

**LOS ESTUDIOS CULTURALES EN ESPAÑA.  
EXPLORACIONES TEÓRICO-CONCEPTUALES  
DESDE EL LÍMITE DISCIPLINAR**

Chantal Cornut-Gentile D'Arcy

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In an often quoted Q&A session following a lecture on the practice of cultural studies, the late Stuart Hall, one of the most influential intellectuals of recent decades, deviated from academic etiquette to passionately assert that “cultural studies isn’t every damn thing” (1992: 292). Hall was speaking about the conditions of the institutionalization of cultural studies in the United States, and his impassioned outburst reveals that, while the spaces gained for cultural studies in academia surely contributed to the survival of an originally fringe movement, the particular conditions and constraints of these spaces threaten to rob cultural studies of its cutting edge.

Institutionalization is thus no occasion for complacency. Quite the reverse, institutionalization calls for a more critical stance towards the work academics do and the institutions that harbor their work, and, in Hall’s words, it “requires a much more careful job of trying to define what [our] project is” (1992: 292). This job has been taken up by different cultural studies theorists since. Three come to mind as I think of Stuart Hall’s flare-up: Cary Nelson acknowledges the apparent success of cultural studies in the United States but goes on to apologetically conclude that no recent cultural movement in the academy has been “taken up so shallowly, so opportunistically, so unreflectively, and so ahistorically” (1996: 274). For Mikko Lehtonen, who has elaborated on the pressure institutionalization places upon cultural studies (2009), the academic context obstructs the political

work and the critical self-assessment that drive cultural studies. With its fiefdoms, its unspoken norms, and its tacit forms of knowledge, Lehtonen notes, the University has proved an adverse environment for cultural studies. More recently, Graeme Turner has also warned against the risks of aligning the development of cultural studies with the interests of the University. In his book *What's Become of Cultural Studies?*, he bemoans the “increasing complacency about cultural studies’ usefulness, applications and effects” (2012: 2) and laments that its original concern with the public good and the distribution of power has been replaced by derivative analyses of the latest cultural sensation.

Judging from Dr. Chantal Cornut-Gentile D’Arcy’s book *Los estudios culturales en España. Exploraciones teórico-conceptuales desde el límite disciplinar*, this scenario only partly resembles the situation in Spain. It seems that here cultural studies has suffered the downside of institutionalization without ever reaping any of its rewards. As Dr. Cornut-Gentile illustrates, when cultural studies managed to overcome the cultural isolation of Spain, it encountered obstacles on two related fronts. It hit upon the stuffiness of a bureaucratized University that regarded its multidisciplinary approach as an antagonistic force that might lead to a denaturalization of the rigid disciplinary organization of the Spanish University. At the same time, it was belittled —sometimes viciously— by scholars who claimed that the sociocultural analysis it assumed had always been well served by their formulaic take on academic work and that, therefore, there was no real need for any of the innovations that emanated from the cultural studies project.

This being the case, in Spain, cultural studies was condemned to an incongruous situation. Powerless to find a place in the University that was consistent with its self-reflexive position and with its political involvement, but disinclined, likewise, to sever all ties with academia if it was to survive and have an impact on society, cultural studies failed to deal in a consistent manner with the conceptual challenges it encountered. Following the imperative of a disciplinary environment that works to produce value only in the form of disciples, jobs, funding and self-promotion, cultural studies became either a sort of multipurpose, power-friendly label adopted by indiscriminating university teachers who simply continued doing what they had been doing all along or a hodgepodge of shoddy, conformist, and irrelevant studies of popular expressions of culture. In brief, save for a few exceptions, in Spain, cultural studies has manifested itself in the form of undemanding, complacent, and cartoonish versions of what it was destined to be. Do not get me wrong, the aforementioned cultural studies theorists are hardly the messianic type, and cultural studies is an open and flexible intellectual project. Yet, it must also be vehemently stressed that, at its very core, cultural studies has always been marked by the struggle to produce a different and more complex knowledge of social processes

than traditional disciplines could provide, by its serious engagement with progressive politics, and by the belief that ideas and academic work matter outside the walls of the University. Take it or leave it, but cultural studies is not every damn thing.

These are, in a few words, the issues Dr. Chantal Cornut-Gentille D'Arcy wrestles with in *Los estudios culturales en España*. Written in Spanish, for it was commissioned by a cultural studies group in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Valencia, the book comprises five chapters that fall into two distinct parts. The first part offers a complex analysis of the difficult history of cultural studies in Spain. Dr. Cornut-Gentille begins by establishing an analogy between the exclusion of women from academic life described by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the circumstances of cultural studies practitioners in Spain. She then looks at the disappointing results of the process of European Convergence. In both cases she offers a piercing though discouraging perspective on the situation of the Spanish University in general and of cultural studies in particular in the present context of globalization and liberalization of capital and resources. Dr. Cornut-Gentille's commitment to the field of cultural studies is beyond any doubt. As a founding member of IBACS (Iberian Association of Cultural Studies), she pioneered the introduction of cultural studies in Spain, and thus there are few people with the experience and the moral legitimacy to offer better judgments on the difficulties cultural studies has faced and on its present situation. The three chapters included in the second part are case studies that address the questions and the strategies that have characterized cultural studies, with a special focus on gender, race, class, and popular culture. The first of these chapters, for example, discusses witch hunts and the persecution of women, but it moves beyond dominant paradigms to incorporate anthropology, sociology, psychology, sexuality and philosophy in an attempt to better reinterpret the contexts of women's experience of oppression and offer a more complex understanding of gender relations, gender-related violence, and the practices through which these attitudes persist today. The following chapter focuses on TV comedy to illustrate how the concepts of articulation and radical contextualization help to bring to light the racial tensions that have remained silenced in British society. Similarly, the last chapter illustrates how a hybrid and flexible understanding of film genre that borrows its concepts from chaos theory sheds new light on how class issues are addressed in British film. However, what I find of particular interest is how all these chapters build up to a composite illustration of what cultural studies is and the possibilities it provides as a field of cultural inquiry, and how they demonstrate that the methodologies we adopt and the positions we assume determine the kind and the significance of the work we do.

So, what exactly is cultural studies, anyway? As it arises from *Los estudios culturales en España*, cultural studies is a conjunctural, cross-disciplinary mode of inquiry which intends to make the world a better place. But cultural studies is also about pedagogy and the position that academics choose to take up in the production and circulation of knowledge as it relates to the activities of power. Cultural studies has taken from Antonio Gramsci a view that knowledge is not the accumulation of data, but rather the activity of producing accurate, complex and contextual analyses of social processes and power relations, and a view of the intellectual as the person who takes on the responsibility of making this knowledge known to the general public.

Cultural studies contends that the world is more complex and more inequitable than we often care to believe and that, therefore, it cannot be approached from the hyperspecialized niches of traditional disciplines or by means of outmoded methodologies. As French philosopher Edgar Morin has demonstrated at length (2011), traditional forms of knowledge hinge on principles of disjunction and abstraction; they depend on established disciplines and on the tacit or consensual patrolling of disciplinary self-similarity. But working within inherited disciplines creates a distorted or mutilated view of reality, because disciplinary work legislates what is proper and improper knowledge, strives for homogeneity, and ignores everything that would jeopardize the consistency of the category. Cultural studies, on the contrary, attempts both to overcome the limitations of this way of dealing with culture and to engage effectively with issues of power and justice. It refuses to segregate cultural elements into isolated categories or be itself circumscribed by inherited disciplines. Instead, as Dr. Cornut-Gentile underscores, cultural studies works by relationality and contextualization, for it rests on the belief that no single discipline or cultural manifestation can capture the complex nexus of power at any one moment. While traditional academic work seeks to inscribe itself in institutional disciplines, and is comfortable with the limitations of this way of going about things, cultural studies assumes that no element of everyday life can be isolated from the complex set of relations that interpenetrate it and make it what it is. Therefore, cultural studies confers upon itself the freedom to work across and between disciplines, borrowing freely but rigorously from all of them in an attempt to produce a more complex kind of knowledge and bring to light the relations that a more traditional understanding of culture and cultural analysis leaves unarticulated.

Faced with the sterility of a complacent and visionless academia that, Raymond Williams tells us (1986), had abandoned social debate for the so-called science of language, cultural studies attempts to effectively put the focus back on society. As Russell Jacoby (1999) or Chris Hedges (2010), for example, have explained,

cultural and literary critics renounced questions of values and social justice; they withdrew into their institutions and secured the gates with thorny theoretical models and intricate, self-referential lingo. Cultural studies intends to demystify this retreat into the walls of the University and to defetishize theory; it intends to win back the control academics had surrendered to theory in an attempt both to address socially pertinent questions and to reach a wider audience; it puts public values above textual analysis and treats the text (or any other cultural expression, for that matter), not as an end in itself, but as an instrument to gain a more complex understanding of reality (of social relations, of exploitation, of the relations between culture and politics, etc.) that might change our attitudes, perturb the workings of power, and enrich social life.

Cultural studies, Dr. Cornut-Gentile says, does not subscribe to the straitjacket of traditional institutional disciplines and, thus, it cannot be properly apprehended by following our inherited ideas of what a discipline is. Yet, this unconventionality does not mean that “every damn thing” that departs from the rigid methodological procedures of traditional disciplines is cultural studies. Cultural studies may lack a Grand Theory but it has been thoroughly theorized in the light of real challenges posed by society (and by academia) at specific conjunctures, and so a cultural approach that ignores the history and the particulars of this ongoing theorization process is necessarily something other than cultural studies; it may choose, as Stuart Hall once put it, to march under the banner of cultural studies, but that does not make it cultural studies. It has been nearly two months since Hall passed away and the misunderstanding, the trivialization and the institutional disparagement of the cultural project he helped to develop (as well as the manifest absence of barely any notice of Hall’s death in the mainstream Spanish media or of any response to date from cultural institutions in Spain) testify to the importance and the contemporaneity of the debates on the nature of knowledge and on the role of the academic that books like this ignite.

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