of loss for something they had never had in the first place. Not for the first time in my academic life, I felt like I'd arrived too late to the party when everyone else was packing up and going home. A delegate in the audience whose name I do not know said something along the lines of: 'the pain and the grief for the loss of Stuart Hall is palpable here, I can feel it; but I have a different kind of grief – the grief of never having being here, of never meeting Stuart. And now I never will'.

Having attended the conference, I came away with the sense of an ending, and a deep sadness that I could not shake off – the sadness of not having been there (and not having been *then*) - of having missed that moment, a radical moment characterised by a sense of political possibility that I thought could never be repeated. But reading *50 Years On* does not reproduce these feelings – for me, it is much more of a resource of hope, more generative, and perhaps this is also related to the changed context even in the few years since the conference, and, perhaps, the ways that cultural studies sees itself. In the midst of the current political crisis, I have increasingly begun to hear the refrain that cultural studies is needed more than ever again now – cultural studies thrives in a crisis – cultural studies is going to have its day again. What I experienced at the conference was my own misrecognition of that particular moment – I had mistakenly equated grief and loss with ending and closure. Perhaps my sadness was also produced as a result of own my over-investment in the myth of the Birmingham centre as *the* centre of cultural studies – and this is a myth that is addressed and grappled with in both *50 Years On* and *Why Cultural Studies?*

Reading Jo Littler's contribution to *50 Years On*, which was initially delivered as a paper on a panel on inter-disciplinarity, provides a valuable route 'in' - and the possibility of a sense of belonging to cultural studies - for those who were not at Birmingham. Indeed, it is titled 'On not being at CCCS'. Littler points

us to the many spaces where cultural studies has ‘percolated’ (p.276) – from her own predominantly conservative English Literature undergraduate degree in the 1990s, to the increasing visibility of cultural politics in spaces such as contemporary journalism and podcasts, as well as flourishing new forms of feminist and anti-racist activism. It wants to consider the ‘glimmers and offers of hope’ (p. 280) that have been made possible by cultural studies, even if they do not reside within university spaces.

The spaces of cultural studies: centres and peripheries

The ways that the CCCS is positioned within histories of cultural studies and conferred the status (or not) as ‘foundational’ is, of course, deeply contested terrain. In the inaugural issue of this journal, Handel Wright (1998) wrote an oft-cited paper that sought to ‘de-centre’ Birmingham from its regular positioning as the first and originary site of organised cultural studies in the world. *50 Years On* - by necessity - must operate on this difficult and highly charged terrain, given that its primary purpose is to collect stories about the CCCS, and so – inevitably – put the Centre back at centre-stage. It is acutely conscious of this unavoidable problematic, and cites Wright’s paper in its introduction to emphasise that ‘the aim of this book is by no means to reassert [Birmingham’s] mythical status’ (p. xv). Chapters by Keyan Tomaselli on cultural studies in African contexts and Huang Zhuo-yue on cultural studies in China provide valuable examples of the projects’ transnational movements in ways that do not assume that theoretical models generated at Birmingham were straightforwardly imported and received in other, non-western contexts.

Rodman believes that the tendencies to deflect or even reject the centrality of Birmingham are detrimental to the ways that we imagine cultural studies. He puts the CCCS at the centre of his history of the project, seeking not to reaffirm its status as the ‘place where it all began’ but to reclaim

what one might call the *spirit* of Birmingham (or, more precisely, one of the many spirits of Birmingham), with an eye on how that old sense of

purpose might be rekindled so as to produce a revitalized version of cultural studies that is actually worthy of the name. (p.123)

50 Years On does indeed capture the 'spirit of Birmingham', but not in the ways that might be expected. Indeed, some of the most powerful but also surprising resources of hope for me were the chapters recounting the pain and the messiness of the Centre - the often 'acrimonious and guilt-tripping' debate that Rosalind Brunt describes (p.96); or Hall's own profound disenchantment with the Centre - his own sense of loss, absence, resentment and unhappiness, captured in the 'Missed Moment' talk (as relayed by Dennis Dworkin (p.17)). This made me realise that the 'moment' that I thought I had missed was actually always-already experienced as lack. While it seems embarrassing to admit, I had assumed that the Centre was a hive of consistently vigorous and productive debate, and that the disagreements among its members had only ever been generative, vitalising, and affirmative of the overall project. To realise that academic work, political engagement and intellectual debate are tough, painful, messy - and have ever been thus - gives me hope for our own deeply difficult moment, because it reminds us that challenges must (and can) be overcome.

While the book's focus on the Centre might run the risk of reifying and simplifying its place within the history of cultural studies, in reality it valuably complicates established narratives about the Centre and its relationship to other places and spaces. For example, I am based at the University of Leicester, and have often heard stories about the nemesis-like relationship between CCCS and the Centre for Mass Communication Research at Leicester, which was established in 1966 by James Halloran. Both Geoff Eley's and Connell and Hilton's chapters recount a more complex and dialogical relationship between the two centres, which were born out of shared as well as diverging interests. While from the 1970s onwards the differences between them did become more pronounced, the two centres underneath Hoggart and Halloran had much in the way of common ground - for example, both centres shared a desire to counter arguments made by Mary Whitehouse's campaigns that television content directly affected people's behaviour (p.70). At an event in 2016 at the University of Leicester, held to mark fifty years since the founding of the CMCR, it was

similarly noted that the historical tensions between the two centres are perhaps over-emphasised, and that this obscures the fact that both were committed to a critical and political position.³

It's the hope that kills you

These books and the ideas they contain have, of course, been produced and published within a context – or a conjuncture – that seems to grow bleaker, less hopeful, and more desperate with every passing day (and even again in the short space of time since they were published – see Brexit, Trump, the rise of the far right across Europe, etc.). It too often now seems that a miserable paradox exists for the left, whereby the political sphere is characterised on the one hand by chaos and unpredictability - delivering repeated shocks to the system in ways that we are unable to foresee – and yet it is also characterised by a grim certainty that things are getting, and will only get, inexorably worse. There is a prevailing sense that politics as we know it is radically unravelling - but not in a good way; that we are collectively unable to apprehend, theorise, or meaningfully respond to these shifts; that the university has become a place that closes down rather than facilitates radical or progressive thought; and that all we can do in the midst of these multiple crises is brace ourselves for the unforeseeable - but assuredly coming - ways that we are going to be devastated anew. Hope, in this context, becomes a liability, something that will make you vulnerable, and so something to work against: *it's the hope that kills you*.

I have sketched this gloomy picture as the prevailing affective mood in which I read *50 Years On* and *Why Cultural Studies?* - and to highlight the ways in which, increasingly, I have come to understand the books as powerful resources for a generative kind of hope which – if not offering concrete, fully-formed solutions to contemporary crises - do give us exhilarating glimpses of political alternatives and possibilities. These glimpses are exceptionally important, as they allow us to come up for air from the otherwise deadening sense of political powerlessness that neoliberalism entails. As Rodman writes, we need to focus more on 'lofty, elusive, utopian goals' that may well seem naïve or overly-

idealistic: 'Things like justice. Peace. Democracy. Equality. Freedom. For everyone in the world' (p. xi). Despite the risky (and more than that, potentially treacherous) approach of reaching into the past of cultural studies as a way of addressing the problems of its temporal present, both books ultimately avoid the trap of reifying a 'golden age', or simply rehearsing a 'those were the days'-style narrative.

The inevitable contestations that these books encounter - in historicising the recent past and its living subjects - have compelling resonances and parallels with similar, contemporary debates within feminism. For example, Clare Hemmings' (2010) excellent book *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* points to the competing narratives of progress, loss and return in historicisations of the recent feminist past, and how these stories construct a 'political grammar' to which we must be attentive. Nancy Fraser (2013) has provided what is in my view a powerful assessment of contemporary feminism, in which she suggests that the politics of redistribution and socialism, once so central to feminist imaginaries, point us to the shortcomings of the current moment that is so dominated by the politics of recognition. Both of these interventions, in different ways, seek to simultaneously mobilise and complicate the past as a resource for contemporary feminism – and both Rodman's and Connell and Hilton's books seem, too, to lend themselves to this complex but productive use of history as a resource for cultural studies.

Rodman intriguingly suggests in his book that it is typically academics who are earlier on in their careers who value meta-commentaries and internal, highly charged debates within cultural studies about its aim and purpose. Perhaps this is because those who have been working in this field for many years have already experienced enough pain and acrimony to last a lifetime. It is understandable enough: why re-tread old ground, re-open old wounds, bring to the surface grievances that have long been buried? It is through a recognition of how difficult and painful it is to go back to 'the scene of the crime', back to these stories, that I feel so grateful and indebted to those who have done so. As somebody who still feels like such a 'newbie' (in Rodman's words) to cultural studies, I cannot help but sometimes feel like I have 'missed out' on the heat and light, the sweat and the tears, and the sheer emotional intensity of its early

formation (a rite of passage?). By offering and opening up accounts of this contested and dynamic history (Connell and Hilton) and agitating for a new debate about the big, constitutive questions of cultural studies (Rodman), these books offer a way in for those who wish to travel under the sign of cultural studies – who might then feel a sense of belonging and commitment to the project, forged through the intensities of debate and the radicalness of hope.

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¹ This Centre was founded in 1989 by – among others - Chris Weedon, who had obtained her PhD at CCCS.

² Andrew Tolson was also on my supervisory team, and he and Helen Wood were both interviewed (along with Stuart Hanson) as part of a special issue of *Cultural Studies* in 2013 entitled 'Contributions to a history of CCCS' (Hanson, Tolson and Wood 2013)

³ The event was entitled 50 Years of Media and Communication Research at the University of Leicester. It was held as a pre-conference event immediately before the conference of the International Association of Media and Communication Research. Helen Wood, the Head of the Department of Communication at Leicester, made these remarks about the shared as well as divergent interests of the two centres.